

**Contemporary Ruins: Politics and Aesthetics**  
**Beyond the Melancholy Imagination**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis attempts to elucidate the specificities of contemporary ruins using critical theory and cultural studies applied to various sites of analysis ranging from art and film to abandoned factories and disaster zones. It is motivated not only by the question of whether thinking about the contemporary world through the conceptual paradigm of the ruin might offer insight into the crises that afflict our everyday lives, but by the political desire to seek, amidst the ruins, an opportunity to re-imagine the possible. The ruinous processes of creative destruction, dispossession, commodification, forced obsolescence, deindustrialization, and disaster are examined in their relation to the workings of capitalism. Capitalism is seen to systematically manufacture ruins, producing physical, ecological, and affective geographies of ruination. These ruins are the starting point to ask the question: What does it mean for the political imagination to be confronted with social reality as a mounting pile of wreckage? I suggest that it has a profound impact upon our sense of historical agency, upon our capacity to dream, to imagine, and to act. Ruins are bound up with losses of all kinds, and, as such, with larger cultural practices of memory and mourning. While ruins in capitalist modernity still embodied a dialectic tension between old and new, loss and invention, nostalgia and optimism, ruins in postmodernity lack the same productive tension: they seem to signal unqualified loss and the foreclosure of all possibilities for the future. I argue that moving beyond this depressive melancholy imagination, one of the many 'ruins of modernity', requires that we confront and work through these losses in order to be better able to seize upon the opportunities for resistance and social change that exist in the present. The representation of ruins, specifically the relation of form to content, is considered from the standpoint of its ability to restore perceptibility and responsiveness or, inversely, to anaesthetize and make us numb. Radical, self-reflexive aesthetic practices concerned with symbolizing loss and deepening historical awareness, are presented as a creative and promising approach to re-appropriating the ruins.

*In loving memory of my grandfather, William Murphy, who passed away  
on the day this dissertation was defended.*

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# Introduction

We live, it seems, in a world in ruins. The daily news is full of headlines and images of the latest disasters: countries devastated by war, famine, or foreign intervention; cities ravaged by financial ruin or deserted in the wake of deindustrialization; societies mired in political strife or struck by economic collapse; environmental catastrophes so devastating that they are hardly graspable by the human imagination—and the list goes on. Overnight entire countries fall into bankruptcy and cities are wiped off the map. Economic restructuring puts thousands out of work and signals the devitalization of communities. The aftermath of an earthquake or hurricane unfolds in a series of related disasters that are the direct result of decision-making processes. While there is tremendous variation in the phenomena mentioned above, what is interesting is precisely the way in which contemporary catastrophes increasingly blur the distinctions between the environmental, the political, and the economic. Indeed, while ruins have always embodied the tension between nature and culture, as theorists like Georg Simmel (1958) have pointed out, in the ruinous landscapes of today it is often no longer possible to disentangle them. As such, to be engaged with social and political life is to be faced with

the problematic of how to account for this ruinous state of things, to ask whether there might be a deeper logic at work behind what on the surface appears to be an unrelated but terrifying accumulation of crises and turmoil. This project emerges out of a concern to draw the connections between these sites and scenarios, in order to better understand our relationship to the landscapes of devastation which we inhabit. It is motivated not only by the question of whether thinking about the contemporary world through the conceptual paradigm of the ruin might offer insight into the crises that afflict our everyday lives, but by the political desire to seek, amidst the ruins, an opportunity to re-imagine the possible.

We are so accustomed to thinking of ruins as the ruins of distant times and ancient civilizations that we often fail to see the devastated landscapes around us as the ruins of our own age. As a cultural category, ruins can evoke a diverse set of images: the rubble of a medieval church in the French countryside, a crumbling temple in the Central American jungle, or more famous and well-preserved monuments like the Pyramids of Giza or the petrified city of Pompeii. Though geographically and historically dispersed, and the products of very different cultures, what unites these images is their temporal discontinuity with the present. They are safely situated in the distant past—in ancient times or the dark ages, remote and immemorial. While, undeniably, the iconography and the discourse of ruins is dominated by the ruins of ancient Greek and Roman times—those of Classical Antiquity—the concept has been increasingly interrogated by critical scholarship and challenged by the disastrous events of recent history, including the

aftermath of war, genocide, and atomic power. As such, it has been made to encompass a much broader range of sites and phenomena. The 'classical' ruin of antiquity, once considered the standard model of the ruin, is now one ruin among many, whose self-evident status and social significance is no longer left unproblematicized. The result has been that the conceptual terminology of 'ruins' increasingly occupies an important, even contested, place in academic discourse and in popular culture, and is called upon to make sense of the state of cultural and social institutions, including the university and the museum (Readings 1996; Crimp 1993).

The ruin, as it is conceived by the discipline of archaeology, is a self-evident *thing*, a recognizable material artefact. It is loosely defined as the remains of a human-made structure that is in a state of decay. A ruin is an edifice or construct that has lost its purpose and functionality, that has fallen out of use, and thus been exposed to the vagaries of time and the forces of nature. Its destiny in the present is seemingly a purely passive one: to be photographed, studied, and preserved as a historical remainder, a palimpsest of epochs. Yet, this conceptualization of the ruin has been challenged by recent scholarship, which argues that the status and social significance of the ruin is no longer self-evident, but rather, something that needs to be problematized and rethought by social scientists, cultural theorists, and art historians. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (2008), in their ground-breaking edited volume, *Ruins of Modernity*, point to the fact that the ruin is, in fact, an indeterminate, open-ended theoretical construction, one that is available to critical re-appropriations. As such, they call upon us to attend to the



essential questions that the ruin raises for theory:

As an aesthetic and conceptual category, [the ruin] is uniquely ill-defined. Where does the ruin start, and where does it end? Is a well-preserved but empty building already a ruin because it has lost its practical and social function? And, at the other end of the spectrum, does rubble still qualify as a ruin? More broadly, is a ruin an object or a process? Does it signal the loss or the endurance of the past? Does it matter whether ruination is the work of nature or human action? Is authenticity a necessary condition of the ruin, or are manufactured ruins just as real? (6)

This is just the beginning of the theoretical trajectories that take the ruin as their point of departure. We could further ask: What is the relation of the ruin to time? Indeed, are there multiple temporalities of ruination? Is it necessary that a given structure was once complete to be considered a ruin? What is the relationship of the ruin to capitalism, or to the 'manufactured landscapes', to borrow the title of the 2006 film on photographer Edward Burtynsky's work, of heavy industry or resource extraction? What place does the ruin occupy in our cultural imaginary? How has the ruin been appropriated by visual culture? There are no clear answers to these questions, but the very act of problematizing what was previously taken for granted opens up the space for a series of creative and critical revaluations. Thinking through the possible distinctions between the ruins of antiquity and those of modernity (and postmodernity), between those of the past and the

present (and even the future), necessitates such an approach.

The ruin has long been a subject of fascination, particularly in the modern period. As Brian Dillon suggests in “A Short History of Decay,” modernity generated an “early enthusiasm for ruins: a craze that culminated with the elaboration in the late eighteenth century of a Romantic aesthetics of fragmentation, failure and picturesque decline” (2011, 11). In previous, premodern times, ruins were not part of the cultural imaginary in the same way. While, indeed, there were structures and edifices in states of decay—the ruins of Classical Antiquity lounged languorously upon the landscape long before modernity—they were not conceptualized as a socially significant and meaningful category. There was nothing notable about ruins: people inhabited them, passed through them, played amidst them, but never thought to turn them into an object of knowledge, art, literature, or poetry. Ruins first take on an aesthetic force and metaphoric power in relation to modernity: “it is not really until the renaissance—that is, until the advent of a modernity that conceives itself in relation to the remains of the past—that the ruin becomes an essential aesthetic concept” (Dillon, 12). In other words, it is, according to Dillon, modernity's reflexivity and historical positioning that is key when thinking about its relationship to ruins. Modernity is situated in relation to antiquity or the pre-modern; one of the features of modernity is a sense of historical discontinuity with the past, of rupture with former ways of life. The conditions of modernity, modernization, and urbanization, create an awareness that, in the words of the famous modern artist Piet Mondrian, “the destruction of old forms is a condition for the creation of new, higher

forms” (cited in Dillon 2011). The 'modern' is keenly conscious of the loss constituted by the insuperable break from the cultural traditions, social structures, and everyday life of the ancients, even if these are imaginary and idealized. It is only in such a context that the ruin, as a trace or a fragment, is valued as a cultural container which “encapsulates vacuity and loss as underlying constituents of the modern identity. It is the reflexivity of a culture that interrogates its own becoming” (Hell and Schönle, 6). Ruins become one of the tropes through which modern subjectivity is organized.

Ruins, for the modern imaginary, become a vehicle for registering the passage of time, for marking the gap between present and past forms—the gap that is generated by the revolutionary process of creative-destruction accompanying modernity. Modernism was understood as producing ruins as its very condition of possibility. In modernity ruins are an organizing trope for thinking through such themes as the revaluation of values, the questioning of traditional social roles, the destabilization of social meanings, and the dissolution of former modes of being, thought, and behaviour in modern society. They capture the effects wrought upon everyday life by the great upheavals of modernity: the transition from rural to urban environments, industrialization, and the imposition of capitalist social relations. Yet loss in modernity, painful as it often was, was ultimately understood as productive: of new forms, new values, and advances toward the betterment of the human condition through progress. Ruins were able to embody the tensions accompanying loss, to evoke at once the feelings of melancholy for the past and the optimism for the future; they were reminders “of what we have lost and are constantly

losing in our rush into the future” (Quint 2006, xi-xii). Huyssen calls this tension between loss and the creation of the new the “dialectic of modernity” (2006, 20). It is perhaps this dialectic, which traverses the possible, that has been lost in the 'postmodern' moment in which ruins are so often the signifiers of unqualified loss, the products of human shortcomings and evil. While one side of the modern dialectic remains, what Harvey (1990) sees as that of the destructive forces of fragmentation, damage, and dispersal, the side of hope, of creative projects for the emancipation and the betterment of the human condition, has been abandoned. Indeed, the contemporary concern to chart the 'ruins of modernity', to cite the title of Hell and Schönle's (2008) influential collection, is suggestive of a desire to understand precisely what has been lost in the contemporary era.

The twentieth century—which witnessed, notably, two imperial wars, a series of violent revolutions, extreme forms of political repression, and the invention of the atomic bomb—produced a startling pile of wreckage, and this tendency toward ruination appears to be accelerating as we move into the twenty-first century. The welding of new technological capacities to the pursuit of political power is in part responsible for this phenomenon, as are the scientific developments that have allowed us to manipulate the natural environment on a massive scale without taking into account the long-term or unforeseen consequences of such actions. Yet, in many ways, ruination does not appear to be merely the consequence of war-making or the outcome of environmental backlash. Ruins can be seen as much more than a side-effect, intentional or unintentional, of man's pursuit of power over fellow man or nature. Indeed, while ruins certainly are bound up

with the rise and fall of empires, as well as with the natural processes of decay with which they are commonly associated, in recent times, ruin-making is much more insidious to the deeper logic and organizing principles of this society—perhaps inseparable from the very dynamics of capitalism. This has led some scholars to reflect upon the ruin's relationship to modernity: “Is there a possible elective affinity between ruins and modernity? Or is the connection [...] even stronger—is there some intrinsic logic of ruin at work in modernity?” (Hell & Schönle, 5). What is certain is that these catastrophic events have instigated a major reconceptualization of ruins in contemporary scholarship which has had, as we shall see, an impact upon the cultural imaginary.

Indeed, I have only hinted at the complicated and often convoluted ways in which the contemporary scholarly discourse on the ruin is bound up with—whether critically or uncritically—a larger cultural melancholia. This melancholia, the inability to work through losses and trauma, the failure to mourn, is perhaps, as suggested in the next chapter and throughout the dissertation, the outcome of what is perceived as modernity's failed project: it signals the incomplete, seemingly impossible, mourning for the utopian possibilities that modernity and modernism were felt to harbour. In the aftermath of the horrific events of the past century, our obsession with the ruins of modernity is, perhaps, an expression of nostalgia for the ruins of another time—ruins that were the work of decay rather than human destruction, of the passing of time rather than capitalist and imperialist practices. This nostalgia, far more than just the longing for an absent past, whether real or imagined, is, as Huyssen writes, “also a longing for another place,”

another reality, which can mean another future (7). At its limits, this means that the universalization of capitalism does not signify the end of history nor of hope for a better world.

The first chapter of this dissertation is dedicated to elucidating the social history of the ruin in modernity and postmodernity, tracing the socio-historical circumstances that have altered our discourse and conceptualization of the ruin. It approaches the ruin as a social concept as much as a material process, which offers insights into our larger ways of perceiving and interpreting the world around us. The starting point is the romantic conceptualization of the ruin, which saw it as a picturesque fragment left by the struggle between nature and culture, and capable of evoking a melancholy, but nevertheless pleasurable, aesthetic enjoyment. I outline how the devastating material realities of the twentieth century gradually extended the concept and category of the ruin to include those of human-made disasters. In the aftermath of the worst horrors of the twentieth century, the very notion of aestheticizing ruins was to come under attack, as any pleasure derived from the contemplation of catastrophe was problematized. When dealing with ruins, we are dealing with the difficulties of history and its representation; we inevitably face questions of historical preservation and erasure; we confront at once the deepest human suffering and the most abhorrent human evil. From this theoretical excursus, it becomes clear that ruins are bound up with losses of all kinds, and, as such, with larger cultural practices of memory and mourning. I argue that moving beyond the melancholy imagination, one of the many 'ruins of modernity', requires that we confront

and work through these losses in order to be better able to seize upon the opportunities for rebuilding in the present. Ruins, with the power they hold over the imaginary, become a bridge between a past which is always, to some extent, unknowable, and a future which remains uncertain, helping us to relocate ourselves as agents in the historical process.

In chapter two, I explore the ways in which the manufacture of ruination could be argued to be an inextricable feature of the logic of capitalism. In building upon the existing critical theory dealing with the ruin, I create a conceptual framework adequate to the task of elucidating the specificity of contemporary ruins: the ruins of capital. The 'ruins of capital' is a term used here to refer to landscapes devastated by deindustrialization, financial speculation, commodification, and imperial ventures. Capitalism, as such, is seen to be bound up with the production of economic, social, and political wastelands, including Detroit and New Orleans, to mention just two notable cases. Its logic is that of the relentless pursuit of profit, forced obsolescence, and the rapidly outmoded. Its 'self-revolutionizing' tendency, the outcome of the drive to overcome inherent and periodic crises, was first identified by Marx as expressing itself in the dynamic of 'creative destruction', and later developed by Harvey (2012), Mandel (1976), and others. Within the field of political economy, such concepts as 'disaster' or 'crisis' capitalism (Klein 2007; Gunewardena & Schuller 2008) have begun to elucidate the contemporary features of the production of and capitalization upon catastrophe. These theories allow us to identify catastrophe as the latest frontier, not only of the

accumulation of capital, but also of dispossession. As the production of space—in this case of ruins—is simultaneously a fashioning of the self and the senses, it is also important to question the ways in which our identities and our capacities, our ability to imagine and to act, are informed by the ruinous landscapes that we now inhabit, an issue raised by artists such as Edward Burtynsky.

The third chapter of this work takes up this issue of the interrelation of subjectivity and space by examining two figures of the ruins—the *flâneur* and the *glaneur/euse*—who serve as lenses through which the processes refashioning the landscape in modernity and postmodernity can be grasped. Urban sociologists, including Simmel, Benjamin, and Lefebvre, have long been concerned with the impact of modernization and urbanization, with its various disruptions and dislocations, upon the sensibility and character of modern men and women. They have argued that everyday life occurs in spaces (and according to temporal rhythms) that have been produced and structured in particular ways by forces associated with capitalism, such as fragmentation, commodification, and rationalization. Building on this work, it becomes important not only to explore the ways in which ruined spaces are negotiated and inhabited, but also to examine our interactions with cultural ruins and debris—those objects destined by forced obsolescence to become old-fashioned and outmoded. Such an analysis speaks to the lives and the afterlives of things in our society, a trajectory that all too often leads from the commodity form to the trash bin in a seemingly predestined manner. Nevertheless, the circuits of cultural objects beyond the commodity form at times follow creative paths



that lead to their re-appropriation. As residues of a production process organized not according to the fulfilment of needs and the cultivation of human capacities, but instead toward profit maximization, cultural debris have the potential to spark moments of critical insight, akin to what Benjamin terms “profane illumination” (1986, 179). The flâneur and glaneur/euse are thus protagonists that can help untangle both the contradictions and overlooked potential of our encounters with the ruins of everyday life.

Problematizing the representation of ruins is crucial for thinking about the interrelated issues of aesthetics and ethics, in particular, the aestheticization of horror. In the conditions of late modernity, or postmodernity, there has been much discussion of the idea of representation itself as a ruin (Horkheimer & Adorno 1986). Theodor Adorno (1983) was perhaps the first to signal the state of crisis in which cultural production found itself following the horrors of the Second World War, including the Holocaust and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in his famous declaration regarding poetry after Auschwitz. The dilemma that faces the architect, artist, and even historian in the post-war, post-nuclear aftermath of the twentieth century is how to represent the wreckage of history: What is the relationship between form and content? Does horror resist all attempts at understanding; is it unspeakable? How does one negotiate “the impossibility of remembering and the necessity of forgetting” (Merewether, 33)? The fourth chapter of this dissertation examines these issues in relation to our capacity to respond to human suffering, and in light of recent discussions around the relationship between aesthetics and anaesthetization (Buck-Morss 1992), or

the impairment of our ability to react and act when faced with the 'pain of others', as Sontag (2004) puts it. The ruins produced in this last century demand that we rethink the project and the conventions of representation, particularly in a media culture so saturated with images, in order to retrace the possibilities and limitations of artistic and aesthetic appropriations, for these have had both the power to move us and the unfortunate side-effect of making us numb.

Finally, the fifth chapter of this dissertation, in further developing the relation between aesthetics and politics, seeks to define the features of an 'aesthetics of the ruins'. Following Flatley (2008), it qualifies melancholy as something that is not necessarily depressive in character, but at times stimulative of agency; as an activity or method, to *melancholize* is productive of knowledge of loss, oppression, and various structures that are responsible for the affective life and the state of the imaginary of the individual and collective (2). In contrast to the 'aesthetics of disengagement', the enacting of depressive states of boredom, social withdrawal, and communicational rupture, which Ross (2006) argues characterizes contemporary artist practice, I seek out examples of an alternative aesthetic practice which, in these terms, is melancholy, rather than depressive, in character. While preoccupied with irretrievable losses, such an aesthetics seeks, nevertheless, to work through them. It is an engaged practice which is concerned with contemporary ruins, including the ruins of occupation, the remains of civil war, and what Stoler (2008) calls 'imperial debris'. Insisting upon the ruins becomes a way of resisting dominant ideologies that would erase or aestheticize death in order to promote further

cycles of violence, retribution, or sectarian warfare (Seigneurie 2011). Several interesting artistic examples are discussed, in which art is used to recall the past, or to create temporal juxtapositions, in such a way that another future, for instance of reconciliation or co-habitation, becomes imaginable.

There are undoubtedly notable omissions in this work—certain themes not addressed, some theorists left aside, numerous artistic and social movements meriting attention that were not discussed. In response, I can say that this dissertation does not claim to be fully comprehensive of all of the contemporary theoretical and aesthetic excursions that take ruins as their starting point as that would be far beyond the scope of this work. There will be future projects, my own and others, that will pick up where I have left off. The decision to structure the chapters thematically was in the interests of raising some thought-provoking questions and stimulating debates that challenge the ways in which we are accustomed to thinking about ruins. I was interested in considering ruins from multiple angles, through the lenses of art, history, politics, aesthetics, space, and subjectivity. My own desire to revisit the ruins was born of a personal need, as much as of a theoretical interest, to rethink the possible forms of engagement within the contemporary social and political landscapes that surround us. It was inspired by those many artists and thinkers who have not remained prostrate before the ruins of their time, but who have courageously sought to face them, to grapple with them, even to transform them. As one of my favourite artists, the great English sculptor, Henry Moore once said, “To be an artist is the opposite of being in a state of despair. To be an artist is to believe

in life” (120). Beyond naïve optimism, returning again and again to the ruins can generate another kind of hope that is not blind to the sorrows of history: a hope that is rooted in human agency, the recognition that we are, and have always been, the agents of history.

1.

## The Social History of the Ruin

### I.

What stands out, as one begins to engage with the vast body of literature that deals with ruins, is the way in which ruins have intersected with the human imagination throughout modern history. Ruins have, for many centuries, occupied an important place in the cultural imaginary of the Western world. They have been studied, painted, photographed, contemplated, and reproduced. In certain periods, ruins have generated a veritable craze of enthusiasts, among them several important theorists and authors of the twentieth century, including Sigmund Freud, Georg Simmel, and Walter Benjamin, just to mention a few. Ruins, far from being the dead relics of the past, are productive: of literary and artistic works, poetry, art historical narratives, tales of adventure, myth, and legend. They have a remarkable ability to resonate with the deepest preoccupations and cultural projects of certain epochs; invested with social meanings and symbolic significance, ruins often serve as a cultural screen upon which are projected the fears, anxieties, desires, and hopes which are shared and shaped by society at large, especially

in times of radical upheaval and social change. Taken up by the socio-cultural imaginary, ruins become the object of contention and desire, of fantasy and imagination, of speculation and struggle; they are interwoven in networks of knowledge and power—with expert opinions, authorized interpretations, and institutions from the university to the museum. Thus, far from being the exclusive preserve of art historians or archaeologists, ruins are a fascinating site of socio-cultural analysis. While ruins have been extensively analyzed through the lens of aesthetic concepts and judgement, in this chapter, we will shift the register to the realm of the imaginary, shedding light upon the ways in which ruins have served as a key trope through which men and women have grappled with the larger forces at work in transforming their everyday lives. The multiple expressions given to ruins in modernity and 'postmodernity', whether in literature, poetry, film, or painting, reflect the attempts of ordinary people to engage with historical processes in a meaningful manner.

While ruins, in some cases, may remain more or less unaltered for centuries, the meanings attached to them change substantially over time; that is, despite their evident materiality, their status and significance are socially-constructed, historical, and contextual. Much more than mere historical traces, ruins themselves have a history that is not only natural, but more importantly, social. They have been inextricably bound up with history, politics, aesthetics, philosophy, and social practices, appropriated towards various ends and projects, ranging from the artistic to the political. Despite what Francesco Orlando (2006) terms their “primary non-functionality,” or their retirement

from their intended function, as something lived in or used for specific purposes, they have been invested with a creative range of secondary functions (10). Symbolically, they are taken up in the present in countless ways to make sense of different aspects of human experience related to time, materiality, transience, and in particular, the larger processes (re)fashioning the landscape and our everyday lives. Indeed, as a material feature of the physical and social landscapes which we inhabit, we are faced not only with the question of how to conceptualize ruins, but what to *do* with them. An analysis which looks toward the past for insight and inspiration must become a praxis that is turned toward the future, and receptive to the moments of possibility in the present. Praxis is the moment in which the imaginary connects with agency in the struggle to insert ourselves, as thinking and dreaming beings, into the historical process.

This chapter will offer a brief overview of how ruins have been conceived, interpreted, and imagined across a period of Western history: from the Romantic era to the current age. It will broadly trace the theoretical excursions that take the ruin as their starting point, just as it will chart the vicissitudes and trajectories of the ruin in representation, in order to provide the context for a discussion of the ruin in the contemporary period, designated by some as that of *post*-modernity. For our purposes, we are less interested in the debate as to whether 'postmodern' is indeed an accurate or appropriate appellation for our age, than with the question of how and if contemporary ruins differ from romantic, modern ruins. For many critical theorists, including Harvey (1990), Berman (1988), and Jameson (1991), the cultural and political landscape of the

mid- to late-twentieth century *does* differ from that of what is commonly referred to as modernity—even if they do not agree on what to call it. What each does affirm, however, is the *persistence of capitalism*, which remains in its essentials unchanged in the contemporary era, even as certain of its features have evolved.

As we shall see, there has been a major reconceptualization of ruins in the twentieth century, one that is still ongoing and in which this thesis participates. Certain historical events of the past century have no doubt played a compelling part in stimulating this broad cultural debate—events that include, but are not limited to, two world wars, the Holocaust, and nuclear disaster. While ruins before the mid-twentieth century were seen as 'fertile', expressive of human hopes and folly, ruins in the subsequent period came to be experienced as hostile and inhuman (Yablon 2009). Far from the product of natural cycles, the ruins left by these catastrophes came to be seen by theorists, including Adorno and Horkheimer (1986), as the inescapable product of Enlightenment thinking and rationality to which the project of modernity was bound. “Europe,” they write in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “has two histories: a well-known, written history and an underground history. The latter consists in the fate of the human instincts and passions which are displaced and distorted by civilization” (231). Their conclusion: “The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression” (36). Departing from a vision of history as still rich in redemptive and revolutionary possibilities, however broken, this cultural shift presents a more pessimistic perspective which casts culture itself as a ruin. Indeed, the anti-modern sentiment which, according to Harvey



(1990), arose from within the folds of modernism itself, in response to the horrors of genocide, atomic war, and other forms of systematic murder and oppression—to the failures of the 'Enlightenment'—rejected the larger project of modernity as complicit with barbarism. It is thus we are to make sense of the affirmation of the postmodern, which distances itself from the aims, the means, and the crimes of the modern.

This reaction, though appropriate to the scale of devastation witnessed over the course of the past century, has had major consequences on the socio-political imaginary and the possibilities for meaningful political praxis in our time. Indeed, while ruins have been inextricably bound to the experience of loss in modernity, only now do they signal the *foreclosure* of loss—the inability to work through trauma. By way of a journey through the contemporary critical scholarship on ruins, this chapter will argue that ruins in 'postmodernity' are entangled with what I will term the *melancholy imagination*: a socio-cultural imaginary unconsciously preoccupied with loss and unable to perform the work of mourning. Aside from the continuing effects of historical trauma, the reading of the 'project of modernity'—which Harvey defines as the project of using the “knowledge generated by many individuals working freely and creatively for the pursuit of human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life” (1990, 12)—as responsible for the ills of the past century, is, at least in part, at the root of this melancholic condition. While the exploitation of nature, instrumental reason, and the development of rationalized methods of domination were certainly among the products of this project that merit condemnation, this does not mean that the concern for the betterment of the human condition, which

animated modernity even if it was distorted, should be replaced by cynicism. Furthermore, the cautionary tale afforded by *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, while no doubt a brilliant work of cultural criticism, perhaps under-emphasizes the leading role of capitalism and imperialism in many of the traumas of recent times. The practices connected with the logic of capital call for close scrutiny as being productive of many of the ruins of our time—a theme explored in greater depth in the next chapter. Beyond indicting the human passions, a rather hopeless task, especially when it becomes, as it often does, a question of an unmalleable human nature, such an approach offers an effective target for practices of resistance and reinvigorates a sense of agency.

Ruins are, for the imaginary, storehouses of loss, archives of collective memory. As Francesco Orlando argues in *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination*, while in capitalism we value what is new, useful, and in fashion, those things made “useless, old, unusual, decayed, obsolete, or derelict,” like all repressed materials, find a way of returning in cultural forms (2006, 6). Literature, for him, is thus “a photographic negative of the positive cultural reality” (5), a place where discarded objects are piled up. Similarly, cultural expressions of ruins might also be seen as such reminders: they recuperate fragments of the various historical losses and traumas that have accompanied the changing material conditions of life in modernity and postmodernity, the transformation of social relations by the imperatives of capital, and acts of domination and violence. They are the imperatives to remember rather than to forget, or repress, the past. As Quint writes of the obsolete, one form taken by the ruin, in the preface to the

book, “these objects return, depicted in literature whose own cultural function is to remind us of what we have lost and are constantly losing in our rush into the future” (2006, xi-xii).

I would like to argue that, just as the disruptions and dislocations to the social fabric in modernity demanded 'working through' in the Freudian sense of confronting loss, so too the traumas of our 'postmodern' time require confrontation, elaboration, and even interpretation, for as Freud stressed of traumatic events, ““the meaning [...] is only recognizable later on” (1973e, 118). Ruins, an intimate register of time and of history, are one possible site of this cultural work. Overcoming the depressive and paralyzing features of melancholia which have cast their shadow over politico-historical praxis means revisiting the ruins of the past, as well as those of the present and the future. Remembering complicated legacies of violence and damage, of lost hopes and ideals, reopens history's book. The social history of the ruin—whether architectural or industrial, produced by financial speculation or by war—reveals the tension between loss and its foreclosure, between the imperative to remember and the need to forget that are part of the vicissitudes of mourning and melancholia. The proliferation of cultural expressions centred upon ruins can, as such, be read as attempts at narration, meaning-making, and symbolization; and symbolizing losses, be they personal or political, is the first step toward working through them. It is as such that the ruin is a key trope of (post)modernity, and bound up with what Michael Rothberg, in his book *Traumatic Realism: The Demand of Holocaust Representation*, terms our “contemporary fascination

with trauma, catastrophe, [and] the fragility of memory [...]” (2000, 3).

## II.

The ruins of ancient and medieval times came to be associated with the aesthetic experience of the picturesque in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, an association that has persisted, to a large extent, in the present. The picturesque, an aesthetic ideal developed during the period of romanticism in the writings of William Gilpin, Richard Payne Knight, Uvedale Price, John Ruskin, and others, was conceptualized as a quality of the landscape that evokes a certain quality of feeling: in occupying a space between the beautiful and the sublime, the picturesque scene was understood to give rise to a pleasant, melancholy state of being that is neither the expansive, harmonious play of the senses in the contemplation of beauty, as defined by Immanuel Kant, nor the terror of a confrontation with sublimity. Theorists of the picturesque attempted to pin its visual qualities to the character of line and texture, the contrast of light and dark, and the relationship between foreground and other elements of a scene, all discussed by Gilpin (1794) in his essay “On Picturesque Beauty.” As J. Aikin wrote in a letter to his son in 1794: “in ruins, even of the most regular edifices, the lines are so softened by decay or interrupted by demolition” (quoted in Hunt 1997, 179). Ruskin similarly notes in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, published in 1849, that “there is not a cluster of weeds growing in any cranny of ruin which has not a beauty in all respects *nearly* equal, and, in some, immeasurably superior, to that of the most elaborate

sculpture of its stones” (2001, 83). Rough, broken, angular—these defining qualities of the picturesque adhered perfectly to the shape and character of ancient ruins or the rubble of medieval churches that speckled the European countryside. Indeed, with their crumbling walls, the intricate play of light and shadow upon their varied surfaces, and their simultaneous evocation of fragility and endurance, such ruins became the prototype of the picturesque in the romantic sensibility.

Ruins for the romantics were not only the source of visual appreciation, but were expressive of history, time, and materiality—suggestive of larger metaphors that could be grasped by the imagination. As John Dixon Hunt explains in *Gardens and the Picturesque: Studies in the History of Landscape Architecture*, there was, in the eighteenth century, “a movement from learned identification of specific classical remains to generalized evocation”; that is, rather than being emblematic signifiers of particular people or events, ruins came to be viewed as the more generalized “impressionistic suggestions of decay and loss” (1997, 181). Indeed, ruins were central to the picturesque because they met both its formal (or aesthetic) and associative (or imaginative) demands (180): “Ruins were a prime ingredient of any picturesque view. They satisfied, in the first place, a love for broken and rough surfaces” (179). In the second place, they satisfied the mind, for it was “equally essential” that ruins “should have been 'of some grandeur and elegance' [...] so that the associative faculty could be brought into play. For what attracts one to ruins is their incompleteness, their instant declaration of a loss which we can complete in our imaginations” (179). The historical presence in ruins gives them their

“noble” character, and contributes to the feeling of melancholy they evoke (Ruskin 2001). As Smethurst notes, for Gilpin “[t]he picturesqueness of ruins is guaranteed by their 'roughness' and 'irritation' to the eye”; yet he “connects ruins with the English affectation of pleasing melancholy: 'But in a ruin the reigning ideas are solitude, neglect, and desolation’” (2012, 144). As such, ruins were a coveted source of philosophical contemplation and artistic inspiration, attracting poets, painters, writers, and travellers of a romantic persuasion.

Ruins evoked a pleasurable reflection upon the passage of time and the transience of all things—the life cycles of nature, lost love, the passing of fellow creatures, and, of course, the rise and fall of empires symbolically captured in the tangible fragments of the past. They appealed to the sensibility of the early moderns. The bitter-sweet pleasure with which they came to be associated was a highly desired aesthetic experience or affect of the time. According to Michael Roth in *Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed*:

By the eighteenth century, the taste for decay had become a mark of aesthetic sensitivity for many aristocratic Europeans. But the kind of decay that was to please, the kind that was to call up the pleasurable melancholy that writers associated with the contemplation of ruins, was a slow process. Each 'survivor' from the past was supposed to convey the fragility of the human endeavor over time. There were only so many ruins that were well-enough preserved (while retaining the proper amounts of picturesque irregularity) to produce the

desired mix of emotions in the beholder (1997, 3-5).

As Roth indicates, it is the passage of time and the work of nature, in the form of slow decay gaining the upper hand over even the greatest cultural accomplishments, that constituted the chief appeal of ruins for the Romantic imagination. The ruin was not just any old pile of rubble, but had to contain the right mix of formal elements to offer satisfaction to the beholder and meet the picturesque standard.

Similarly, Georg Simmel, in his 1911 essay, "The Ruin," pointed to the pleasure of ruins as being a function of their temporary suspension at the edge of obliteration, their momentary holding of the "contradictory strivings" of nature and culture, matter and idea, form and chaos (1958, 24). He writes: "Whenever we perceive aesthetically, we demand that the contradictory forces of existence be somehow in equilibrium" (23). The charm of the ruin is its ability to hold, just for an instant in historical time, these contrasting tendencies in a unified form available to perception: "the past with its destinies and transformations has been gathered into this instant of an aesthetically perceptible present" (23). The ruin bridges time, making the lost past—even if only mythical and imagined, remote and romanticized—tangible to the senses, and, in doing so, throws the present into sharp relief. Ruins, thus, speak to the perceptibility of history—the ways in which it is embedded in things—just as they offer the clues to make comprehensible that same history. Thus, the meanings assigned to ruins—the ways in which we fill in the gaps—touch upon our understanding of the past and its significance for the present: they reveal something of the imaginary.

It is, therefore, perhaps in their very ambiguity, in the subtle tensions that made of them the archetype of the picturesque, that the ruins of antiquity have exercised such generative potential and become so culturally charged. Given their uneasy resolution of nature and culture, past and present, persistence and decay, ruins could become the symbolic container for the contradictions of everyday existence during the period of modernity. In the noble and picturesque form of ruins, worn away by the passage of time but still persisting, loss could find its plaintive and poetic expression. Thus, in the context of the almost unwavering Enlightenment belief in progress, scientific development, and Western Europe's colonial project, ruins were, in the cultural sphere, a kind of antidote to the unbridled optimism of the era. Ruins stood for the other side of modernity that was deeply felt during the height of Romanticism: the displacements, disjunctions, and shocks associated with industrialization, modernization, as well as empire- and nation-building. As Huyssen notes, this quality of negativity, of critique, is one that is still important today: "An imaginary of ruins is central for any theory of modernity that wants to be more than the triumphalism of progress and democratization or longing for a past power of greatness" (2006, 13). As such, in the realms of representation and the cultural imaginary, ruins were thoroughly permeated with the melancholia and nostalgic sentimentality of the modern age. Symbolically invested with such poignancy, ruins could speak to the often unconscious and contradictory hopes and fears of the time—for instance, the deep-seated belief in the betterment of the human condition and the pessimistic sense of the ultimate futility of grandiose projects.



Similarly, in his book *“Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History,”* Peter Fritzsche (2004) traces the social history of ruins during the period of 1780-1850. He argues that the French revolutionary period witnessed a transformation in the way that the past was perceived and experienced. The ruptures and dislocations of revolution and war, as well as industrialization, that characterized that period, gave rise to a sense of history as discontinuous. People began to perceive themselves as cut off from the past, yet connected to one another to the extent that they shared the same time: they “felt themselves as *contemporaries*, as occupants of a common time zone with mutually recognizable personalities, dramas, and processes such as “revolution” or “industrialization”” (10). History, in other words, became what Fritzsche calls a “mass medium” (13). The events of this tumultuous time, which constituted a “deep rupture in remembered experience” and the fabric of everyday life, also denaturalized the 'natural order', opening given social and political arrangements onto a field of possibility (16). Ruins, while expressive of the “melancholy of history,” nevertheless played an important role in reimagining the possibilities of the present (8): “the ruins of the past were taken to be the foundations for an alternative present” (96). Ruins, the result of human actions and endeavours rather than the work of nature, could now speak to human possibility: “the fragment also spoke through history in a way that the silence of nature's reclamation had not permitted” (105). Surviving bits of the past—the broken fragments that were to become the ruins of the age—served as reminders, not only of that which had been irretrievably lost, but of that which might still be achieved, but remained incomplete, in

the present. Thus, there is during this time, as Fritzsche describes, a growing awareness among Europeans, “of the ways in which history enhanced the subject and enabled action” (128). Modernity is, in other words, a time of unprecedented loss, but also of great historical dramas in which ordinary people are the protagonists. As Fritzsche concludes:

What is crucial here are not the ruins themselves, for they did not change, but the new historical field in which they were seen and apprehended [...] They were rendered visible by the new structures of temporality based on disorder and rupture, concealment and half-life, that emerged with the revolution in France. The power of ruins in the nineteenth century was to depict the violence of historical movement without imputing necessity to its direction. They challenged the absoluteness of the present with the counterfactuals of the past (106).

The new awareness of history had the potential to be progressive in so far as it revealed history as having no fixed *telos*, no necessary linear movement, but rather, whose direction was a site interpretation, contestation, and struggle.

Orlando locates literature's obsession with obsolete and outmoded objects in this same historical epoch. The French revolution, he argues, which did away with privilege on the basis of birth right, was, for the bourgeoisie, a double-edged sword. While, on the one hand, it promised upward mobility in the form of access to various posts and

positions of power previously restricted to the nobility, it also brought with it the risk of downward mobility, even impoverishment. In other words, the unhinging of social position from the 'natural order of things' did away with any guarantee as to one's life chances and outcomes, and was, therefore, a great source of anxiety. As Quint writes:

This preoccupation with things that rapidly lose their utility and value testifies to the uncertain social and economic bourgeois world that has succeeded the continuity of the *ancien régime*, a world of commodities with built-in obsolescence and of decontextualized kitsch, a world where the fluctuations of the marketplace constantly threaten the self-made man with *declassement*, rich today, poor tomorrow (xii).

The transformation of social relations and conditions in modernity, which happens primarily through the imposition and extension of the logic of capital onto the circumstances of material life, but also through technological change, brings with it an interest in those forms, objects, and relations with which capitalism does away. For Orlando, this can be explained by the “performance principle” or “functional imperative” and its opposite: ruins, relics, and rubbish represent the non-functional, the social unconscious, which exercises a power of fascination by falling outside of the logic of commodification (7). In a world in which, according to Marx's (1990) analysis in *Capital*, commodities reign, where everything is reduced to equivalences, the non- or anti-commodity becomes, at least in the imaginary, a form which recuperates that which

has been lost, threatened, or displaced. Thus, Orlando, whose interest is in the social function of literary texts, takes Marx's famous quote and adds a twist: “The *literature* of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself at first sight as ‘an immense accumulation of *ant Commodities*’” (15). Ruins, in this sense, are a cultural form that embody the tensions and conflicts that accompany changing social relations; their representation in literature, art, or poetry reveals the nostalgia for an *ancien régime*, real or imagined, that was, at the very least, stable, predictable, and rooted in tradition. The often unconscious idea that something has been irretrievably lost—a sense of certainty about the world or our position within it—as we charge forward into the arms of 'progress' explains, at least in part, the romantic appeal of ruins. Ruins became not only a key trope through which cultural anxiety was able to find an expression, but also a modality of working through loss in a period of rapid transformation and upheaval.

Nevertheless, the nostalgia evoked by ruins is not necessarily just a reactionary sentiment, symptomatic of the anxieties provoked by the insecurities arising from the transformations of capitalist modernity. As Andrea Huyssen argues in “Nostalgia for Ruins,” such a nostalgia often signifies a desire not only for a lost past, but for a *different future*:

Since the European seventeenth century, with the emergence of a new sense of temporality increasingly characterized by the radical asymmetries of past, present, and future, nostalgia as a longing for a

lost past has developed into the modern disease per se. This predominantly negative coding of nostalgia within modernity is easily explained: nostalgia counteracts, even undermines linear notions of progress, whether they are framed dialectically as philosophy of history or sociologically and economically as modernization. *But nostalgic longing for a past is always also a longing for another place. Nostalgia can be a utopia in reverse* (7; my emphasis).

Particularly in the contemporary, postwar, post-Holocaust, post-modern moment, where neoliberal capitalism reigns supreme, ruins are important to reclaiming a sense of the possible, though the task of revisiting them has been no doubt made difficult by the ways in which they are both commodified and made to commodify the past. Nostalgia is a critical sentiment because it mourns and pines for the ideals and alternatives of the *future* that were lost along with modernity's imagined project: "We are nostalgic for the ruins of modernity because they still seem to hold a promise that has vanished from our own age: the promise of an alternative future" (8). According to Huyssen, the ruin topos, as it was taken up in modernity, reflected "a deep understanding of the ravages of time and the potential of the future, the destructiveness of domination and the tragic shortcomings of the present," and thus was stimulative of "emphatic forms of critique, commitment, and compelling artistic expression" (9). Returning to such a potent sense of time and of history, as connected to the past but not determined by it, is, as we shall see throughout

this dissertation, a first step toward imagining the future otherwise.

### III.

Approaching ruins through the framework of aesthetic experience is a practice that continues into the present day. There is a certain pleasure or enjoyment associated with the contemplation of ruins—one that was to be problematized in the latter part of the twentieth century as the Romantic conceptualization of ruins was blown apart in the aftermath of war and terrifying genocide. Exemplary in this regard, Rose Macaulay (1967), an English novelist, in her exuberant celebration of ruins, *Pleasure of Ruins*, takes what she terms a “pleasurist” approach to her study, mapping the various human reactions to ruins in the terms of aesthetic enjoyment. Each chapter of the book traces a different aspect of the emotional spectrum evoked in response to ruins, from the romantic melancholy stimulated by imagination of former times, to the exaltation aroused by fragments of past nobility and greatness. Interestingly, Macaulay's book, written in 1953 in the shadow of the atrocities of the Second World War and the London cityscapes devastated by the Blitz, makes little mention of what, in a short note at the very end, she refers to as the “new ruins.” Her pleasurist approach, which seems blind to the ruins surrounding her, is all the more perplexing when one considers, as Brian Dillon (2006), points out, that her own home and library were completely destroyed during the London bombings. For Macaulay, ruins must be safely situated in the distant past to be capable of evoking aesthetic pleasure—they must be aestheticized or made beautiful by art. It is

thus that the ruins of her home and city, like so many open wounds, fall outside her interpretive framework; she writes:

Ruin pleasure must be at a remove, softened by art, by Piranesi, Salvator Rosa, Poussin, Claude, Monsù Desiderio, Pannini, Guardi, Robert, James Pryde, John Piper, the ruin-poets, or centuries of time. Ruin must be a fantasy, veiled by the mind's dark imaginings: in the objects that we see before us, we get to agree with St Thomas Aquinas, that *quae enim diminutae sunt, hoc ipso turpia sunt*, and to feel that, in beauty, wholeness is all (454-455).

To her nostalgic imagination, ruins belong to a time when things were still 'whole', or at least capable of being made whole, by being given an aesthetic form.

In her romantic conceptualization, ruins are bound up with nostalgia for the past, for a lost and irretrievable age that does not touch upon the traumatic wounds left by the violence of the present. She reveals, however, that her exclusion of the modern ruins of war is, in fact, an ambivalence born of trauma, a desire to hold onto a more certain time; as she indicates, "such wholesome hankerings are, it seems likely, merely a phase of our fearful and fragmented age" (455). To Macaulay, the debris of war are too close, too sharp, too raw to be aestheticized; they resonate, not with the beauty of the picturesque, but with the horror of the sublime: "[n]ew ruins have not yet acquired the weathered patina of age [...] [they] are for a time stark and bare, vegetationless and creatureless; blackened and torn, they smell of fire and mortality" (453). Macaulay would perhaps

like to forget the devastation which surrounds her, yet, the timing of her study could be seen as symptomatic. Indeed, the losses associated with these modern war ruins evoke the unconscious desire for the imagined simplicity of those of another time: as Munteán (2011) suggests, she “renders modern ruins a catalyst of nostalgic longing for those *other* ruins that she explores in her book.” Remarkably, it is her idealized representation of ancient and medieval ruins, in a curious book which resists confronting the horrors that surround her, that indicates indirectly the trauma of her own experience as evoked by the ruins of her time.

These ghastly ruins, 'blackened and torn', of modern warfare were to provoke not only the contemporary reconceptualization of the the ruins topos, still ongoing, but a rethinking of modernity itself as a ruin. Michael Roth (1997), in his essay “Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed,” is one of those who intentionally seek to broaden the traditional concept of ruins, away from the picturesque ideal, to include the ruins of deliberate acts of destruction, such as those of war. In doing so, he puts a spotlight on the twentieth century as one of widespread devastation and unbridled destruction. According to Roth, the scale of ruination left behind in the wake of the Second World War has irrevocably altered our perception of ruins, shifting it from one of romantic, pleasurable contemplation and aesthetic enjoyment, to a much more sobering confrontation. As he states,

the total wars of the twentieth century have shaken our framing of ruins and shattered the notion that culture can exist as an innocent,



floating fragment in a powerful sea of violence. In the wake of World War II, culture itself came to be cast as a ruin, as a troubled witness to the violence of humanity rather than as a spectator of the sublime powers of nature (20).

He suggests that the central role once accorded to nature in ruins must now be accorded to humanity's destructive capacities: “[t]he regular rhythms of nature have been replaced in our time by the enormity of our capacity for ruination” (20). In ruins we are no longer faced with the result of processes of decay, but with the debris of history. History itself is no longer conceived as a linear and progressive movement, a continuity that bridges past, present, and future, nor as the cyclical movement of nature, but rather, as a startling series of ruptures and discontinuities that leave behind only the wreckage of the past. This recalls Walter Benjamin's harrowing image of the angel of history, who experiences historical progress as the catastrophic and terrifying accumulation of refuse: “Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (2007b, 257). Such a conceptualization troubles the aesthetic approach to ruins and raises a series of ethical questions. As ruins come to be conceived as the remainders and reminders of historical violence, rather than the great accomplishments of civilization, any pleasure derived from them becomes more problematic: “It is one thing to aestheticize the gradual decay of monumental buildings, another to aestheticize the effects of disaster,” writes Roth (7). Such a statement touches upon the difficult task of the representation of loss, for culture itself is imbricated in the

horrors of genocide, war, and nuclear annihilation.

This brings us to Adorno's famous proclamation of 1949: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (1983, 34). Adorno was clearly concerned with some profound cultural questions: Can cultural expressions exist unsullied in an environment of turmoil and bloodshed? Do the traditional concepts of aesthetics still apply to the catastrophic remains of the twentieth (and twenty-first) century? What Adorno and Roth both suggest is that it is inhuman to take pleasure, even aesthetic pleasure, in those remnants that recall the suffering of others; the ruins of catastrophe cannot be said to be evocative of the enjoyable experiences associated with the picturesque. From this perspective, the very scale of devastation wrought by war and genocide during the last century has produced a qualitative transformation in our understanding of ruins; the sentiments integral to the 'pleasurist approach'—nostalgia for a lost past, exaltation, bitter-sweet rumination, and feelings of grandeur—are entirely inappropriate in response to such horrors. Yet, if not pleasure, what sentiment, if any, should be evoked by the contemplation of such ruins? Should horror spark only horror, the reactivation of the wounds of trauma? Or is it that such ruins should not be preserved at all, but rather rapidly effaced by the wrecking ball or allowed to disappear by neglect? Is it that representations of ruins perform a kind of violence in aestheticizing the remains of catastrophic occurrences? At its extreme, such an approach treats ruins as a kind of pornography, as elicited material looked upon only with perverse enjoyment. Accordingly, the ruins of the twentieth century must escape the very domain of aesthetics, for its horrors resist all form, all intelligibility. Yet, given

ethical demands of cultural memory and mourning in the present, it is insufficient, if not disastrous, to foreclose the possible social functions of ruins and their representation, even if those have necessarily changed. Indeed, ruins continue to occupy a complicated and contested place in public culture, particularly in the postwar period, on account of their being interpreted as the visible and highly charged symbols and reminders of the darker side of European modernity. Perhaps what is needed is less the wholesale rejection of culture as a ruin, than a reconsideration of the traditional categories and functions of aesthetics in relation to the ruins of our time.

Ruins, in the postwar, 'postmodern' context, at least those of war and genocide, are called upon to perform the work of memory. Much differently than the ruins of the past, which, for the Romantics, were 'impressionistic' and 'suggestive' of vague sentiments and a noble past, the ruins of twentieth century violence are expressive of terror and horror. They are the witnesses to the ravages of violence; they stand against the past, as imperatives that it should never happen again. As such, the ruins of war are perhaps best defined as 'negative monuments'. British art critic Herbert Read, writing in the late 1930s, argued that monumental works of art are no longer

[...] possible in the modern world—at least not in our Western European world. We have lived through the greatest war in history, but we find it celebrated in thousands of mean, false and essentially unheroic monuments [...] The only logical monument would be some sort of negative monument. A monument to disillusion, to

despair, to destruction. . . [the artist] can at best make a monument to the vast forces of evil which seek to control our lives: a monument of protestation (1947, 317-318).

He saw Picasso's *Guernica*, exhibited in London in 1938, as such a monument of negativity to the evil of the Spanish Civil War. Similarly, the ruins of the mid- and latter-part of this past century cannot be made to uncritically celebrate the past; they are not heroic structures. Rather they recall devastation and destruction in the manner pointed to by Read. Left in the wake of bombings, civil war, or ethnic cleansing, the architectural remains of houses, synagogues, churches, shops, and libraries have been, and continue to be, so many unsettling, uncanny spectres upon the landscape. Macaulay allowed herself to ponder one such building in London, capturing precisely this surreal quality: “The stairway climbs up and up, undaunted, to the roofless summit where it meets the sky” (3). Modern ruins testify to a world turned upside down, a world made unnatural, unliveable, and strange; they are suggestive of the damage that we have done to ourselves and to one another.

While ruins are assigned the work of memory in the contemporary era, this is anything but a straightforward task, but one that is, rather, convoluted and political, subject to competing demands and differing imperatives. Michael Meng's (2011) study of the vicissitudes of the ruins of Jewish communities following the Second World War, *Shattered Spaces: Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland*, has thrown an important light upon the issue of historical erasure and the ethical demands

that ruins pose as remnants of historical violence. The aesthetic tasks of preservation, monumentalization, and reconstruction are interwoven with the cultural work of memory and mourning, as with its inverse, forgetting and denial. In the case of Germany and Poland, where the worst atrocities of Hitler's 'Final Solution' were carried out, the few surviving fragments of pre-war Jewish life that marked the landscape were almost systematically destroyed or treated with neglect. Meng writes that: "As Poles and Germans rebuilt their bombed-out cities, towns, and villages, they expelled the traces of the Jewish past. The few Jewish sites that escaped the wrecking ball gradually decayed by neglect or were turned into movie theaters, storage houses, swimming pools, libraries, and exhibition halls" (5). As he goes on to explain, Jewish ruins were not merely considered unworthy of preservation, but "reflected a deeply discomfoting, abject past that few Germans and Poles wished to encounter in the early postwar decades" (5). Ruins in themselves served as a moral force—a visible reminder of the violence, injustice, and atrocities committed, not solely by officers or officials, but often at the hands of ordinary Germans and Poles. As such, they were disconcerting to many non-Jewish citizens of these countries who wanted to rebuild, to forget the past, and to get back to 'ordinary' life, or, particularly in the case of the Poles, millions of whom were used for forced labour and murdered in mass, to focus on their own experiences of victimhood: "As European societies recovered from the war, the bonding memories of ethnic national identity left little space for recalling Jewish suffering and complicity; memories of victimization and resistance proved much more popular and comfortable to

recall” (Meng, 254). Jewish sites, provocative of profound anxiety, were covered over or refashioned in a way that foreclosed the working through of the 'abject' past.

The representation and mediation of the ruins of our collective past is clearly an issue that touches upon difficult ethical and political questions. As such, it is entirely inadequate to condemn ruins, or, more particularly, their representations or commemorations—for instance, in the form of artworks, museums, restorations, or monuments—to the dustbin of history. The issue requires re-framing: it is not a matter of *whether* to represent ruins, the legacy of this past century, but *how* to do so in a way that is attentive to the representational exigencies of horror and catastrophe, as will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four. “The difficult question,” as Sorkin writes, “is not whether to make art but how...” (1993, 74). Indeed, for Meng, the 'how' requires consideration of the deeper issues at work in identity, community, and democracy which are most often ignored by the very committees or governmental organizations that are charged with undertaking such projects of restoration or memorialization:

Restoring a synagogue or a Jewish cemetery rarely involves thinking deeply about the shattered histories that these spaces reflect: their destruction during the war and their neglect and erasure after 1945. In reconstructing multiethnicity from the ruins of multiethnicity, this commemorative cosmopolitanism exhibits comforting, soothing flourishes of tolerance and difference for all to see, but deflects critical engagement with liberal democracy's collapse in the past and

its failures in the present (10).

Only in confronting these failures and their aftermath, the deadly human toll, can we meaningfully engage with the past. Ruins require some kind of mediation if they are not to become mere 'heritage' sites which pay token tribute to loss, whether of a people or its cultural achievements. Perhaps at the most profound level, ruins can function as reminders of “the traumatic condition of European modernity and the fragility of human empathy,” which were, as Meng argues, “laid bare” by the Holocaust (26-7). This issue of the mediation of catastrophe and horror, of what kind of form is suited to the content, is one that has been explored in the postwar period up until the present day.

#### IV.

Artists and art historians dealing with such thorny issues as those raised by Roth, Adorno, and others, have been creative in their reconceptualization of the possible social functions and symbolic meanings of ruins. Charles Merewether (1997), for instance, in his essay, “Traces of Loss,” argues that we need to situate our understanding of the ruin within the psychoanalytic paradigm of loss. For Sigmund Freud, the 'father of psychoanalysis', much of our past, both individual and collective, is buried in the unconscious. It is a ruin that requires excavation: the analyst, like the archaeologist, will “start upon the ruins, clear away the rubbish, and, beginning from the visible remains, uncover what is buried” (1962, 192). For indeed, buried though it might be, in fragments and pieces, at times obscure and seemingly inaccessible, this past is nevertheless productive; as Freud writes:

“All of the essentials are preserved, even things that seem completely forgotten are present somehow and somewhere, and have merely been buried and made inaccessible to the subject” (1973b, 276). These deep-seated ruins, which Freud saw as the inevitable outcome of repressions that are part of the very processes of becoming a subject, exercise an unconscious power over psychic life; they are manifested in seemingly fortuitous circumstances and events, in compulsions, and in neurotic behaviours. Thus, Freud (1973a) argued that representing the past is the only way to avoid repeating it in behaviour. Aesthetics, which in the case of psychoanalysis means the symbolic work of personal narration, makes the past meaningful and intelligible—re-members it, in other words. Representation will never be, nor should it desire to be, a restoration, but it is a creative reconstruction, a retelling—inevitably partial, but nevertheless profound. The work of mourning, of dealing with losses and traumas, whether real or imagined, was for Freud a necessary but interminable task: “is there such a thing as a natural end to an analysis [...]?” he writes in 1937, in the shadow of so many horrific political events (1973c, 237).

In Freudian psychoanalysis, working through loss means creatively reworking the past in representation; it is neither the denial nor foreclosure of loss, nor the obliteration of memory. Rather, remembering is a way of acknowledging the impossibility of complete mourning that, while melancholic in character, avoids the 'pathological' attachment to the past that preoccupied Freud (2006) in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia.” For Merewether, ruins are capable of achieving such a reworking in the



social and cultural spheres because they “embody a sense of loss” and signal “the presence of death in the present” (25). Ruins, as incomplete and fragmentary remains, call attention to what is *not* there, to what is missing or absent. They constitute not only an archive of disasters which can be safely situated in the past, but a tangible presence that marks the *ongoing* nature of disaster—its after-effects and lived remains. Yet, they also gesture to what is irretrievable in the past, inaccessible to memory. As records of destruction, they symbolically “[mark] the space between the memory of ruins and the ruins of memory” (Merewether, 32). Ruins offer no easy resolution of the past, but embody a certain tension at the site of memory, between remembering and forgetting:

Ruins are a legacy that can neither be fully remembered nor fully forgotten; they point to the excessive presentness of disaster, its capacity to spill out of the present into our sense of the past and out into expectations for the future. Arrested in time and place, the ruins of disaster are overwhelmingly defined by time and place, yet they are also out of time and out of place (33).

Past events, seemingly in ruins, have an ongoing legacy; they live on in the present, much like the material buried in the unconscious, and have consequences for the future. Indeed, ruins “collapse temporalities,” serving as a temporal bridge (25). As Kolocotroni explains: “Freud’s ‘psychomythology’ [of memory] crucially links the past, present, and future of mental processes, and uncovers, with a single strike of the spade, the loquacious ruins of a personal and collective prehistory” (2010, 161). Ruins, as a metaphor for “the

multi-temporality of human consciousness” (Kolocotroni, 165), are suggestive of the ways in which the emotional economies of trauma and loss have their own time which differs radically from linear time. Ruins are not only reminders of personal loss but of collective trauma and brutality, and therefore have a larger socio-political significance, as suggested by Kolocotroni: “Involving metaphors of archaeological discovery and the poignant permanence of ruins, Freud’s writing accounts for the persistence of memory in the vanguard of personal and political struggles” (154)

This rethinking of the ruins through the paradigm of loss has had an impact on architectural and artistic practices that deal with representing the ruins of catastrophe, a theme discussed in depth in chapter four. Merewether cites the work of architect Daniel Libeskind on the Berlin Jewish Museum as an example of a response to what has been declared 'the ruin of culture' in the wake of the Holocaust. Libeskind's Jewish Museum is structured around a void. Rather than commemorating the cultural achievements of the Jewish people, it recalls the fact that these have been destroyed along with their creators, those millions of individuals who were wiped off the face of the earth within the course of a few years time; thus, according Merewether, Libeskind, “seek[s] to frame what is missing—a voice or the space of loss” (33). The museum serves as a haunting presence at the very limit of representation: it is “an anguished site of cultural patrimony, a site that keeps alive a sense of something at the threshold between the impossibility of remembering and the necessity of forgetting” (33). Ruins are 'negative monuments' of this kind, not the sites of commemoration as such, but those reminders of loss which

trouble the present; they recall but never restore the past. Embodying that tension between presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, they actively resist completion or closure, and as such, leave the task of cultural mourning and working through open-ended, subject to continual revisitation. As Merewether concludes, “ruins belong to the archive: the archive of unending disaster” (37).

Leo Mellor's (2011) book, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture*, is structured precisely around this idea of the “writing of disaster” which draws upon the work of French philosopher Maurice Blanchot. Mellor's is a study of the impact that the bombed-out British cities of the Second World War Blitz had upon the socio-cultural imaginary of the British people; specifically, he is interested in how the actually existing landscapes of devastation left by the London bombings were taken up by the literary modernists, as these texts are reflective of how postwar British culture more generally negotiated its newly made ruins. He argues not only that the ruin was a key trope of modernity, but that the bombsites were the very “condition of possibility of late modernism” (5). The fragments of destruction opened onto multiple temporalities; they embodied a sense of time as discordant and even sublime which was expressed in the literary late modernist works (6). As he suggests,

bombsites contain absolute doubleness. They are inherently both a frozen moment of destruction made permanent; as much as they capture the absolute singular moment, the repeated cliché of the stopped clock exposed, battered by blast but still affixed to a wall in

a bomb site: yet they also act as a way of understanding a great swathe of linear time previously hidden or buried, offering history exposed to the air (6).

Ruins, in this sense, open up a dialogue with the past and its afterlives, with the foreclosed possibilities of the present, and with imagined and apocalyptic futures. They served as the material basis for late modernism's aesthetic veneration of the broken, partial, and fragmented, just as they acted as a container for the fears, hopes, and desires of Britain's traumatized populace. For Mellor then, aesthetics is intertwined with the materiality of cities and with a larger cultural imaginary—with space as with subjectivity. Representing the ruins is a highly charged project, for it requires confronting devastation, but doing so with respect and care for those who have suffered as a result. It means “maintaining through the groundwork of memory a constant vigil over the prospect of past and present brutality” (Kolocotroni, 154). Thus, it invariably embodies the tension between “mourning and the aestheticisation of suffering” (Mellor, 13). Ethically speaking, one must recognize that representation is always bound to interpretation, to privileged narratives that, for instance, either access a potentiality for healing or reify the aftermath of violence: as Mellor concludes, “Reading—and writing—the ruins of war requires the material spaces cut violently into the city fabric to be acknowledged and understood” (203).

We see a major shift in the way that ruins are framed, interpreted, and valued in the twentieth century as compared with the Romantic era. During the earlier period of modernity, ruins were bound up with a humanist vision. Brian Dillon (2006), in his piece “Fragments from a History of Ruin,” points out that, during the Renaissance and Romanticism, representations of ruins were made meaningful by the insertion of a human figure between the beholder and the scene of decay. The landscapes this figure inhabited were still comprehensible to the viewer, still loaded with potential, and therefore, humanized. The figure contemplates these landscapes and is at ease within them. With the catastrophes of the twentieth century, however, a rupture occurs: the human figure vanishes, along with realistic and romantic forms of representation, and we see a dramatic shift toward surreal, fragmented, and dehumanized forms of representation. As Nick Yablon writes:

The Great War signalled the beginning of a larger reconfiguration of the ruin that has continued to this day. Aesthetic or sentimental responses [...] would be considered ill suited to the severe devastation wrought by the total wars of the twentieth century. The ruins left behind by heavy artillery or by the air raids of subsequent wars prompted a break with the convention of the seated figure in the foreground calmly contemplating the scene and imbibing its philosophical meanings [...] Instead, they were captured in abstracted aerial photographs and in expressionist or surrealist

canvases that accentuated the inhumanity of the landscape (2009, 290).

The twentieth century witnessed the rapid development of new technologies of warfare employed in two world wars, which, when combined with an instrumental rationality tuned for domination, made the annihilation of entire cities and entire peoples not only a possibility but an accomplished fact. As Yablon points out, the scale of such devastation could not even be beheld by the human eye unaided; rather, it required the aid of panoramic or aerial shots taken by mechanical devices which exposed entire neighbourhoods, ghettos, and city blocks vanished from the urban topography. The very way in which space was conceptualized was literally blasted apart. New technological and artistic modalities had to be invented to capture and comprehend this new reality, which, as a destruction beyond any hope, any meaning, any possibility of redemption, was experienced as profoundly inhuman. Yablon suggests that only those new artistic movements of the twentieth century, including surrealism, expressionism, and the literary modernism mentioned above, were considered adequate to the task of representation in the war and postwar periods. The experience of horror, once wedded to the ruins, could not be captured in realistic and romantic representations; rather it demanded the confused and melting landscapes of Dali, the maimed bodies and screaming horses of Picasso.

Paul Fussell (1989), in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, has made an analogous claim, arguing that, with the Great War, irony emerges as the only truly effective literary device in understanding and recalling the various “satire[s] of

circumstance” that constituted everyday life in the trenches. In the many “little ironic vignettes” he documents, both real and fictional, disaster erupts just at the moment when everything seems fine (32). The people or characters in these heart-wrenching situations are victims, not only of disaster, but of a disaster that seems to arrive after the fact—when survival or escape from certain death seem to have been secured. It is this “ironic reversal,” at the height of hope, that captures so much of the experience of modern warfare (34). He labels this gap, between experience and understanding, “the dynamics of hope abridged” (14): that devastating “collision between innocence and awareness” in which the former is irrevocably dashed (5). Irony, in those literary works that followed the two world wars, of which Heller's *Catch-22* is exemplary, captures the structure of experience and memory elicited by war: that of traumatic understanding which always occurs after the fact, too late to prevent shock. Thus Fussell locates the temporality of traumatic memory in an economy of remembering, repeating, and forgetting that was to become generalized among those generations that lived through the wars of the twentieth century and those that came after it (5).

For Mellor, it is the devastation that came with the Second World War and its close that marks a dramatic rupture separating the modern and the postmodern period of total dehumanization: “after 1945 any discussion of ruins of the city needs to acknowledge the horror of the atomic sublime—and the human cost—from Hiroshima and Nagasaki onwards” (203-204). He suggests that the bomb sites of the Great War were “broken yet verdant” (204); that is, they still exercised a generative potential,

offering the possibility of healing and redemption. The landscapes of the postmodern atomic period are, by contrast, bleak, dead, empty—ultimately lacking in aesthetic and imaginative potential that could be used for humanist purposes. He takes the Trinity bomb test site in New Mexico as the ultimate symbol of this postmodern sublime:

The reflective glossy plateau of deadly nullity represents the ultimate break into postmodernism, the carcinogenic sublime, the bombsite ruin as showing merely surface sheen rather than possessing depth, resonance or potential. Layers of history are no longer revealed but rather fused into a blur (204).

For Mellor, ruins in the postmodern are not palimpsests of history, not even rubble that can be sifted through. They are cold, hard, and unrelenting: there is nothing intelligible or recognizable, nothing redeemable in the image he offers us. This postmodern sublime recalls Robert Smithson's (1996) bleak description of the ruins of the American suburbs of his home town in "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," an essay written in 1967. Smithson describes the surreality of the scene as akin to a photograph of a photograph, or "an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank" (70). The desert becomes a post-historical, post-apocalyptic landscape, "a map of infinite disintegration and forgetfulness" (74). The monuments of Passaic have no past; rather, they are the "memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures"—a portrait of hopelessness (72). Any traces of hope, any movement of criticism and negativity, as embodied by 'negative monuments' such as *Guernica*, are seemingly effaced in these dead relics. A



massive car lot, sparkling in the dead summer sun, offers a bland version of infinity as a void, an abyss. Passaic finally reveals itself as “an open grave—a grave that children cheerfully play in,” a depressing picture indeed (74).

For others, it was the smouldering rubble of the twin towers in the aftermath of 9/11—another open grave—that heralded, not so much the coming of a new era, as the waking from the dream: the sudden realization that the world had become something unrecognizable. Perhaps it was this moment that sparked the proliferation of academic scholarship, at least in the English speaking world, around ruins in the last decade. As Hell and Schönle suggest: “The destruction of the world's most famous symbolic icon of capitalist modernity on 9/11 brought to a climax the debate about the ways in which modernity, broadly conceived, seems to have invented, framed, and produced ruins” (2008, 5). Moreover, it might also be said to have constituted some of the driving energy behind the flurry of debate that was sparked when *documenta* posed the question “Is Modernity our Antiquity?” in the lead up to their twelfth annual exhibition of modern and contemporary art in Kassel, Germany. What drives this question, this project to conceptualize modernity as a ruin, is an overwhelming sense that we are in a post-modern age, that we stand amidst the rubble of the utopian project that was harboured within modernity, and which for many took the aesthetic form of modernism. Indeed, as Mark Lewis (2006) has pointed out, in response to the question raised by *documenta 12*, there is something elegiac and mournful, even paradoxical, in declaring the passing of modernity into history.

Lewis was one of the many art historians to respond to the problematique of our relation to modernity and to weigh in on the debate around whether we are still modern. He defines modernity as an open-ended process of revolution, transformation, and change—a continual state of flux. The characteristic quality of modernism, the artistic movement that sought to adequately express modernity, was that of its *presentness*: the idea that the modern is *now*. As such, it was premised upon the rejection of historical forms and past traditions in the service of the creation of new ones. Thus, as Lewis notes, ruins were written into the fabric of modernism as the result of its contradictory relation to the past: yet, the “need, at one and the same time, to conjure the past, revere it, excise it and destroy it—extends to the very heart of modernism and undermines modernism from within.” Nevertheless, the distinction between modernism and modernity is crucial, for while the aesthetic forms of the former may belong to what Lewis calls “a different time, to a different knowledge, and finally, of course, to a different ambition” than those of the contemporary moment, this does *not* mean that the immediate past has become an instant antiquity; rather, it points to something a bit different. Modernism imbibed a utopian impulse, concerned, as it was, with the prefiguration of futures to come. As Lewis writes:

Modernism tried to make sense of the modern revolution in the world; it produced aesthetic objects, images and ideas in relation to the fact that modernity was deemed not yet to be complete, nor its ideas fully actualised. Modernism was, in other words, the idea that

modernity could be figured and interpolated with utopian possibility.

It is that sense of modernity-in-the-making—the idea that there was something undecided about it, where it was headed and what it could mean, and that it was possible to shape it—that has passed into history. Modernity is now *fait accompli*, a done deal, a sentiment which is captured in Lewis's rather frightening closing remark: “there is no longer such a theoretical premise or any speculation at the heart of the modern. It's here, it's now and it's triumphant.” *Post*-modernism, in other words, marks the passing of the openness and inventiveness, the creative sense that 'anything is possible', that characterized modernity.

I would, however, like to argue that this sentiment—that history is somehow completed—is symptomatic of an imaginary that has suffered profound losses and failed to recover from them. It signifies a state of political resignation, a profound melancholia, that forecloses all possibilities of a different future. Postmodernism, in this sense, is perhaps a reactionary movement—an acting out—born of trauma. The ruins of modernity need not stand for the end of history. But the fact that we are so concerned, less with the ruins of particular events and tragedies, than with the ruins of *modernity*, as recent scholarship demonstrates, is significant. Mourning, over the disappointed promises of modernity, over our dashed hopes, remains uncompleted. As such, the possibilities for the new remain tightly circumscribed within the confines of given forms. Working through these collective losses—remembering rather than repeating them in symptomatic behaviours—is essential to making a different future imaginable. If this work is not carried out, as Freud warned, there is the “danger of never finding anything

but what is already known” (1973e, 118). The 'already known' here is the frightening reality of neoliberal capitalism which dictates social, political, economic life, and with which postmodern forms often seem so complicit.

The ruins of modernity as well as those of modernism—ruins that haunt our 'postmodern age'—are the cultural signifiers of a profound state of loss, as they represent the ruins not of the past, not of antiquity or our prehistory, but of the *future*—an imagined future that the unstable and shifting present of modernity anticipated. As Smithson put it: “I am convinced that the future lies somewhere in the dumps of the non-historical past” (74). That loss then leaves us, to borrow Peter Fritzsche's (2004) phrase, also the title of his book, 'stranded in the present', in landscapes littered with the remnants of our most cherished dreams: “Time turns metaphors into *things*, and stacks them up in cold rooms, or places them in the celestial playgrounds of the suburbs” (Smithson, 74). Or, alternatively, it houses them in museums, the cultural mausoleums of our age, where they are revered as relics of a more hopeful time. The vital creative energy of an age was invested in a lost object, modernism, which strove to revolutionize life through art, and so continues to exert a power of fascination. It was also invested in that *other*, and today, much less fashionable, if not taboo, object of desire: *socialism*. Much like Macaulay, who would have preferred not to be faced with the ruins of her own time, contemporary ruins, whether in the form of nuclear disaster zones, abandoned industrial cities, the twin towers, or the Soviet Union, have become for us the “catalyst of nostalgic longing for those *other* ruins” (Munteán 2011)—the ruins of a modernity that, while confronting the

ravages of loss, was still able to remain hopeful about the future. It is this “dialectic of modernity” that, according to Huyssen, “should be remembered as we try to imagine a future beyond the false promises of corporate neoliberalism and the globalized shopping mall. The future, not just of nostalgia, is at stake” (20). Our backward looking gaze sees only the wreckage of the future in present forms, and fails to acknowledge the possibilities that are immanent in the present, persisting in spite of these recent catastrophes. This is a paralyzing form of melancholia that must be addressed if we are indeed to change the world.

I would argue that what is triumphant is not modernity, as Lewis suggests, but global capitalism. What is so often conceptualized as a radical break into a postmodern world, might be better understood as the universalization of capitalism, as Ellen Meiksins Wood (1997) has convincingly argued in her article, “Modernity, Postmodernity or Capitalism?” She writes:

capitalism, even in so-called advanced capitalist societies, has only now truly penetrated every aspect of life, the state, the practices and ideologies of ruling and producing classes, and the prevailing culture [...] I am speaking here about the *universalization* (or should I say the totalization?) of capitalism itself, its social relations, its laws of motion, its contradictions—the logic of commodification, accumulation and profit maximization penetrating every aspect of our lives (551).

Rather than speaking about postmodernity or globalization, Wood prefers to focus on the manner in which capitalism transforms social relations, in a way that “subjects human beings, their social relations and practices, to the imperatives of capital accumulation” (554). The process is one that has gradually been extended and deepened, until no sphere of life or geographical zone remains untouched. Capitalism has finally reached its “maturity,” she tells us: “It may be that we are seeing the first real effects of capitalism as a comprehensive system. We are seeing the consequences of capitalism as a system not only without effective rivals but also with no real escape routes” (558). What is passing into history is not necessarily modernity, but other systems of production, other configurations of social relations, and other ways of life that still existed alongside capitalism. Thus, to lament the failings of the utopian strivings of modernism is perhaps a little misguided. It is possible that what we are really lamenting, as many commentators, including Susan Buck-Morss (2000) and Wendy Brown (1999) have noted, is the loss of that alternative project, socialism—or at least one version of it—the hopes for which were damaged by the failures of Soviet-style state socialism and the lack of long-lasting revolutionary change. Nevertheless, the revolutionary and creative energies that modernism and socialism imbibed are not irretrievably lost and can be reclaimed and reinvested in visions for a different world, including those that imagine a different socialist project.

There were, indeed, many modernisms, as Marshall Berman (1988) discusses in *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, some of which harboured a more revolutionary vision

than others. The most revolutionary were those which were able to grasp the very tensions of the age and engage with them in a dialectical manner. Modernism, if it is not purely about aesthetics and style, is precisely about reinserting ourselves as historical agents into our social and political worlds, and using cultural expressions to help us do so. Berman argues against postmodern claims as to the closure of the possibilities associated with modernity. “Post-modernists,” he writes, “maintain that the horizon of modernity is closed, its energies exhausted—in effect, that modernity is passé”; whereas, he suggests, “modern life and art and thought have the capacity for perpetual self-critique and self-renewal” which persists in the present (9). To accept postmodern cynicism, to give up hope, is to accept the triumph of capitalism as the end of history. Modernism, according to Berman, was a form of artistic praxis: a dialectical process of being shaped by, and in turn seeking to shape, the world. Essential to that process was understanding, insight. Thus, modernists sought to grasp the creative-destructive forces about them—which Berman captures with Marx's famous maxim “all that is solid melts into air”—forces which reduced to rubble all former traditions and ways of life and thought. While we can conceive of modernity, in broad strokes, as a period of rapid transformation and flux, of the doing away with tradition and ushering in of the new, we must also understand the specific transformations wrought by capitalism, in particular, capitalism's way of producing ruins, a theme explored in depth in the following chapter. The reviving of a cultural and artistic movement with a vitality equal to that of modernism requires precisely that we strive to understand and engage with the forces of capitalism which

have reached their maturity and are radically refashioning the social, political, economic, and physical landscapes which we inhabit. Doing so demands that we overcome our 'left melancholy', to borrow Benjamin's term; it involves confronting an "unaccountable loss, some unavowably crushed ideal, contemporarily signified by the terms *left*, *socialism*, *Marx*, or *movement*" (Brown, 22), in order to rethink social movements in the aftermath of the ruins of a particular genre of socialism.

Symptomatic of the melancholy imagination is the wholesale rejection or disavowal of the former concerns with social and economic justice issues, with the 'grand narrative' interest in the betterment of the human condition or even human emancipation. Honest stock needs to be taken not merely of the failings of the movements that fell under the banner of socialism, but of what is still salvageable therein. Praxis means engaging socially, historically, and politically with those forces shaping everyday life, and these are the forces of ruination which shut down factories, lock out workers, wage wars, and create the conditions of disaster. The 'postmodern turn' in cultural studies tends to shift our concern away from these questions and concerns and towards other interests, related to the body, to difference, to (non)identity. While this undoubtedly opens up new and interesting fields of inquiry, this is not necessarily a solution to the problem posed by the lack of alternatives to capitalism in the wake of the failings of 'actually existing socialism' or an effective strategy of countering the above-mentioned forces that are making ruinous landscapes of our everyday life. Postmodernism is not an answer to capitalism, as Ellen Meiksins Wood writes: "The antithesis to that [capitalism],



of course, is not postmodernism but socialism” (559).

## VI.

As a final note, as I have been hinting at above, there has been a recent 'postmodern turn' in the literature on contemporary ruins, which emphasizes the bodily, the experiential, and the affective in the lived experience of ruins, in contrast to the more philosophical concerns to which ruins often give rise. Such approaches aim to explore and describe the embodied and sensual experience of being in or passing through a ruin. They are less concerned with traditional aesthetic categories, such as the beautiful, the picturesque, and the sublime, or with the aesthetic states associated with such judgements. Indeed, these contemporary theoretical approaches are distinct in that they move away from a preoccupation with representation in general. While art theory and critics of the past were interested in how a scene, for instance of an ancient ruin, might be represented in a painting, a poem, or a literary work, the approaches to which I am referring are interested instead in the lived experience of the landscape or architectural form in itself. They seek to describe the various sensations and responses stimulated by the interaction of the human sensorium with the materiality of a particular space and the objects, animate and inanimate, that occupy or traverse that space. As such, these approaches to the study of aesthetics might be said to fall under the category of spatial or situational aesthetics, tendencies which began to emerge in the 1960s in the discipline of art history to theorize the significance of spatial and social contexts to the practice of art. Encouraging a shift

away from thinking of art as a collection of objects that can be housed in a museum or gallery, such contemporary aesthetic theories focus instead upon the aesthetic dimensions of everyday life—with spatial aesthetics paying particular attention to the ways in which the senses and sensibility are shaped by the built environment, and situational or relational aesthetics highlighting how social interactions are conditioned by and structured around the allocation of spatial props. To approach aesthetics in this manner is to conceptualize the everyday as the terrain of artistic practice and aesthetic experience, and as such, as a site that is inherently invested with power. It is to explore, negotiate, and even contest, the boundaries between art and life, between aesthetics and politics. It is another genre of 'new ruins' that are at the centre of this discussion: industrial ruins. While these ruins will be discussed in the next chapter, here I would like to point to the ways in which these ruins are, in fact, also bound up with larger questions of loss, with the possibilities of a different future.

Tim Edensor's (2005) study of the decaying industrial landscapes of Great Britain, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality*, is exemplary in its emphasis on the embodied and experiential aspects of ruins. Each chapter delights in a different aspect of the wondrous world of sights, textures, smells, colours, and sounds that ruins offer to the intrepid explorer. He envisions the industrial ruin as a specie of unregulated theme park which offers free reign for sensorial engagement, veritably, an immense cabinet of curiosities. Within the ruin, individuals can experience alternative ways of being in their bodies and in the built environment. They can explore their capacities for action, and, in

particular, for destruction, in activities not normally sanctioned by society, including breaking, smashing, lifting, throwing, and screaming. Outside of the panopticon of institutionalized social life, which subjects social performance to surveillance and policing, the ruin is a space of spontaneous encounters, underground activities, underaged parties, or romantic liaisons: alternative aesthetic experiences which Edensor conceptualizes in terms of the carnivalesque, the transgressive, the illicit, or the uncanny. Creatively appropriated, the industrial ruin is rich in perceptual, sensual, and imaginative potential: it can stimulate flights of fancy or awaken memories, conjure up associations or allow perceptual exploration. Above all, it generates new experiences which offer an alternative to those more restrictive forms made available under the dominant regimes of power and knowledge. As Edensor states:

For me, however mundane they may seem, ruins still contain this promise of the unexpected. Since the original uses of ruined buildings has passed, there are limitless possibilities for encounters with the weird, with inscrutable legends inscribed on notice boards and signs, and with peculiar things and curious spaces which allow wide scope for imaginative interpretation, unencumbered by the assumptions which weigh heavily on highly encoded, regulated space. Bereft of these codings of the normative—the arrangements of things in place, the performance of regulated actions, the display of goods lined up as commodities or for show—ruined space is ripe

with transgressive and transcendent possibilities. Ruins offer spaces in which the interpretation and practice of the city becomes liberated from the everyday constraints which determine what should be done and where [...] (4).

As the above statement makes clear, Edensor celebrates that which escapes, exceeds, transgresses: he views alterity as a positive force in and of itself. As such, the industrial ruin, which he understands as falling outside the spatialization of regulatory regimes, is a site rife with emancipatory possibility.

As Edensor suggests, it is not just manual labour that subjects the body and the senses to strict regimentation, that conditions them through repetitive tasks and habitual movements. The spaces of city life are produced in a way that is intentional, bureaucratic, and ultimately commodified—each is assigned a particular social purpose or function, usually one that facilitates the flow of capital, the movement of people and goods, and the processes of accumulation. The disciplinary mechanisms of capitalism have penetrated the very fabric of everyday life: the “production of urban space is coterminous with regulation, surveillance, aesthetic monitoring and the prevalence of regimes which determine where and how things, activities and people should be placed” (54). Such arrangements constitute performative constellations; that is, they give rise to prescribed activities, “the 'preferential' or 'appropriate' practices organised around production, consumption and internalisation of norms” (33). Even leisure is oriented toward the passive consumption of commodities or spectacles. The range of possible

social experiences and interactions, strictly delineated by “commercial and bureaucratic regimes,” is nevertheless challenged in the ruin:

These orderings are violated in the ruin which, once an exemplary space of regulation, has become deliciously disordered. Ruins confound the normative spacings of things, practices and people. They open up possibilities for regulated urban bodies to escape their shackles in expressive pursuits and sensual experience, foreground alternative aesthetics about where and how things should be situated, and transgress boundaries between outside and inside, and between human and non-human spaces. (17-18)

The strength of this approach, which takes its cue from the critique of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991), is that it calls upon us to take seriously the arranging and deranging of the senses under the capitalist system. The production of needs, desires, and tastes is social and historical. This constitution of sensibility, of structures of feeling, is at the core of what it is to be a subject, and, crucially, a social and political being. As social activity and practice are increasingly structured around the consumption of spectacles which overstimulates the senses, Edensor and others are concerned with the consequent desensitizing or anaesthetizing effects, with the consolidation of unreflexive “patterns of identity” (81), the production of socio-political subjects who lack the capacity to formulate and articulate revolutionary desires. Edensor's approach, which values “immanent immersion” (91), affective and synaesthetic intensities, and *jouissance* as

potential political forces, is inspired by the Situationist movement, which foregrounded the place of the body and of desire in struggle. It was, indeed, May '68 which drove home the message that any alternative socio-political project, for instance, socialism, requires the re-education of the senses along with the recovering of our capacities—creative, destructive, and productive. Any revolution must certainly involve the transformation of everyday life alongside the seizure of political power; that is, it must include a deep institutional, spatial, and social transformation.

There are, however, some important limitations to the way in which Edensor locates the transformative potential of the industrial ruin in the individual's experience. The focus on the body as the primary site of the application of power and the reproduction of social norms, as well as their point of resistance, insightful as it is, shifts attention away from other levels of analysis, particularly of the socio-political and productive spheres. Indeed, while making visible the micro-operations of corporeal and sensorial management, it obscures the more essential social relations of production and consumption, the ways in which bodies are inscribed in larger structures of capital accumulation. The momentary transgression of boundaries, liberatory as it may feel, does not constitute a meaningful institutional challenge, does not address the structural and disciplinary mechanisms of capital. Fetishizing the moment of destabilization as the practice of politics is a dangerous move, in that it devalues longer-term, organized political movements, the day-to-day activity of which is not glamorous or exciting, but laborious. The question of subjectivity is, no doubt, one of the most pressing issues

facing the political Left in developed countries; yet, in recent decades, the formulation of the problematic in terms of class consciousness has been superseded by its formulation in terms of revolutionary desire, often shifting the focus away from the collective toward the individual. Celebrating the radical potentiality of alternative forms of experience is symptomatic of this tendency, and fails to address substantial social issues that revolve around basic human needs, like employment, housing, daycare, and so forth, whose redress requires a more meaningful confrontation with political power.

Furthermore, conceptualizing the industrial ruin as a site which falls outside the bureaucratic and regulatory regimes of society ignores the ways in which it is inherently and inextricably bound to the deeper logic of capitalism—both in how it has been produced and how it continues to be policed. Edensor is not entirely complicit in this regard. He opens his book by recognizing that ruins are manufactured by the uneven development of capitalism: “The production of spaces of ruination and dereliction are an inevitable result of capitalist development and the relentless search for profit” (4). However, he does not seek to problematize the logic of forced obsolescence, but rather, takes it for granted. While he affirms the value of ruins as sites of alternative forms of public life, “leisure, adventure, cultivation, acquisition, shelter and creativity” (21), he does not see in them any remaining economic viability—the activities that he imagines are on the margins of the political-economic system. Industrial ruins are not empty and void of function, he argues, but rich in positive material and aesthetic properties that encourage alternative socialities (9). Yet, at the socio-economic level, do not industrial

ruins actually represent wastelands? They are, ultimately, the material signifiers of loss: the loss of jobs, community sustenance, economic vitality, and frequently, government subsidies. As empty, often asset-stripped, shells of former economic activity, they serve as the visual remainder and reminder of a forced expulsion that was the product of hierarchical decision-making, of the lack of control that workers have over the means of their labour, of a system of production that fails to account for real social needs, but is, rather, dictated by the market and the bottom-line of maximizing profits. Fenced off, boarded up, policed—and therefore far from accessible to the general public—they stand over and against the community. As such, industrial ruins are symbols of dispossession rather than liberation.

One meaningful way to transform the loss that industrial ruins embody is to actually recuperate those spaces back into the socio-political, economic, or cultural life of the community. Industrial ruins, including factories and plants, can and have been recuperated collectively. As Sam Gindin (1998) points out, in his article “Socialism 'With Sober Senses': Developing Workers' Capacities,” there is a forceful historical precedent for this practice: during the Second World War North American factories were rapidly converted to war-time production; the manufacture of consumer goods was quickly shifted to the manufacture of weapons and air planes for the war effort. Gindin alerts us to the fact that it is possible to convert factories to other uses that are *socially*-dictated, instead of determined by market imperative. In Argentina, for instance, on the heels of the economic crisis of 2001, we have seen workers recuperating factories for



collectivized production after being shut out by the owners, as Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis's film, *The Take* (2006), documents in depth. Other such social uses include community or childcare centres, cooperative housing, and spaces for the arts and culture. Reclaiming privatized spaces as social spaces in this way resists the capitalist social logic of dispossession, privatization, and profit maximization which makes ruins of our personal lives and the vitality of our communities.

Ruins, if we think creatively and collectively, offer us the possibility of imagining and even enacting another future, of exploring different social relations in concrete spaces. Cities across the world, from Buenos Aires to Detroit, are becoming the fertile terrain for such experiments which bring together political, economic, and artistic concerns. Beyond the melancholy imagination, the possibilities for action are endless. The losses of the past present new opportunities in the present which, once recognized, can be realized through collective action. Ruins must be viewed as the ground upon which we can rebuild our lives and communities in more vital, just, and creative ways. While they are certainly the signifiers of loss, they are also the prompts that encourage us to remember and revitalize our dashed hopes. The 'dialectic of modernity' discussed in this chapter, means “maintaining through the groundwork of memory a constant vigil over the prospect of past and present brutality” and forms of domination, while not allowing the crimes and disappointments of the past to shatter our dreams for the future (Kolotroni, 154).

2.

## Manufacturing Ruins

### I.

In this chapter, I will discuss the manufacture of ruins: as capitalism is involved in the production of space, it is also and equally engaged in the production of ruins. This double aspect of capitalism can be traced to the processes of “creative destruction,” a term coined by Schumpeter (2008), but used here to refer to the crisis-ridden character of capitalism first discussed by Karl Marx, and developed by Mandel (1976), Harvey (2004), and other Marxist thinkers. As we shall see, Marx and Engels (1972) identified the logic of capital as a “revolutionizing” one, in the sense that its internal contradictions lead it to constantly transform itself through violent means, creating a situation in which the inverse of the accumulation of capital becomes its forced and necessary destruction. In this context, the ruins created by the devalorization of capital and its increasing rationalization eventually lay down the conditions for the rate of profit to rise once more, as damages caused to landscapes, buildings, and output production by the crisis open up new areas for the expansion of the market. The latter coalesces, as Mandel has

explained, in “the recovery of the rate of profit to restimulate entrepreneurial investments, and hence to launch an upswing in production” (1976, 439). Thus, capitalism can be read as a system of catastrophe-making, akin to Walter Benjamin's (2007) image of history as a mounting pile of debris. Although much of this chapter's argument relates to political economy, the goal of its exploration of the internal contradictions of capitalism is to bring into relief the spatial and structural formations left behind them—the complexity and totality of which are formulated by David Harvey (2001), with his concept of the 'geography of capital accumulation', and Edward Burtynsky (2006), with his visual body of work entitled 'manufactured landscapes'. Debates about crisis theories and the tendency of the rate of profit to fall will only be discussed in passing, for what is interesting for our purposes here is that ruination is written into these landscapes: devaluation and devastation strike, inescapably, at the heart of capitalism's built environments. Thus, it is not only theorists but also artists who are drawing our attention to the fact that the spaces of advanced capitalist societies are littered with ruins—abandoned plants, mine pits and tailings ponds, or cities such as Detroit and New Orleans, devastated by deindustrialization or by the aftermath of disasters like Hurricane Katrina—that question the very distinction between the natural and human-made. Meanwhile, the profiteering that goes on in the wake of such catastrophes has led some, including Naomi Klein (2007) and Mark Schuller (2008), to herald the rise of a 'disaster capitalism' that seizes opportunistically upon the rubble to 'reconstruct' social and spatial orders in service of a neoliberal agenda. What is clear is

that processes inextricably environmental, political, and economic are remaking the geography of our cities in ways that are bound up with capital. While this chapter will explore the spatial side of this geography, it will also emphasize the strange temporalities of these ruins of capital, what Nick Yablon (2009) terms their 'untimely' aspect. Modern ruins defy the 'natural' processes of decay in multiple ways—for instance, in buildings, often the victims of private-public ventures, that fall into disrepair before ever being completed, or in objects that are (pre)destined to ruin by their planned obsolescence. Concepts like Robert Smithson's (1996) 'ruins in reverse', as well as the 'day-old' or 'temporary' ruins discussed by Yablon, capture this idea. Finally, we must consider the ways in which the production of ruins is connected with the human imaginary—with our ability to grasp the forces shaping the social and physical landscapes which we presently inhabit and to imagine different possibilities for the future.

## II.

In *Capital, Volume 3*, Marx addresses a key component of his theory of capital: the general tendency toward a falling rate of profit. According to his formula, the development of the “social productivity of labour” results in a situation in which “the growing use of machinery and fixed capital generally enables more raw and ancillary materials to be transformed into products in the same time by the same number of workers, i.e with less labour” (1991, 318). As the means of production progressively advance, products can be made with less living labour or 'variable' capital relative to total

or 'constant' capital than previously. The increasing efficiency of production results in a situation in which 'dead labour'—the productive forces crystallized in capital—rules over 'living labour'. This means that products contain less value or congealed labour time, as “[e]ach individual product, taken by itself, contains a smaller sum of labour than at a lower stage of development of production” (1991, 318). Thus, we see a cheapening of the products of labour, translating into a decline in the rate of surplus value. As Marx writes:

Since the mass of living labour applied continuously declines in relation to the mass of objectified labour that it sets in motion, i.e. the productively consumed means of production, the part of this living labour that is unpaid and objectified in surplus-value must also stand in an ever-decreasing ratio to the value of the total capital applied. But the ratio between the mass of surplus-value and the total capital applied in fact constitutes the rate of profit, which must therefore steadily fall (1991, 319).

This is, according to Marx, the “peculiar” characteristic of capitalism. The increasing efficiency of production, or what he calls its “higher organic composition,” which could actually be socially useful if translated into the realm of freedom (the shorter work day) under the economic relations of socialist society, becomes a central contradiction under the social-property relations particular to the capitalist mode of production, one which must be constantly addressed through restructuring or necessary destruction in order to

ensure the survival of capitalism.

As such, in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels point to the crisis-ridden character of capitalism. As they see it, the history of “modern bourgeois society” is one of tensions and strife caused by the friction between the progressive development of productive forces and the existing social-property relations, which are, for them, outmoded. Of the “commercial crises,” one of the main outcomes of this contradiction, witnessed in their time as much as in our own, they write “their periodical return puts the existence of the entire bourgeois society on its trial, each time more threateningly” (1972, 340). It is worth quoting at length as they draw out the consequences:

In these crises, a great part not only of the existing products, but also of the previously created productive forces, are periodically destroyed. In these crises, there breaks out an epidemic that, in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity—*the epidemic of over-production*. Society suddenly finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism; it appears as if a famine, a universal war of devastation, had cut off the supply of every means of subsistence; industry and commerce seem to be destroyed; and why? Because there is too much civilisation, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce. The productive forces at the disposal of society no longer tend to further the development of the conditions of bourgeois property; on the contrary, they have become

too powerful for these conditions, by which they are fettered, and so soon as they overcome these fetters, they bring disorder into the whole of bourgeois society, endanger the existence of bourgeois property. The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them. And how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones. That is to say, *by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented* (1972, 340; my emphasis).

Under the social relations of capitalism, the development of the productive forces becomes a drag on the very processes of accumulation. The contradiction inherent in the system is that while competition spells the constant revolutionizing of the means of production, increasing mechanization, and the development of a massive architecture of fixed capital, at the same time, the very value of the products of this infrastructural capacity is undermined by their overproduction, which is an attempt to maintain profits in the face of their tendency to continuously decline. The results are absurd: the products of this 'civilized' system are systematically destroyed, creating scarcity where there has been abundance, and the imperial machine, with its violent measures, is set in motion to secure fleeting respite in new markets. Instead of advancing in the direction of freedom and

security for all, capitalism undermines these, forcing workers into the conditions of exploitation and uncertainty. The dream of progress becomes, from a literary point of view, a farce—but a terrifying nightmare for all those who live it.

Thus, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx once again addresses this fundamental “incompatibility,” between the productive powers of labour and the constricting form of capital by which they are “fettered,” as one which inevitably gives way to crises. While attempts are made to assuage this tension, they fail to address the deeper contradictions inherent in the system, and therefore, to provide any lasting solution. The only real resolution is, according to Marx, a corresponding transformation of the social relations of production—a revolutionary demand:

The growing incompatibility between the productive development of society and its hitherto existing relations of production expresses itself in bitter contradictions, crises, spasms. The violent destruction of capital not by relations external to it, but rather as a condition of its self-preservation, is the most striking form in which advice is given it to be gone and to give room to a higher state of social production (1973, 749-750).

As we can see, Marx identifies capitalism as a system of crisis, a point which David Harvey and others critical theorists will pick up on. Interestingly, the tendency toward the falling rate of profit leads to the forcible destruction of capital—through devaluation, destruction, and imperial war, among other methods—as the precondition for its renewed



accumulation. Thus capitalism depends not only upon the building up of environments (and the putting into place of fixed capital) to facilitate the stockpiling of commodities, but also their *intentional razing*; it is absolutely bound up with the destruction of built environments and manufactured goods as a condition of its survival. This is the process that has come to be known as 'creative destruction', and is, I argue, at the heart of the manufacture of ruins—the *other* side of the production of space.

Revolutionary Marxist theorist Ernest Mandel attempted to apply Marx's analysis of these dynamic contradictions to post-Second World War capitalism by looking at 'long waves' of capitalist development while also formulating an analysis of what he considered to be a long-drawn-out recession of global capitalism since the 1970s. For him, economic crises under capitalism are inevitable as commodities (exchange values) are overproduced, in sharp contrast with pre-capitalist economic crises, "which are essentially", as he explains, "crises of underproduction of use-values" (2003). It is exceptional in human history that, under economic development according to capitalist imperatives, accumulation reaches such levels that interruptions of economic growth occur no longer "because too few commodities have been produced but, on the contrary, because a mountain of produced commodities finds no buyers" (2003). What follows are successions of corporate bankruptcies, higher rates of unemployment, and diminished amounts of goods and services sold, including raw materials and machinery. As production and earnings are reduced, new ruins are created, for outputs are wasted, buildings are abandoned, and machines lay idle. Outside the confines of industrial

production, residential houses are emptied of their inhabitants as banks evict families unable to pay their debts.

Mandel observes that “[a]t the end of the declining spiral [...] production can pick up again; and as the crisis has both increased the rate of surplus-value (through a decline of wages and a more ‘rational’ labour organisation) and decreased the value of capital, the average rate of profit increases” (2003). According to him, this process generally allows for investment to be stimulated: “Employment increases, value production and national income expand, and we enter a new cycle of economic revival, prosperity, overheating and the next crisis” (2003). Crisis and recovery cycles might, however, be more complex than what this schematic exposition suggests. David McNally (2011), for instance, in his book *Global Slump*, has convincingly made the case that the recovery of corporate profitability is far from translating automatically into new jobs, incomes, or social services (24). As he suggests, the end of the exceptional economic boom of the post-World War II era should not be understood, as is generally the case among Leftist scholars, as a protracted ‘crisis’ of capitalism, but rather as “a pure and simple program for restoring corporate profits” (25-26). In his view, the neoliberal period “did boost corporate profitability after the recessions of 1974–75 and 1980–82 [...] substantially enough to move the global economy out of crisis for a quarter-century” (49). Moving out of crisis, however, is no synonym of prosperity for all, quite the contrary, for capitalism begets ruins and devastation in ‘good’ times as in ‘bad’. As such, it is a mistake to associate the creation of industrial ruins with a specific ‘moment’ within capitalist

cycles—the downward turn—for there is no discrepancy between capitalist growth and the profound industrial restructuring that transforms infrastructural landscapes in ways that rarely suit the requirements of sustainable development or respect workers' ability to take care of the physical environment in which they live. The most local of matters thus comes to appear as much out of reach of social power as the broader governance of the international political economy.

Critical Marxist geographer David Harvey was one of the first to explicitly highlight the complex geographical dimensions of this process. As is evident in his essay “The 'New' Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession,” the problem of overaccumulation creates a rather strange scenario in which the surpluses of capital must be either destroyed or absorbed to allow the processes of accumulation to be rejuvenated and expanded. As he writes:

[there is] a pervasive tendency of capitalism, understood theoretically by way of Marx's theory of the falling rate of profit, to produce crises of overaccumulation [...] If system-wide devaluations (and even destruction) of capital and of labour power are not to follow, then ways must be found to absorb these surpluses. Geographical expansion and spatial reorganization provide one such option. But this cannot be divorced from temporal fixes either, since geographical expansion often entails investment in long-lived physical and social infrastructures (in transport and communications

networks and education and research, for example) that take many years to return their value to circulation through the productive activity they support (2004, 63).

Harvey is pointing toward the resiliency of capitalism, perhaps underestimated by Marx, which finds multiple strategies to avoid or escape the crises internal to it—strategies with spatial and temporal dimensions and consequences. He identifies two important routes that have been taken historically to extend the life of the system beyond its contradictions: “temporal deferment and geographical expansion” or “spatio-temporal fixes” (2004, 65)—traditionally thought of as imperialism and long-term infrastructural development—both of which radically refashion the landscape and allow capital to be, at least temporarily, absorbed. “Accumulation by dispossession,” the defining feature of what he calls “the new imperialism,” is another strategy of pursuing the expanded reproduction of capital by extending and intensifying exploitation (and thereby increasing profits) by means of the processes of commodification and privatization, in which credit and financial systems have come to play a major role. Thus, capitalism, fleeing crisis, produces its social and physical geographies, which have reached a global scale:

The production of space, the organization of wholly new territorial divisions of labour, the opening up of new and cheaper resource complexes, of new dynamic spaces of capital accumulation, and the penetration of pre-existing social formations by capitalist social relations and institutional arrangements (such as rules of contract

and private property arrangements) provide multiple ways to absorb existing capital and labour surpluses (2004, 65-66).

Yet, sophisticated as they are, these strategies can and do fail, and the outcome is, as we shall see, a further devastation that touches both the geographical and social landscapes.

Influenced by the work of Henri Lefebvre on the production of space, Harvey's ingenuity is to introduce the geographical dimension into the theorization of the processes of capital. Social and productive relations are spatialized, which means that we need to take account of built environments in our social and political analyses, as they are potentially revealing of the deeper logic at work in the capitalist system. His analysis of the creative-destructive process of capitalism's territorialization and expansion gestures toward the ways in which the manufacture of ruins could be read as *part and parcel* of capital's production of space:

capital necessarily creates a physical landscape in its own image at one point in time only to have to destroy it at some later point in time as it pursues geographical expansions and temporal displacements as solutions to the crises of overaccumulation to which it is regularly prone. Thus is the *history of creative destruction* (with all manner of deleterious social and environmental consequences) *written into the evolution of the physical and social landscape of capitalism* (Harvey 2004, 66; my emphasis).

Seen in this light, the history of capitalism becomes *a history of ruin-making*—the

creation and re-creation of the built environment through continual destruction. The architectural and spatial assemblage of productive forces and social organization is constantly undergoing decimation and re-configuration. Much like Walter Benjamin (2007), whose image of the *angelus novus* recounts history not as progress but as a mounting pile of debris, the history of capitalism is one in which productive capacities are built up only later to be destroyed, and with devastating human consequences. When the crises of overproduction are resolved through devaluation, destruction, de-industrialization, or war, it is the most marginal groups and persons in society who suffer the greater harm. The loss of lives or of livelihoods, of homes or hopes for the future, are just some of the many outcomes. As capitalism produces landscapes of ruin, those who inhabit those landscapes are inevitably affected—shut out of factories, dispossessed of their houses, and barred access to a future of real possibility in terms of the development of their human capacities and the realm of freedom.

Baran and Sweezy (1968), in their book *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order*, argue for a reading of contemporary capitalism in the core capitalist countries as the phase of monopoly capital, in which the rules that govern competitive capitalism, particularly those of price competition, no longer apply (though whether free competition ever truly existed is another question). Yet, while the dominance of large corporate conglomerates in the international market alters the playing field, leading to other forms of competition such as the sales effort, the essential thrust of their argument is in tune with both Marx and Harvey. The development of the forces of

production remains fettered by the organization of socio-economic relations: there is a “contradiction between the increasing rationality of society's methods of production and the organizations which embody them on the one hand and the undiminished elementality and irrationality in the functioning and perception of the whole” (341). While we have developed the capacity to produce enormous quantities of goods, as evidenced by the growing surplus, capitalists must find ways to absorb this surplus (of capacity and products) in order to maintain profitability; the “pervasive problem” of this society becomes that of “too much” (110). They thus seek out ways of “maintaining scarcity in the midst of potential plenty,” creating a completely irrational situation of poverty and want even in the heart of the world's most rich and powerful country, the US (337). Thus the strange, once inconceivable, fact “that idle men and idle machines coexist with deprivation at home and starvation abroad, that poverty grows in step with affluence, that enormous amounts of resources are wasted in frivolous and often harmful ways” (1). The features of this system of monopolization are the underutilization of productive capacity, chronic unemployment, and waste (a form of destruction). Indeed, Baran and Sweezy emphasize that planned obsolescence, the repackaging of the same products to create new demand, and advertising are just some of the many ways that large amounts of capital are necessarily redirected along channels that are not socially useful; in fact, planning for social needs in such a system is impossible. Contemporary capitalism is a “wasteland,” both literally and figuratively—a ruined landscape littered with broken things (141).

If capitalism has always restructured in ways that lead to ruination, what is specific about the current moment? We have seen that the ways in which contemporary capitalist societies produce waste at home is one feature, while the 'new imperialism' abroad is another. To answer this question in a different way, we need to consider the distinction that is often made between modernity and postmodernity. As we shall see in more detail below, ruin-making has been intricately bound with capitalist modernity. The logic of creative destruction is the dynamism that drives the constant revolutionizing of the system. The so-called “postmodern moment” does not differ in this fundamental sense. Indeed, theorists of postmodernity insist that in this so-called postmodern phase or condition of capitalism, “the basic rules of a capitalist mode of production continue to operate as invariant shaping forces in historical-geographical development” (Harvey 1990, 121). What is different about the contemporary era is what Harvey calls, in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, “the *regime of accumulation* and its associated *mode of social and political regulation*” (121). Essentially what this means is that the ways in which labour is composed, society organized, and capital invested *have* changed. Harvey makes a useful distinction between the contemporary configuration of production and reproduction and that of the Fordist-Keynesian era (1945-1973). The latter was a regime of mass production and consumption, accompanied by “a new kind of rationalized, modernist, and populist democratic society,” which supported a golden era of capitalist development, a long boom that lasted until the crises of the 1970s (126). The restructuring of capital, again through processes of creative destruction, was the outcome



of that wave of crises. To briefly summarize Harvey's argument, industrial capital suffered whereas financial capital gained ground, “achiev[ing] a degree of autonomy from real production unprecedented in capitalism's history” (194). This process, still ongoing to some degree, has ushered in what Harvey describes as a regime of “flexible” accumulation, characterized by space-time compression, structural unemployment, austerity, deregulation, monopolization, and neoliberal governance.

For the core capitalist countries, once centres of industrial activity of an enormous scale, this transition has refashioned the social and physical landscape. The restructuring of capital has led to a new global organization of production and consumption, commencing a decades long process of deindustrialization in much of North America and Western Europe. The ruins of capitalist industry—contemporary ruins—litter the cities of these continents. The social consequences, in the form of unemployment and the devitalization of communities, just to name a few, have also been ruinous. But there are other ruins too, less recognizable as such: those that have resulted from decades of poor, disorderly city planning and development according to neoliberal imperatives. Such processes have left communities vulnerable to disasters that are no longer straightforwardly 'natural'. Ruin-making has become not just the necessary, if unintended, side-effect of capitalism's driving force of creative destruction, but the latest frontier for profit maximization. Disasters are another aspect of life that have been commodified in the interests of extending and prolonging accumulation. I would like to turn now to a closer examination of these forces that are making and remaking the social

and physical terrain of North America to illuminate the social consequences of ruin-making in greater depth.

### III.

As gestured to above, two forces in particular are fashioning and re-fashioning the urban environments of North America in the contemporary context: deindustrialization and disaster. On the one hand, we are witnessing the effects of the shift from the 'Fordist' to the 'post-Fordist' or 'flexible' regime of capital accumulation, which has resulted in the restructuring of the economy and the decline of the manufacturing sector. As capital attempts to deal with crisis—seen most recently in the wave financial meltdowns and the near-global recession—new markets, not only for products but also for labour, are increasingly being sought abroad in the global South. In the last few decades, this tendency has caused a marked shift in Western capitalist countries to a service sector economy, which, when combined with neoliberalism and austerity measures, has resulted in the creation of precarious labour conditions, part-time employment, and the loss of unionized factory work, particularly in the automotive sector. Mobility, in contrast to territorialization, is the strategy behind the transnationalization of capital, which has seen factories move overseas where labour is cheaper and regulations virtually non-existent. Outsourcing, contract-work, and other just-in-time production methods have replaced the traditional factory line geared toward mass production which was popularized by Henry Ford. Rapid deindustrialization, particularly of the heavily industrialized north-eastern

and mid-western United States and Canada, as well as in Western Europe, has been the outcome of these changes, and has left behind ruins of a scope far greater than those of classical Antiquity—massive factories, industrial zones, decaying city centres, and vast urban prairies.

On the other hand, we have seen a recent wave of disasters whose causal factors, blending as they do ecological crisis with political decision-making and bad city planning, are, at first glance, rather difficult to pinpoint. The scale of devastation wrought by these is almost incomprehensible. What has become evident, however, is that, in the contemporary epoch, crisis and catastrophe zones have become fertile ground for capital accumulation, through corporate reconstruction efforts, as well as the privatization of social goods and the commons. This suggests that capitalism, in the 'postmodern' era, is increasingly taking advantage of the very ruinous landscapes it systematically produces by reincorporating them back into the cycles of accumulation as a terrain for unbridled profiteering. Creative destruction—a basic logic of capitalism—is evident as the driving principle behind both deindustrialization and disaster, but it has reached new scales and swept away old taboos and pretences. Ruin-making is, in other words, the new frontier of accumulation, the newest scene of mass dispossession, rather than just a by-product of restructuring. Capitalism's crises, and the responses to these crises that lead its elite in search of new frontiers of accumulation, take us back to the ruins as the latest source of profitability in an ongoing struggle to deepen and expand the production of surplus value.

Let us address the first process mentioned above, deindustrialization, taking the city of Detroit, Michigan, as an obvious and powerful example of the havoc wreaked as a result. Harvey (2004) ties the processes of deindustrialization back to the ways in which surpluses of capital are absorbed by embedding them in the built environment, or the infrastructures of production and consumption—which, in the case of Detroit, are primarily those of the automotive industry. Investment in such massive industrial infrastructure, requires, as Harvey points out, the backing of 'fictitious' capital, or credit, which must later be realized, or returned in real terms. Yet, these strategies to “fix” capital through territorialization end up serving as an impediment to the expanded reproduction of capital, which must eventually move onto new ground: “Vast quantities of capital fixed in place act as a drag upon the search for a spatial fix elsewhere” (2004, 66). As Harvey points out, this inbuilt drive toward “geographical expansions, reorganizations and reconstructions often threaten, however, the values fixed in place but not yet realized” (2004, 66). In such a situation, there are few possible outcomes—massive devaluation, fiscal crisis, and/or capital flight—each devastating to the given spatial and social order. Harvey describes this conundrum, in which overcoming crisis necessarily requires some form of destruction of fixed capital:

If capital does move out, it leaves behind a trail of devastation (the de-industrialization experienced in the 1970s and 1980s in the heartlands of capitalism, like Pittsburgh and Sheffield, as well as in many other parts of the world, such as Bombay illustrates the point).

If overaccumulated capital does not or cannot move, on the other hand, then it stands to be devalued directly (2004, 66).

Deindustrialized landscapes have come to characterize much of North America and Western Europe. In an era of transnational and mobile capital, factories have been increasingly re-located to low-wage regions, most of which are to be found in the global South. The labour market, as well as weak regulations and cheap raw materials, in these relatively undeveloped areas facilitate the search for increased profits. However, this process too has limits, as these zones become increasingly subjected to the logic of capital; capitalism's expansionary tendencies are checked as it becomes a global system with virtually no geographical regions left untouched. In Canada and the US, the resultant collapse of the manufacturing sector in the wake of this geographical expansion and reorganization of capital has left entire cities, particularly those economically non-diversified and reliant upon heavy industry, in a state of disrepair. Detroit, as we shall see, serves as a highly visible and symbolic example of this process, one which has captured the imagination of numerous critics, film-makers, and artists.

Much has been written, filmed, and photographed of America's 'Motor City', once known affectionately in the past as the 'Paris of the Midwest'—a centre of high art and architecture. Detroit long served as a symbol of American prosperity and power in the interwar and even post-war period until its decline. Over the last several decades, it has also been a highly visible site of racial conflict and segregation, urban poverty and decay. It was in Detroit that Henry Ford first introduced his motorcar, and later, the Fordist

model of mass production based on the assembly line, which transformed existing production methods and accumulation strategies. It was here that the American dream, of comfortable consumerism and a home in the suburbs, was perhaps the most nearly achieved, at least by some, if only for a short while. Manufacturing became a bastion of unionized labour—the stable, well-paying employment behind the mass-purchasing power that would help fuel two decades of postwar economic growth. The automobile industry, as has been well-documented, provided the both the vehicles that permitted so-called 'white flight' from the downtown core to the surrounding suburban neighbourhoods, as well as the wages that allowed factory workers to purchase their own model (Darden et al. 1987; Farley et al. 2000; Rucker & Upton 2007). Thus, it has been remarked with a certain irony that the automotive industry sowed the seeds of its own decline, as it played a key role in defining the new socio-spatial relations that were to be consolidated in postwar period in America: suburbanization, the spatialization of inequality, and profound regional variations of development (Darden et al. 1987; Surgue 2005). The fate of Detroit, as a city that now stands in ruins, must be understood in the full light of these factors. Ruin-making in contemporary capitalism broadly, but here, in the case of Detroit specifically, can be traced back to historical patterns of geographical development and (sub)urbanization—with undeniable racial and class dimensions—as strategies that responded to the economic conditions of the interwar and immediate postwar period, including recession and unemployment, but ultimately provided only short-term relief to the deeper crises of capital discussed above.

As critical theorists have pointed out, Detroit's spatial logic has been defined by an uneven development, the result of a “spatial trajectory of investment and divestment, economic growth and decline,” which has unfolded very much upon racial lines (Darden et al. 1987, 11). In *Detroit, Race and Uneven Development*, Darden et al. trace this pattern of development back to the 1940s, when policies of suburbanization, fuelled by transportation and housing subsidies, were actively pursued at the federal and local levels, encouraging urban dispersal and industrial relocation. This process fragmented Detroit, creating a duality between the decaying downtown core with its satellite working-class neighbourhoods, and prospering suburban municipalities, such as Dearborn and Troy, which are today the still relatively prosperous seat of administrative and service activities. As they write: “Auto decentralization, then the reorganization of commercial capital from downtown to regional shopping centers gave birth to two Detroits” (1987, 11). In other words, the geographical logic of capitalism produced not only particular *physical* environments through the mapping of circuits and infrastructure of production and consumption onto the landscape, but also, and perhaps more importantly, *social* geographies of division and inequality. That is why, today, Detroit is not uniformly desolate and decayed, even if the city itself is bankrupt; rather certain sectors and areas—for the most part gated communities safely set away from the downtown core—continue to receive investment while others are left to the processes of ruin: “economic reorganization in response to the industrial crisis is bringing with it a spatial redistribution of capital that continues to advantage selected suburbs” (Darden

1987, 12).

Thomas Sugrue (1996) explains the racial dimension of this process of uneven development in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. He describes how as African Americans moved north in the early half of the twentieth century in search of better jobs in America's 'Rust Belt', they were met by racist attitudes and discriminatory practices, both in the areas of work and residence. Detroit's geography developed in a racialized fashion, with the white and black areas of town segregated, the former situated outside the downtown core and subsidized in various ways, and the later ghettoized and impoverished. Detroit developed not as one city but as many, characterized by markedly different socio-economic realities: black neighbourhoods were spatially isolated from their white counterparts, encouraging patterns of investment and divestment that benefited the privileged communities. Sugrue thus identifies the decline of Detroit—in which over a million people have left the city in a mass exodus and hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost—as, at root, an “urban crisis” fuelled by racialized poverty and uneven development:

Detroit's postwar urban crisis emerged as the consequence of two of the most important, interrelated, and unresolved problems in American history: that capitalism generates economic inequality and that African Americans have disproportionately borne the impact of that inequality (1996, 5).

Uneven development, coupled with neoliberal urban policies, exacerbated social



inequalities, leading to social struggle and racial conflict. Thus, David Harvey, in words that echo those of Surgue, writes:

the urbanization process was as geographically uneven as were the income streams that flowed to different segments of the working class. While the suburbs flourished, the inner cities stagnated and declined. While the white working class flourished, in relative terms the impacted inner city minorities—African-American in particular—did not. The result was a whole sequence of inner-city uprisings—Detroit, Watts, culminating in spontaneous uprisings in some forty cities across the United States in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 (2012, 16).

Creative destruction is a highly uneven spatial process—one with racial and class dimensions and consequences. Inequality is a spatial practice, as much as a social one. Darden et al. and Surgue, much like Harvey, identify the spatial logic of capitalism as a key factor in facilitating or hindering its processes of accumulation. As George Steinmetz remarks in his piece, “Detroit: A Tale of Two Cities,” the “nonsimultaneity of the urban and automotive crises” suggests that they are non-identical—separate but interrelated problems (2009, 765). The spectacular fall of Detroit is not due merely to bad management or lack of competitiveness of the auto-industry on the global market, or to the crisis of overproduction faced by manufacturing sector in general, but to the very ways in which space is occupied, invested, and organized—in this case along class and

racial lines.

The process of uneven investment, divestment, and reorganization of capital—of creative destruction, which is manifestly more destructive than creative in Detroit—continues until today. Photographic images of the city, which abound in books and on the internet, reveal huge expanses of grassland where houses and factories once stood: “You have to see 189 acres of vacant land in the middle of a big city to understand the term urban prairie,” writes John Gallagher in his book *Reimagining Detroit* (2010, 26). This so-called urban prairie poses developmental questions of a kind not hitherto faced by urban environments habitually struggling with the problems of expansion, rather than those of contraction: “Nobody trains to deal with emptiness other than by filling it with traditional development—housing, retail space, industrial parks—but that kind of development is inadequate to deal with the scope of Detroit's prairies” (Gallagher 2010, 23). As the recent film *Detropia* (2012) demonstrates in its filming of a public town-hall meeting, strategies proposed by the mayor and his team of consultants to “consolidate” or “down-size” the city have been met with hostility among its impoverished residents who feel that once again they are being made the victims of uneven development, forced to give up their homes and move elsewhere. Nevertheless, the local inhabitants *are* reimagining these spaces, through, for instance, the implementation of urban parks and community gardens, but the long-term health and vitality of the community certainly cannot be separated from deeper attempts to revitalize the economy and address the legacy of uneven development and creative destruction that has so radically and rapidly

transformed the city's landscape.

There are, in other words, two broad tendencies at work in Detroit's ruination: an economic and an urban crisis, which are, however, inseparable. Both must be traced back to the drive to revolutionize the processes of accumulation, pursued through territorialization, geographical expansion, (de)industrialization, investment and divestment, and the reorganization of capital, which results in profound unevenness of development, even at the level of the metropolis itself. While the strategies producing unevenness can create opportunities for exploitation, it is also a highly volatile process which can backfire. As Robert Brenner argues in *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, “capitalism tends to develop the productive forces to an unprecedented degree, and [it] tends to do so in a destructive, because *unplanned and competitive*, manner” (2006, 25). The uneven development of the means of production, though stimulating competition among sectors or manufacturers, also creates tendencies toward over-production and over-competition. Fixed capital, according to Brenner, is particularly “vulnerable to new productions with more advanced techniques operating at lower costs” (2006, 32). While certain sectors or regions of the economy surge ahead, taking advantage of new technologies and cost-cutting measures, others are left behind, unable to recuperate the investments sunk into masses of territorialized capital. In the case of Detroit, this spatial logic divided and developed the city such that, when crisis befell the automobile industry, vast stretches of the urban metropolis had already been made vulnerable to decay. Ruins were built into the process of development from the outset, through the systematic

manufacturing of divestment, underfunding, and poverty.

#### IV.

I would like now to take a look at that other force mentioned above that is refashioning the physical and social geographies of the global South, and increasingly, the core capitalist countries of the global North: disaster. An entire field of contemporary study has emerged to theorize the rise of so-called 'disaster capitalism'. As Mark Schuller (2008) explains, researchers are beginning to understand natural catastrophes—such as floods, earthquakes, or hurricanes—as merely the “triggering events” to what should be conceptualized as much broader political and economic disasters (17). Social policy, uneven development, economic decisions, and political factors are among the factors at work in what he terms “the disaster after the disaster”—the *secondary catastrophe* that disproportionately affects the most marginal groups and regions in our society (18). He points to neoliberal capitalism as *manufacturing* the states of 'vulnerability' and 'hazard' which are then exacerbated following 'natural' crises such as Hurricane Katrina—a relatively new phenomenon. Development, an uneven and unplanned process—particularly in the era of flexible accumulation and neoliberal governance—as we have seen above, leaves certain physical and social landscapes which are more vulnerable to damage than others. The creative destructive process often results in poorly planned metropolitan regions. The “technical' decisions about land use and development,” Schuller suggests, which are in existence long before a disaster strikes, help to explain

the scale and the pattern of devastation that emerges in its wake (17). Thus, institutional practices and policies are pervaded by structural forms of inequality which organize spatial and social relations in hierarchical ways. Indeed, as Alexander De Waal notes in his introduction to the book, *Capitalizing on Catastrophe*, disasters reveal the socio-political fault lines of a society, exposing class and race divisions, as well as institutionalized power arrangements: “disasters [...] strike disproportionately in locations with poor infrastructure and where people are poor and politically marginal. Entirely man-made disasters such as wars display even greater spatial and political bias” (2008, ix). Disasters are not wholly natural events; rather, they are unleashed within the channels opened up by capitalism's geography of accumulation and dispossession—channels which have increased and widened over the last few decades. Moreover, the crisis-ridden character of capitalism has led it into the domain of disaster 'reconstruction' as the newest frontier of its expanded reproduction. Zones of disaster promise tremendous profits, as well as an exceptional opportunity for economic restructuring and socio-spatial engineering according to the principles of neoliberalism. Thus, Schuller defines *disaster capitalism* as the “instrumental use of catastrophe (both so-called natural and human-mediated disasters, including postconflict situations) to promote and empower a range of private, neoliberal capitalist interests” (2008, 20).

While private sector-led reconstruction efforts abroad—corporate contracts in post-invasion Iraq being a prime target in this regard—have long attracted critical attention, it is only recently that scholars have begun to take note of the similar processes

happening in North America. Both Schuller and De Waal identify Hurricane Katrina as a textbook example of disaster capitalism in a 'developed' capitalist country. Several decisions about the region's development, made in the interests of the private sector in the first place, left it vulnerable: among those, “the destruction of wetlands, offshore oil production, construction of levees, and other infrastructure projects destroyed the natural ecosystem, amplifying the storm's destructive effects” (Schuller 2008, 17). Capitalist processes were, in other words, systematically at work in the production of the ruins of New Orleans; in devastating the region's natural habitat and in creating social marginalization mapped onto the city's topography, it manufactured a landscape that was easily decimated. The calamity that followed then allowed worker's rights to be weakened and no-bid contracts to flourish in the reconstruction period, creating major profits for big business (18). While fishing and other small-scale industries were reduced to ruin, oil companies and casinos stood to gain (18). Furthermore, the immediate aftermath of the event was seen as a “window of opportunity” for a series of troubling structural changes in the interests of the capitalist class (22). The hurricane was, in other words, a pretext for the political and economic interventions which constituted the “secondary calamity”; as De Waal writes, “the storm itself was only the harbinger of a greater disaster, the wholesale transformation of the region in the interests of real estate developers and the tourism industry” (2008, xii). This involved the privatization and gentrification of New Orleans, particularly the waterfront, as well as the underhanded introduction of a privatized, for-profit educational system, following neoliberal

ideological lines, referred to by teachers as an “educational land grab” (Klein 2007, 6). While the disaster itself impacted the landscape, producing ruins to be sure, it was these changes that followed in its wake that truly remade the spatial and social geographies of the city, in ways that suggest that creative destruction is now actively being pursued as a strategy of accumulation and social engineering.

Naomi Klein, in her book *The Shock Doctrine*, further clarifies the intricacies and complexities of disaster capitalism, particularly the discourse of exceptionalism that surrounds disaster response scenarios. She highlights that the “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events,” such as those mentioned above, are facilitated by the state of shock into which the public has been ushered (2007, 6). Crisis, capitalists have learned, creates opportunity: the state of emergency and exception to which it gives way does away with all constraints that curtail the unbridled pursuit of privatization and social restructuring in 'normal' times. She describes this as a “powerful move [...] to break the taboos protecting “the core” from privatization” (288). The administering of social, political and economic “shock treatment” is what follows (7). Indeed, the commodification of certain elements of our everyday life—of the commons or social goods such as education or health care—does not come easily. A public accustomed to certain services is not willing to readily cede these assets; thus, such transformation becomes, as Klein remarks, a “possibility available only in times of cataclysmic change—when people, with their stubborn habits and insistent demands, are blasted out of the way” (20-21). She aptly compares the mechanism of disaster

capitalism with that of torture, which breaks down subjects' resistance through “deep disorientation and shock in order to force them to make concessions against their will” (16). The violent nature of the system is, thus, revealed: in “contemporary capitalism,” she writes, “fear and disorder are the catalysts for each new leap forward” (9). The systematic production of ruins creates the conditions for radical restructuring by producing states of vulnerability and shock that weaken the possibilities of collective organization and resistance.

Schuller, De Waal, and Klein encourage us to conceptualize disaster as something not at all exceptional, but rather, integral to contemporary capitalism. Catastrophes are not avoided but rather 'managed' so as to create opportunities for profit and to pursue neoliberal agendas; as De Waal argues, we are witnessing a regime of “disaster *management* whereby calamities are not, in fact, prepared for, prevented, relieved, or recovered from, but are handled in such a way that they pose the minimum political threat to governments” (xi). Out of disaster zones emerge 'exciting investment opportunities' and contracts with better terms and conditions than in times of normality, extending the possibilities of accumulation (and thereby providing a solution to the falling rate of profit).

Similarly ruins must be seen as not merely the by-products of the passage of time and the 'natural' forces of decay—in other words, as incidental to the processes of production and accumulation—but instead, as products being manufactured by contemporary capitalism. Ruin-making in its many forms is increasingly an actual



strategy of capital accumulation. When viewed in the light, it could be conceived as the latest frontier for the new forms of “accumulation by dispossession” discussed by Harvey (2004), a notion which he likens to Marx's concept of primitive accumulation, but identifies as an ongoing capitalist process. While his emphasis is on structural adjustment programs, which pave the way for corporations to enter new markets, he recognizes “that the US may not be immune” to the kinds of crisis that lead to rounds of devaluations and restructuring (2004, 79). In this case, disaster becomes an opportunity to seize public goods or services in order to privatize them, and to impose neoliberal policies that facilitate the process, ultimately concentrating wealth into the hands of the elite while dispossessing the majority of access to these resources.

The manufacture of ruins, becomes, as Klein points out, a perfect pretext for wiping the slate clean: disaster zones are seen by developers as “clean sheets” for radically refashioning the landscape (2007, 8). Catastrophe is now “the preferred method of advancing corporate goals: using moments of collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering” (8). Spatial remapping, along class and racial lines, and economic restructuring, based on accumulation by dispossession, are forces that remake the social geography of our cities. The principle of erasure is in line with the logic of creative destruction, and is one which creates a profound sense of dislocation and uprootedness for the human communities who experience it. As Klein argues: “Most people who survive a devastating disaster want the opposite of a clean slate: they want to salvage whatever they can and begin repairing what was not destroyed; they want to

reaffirm their relatedness to the places that formed them” (8).

The temporality of contemporary ruins is one in which they rapidly appear, and are just as quickly made over, or turned over—reincorporated into the capitalist process of accumulation. The pace of these changes, jarring and sudden, is one that is difficult to grasp by the human imaginary; it is, as Klein hints at, somehow out of synch with the human need for historical continuity and connection. Yet, while the specifics of disaster capitalism, as an aspect of the contemporary visage of ruins, may be new, the processes of creative destruction have, as suggested above, been integral to the history of capitalist urbanization and modernization. Thus, erasure, dislocation, and discontinuity have been part of the experience of urban modernity more broadly, even if these are exacerbated in present conditions. The effacement of the past is written into the logic of creative destruction as a condition for the invention of the new, with implications for our sense of historical agency: “modernity can have no respect even for its own past, let alone that of any premodern social order. The transitoriness of things makes it difficult to preserve any sense of historical continuity” (Harvey 1990, 11). In the next section, I would like to discuss the temporality of modern ruins—the ruins of capitalism and market imperatives—to highlight how this temporality is different from the ruins of a past, premodern, precapitalist society, as well as to give an indication of how the cultural imaginary has responded.

## V.

Marshall Berman (1988), in his renowned book *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, describes with vividness the chaotic upheavals, the geographical transformations, and the temporal disjunctures that characterized modernity. For him, the modern period was ripe with dialectical tensions and contradictions—forces with which modernism, as a cultural, intellectual, literary, and artistic movement, attempted to grapple. Berman situates Karl Marx in this context—as one of the great modernists, alongside Goethe, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky. Marx, according to Berman, reveals the pace and experience of modern life as fast and fleeting, ephemeral; the quote from which Berman takes his title—“all that is solid melts into air”—captures the essential quality of this experience. The forces of upheaval which dominate bourgeois society are revealed by Marx to be inherent to the system: “All the anarchic, measureless, explosive drives that a later generation will baptize by the name of “nihilism” [...] are located by Marx in the seemingly banal everyday working of the market economy,” writes Berman (100).

Modernity is, in other words, an experience which cannot be separated from the workings of capitalism, and Marx sees both the potentialities and the limitations of this capitalist modernity, among these, the productive possibilities it inaugurates but leaves shackled by the organization of social relations. The break with tradition, the unequalled creativity, and the sheer effervescence of new forms and ideas made possible by the bourgeois revolution are accompanied by unparalleled destruction—the obliteration of existing values and social practices. Thus, for Marx, the bourgeoisie “are the most

violently destructive ruling class in history” (Berman, 100). Furthermore, they have no power over the forces which they have unleashed; capitalism is akin to a volatile monster, “demonic and terrifying, swinging wildly out of control, menacing and destroying blindly as it moves” (101). To quote the original statement of Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations [...] are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind (1972, 338).

Lack of duration becomes the defining temporal quality of bourgeois 'monuments'. Under capitalism, all things become provisional, disposable, ruled by the logic of forced and premature obsolescence. Even when built of the most durable materials, the architectural accomplishments of this society are not meant to grow old. As Berman notes:

The pathos of all bourgeois monuments is that their material strength and solidity actually count for nothing and carry no weight at all, that they are blown away like frail reeds by the very forces of

capitalist development that they celebrate. Even the most beautiful and impressive bourgeois buildings and public works are disposable, capitalized for fast depreciation and planned to be obsolete (99).

Durability no longer has anything to do with materiality; longevity becomes impossible when it is not located within the material properties of an object or structure, but bound to the wildly fluctuating movements of the market. In such conditions, no matter how developed our technology and building techniques become, the world that they construct is strangely ephemeral. Under capitalism, the ground *must* be cleared to create new spaces and opportunities for accumulation, putting the very notion of progress—as enduring achievement—into question. Thus, Berman reiterates that “everything that bourgeois society builds is built to be torn down” (99). As he goes on to write:

“All that is solid”—from the clothes on our backs to the looms and mills that weave them, to the men and women who work the machines, to the houses and neighborhoods the workers live in, to the firms and corporations that exploit the workers, to the towns and cities and whole regions and even nations that embrace them all—all these are made to be broken tomorrow, smashed or shredded or pulverized or dissolved, so they can be recycled or replaced next week, and the whole process can go on again and again, hopefully forever, in ever more profitable forms (99).

The monuments of the bourgeoisie are not destined to become ruins in the same way as

the monuments of antiquity. They do not last long enough to register the passing of time in the manner of Greek and Roman ruins. The temporality of modern ruins is thus markedly different from that of medieval or classical ruins; it is strange, uneven, non-linear, even multi-directional.

The ruins of classical antiquity and medieval Europe belong to the premodern world, to a different set of material conditions and social relations. The temporality of these ruins is and was rather straightforward. They were built, inhabited, abandoned, and, over the course of centuries, they were left to decay by exposure. The ruin was, in this case, a process, an indefinite point somewhere in a long trajectory between a monument and a pile of rubble. Ruination in precapitalist societies is the work of both time and the forces of nature—rain and snow, sun and wind, erosion and gravity—which gradually reclaim human structures. One cannot speak of the *manufacture* of ruins in this sense, as a ruin's becoming occurred quite apart from the activities of the market or the forces that govern production. Capitalism, by contrast, imposes its own temporality upon structures; it manufactures ruins—a process which seems particularly exacerbated in the present era. Capitalism erases or compresses time; speeding up production practices and financial transactions is, undoubtedly, in the interests of accumulation. In this regard, we would do well here to consider Hamlet's remark: "Time is out of joint" (Shakespeare 1993, 69). Time, under capitalism, is unhinged—that is, wrested from the cyclical patterns that dominated premodern societies, and forced into the service of the new rhythms of production. This has profound consequences for the ways in which we

register the passing of time, as well as for our understanding of history and the past. Capitalism, in remaking the world in its image, imposes upon it a second nature; this is reflected, spatially and temporally, in the formation of its ruins. The ruins of capitalist modernity do exist—are, in fact, pervasive. It is the ways in which they unfold—emerging seemingly at random, in chaotic and unplanned fashion, and disappearing just as quickly—that is different from ruins of the past, and alters the romantic conceptualization of ruin-making as a process of nature.

Yet, before going on to discuss the illustrative example of American ruins, it is worth briefly noting the role that modernism played in relation to the ephemerality of life in capitalist modernity. Modernism was, at least according to theorists like Berman and Harvey, the cultural and aesthetic attempt to grapple with the upheaval of capitalist urban experience, which is characterized by transience and rupture, without losing all sense of control and design. Certain modernisms were successful in this regard. As Harvey points out:

Modernists found a way to control and contain an explosive capitalist condition. They were effective for example, in the organization of urban life and the capacity to build space in such a way as to contain the intersecting processes that have made for a rapid urban change in twentieth-century capitalism (1990, 115).

Modernism negotiated the two poles of order and disorder, the contingent and the contrived—that is, it still attempted to find purpose and truth, even if “that meaning has

to be discovered and defined from within the maelstrom of change” (11). Postmodernism, on the other hand, having lost this subtle tension, is one-sided, marked by “its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic”—its virtual affirmation of ruination (44). According to Harvey, postmodernism, which he defines as an anti-modernist, reactionary movement that sprung up in the 1960s, is misguided in targeting modernism, rather than capitalism—or better yet, the way in which the two were wedded together in the postwar era in the support of economic stabilization and corporate interests—as the source of many of the ills of urban and social life (38). For it was part of the spirit of modernism, however flawed, in struggling with the forces of creative destruction, to seek out solutions to social problems in architecture, urban design, and everyday life—even if they failed. The danger is that postmodernism, in rejecting any project aimed at progress, emancipation, or justice, is, at best, depoliticized. At worst, it champions—and often in the name of such celebrated postmodern principles as the sublime, as Lyotard (2011) noted—a stark and frightening world ruled by wild market forces that undo any stability and plunge lives and livelihoods into detrimental chaos. In looking at the ruinous landscapes of today, we might ask whether there are signs of new cultural attempts to grapple, in more complex terms, with the ethical and political dimensions of the manufacture of ruins, an issue which will be raised in the final section of this chapter, and taken up again in other chapters. First, I would like to take a detour into an exploration of American ruins to further highlight the strange temporalities that they evoke and consider the impact on the



imaginary.

## VI.

American ruins—the ruins of a nascent capitalist nation—have always been modern, in the sense described above. Nick Yablon's (2009) discussion of the history of American ruins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in his book *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of Urban Modernity, 1819-1919*, traces the ways in which writers' and artists' encounters with the ruins of the American landscape, particularly those of early capitalist urbanization, challenged the dominant aesthetics and poetics of ruins, profoundly shaping the cultural imaginary. As he discusses, many were reluctant to recognize the existence of ruins on American soil, not merely because they did not fit with the classical model of a ruin, but also because to do so would be to go against the deep-seated national ideology of an “Adamic” and “forward-looking” empire, which was “immune to [the] melancholic meanings” and vision of history (as inevitable decline) embodied by ruins in the dominant discourses of the day (5). Yet ruins—of both Aboriginal peoples, which were mostly overlooked, and early settlers, as well as those of cities—did, of course, exist: “Far from being absent or marginal, ruins were in fact ubiquitous across diverse cultures and landscapes of the United States during the nineteenth century” (5). The reason why these ruins were invisible or meaningless to local inhabitants and visitors alike was that, for the most part, they escaped dominant conventions and received notions about what constituted a ruin. “In stark contrast to the grandiose neoclassical piles conjured by its

antebellum landscape painters and poets,” Yablon writes, “the actual ruins found in the urbanizing landscapes of nineteenth-century America tended to be prosaic, even tawdry structures” (7). Among their ranks were to be found “abandoned log cabins and defunct canal bridges,” “half-demolished churches and cemeteries,” and the “first dismantled skyscrapers” (7-8). Such apparently banal structures could not be recognized at a time when the aesthetics of ruins was dominated by those picturesque and romantic ruins of classical antiquity and Medieval Europe. As such, even acknowledging American ruins *as ruins* posed a challenge to the whole discursive enterprise, which was to undergo a profound “destabilization of its meanings” as a result (7).

What was it that made American ruins modern? As discussed above, their quality of otherness, which made them “unassimilable to the grand historical narratives concretized by the classical and Gothic ruins of Europe,” was a key characteristic in this regard (Yablon, 8). In specifying this otherness, Yablon points to their deformity, their illegibility, and, especially, their *untimeliness*. They were considered to be deformed because they failed to age in the appropriate manner. The materials with which they were constructed did not register the passing of time in the same way as those of classical ruins: “Houses built of cheap materials such as wood [...] did not offer sufficient resistance to decay, fire, or vegetative growth [...] Conversely, the newer industrial materials of steel, iron, glass, and concrete were too durable—liable only to rust, shatter, or crack” (8). As well, theorists argued of American ruins that they were ambiguous and unintelligible—they revealed little of the nature, achievements, or significant events of

the civilization which gave rise to them. This “resistance to interpretation” had to do with the limitations of the existing metaphors and tropes for reading ruins (9). Yet, above all, the feature that distinguished these modern ruins from classical or medieval ruins was their temporal aspect: “The most glaring anomalies of America’s ruins, however, were their temporal properties, or what I call their *untimeliness*” (10). The strange temporalities of these modern ruins upset the given notions of time and history—as natural cycles of growth, maturation, and decay—which informed the romantic conceptualization of ruins. This quality of untimeliness—the outcome of capitalism’s revolutionizing of space and time as discussed above—has given rise to new concepts with which to grasp it. As Yablon argues:

To some extent, all ruins exhibit a degree of nonsynchronicity [...]  
But the anachronism and incongruity of American ruins—the way in which they erupted out of time and out of place—generated a particularly complex sense of temporality as multilayered and multidirectional. It was to convey their disruption of traditional conceptions of time that nineteenth-century witnesses coined such oxymoronic terms as *day-old ruins*, *temporary ruins*, or simply *modern ruins* (12).

Modern American ruins were 'immature', 'premature', or 'instantaneous', and these qualities spoke to the new forces at work in fashioning the landscape, forces that blurred the distinction between the natural and 'man-made'. The ruins of early speculative

property development or “the equally swift and destructive swings of the capitalist economy, were all instantaneous and largely unanticipated, and thus radically different from those formed over time” (10). Yablon locates, to a large extent, the untimeliness of modern ruins in the processes of uneven development which characterized the growth and urbanization of America. This is the force of creative destruction, discussed above, in which capital develops its geography in a volatile and uneven manner—one in which, as Marx and Engels grasped, “all that is solid melts into air” (1972, 338). As Yablon notes:

given the rapid and seemingly relentless process of capitalist urbanization in the United States, its ruins typically proved ephemeral. Despite some efforts to preserve them for future generations, the ruins of fires, earthquakes, or bankruptcies tended to disappear almost as quickly as they had materialized, recycled for their precious building materials, deployed as landfill, or simply erased to clear the way for new rounds of capital investment (11).

Unlike classical ruins which lasted for centuries in a state of gradual decay, modern ruins appeared and disappeared overnight. Cities sprung up and were rebuilt, ravaged, or abandoned. Much of this, as Yablon points out, was related to the investment and divestment of capital—property speculation, financial crisis, redevelopment. In the urban geography of North American cities, strange disjunctures were produced between the old and the new:

holdovers from earlier periods [...] testified to the unevenness of capitalist urbanization: the way in which one plot of land was developed while an abutting one was left barren, one neighborhood was “improved” while an adjacent one deteriorated, or the way in which one city (such as Chicago) could blossom into a metropolis while others in the region lagged or collapsed (as with St. Louis and Cairo, Illinois, respectively) (12).

While 'day-old ruins' first described “the remains of a settlement that was hastily built, hastily abandoned, and almost as hastily reclaimed by nature” (20), this term came to be applied to major cities like New York, whose development was largely unplanned, following the uncharted paths dictated by the flows and irregularities of financial capital (264). Yablon discusses the example of New York which, particularly during the period of 1893 to 1919, was undergoing rapid demolition and (re)development. The changing landscape represented the economic geography of capital investment and financial speculation, as well as a growing population. He describes Manhattan as “a metropolis [...] becoming notorious for mercilessly devouring its own architectural landmarks” (244). The momentum and power of the wave of creative destruction, in which buildings sprung up only to be knocked down, and various monuments were bulldozed to clear the way for new developments, eventually included the rapid demolition of some of the city's first skyscrapers. As Yablon points out, new buildings and architectural developments came to feel temporary, provisional: only “the merest of stop-gaps,” he quotes writer

Henry James (244). Even those built with the most durable of materials were not expected to survive long enough to become old: “the notion of modern skyscrapers as antiquated ruins was belied by the economic geography of Manhattan” (244). All of this led many perceptive thinkers of the time to question the very possibility of ruins on American soil: “How could buildings become antique if their life spans were constrained by economic laws demanding the perpetual turnover of capital, and thus perpetual cycles of demolition and construction?” (244). Yet this very notion of an absence of ruins, when considered from the perspective of individual monuments, becomes a permanent state of ruin when looked at from the whole; while ruins may not survive into their own antiquity, they are perpetually being spit out and devoured again by the same system.

The ruin, rather than being a structure that reveals itself gradually with the passage of time, thus rises overnight, “erupt[ing] out of time and out of place” (Yablon, 12). This is the concept that Robert Smithson referred to as “ruins in reverse”: “buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built,” he suggests, “but rather rise into ruin before they are built” (1996, 72). This designation aptly applies to many such contemporary structures—for instance, the *Îlot Voyageur*, a failed private-public venture of the Université du Québec à Montréal and real-estate conglomerate Busac, which sits rotting in downtown Montreal—made the victims of capital divestment that has left them to ruin *before they were ever even completed*. We come across this concept in Smithson's influential 1967 essay, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” in which he introduces the idea of the monument to the suburbs. We tend to think of the suburbs as

banal and non-historical, but Smithson, like an archaeologist delving into the monuments of an unknown civilization, photographs them, turns them into metaphors, and ultimately reads them as ruins. Pipes spewing become dirty water become “The Fountain Monument,” a bridge that crosses a river is named the “Monument of Dislocated Direction,” and a sandbox is labelled, quite simply, “The Desert” (70-71).

Abandoned construction sites, public works, parking lots glittering in the sun, and suburban strip malls are all ruins, but whether of the past or the future remains unclear. Smithson plays with the elements of ambiguity in these structures. What are they? What do they tell us about the civilization that constructed them? Are they new or old?

Along the Passaic River banks were many minor monuments such as concrete abutments that supported the shoulders of a new highway in the process of being built. River Drive was in part bulldozed and in part intact. It was hard to tell the new highway from the old road; they were both confounded into a unitary chaos. Since it was Saturday, many machines were not working, and this caused them to resemble prehistoric creatures trapped in the mud, or, better, extinct machines—mechanical dinosaurs stripped of their skin. On the edge of this prehistoric Machine Age were pre- and post-World War II suburban houses (70-71).

Through the lens of his representation, the machines of industrial capitalism become prehistoric creatures. Works that are still in progress, not yet even finished, take on the

quality of being already faded, blurred and aged, like a tattered old photograph. Indeed, Smithson describes the whole scene as eerily similar to an “over-exposed *picture*. Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph” (70). His use of such imagery to describe Passaic, a suburban landscape like so many others, estranges us from the everyday, habitual patterns of seeing and understanding the world around us, and, in doing so, allows us see how strange, even uncanny, these spaces really are. The landscapes of contemporary capitalism are revealed as ruins, and reading them as such, as something already past, disrupts the oppressiveness of the *now*, opening up the trajectory of history to other possibilities. His vision is thus sobering, if melancholic: “a kind of self-destroying postcard world of failed immortality and oppressive grandeur” (72).

Smithson's essay on his journey to Passaic puts into question the notion of history as progress and the future as possibility when both are dictated by the capitalist logic of obsolescence and the outmoded: “If the future is “out of date” and “old fashioned,” then I had been in the future,” he writes (73-74). Yet these ruins, lifeless as they appear to him, still contain the residues of human hopes, a distorted version of utopia, which can perhaps be recovered, or at least uncovered, amidst the wreckage:

This anti-romantic *mise-en-scene* suggests the discredited idea of *time* and many other “out of date” things. But the suburbs exist without a rational past and without the “big events” of history. Oh, maybe there are a few statues, a legend, and a couple of curios, but



no past—just what passes for a future. A Utopia minus a bottom, a place where the machines are idle [...] Passaic seems full of “holes” compared to New York City, which seems tightly packed and solid, and those holes in a sense are the monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures (72).

Ruined landscapes are “full of holes”: these are the erasures—the buildings and communities wiped off the map by capitalist machines without a second thought. Smithson alerts us to the idea that it is not necessarily just what fills the landscape, but, perhaps more importantly, what is *absent from it*, that requires consideration. One might think of the landscapes of capitalism as geographies of forgetfulness. The past is consumed in the constant manufacture of profit, and with it our hopes for a better future. Yet, if we think of these “vacancies” as “monumental” perhaps we can begin to grasp the very absurdity of a world predestined for its own destruction, and even become angry about it.

We have seen that the dislocations of urban modernity have destabilized received categories for thinking about time and history, antiquity, and the present. The concepts of modern, day-old, and reverse ruins capture the instability of capitalist urbanization, particularly the processes of creative destruction that have resulted in the temporal ruptures that characterize everyday life. They are the concepts with which the men and women inhabiting these landscapes, including the intellectuals and writers discussed

above, have tried to make sense of the contradictory forces refashioning them. As Yablon points out, in imagining “urban modernity [...] as the classical antiquity of the future” (3) we are striving to grasp the chaotic processes at work in remaking the world around us and our own lives. Identifying the ruins of the past, present, and future is the first step toward reinserting ourselves into the historical process and reclaiming our capacity as historical agents. Flights of the imagination, into a distant time when the present can be viewed from a futuristic perspective, have, as Yablon argues and Smithson demonstrates, been one such creative response to the ruins, both real and imaginary. Modernism, as Berman tells us, was another response. I would like to turn now to a consideration of a contemporary artist and intellectual whose work deals with this problematic of the relation of the human imaginary to the “manufactured landscapes” that surround us. Edward Burtynsky's work struggles with the contradictions of contemporary capitalism, particularly as they are manifested in geographical formations, in order to represent them to us in a new light. In a similar way to the the great modernists, according to Berman's definition, Burtynsky's work, in the 'postmodern' context, is deeply invested by the concern that “even in the midst of a wretched present, [we might] imagine an open future” (27).

## VII.

What is the impact of these ruinous geographies that have been discussed in this chapter

upon the human imaginary? Photographer Edward Burtynsky thinks that there is a certain evocative potential in viewing what he terms the “manufactured landscapes” that characterize contemporary life. In his presentation for the acceptance of the 2005 TED Prize, he discusses our alienation from industrial environments and other wastelands of capitalist modernization and restructuring as highly problematic. We are disconnected from the ways in which our human activities are transforming the world around us. His photographs, of mine tailings, quarries, garbage dumps, and tire pits, attempt to re-establish this connection between how we live—our dependency upon oil, the mass production and consumption of commodities, the lack of environmental sustainability—and the geographies that are the direct result. We are, perhaps wilfully, unconscious or inattentive to the consequences of industrial processes on the environment. It could be argued that this is, at least in part, because capitalism alienates us from the processes of production more generally, leading to a state in which we do not know, except in an abstract way, where things—be they food, clothing, electronics—come from, or where they go to when we are done with them. This is especially the case in the Western world, where decades of deindustrialization have further removed us from this reality, and where our waste is exported overseas to be dealt with by poor and marginalized workers in countries like China and India. We think of nature as 'natural', and not as something produced like other commodities, as a type of built environment. The landscapes that Burtynsky illuminates are those visibly touched—better tormented—by human endeavour, in which nature and culture are inextricably interwoven. We are forced to

rethink the very category of 'landscape' to fully grasp the scope of humanity's imprint, far from benign, upon the globe.

As Edward Burtynsky shows, the 'nature' that surrounds us is a manufactured one, and one that is, according to my reading, increasingly in a state of ruin. Burtynsky's work brings home what is hidden from everyday view: the massive mark that we are leaving on the face of the earth. His photographs reveal the “scale [...] of what we call 'progress',” and it is astonishing, or some might say, sublime (TED 2005). Yet, rather than being overwhelmed, his hope is that the viewer will “be challenged by the image”—encouraged, that is, by the tension he builds between attraction and repulsion, to “enter the image” instead of turning away (TED 2005). Thus, the pictures are beautiful even if their content is troubling. The beauty and complexity of the scenes draw us in: he makes photographs in which we will look and linger, images that will ultimately haunt us. While Burtynsky focuses on the productive powers that we have built up, linking his work, as he writes in the artist statement on his website, to the “ages of man; from stone, to minerals, oil, transportation, silicon, and so on,” the other side of his images reveal the simultaneous manufacture of ruin. He understands that the processes in which we are engaged have a catastrophic aspect, in that they are not only shaping, but also devastating, the world in which we live. Like Marx, who saw dead labour, crystallized in the forces of production, as weighing upon the living, or Benjamin, for whom the multiple events that comprise human history could be read as “one single catastrophe” (2007; 257), Burtynsky's vision of the landscape problematizes the notion of history as

progress. There is an ambiguity at work in our very relation to these manufactured geographies, for while providing us with the 'stuff' needed for a life of comfort, this life itself is a dreamworld, one sustained by denying its lack of sustainability and its destructive impact, which his images force us to confront. To look upon ruin, upon the debris, raises questions which he recognizes as ethical and aesthetic. The premise is that contemplation can lead to some kind of action, self-reflexivity, and social change. This is, for Burtynsky, the power of art, a theme to which I will return in greater depth in the next chapters.

For now, I want to stay with the question of the link between ruins and the imaginary, by returning to this notion of the disconnect, or Marx's concept of alienation. As mentioned above, Burtynsky alerts us to the fact that we are disconnected from the manufacture of landscapes, as we are alienated from production processes more generally, and, perhaps most importantly, from the making of history as a human activity. I would like to add that these landscapes which we are producing are deepening and entrenching the experience of alienation. The social and physical geographies of contemporary capitalism are those of exclusion, dispossession, and loss. As Henri Lefebvre alerted us to, lived human realities—our everyday life—unfold within these spaces, and are thus structured and disciplined by them. What is our relation then to the ruins? Contemporary ruins are increasingly a visible aspect of the landscape. They serve not only as the outcome, but also as the symbols or metaphors of this state of dispossession. Boarded up houses remind us of the recent wave of mortgage

foreclosures, unfinished urban structures signal the troubled history of private-public investment ventures, closed down factories re-invoke the painful loss of thousands of jobs, and even the death of a community. In each of these cases, it is poor and marginalized communities who bear the burden. Banks are bailed out, companies are restructured, CEOs walk away unscathed, but ordinary people suffer profound losses. Ruins, as we saw above, are the product of changing regimes of capitalist accumulation and crisis. But they also have a power to connect with our imaginary—as the remainders and reminders of the processes from which we are forcibly excluded. Ruins populate the landscape and they haunt our imaginary. They are a source of fascination, in part, because they reveal something about the spatial and temporal configurations of everyday life, and also because in touching the profound depths of human experience—loss and longing, memory and projection, the past and the future—they serve as structures of possibility.

Interestingly, it was Burtynsky's familiarity with industrial ruins in St. Catherines, Ontario, that stimulated his critical thinking about the creative-destructive capitalist processes of industrialization, deindustrialization, and restructuring that are making and remaking our world; as mentioned in his online biography: “He links his early exposure to the sites and images of the General Motors plant in his hometown to the development of his photographic work.” Viewing ruins, at least in a certain light, can encourage us to reflect on the larger processes that are at work in this refashioning of the landscape. If we can get past the sense of inevitability that surrounds historical events, we can better

understand the real factors, including the political decision-making, state intervention, and neoliberal policies, that are fuelling deindustrialization and economic restructuring. Seeing ruins as part of an historical process-in-the-making, of which we are a part, can help us move from a sense of disempowerment toward the reclaiming of political agency. Ruins are the site of ambiguity and tension, structures from which we have been excluded—and which are frequently boarded up, closed off, guarded, fenced in—but also structures manufactured by human productive activities. For the melancholic imaginary, they are the symbols of a past of which we have been dispossessed and of a future of possibilities barred off. Nevertheless, as the reminders of the development of our productive capacities as a society, they also invite us to imagine their culmination otherwise, in inclusive geographies supportive of human realization. As such, they are an invocation of struggle: the struggle to reclaim our rights, our dignity, our hope, and to manufacture landscapes according to another principle—one more in line with the needs of human communities and the environment.

### 3.

## Figures of the Ruins

### I.

In this chapter, I would like to contrast two very different figures of the ruin: the *flâneur* (sometimes the *flâneuse*) and the *glaneur/euse*. Both figures are rich in cultural imagery and significance. The former is the protagonist of much of modern literature and poetry. He appears in Balzac and Baudelaire as a modern hero and a literary device: he is both the gentleman stroller who surveys, and even dabbles in, the crowd without surrendering his individuality, as well as the lens through which the revolutionary processes of industrialization and urbanization radically reshaping the physical and social landscapes of the time are registered and deciphered. He is for Walter Benjamin “the dreaming idler” (1999, 417) of commodity culture—an ambiguous formation of the subject whose distracted perceptual habits tell us something about the metropolis as a “phantasmagoria” (2008). The latter figure, the *glaneur/euse*, is also a character that haunts modern Western culture, appearing famously, for instance, in Jean-François Millet’s canvas, *Les glaneuses*, as a romantic feature of the picturesque countryside—the peasant woman



gathering grain. S/he is the ragpicker of Baudelaire and Benjamin—a metaphor for the poet and historian who collects the debris of history or the discarded bits of everyday life and reworks them into literary or historical montage. The contemporary gleaner, as she appears in Agnes Varda's documentary film-essay, *The Gleaners and I* (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*), forages in open-air city markets and transforms discarded objects into works of art.

I would like to suggest that both *flanerie* and *glanage*, when taken as modalities of activity, become metaphors for a type of engagement with the materiality of the world, especially its ruins, which holds out potential moments of demystification. While the perceptual habits embodied by the flâneur and the salvaging activities undertaken by the gleaner are, no doubt, conditioned or enforced by capitalism, and thus should not be romanticized, they nevertheless proffer the possibility of experiences that, in denaturalizing capitalism through the encounter with its detritus, reveal history as a human activity. Gleaning, in particular, demonstrates that even under the conditions of barebones survival in late capitalism, within a severely restricted framework of possibility, human agency and reflection—in the most basic form of refashioning the self and the world—are still plausible.

## II.

One of the key concerns of modern thinkers, particularly at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was the impact of modern life on the individual. Sociologists, psychologists, and literary

figures alike sought answers in different domains the following questions: in their encounters with the conditions of high density living—crowds, noise, traffic, pollution, poverty, and disease—how was the sensibility of men and women transformed? What are the effects of sensory over-stimulation on the personality traits and moral character of modern man or woman? These preoccupations reflected the sense of displacement brought about by the economic, political, and technological changes wrought by industrialization, modernization, and urbanization. Modernity, a time of great transition, was lived by individuals in a very tangible way, most notably in the transition from rural to urban forms of life and the rise of capitalism, with its commodification of labour and introduction of consumer culture. Collective life took on new forms and adapted itself to new spaces and architectural arrangements, as much as to a new rhythm of time. The crowd, the commodity, the prostitute, and the ruin (as fragment or trace, as the discarded or outmoded) were, among others, phenomena that attracted and repelled the writers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In these conditions, the flâneur and the glaneur/euse emerge as the paradigms of modern urban protagonists: the former, a figure that surveys and savours, but also decodes and deciphers, the city and its ruins; the latter, a ragpicker who collects the broken bits of everyday life, discarded objects, and the recently outmoded to transform them.

Georg Simmel was one of these early theorists to explore the relation between urban spaces and psychic life. In his 1903 essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” working from the idea that there is an “inner meaning of specifically modern life”—in

other words, that the material reality of social forces and their organization in space have corresponding subjective forms—he proposes that there is a specifically “metropolitan type of individual” (1950, 409). He operates on the historical materialist and Marxist preposition that subjectivity has “sensory foundations” which are structured and conditioned by social relations and the environment (410). As such, Simmel reads, in the transition from the rural to urban environment, the transformation of the sensual conditions of life, and a resultant deepening of the experience of alienation. The tempo, rhythm, and nature of sensory stimuli in the metropolis—rapid, jarring, and uneven—differs greatly from the slow and continuous flow of impressions that characterizes rural existence. This “intensification of nervous stimulation,” a veritable sensory bombardment, requires efforts on the part of the person to shield herself, and her inner life, from attack, to buffer the shocks of modern existence (410). These mechanisms of defence—intellectualism, abstraction, increasing sophistication—gradually become rooted in character types, in “the personality [which] accommodates itself in the adjustments to external forces” (409). Thus Simmel writes:

the metropolitan type of man which, of course, exists in a thousand individual variants develops an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment which would uproot him. He reacts with his head instead of his heart (410).

Crowds and commodities are the milieu in which the modern man must struggle to

“preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence” (409). Modern life is, for Simmel, a highly mediated one—money, in particular, determines social interactions, reduces all quality to a question of quantity and commensurability, and encourages the singular pursuit of gain, whether it be the accumulation of profit or the pleasure of consumption. Such conditions fundamentally impact upon one's capacity for response, resulting in a *blasé* attitude of indifference, in which one is lost in the stream of meaningless and non-differentiated phenomena: “A life in boundless pursuit of pleasure makes one blasé because it agitates the nerves to their strongest reactivity for such a long time that they finally cease to react at all” (414).

In his concern over the devastating impacts of money, Simmel is pointing toward what Karl Marx called in *Capital Volume I* the “fetishism of commodities”—a symptom of the alienation of modern life (1990). “Money,” Simmel writes, in words that closely echo those of Marx, “with all its colorlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all values; irreparably it hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability” (1950, 414). Essential to capitalist modernity, as we shall see, is the condition in which social relations between people become mediated by things. This is to say that commodities, the products of social labour, appear independent of that labour; their exchange value seems to be of an intrinsic, rather than social, character. Commodities organize and regulate human interactions through the mediation of the market. As Marx writes in *Capital Volume I*, “the commodity-form [...] is nothing but the definite social relation between men

themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (1990, 165). Thus the outer form of the commodity obscures the reality of production and social organization that lies behind it, leading to a position in which we are alienated from a deeper understanding of social, historical, and economic conditions.

Capitalist modernity is characterized by a contradictory condition in which the products of social labour come to act independently of social relations and have a power over us. Theorists like Marx and Benjamin are concerned with the impact of this situation, in which everyday life is saturated with ideological objects, upon our consciousness. As David Harvey explains:

The fetish [...] has a real basis; it is not merely imagined. We establish social relationships with one another by way of the objects and things we produce and circulate [...] By the same token the objects and things are redolent with social meanings because they are embodiments of social labor and purposive human action [...] The task of the analyst, Marx therefore held, was to go beyond the fetish, to get beneath the surface appearance in order to provide a deeper understanding of the occult forces that govern the evolution of our social relations and our material prospects (2003, 53).

The commodity is, therefore, a form that deceives: its outer surface obscures the reality of the social relations that produced it. It is both empty and imaginary—a social fiction, but also a material fact, invested as it is with the objective qualities to govern our lives.

Fetishism describes a contradictory lived experience, at once real and mystified—the outcome of a collective social fiction intrinsic to the system of production itself. This is the collective “slumber” described by Benjamin (1999, 106): a form of private consciousness in which the experiences of alienation—of our labour, of our senses, as well as from one another—are misunderstood, and the forces that regulate them are obscured. Thus, Benjamin's notion of the phantasmagoria of consumer urban culture evolves directly out of Marx's description of the “enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world” of capitalism (1991, 969).

Thus, it is this strange world of commodities, with their “phantom-like objectivity” (Marx 1990, 128), that some of the great theorists of the last century have to tried to make sense of, using the figure of the flâneur as their investigative tool. But while Simmel was rather pessimistic about the effects of capitalist modernity on subjectivity, other theorists have had more mixed reactions. The transformations of industrialism and consumerism, including their impact upon perceptual and sensory modalities, are read with ambivalence. In particular, in the writings of Walter Benjamin, whose work will be of central importance to this study, the dialectical or contradictory nature of both material and subjective life under capitalism is emphasized. What is interesting for Benjamin, and for historical materialists in general, is the way in which everyday life provides not only experiences of alienation, but also moments of revelation. In proffering that which Benjamin will call “dialectical images” (2008, 106), or wish formations of the collective, capitalist modernity opens up possibilities for transformation

in unexpected encounters—often with the objects of its own fashioning. It is, as we shall see, ruins that are particularly well-positioned to play the part of stimulating the dialectical imagination.

### III.

As David Harvey notes in *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, it was French novelist Honoré de Balzac who first “placed the myths of modernity under the microscope and used the figure of the flâneur to do it” (2003, 24). He argues that the changes remaking Paris at that time—both revolutionary and ruinous—rendered the city illegible: “The rapid and seemingly chaotic growth of Paris in the early nineteenth century rendered city life difficult to decipher, decode, and represent” (24). The writers of the time, including Balzac, Flaubert, and Baudelaire, took upon themselves the task of interpreting the social forces and forms at work in this process of transformative or 'creative destruction'. They developed a literary language and imagery to describe the city so as to make it intelligible to the popular imagination. According to Harvey, they not only presented the urban landscape as it was, but also as it *could* be: “They explored different ways to represent that world and helped shape the popular imagination as to what the city was and might become” (24). These novelists and poets were the inventors of what he terms “psychogeography” (84), which can be understood as a mapping of psychology onto the urban terrain: the study of the implications of the built environment on human subjectivity, the distribution of social practices in space, and the ways in which spaces

are invested with meaning. Interestingly, at the same time as they were reading and writing Paris, they were also engaged in a process of fashioning their own identities and ways of knowing, through envisioning themselves in the role of flâneur.

Despite being a key figure in the works of many writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, one cannot ascribe a uniform character to the flâneur or his literary embodiments. He is, rather, a complex and ambiguous figure, providing, at times, a symptomatic reflection of the society in which he moves, and, at others, moments of critical insight that demystify social relations. While possessing, for instance, something of the utopian in Balzac, he represents the experience of alienation in Flaubert: “The flâneur in Flaubert’s world stands for anomie and alienation rather than for discovery. Frédéric in *Sentimental Education* is a flâneur who wanders the city without ever clearly knowing where he is or registering the significance of what he is doing” (Harvey 2003, 84). One explanation for this is that the flâneur's relation to the phenomena that he witnesses, at least as it is interpreted and described by these writers, is, above all, ambivalent. He seeks the sensory intoxication of the crowd, while nonetheless standing apart from it: as Benjamin writes: “there was the pedestrian who wedged himself into the crowd but also the flâneur who demanded elbow room” (2006, 84). He enters into the life of the masses, while nonetheless retaining his individuality. He studies with an acute eye the features and characteristics of the persons he encounters, but often fails to emphasize with them or their experiences. Thus, he embodies the tensions and contradictions of the time, associated with urban existence in capitalist modernity.



Ambiguous and shifting is also the flâneur's positioning on the aesthetic and the ethical registers: on the one hand, he could be charged with being an aesthete insofar as he is absorbed in the life of the senses—devouring, as he does the streets with their scents and sights, with their commodities and women. Withdrawn and detached, he nevertheless turns all he sees into the objects of knowledge and takes pleasure in possessing them with his gaze. And yet, on another level, when faced with the myriad of displays designed to seduce the passer-by to become purchaser, he abstains:

An intoxication comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly through the streets. With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever weaker grow the temptations of shops, of bistros, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next street corner, of a distant mass of foliage, of a street name. Then comes hunger. Our man wants nothing to do with the myriad possibilities offered to sate his appetite. Like an ascetic animal, he flits through unknown districts—until, utterly exhausted, he stumbles into his room, which receives him coldly and wears a strange air (Benjamin 1999, 417).

The intoxication which he experiences must be distinguished from that of the instant gratification of consumerism and the simple satisfaction of desire. Indeed, the flâneur is read by social theorists like Harvey and Benjamin as more complex and purposive than a mere aesthete: the “flâneur is more than an aesthete, a wandering observer, he is also

purposive, seeking to unravel the mysteries of social relations and of the city, seeking to penetrate the fetish” (Harvey 2003, 54). There is something mysterious in his multiple encounters with the city, through which he carries out an important work, perhaps unconsciously: the work which Harvey describes as 'penetrating the fetish' and Benjamin as 'dispelling the phantasmagoria'. Thus the flâneur is positioned as a potentially revolutionary, or at least critical figure, in the work of Walter Benjamin, to whose work we shall now turn, and one who, as we shall see, can tell us something about the social and historical power of ruins.

#### IV.

Walter Benjamin was inspired by the work of the French poets and novelists to undertake his own social archaeology of Paris, a project which brings together Marxist theory, Freudian psychoanalysis, the critical theory of the Frankfurt school, cultural studies, and aesthetics. It is the ruins of Paris, the crumbling arcades of the nineteenth century, that attract Benjamin, particularly in *The Arcades Project*. The streets are for him an open-air museum of cultural artefacts, remnants of the past that he studies in order to understand the present and its possibilities. Benjamin's encounters with the obsolete and outmoded become the sources of critical insight, for, as we shall see, these object traces tell us something not only about history as it *was*, but as it *might have been*—they alert us to the utopian kernel of the collective imaginary contained in each product fashioned by the human hand. The form taken by cultural products contains the transposition of *both*

ideology and wish. It is as such that they have the capacity to serve as 'dialectical images' that critique the very society that produced them by proffering its counter-image: the vision of what it *could be or could have been*. Benjamin sets out to interpret, much like the psychoanalyst, these dream-formations of the collective. In doing so, his work takes us to the heart of fetishism as structure of subjectivity, but also to the revolutionary potential of the human imaginary when it is unleashed from its slumber. It is through the figure of the flâneur that Benjamin reveals the “profane illumination” (1986, 179) of everyday encounters with what theorist Naomi Stead calls the “melancholy traces” of history (2000, 11).

The flâneur is an enigmatic and ambivalent figure in Benjamin's work. On the one hand, he is the perfect embodiment of alienated subjectivity: “the flâneur empathiz[es] with the soul of the commodity,” Benjamin writes (1999, 369); or again, “The flâneur is someone abandoned in the crowd. He is thus in the same situation as the commodity” (2006; 31). The flâneur is immersed in the world of commodity fetishism—in the “phantasmagoria,” a term which Benjamin sometimes uses to describe the totality of superstructural forms in capitalist modernity—which fashions his senses and lived experiences. Benjamin writes of this correspondence between Paris and the modern 'type' of the flâneur:

Paris created the type of the flâneur [...] Landscape—that is, in fact, what Paris becomes for the flâneur. Or, more precisely: the city splits for him into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a

landscape, even as it closes around him as a room (1999, 417).

This confusion of interior and exterior is symptomatic of the collapsing of the subjective and objective conditions that, according to Margaret Cohen's reading, is the result of the “ideological transposition” that characterizes Paris as “phantasmagoria” in Benjamin's writings (1995, 229). The flâneur reveals the “phantasmagorical transformations worked by the commodity structure” (Cohen, 235), transformations which ultimately raise the issue of that which Marx termed “false consciousness” and which Benjamin likened to a collective slumber from which we need to be awakened. Both theorists question the possibility of knowledge about social reality when the form it takes is one obscured by commodity fetishism. Each addresses the problem of the visibility, and thus perceptibility, of the real social relations of production and of our actual relationship to material reality. The dimension of subjectivity—the unleashing of the human imaginary from its reified slumber—becomes crucial for grasping the historical-material conditions of the present in order to realize its full potential.

The flâneur's immersion in the cultural products and forms of his milieu should not be interpreted straightforwardly as a sort of structural confinement; rather, there are inherent possibilities associated with this position. Indeed, Cohen suggests that for Benjamin there is no privileged 'outsider' position which might, for instance, be occupied by the educated cultural critic:

With all experience saturated by the phantasmagorical power of the commodity, even the cultural critic cannot achieve the distanced and

multidimensional relation to his/her object necessary for rational thought [...] Rational demystification can hence no longer be the critic's task. Rather, the critic must seek some form of activity using his/her immersion in the very objects of study to productive end (251).

Like the rest of us, the flâneur's experiences are based on everyday encounters, those through which the self and the senses are fashioned, in a world which is mediated by things, commodities. Yet, it is also in those encounters that *the very contradictions embodied in things*—their dialectical tension—which is the result of the “fetishistic inversion” discussed by Marx, is revealed. The social and historical forces that produce the phantasmagoria are also those that offer clues which can be used to interpret what Benjamin calls its “wish images” or “dialectical images” (2008). As Cohen argues, it is not so much a matter of an abstracted critical position, so much as “a question of seizing the forces destroying the distinction between subject and object to recuperative/disruptive end” (1995, 252). In grasping the dialectical image at the moment of its apparition, the flâneur becomes Benjamin's model of the historical materialist or interpreter of capitalist modernity.

Benjamin, as we know, is interested precisely in these cultural forms and artefacts that circulate within the spaces of bourgeois society. Yet, as Margaret Cohen suggests in *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, he finds the base-superstructure model posited by traditional Marxism to be inadequate to

describing the relation between the economic mode of production and the manifestations of collective life, which include aesthetic objects and practices. In working through a model of *expression* to describe this relationship, which develops out of Freud's notion of how repressed material comes to take its mysterious form within dreams, Cohen argues that Benjamin's work problematizes the causality at the heart of Marxist theory which conceptualizes the base-superstructure dynamic as one of *reflection*. In his 1900 study, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1991) describes how the *latent* material of the dream, connected with an unconscious wish, is subjected to the “primary processes” of the “dream-work”—distortion, displacement, condensation—which give it a *manifest* form. Similarly, the “wish-images” of the collective, for Benjamin, come to be expressed in cultural products in a way that is shaped not merely by the conditions of production, but also by those of subjectivity. Cohen, therefore, writes of the wish-image as “doubly determined, not only by material forces but also by a nonmaterial collective agency that Benjamin names the collective unconscious” (42). Benjamin posits a dreaming collective whose socio-cultural products are dream structures, embodying both repressed content and a deep-seated wish, and which, much like the dream, can be unravelled.

Cultural products are not merely “commodities” in the Marxist sense, but also “wish images” according to the Freudian model—they have a double aspect. Within the form of these social artefacts are mingled “the repressed economic content” (Cohen, 34) of the social relations of production, as well as the utopian imaginings of the collective. As Benjamin writes in his essay “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century”:

In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history [*Urgeschichte*]*—*that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society*—*as stored in the unconscious of the collective*—*engender, through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions (2008, 98).

That cultural products contain a utopian kernel is essential to their revolutionary potential in Benjamin's schema: "Suggesting that these products came into contact with deep-seated collective desires, Benjamin proposed that they could be put to socially transformative ends" (Cohen, 21). Social things, everyday objects, may weave the mystifying veil of the phantasmagoria, but they also harbour that element of desire, of human imagination, which longs to give birth to the new from within the old. Thus, the wish symbols of the collective act as "dialectical images," which are able to, in the words of Marx in a 1843 letter to Ruge, "awaken the world from the dream of itself" (quoted in Cohen, 22)*—*that is, from the strange slumber induced by the phantasmagoria of a world of fetishistic inversion in which commodities and cultural artefacts parade themselves to the onlooker in their mysterious fashion.

Seizing the utopian dimension harboured in the apparition of cultural products, means realizing their dialectical potential. As Susan Buck-Morss writes, "by tracing these images back to their source, one wakes up from the dream with the historical

knowledge necessary to interpret it as nightmare—or realize it as wish” (1986, 133). The “source” here is not only an understanding of the social relations of production—the latent economic content—but also the desire of the collectivity for a different world that expresses itself in traces: “These images are wish images” writes Benjamin, “in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production” (2008, 98). The dialectical reversal of the phantasmagorical apparition reveals utopia—the realm of freedom and human cultivation: “If adults [...] have been regimented and transformed into machines, one has only to reverse the image to recover the child's dream of utopia, where things are humanized rather than humans reified” (Buck-Morss 1986, 138). The cultural products and artefacts of bourgeois society harbour within them the key to their interpretation, a vision of human agency and power which threatens the social order with its undoing. As such, they point toward the ruins:

They are residues of a dream world. The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking. Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening [...] With the destabilizing of the market economy, *we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled* (Benjamin 2008, 109; my emphasis).



## V.

The flâneur emerges alongside a specific architectural and spatial configuration: the arcades. The arcades are structures of consumer capitalism which display commodities and direct flows of people and goods in a particular way; their organization slows down movements, encourages lingering, elicits a consumerist gaze. Within these structures, new needs are born of the desire to possess these objects bought at a price; while those without means are invited to share in the consumer dream through practices of looking. As such, the arcades are a terrain of idleness and reverie, of passive consumption. The flâneur, the idler who roams this environment for hours on end, embodies the new sense that corresponds to this spatio-optical regime, which is, above all, a spectacle: “the mobilized gaze” (Friedberg 1991, 420). This mobile gaze is detached and represents a larger perceptual pattern of distraction which critics argue has become the generalized perceptual regime in late capitalist, or 'postmodern', societies: “If the flâneur has disappeared as a specific figure, it is because the perceptive attitude which he embodied saturates modern existence, specifically, the society of mass consumption,” writes Buck-Morss (1986, 104). Yet, Benjamin treats the flâneur's ways of looking with ambivalence. Indeed, much like Freud who argued in the *Interpretation of Dreams* that this quality of free-floating attention is necessary to untangle the reverie and penetrate unconscious life, Benjamin sees the flâneur's gaze as one which, indeed, skims the surface of things without attachment, but in doing so, is able to make startling connections and

juxtapositions. Thus, at certain moments, detached looking gives way to what Benjamin calls the practice of “illustrative seeing” (1999, 418) or “stereoscopic” vision (458) which pierces the two-dimensional appearance of the cultural object to see it in its full socio-historical depth.

“Illustrative seeing” can be described as surrealistic practice of juxtaposing temporal images—it is based upon the “principle of montage” (Benjamin 1999, 461). “The spatial, surface montage of present perception [...] can be transformed from illusion to knowledge once the “principle of montage” is re-functioned temporally, that is, once the axis of montage is turned “into history,”” writes Buck-Morss (1986, 109). The residues, the debris of the past, provide this temporal juxtaposition—they stand in contrast to the present, both as its ruins, but also as a fleeting vision of what it *might have been*. This double exposure of past and present works dialectically. As such, stereoscopic vision is another concept for describing this imagistic historical dialectic. Interestingly, “a stereoscope,” Buck-Morss tells us, is “that instrument which creates a three-dimensional image, works from not one image, but two” (109). This way of seeing gives weight and depth the cultural object, by piercing the phantasmagoric veil, and situating it within its socio-historical framework to reveal the “multiple nonmaterial imperatives [...] libidinal, symbolic, and ideological” that determine it (Cohen, 44).

For Benjamin, it was amidst the streets and scenes of Paris that one encountered dialectical images, those saturated dream residues of other times and places: “We know that, in the course of *flânerie*, far-off times and places interpenetrate the landscape and

the present moment” (1999, 419). As he strolls, the street becomes a vehicle through which the flâneur is transported through the realms of the real and the imagined, into the heart of what Benjamin conceptualized as the unconscious of the dreaming collectivity:

The street conducts the flâneur into a vanished time. For him, every street is precipitous. It leads downward—if not to the mythical Mothers, then into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private (416).

It is in negotiating the spaces, the architecture, the objects of the city that the flâneur is conducted into intimate regions of the shared imaginary, of social ideas, meanings, and values that are embodied in things. Indeed, Benjamin emphasizes the sensuous qualities, or the “perceptibility,” of history (461). Traces of the past are perceptible in residues and debris, and therefore discoverable in and through encounters with cultural objects, particularly the outmoded. He refers to his own project as one of “literary montage [...] I needn't say anything. Merely show *the rags, the refuse*—these I will not describe but put on display” (860; my emphasis). The flâneur's work is to read in the rags and the refuse the signs and secrets that these forms contain.

The qualities of the gaze, of the flâneur's ways of seeing and perceptual habits, are at once symptomatic of the capitalist modernity which gave rise to them, but also potentially interpretive, when we think about cultural products and commodities as dream structures. Slavoj Žižek, for instance, argues that we should conceptualize both commodities and dreams as symptom formations. Understanding how and why they take

on their peculiar appearance—unlocking “the 'secret' of this form” (1994, 296)—is crucial. And, as Buck-Morss suggests, this involves tracing their socio-historical roots: these “dream-symbols,” she writes, “nee[d] interpretation, and this require[s] a historical knowledge or origins” (1986, 109). Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project* of this need “to educate the image-making medium within us, raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows” (1999, 857). The knowledge of social reality, though not immediately visible in things, is still perceptible to the trained eye that practices illustrative seeing. It is in seeking to “penetrate the fetish,” as Harvey put it (2003, 54), through his practices of looking, that the flâneur could be said to be a historical materialist.

## VI.

It is, above all, the flâneur's chance, undetermined encounters with the “trace” that have a revelatory effect. Traces refer to the remnants of the former ways of life of previous inhabitants; they are the subtle residues of antecedent forms of social relations. They adhere to the notion of the city as palimpsest: composed of overlapping layers of the past, partially erased, but leaving imprints, impressions. Traces are ultimately the ruins of a collective and impersonal past; ruins that render that past sensible. Benjamin describes the trace as the “appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be” (1999, 447). It is this encounter that constitutes, not a rupture with the present, but rather an opening of the present onto the past, as well as, possibly, onto the

future—what he terms the “colportage of space,” an experience of simultaneity of time and place (418). As Eiland and McLaughlin note in their introduction to *The Arcades Project*, “it was not the great men and celebrated events of traditional historiography but rather the 'refuse' and 'detritus' of history, the half-concealed, variegated traces of the daily life of 'the collective', that was to be the object of study” in Benjamin's uncompleted work (1999, ix). Buck-Morss also notes that “it is clear that he chose the Paris arcades as the central image precisely because these early forms of industrial luxury were in decay in his own time” (1986, 100). The debris of history are, for Benjamin, concealed in outmoded, obsolete, and discarded objects. In re-encountering these objects from a historical distance they are denuded of the magical qualities of commodities: disenchanting, they fail to exercise the same power over us. Benjamin is, in other words, teaching us how to *read the ruins*, to project ourselves into the past in order to understand the social and historical relations of the present.

Ruins hold the key to “the moment of awakening,” by which Benjamin (1999) meant the moment of critical insight, or that which Buck-Morss identifies as the development of “revolutionary cognition” (1986, 109). It is in their afterlives—that is, their circulation outside of the realms of value and exchange, beyond the vicissitudes of the commodity—that things return with an unsettling difference. The debris of history haunt the present as spectres, evoking the experience that, in the words of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, “time is out of joint” (1993, 69). Ruins create a tension between the past and the present, out of which the dialectical image is sparked: “The past can be seized only as an

image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (Benjamin 2007, 55). This counter image ruptures the continuity of history, providing the critical distance—ironically by means of an immersion in the very materiality of the world—required for the disenchantment of history. Naomi Stead, writing on ruins, argues that:

It is only through an examination of these melancholy traces, the detritus left after the ‘catastrophes’ of history, that the allegorist or historian can critically approach the present. In his conception, the act of destruction places everything in new juxtapositions, shatters old relationships, and opens history up for examination. It is through the shock of destruction that the subject emerges from the ‘dream’ of tradition and into life in the present (2000, 11).

The ruin becomes the allegory of history. It is an aesthetic form, which, beyond the categories of beautiful and sublime, embeds itself within social history, just as it represents, in an abstract way, that same history; it is a decontextualized fragment which opens up a contemplative window onto the past. As Benjamin writes, “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things” (2003, 178). An allegorical mode of thought or an allegorical sensibility performs a work similar to that of ruins. Thus, Benjamin makes of allegory the conceptual tool of the historical materialist; as Stead writes:

In the context of Benjamin’s philosophy of history the ruin provides

an emblem, not only of the melancholic worldview presented in Baroque tragic drama, but of allegory as a critical tool for historical materialism. Benjamin's concept of the ruin is valuable because it delves beyond the aesthetic of the ruin as an object, and reads it as a process, a means of demythifying and stripping away a falsely affirmative vision of reality, and of history (11).

In his melancholy philosophy of history, ruins, while gesturing toward a lost whole, inevitably signal a gap: the ruin is always a fragment, an indication of loss and incompleteness. On some level, the ruin signals a reading of modernity as a failed project. The ruin, as wreckage or refuse, gestures toward history as an unending catastrophe: we “discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event,” writes Benjamin in a note categorized under “Refuse of History” (1999, 461). Encountering the ruins of capitalist modernity reveals that “the ideal of the shock-engendered experience <*Erlebnis*> is the catastrophe” (Benjamin 1999, 515). As such, it awakens us to the ongoing *process* of history, and becomes an invitation to revision ourselves as its agents.

## VII.

We must be careful not to celebrate the figure of the flâneur uncritically. Indeed, many critics have pointed out the problematic gendered and class dimensions of this figure. Priscilla Ferguson, for instance, argues that the both Flaubert and Balzac “associate Paris

with a woman and flâneur with male desire” (1997, 99). In this reading, the woman, much like the city, is subjected to the male gaze of the flâneur which seeks to possess her: she is “indispensable to the urban drama” which he navigates, enticing and frustrating, fulfilling or resisting, the advances of her “lover” (85). Socially acceptable for her are identifying with the commodity form or consuming it; as Ferguson writes: “No woman can disconnect herself from the city and its seductive spectacle. For she must either desire the objects spread before her or herself be the object of desire” (84). The woman is not accorded the same liberties as the celebrated flâneur, as his position relies upon male privilege: while he roams freely as the detached observer, the same freedom of mobility is denied her. A woman on her own in the public sphere is suspect; as Ferguson argues, “because a woman is defined by the (male) company she keeps, to be alone is to be without station,” or worse, it is to be deemed streetwalker or whore (84)—at least, that is, until shopping emerges as a socially-sanctioned form of leisure activity, one which, nevertheless, takes place within the narrowly-circumscribed domain of the department store and is accorded only to women of the bourgeoisie.

For critics like Anne Freidberg, the flâneur can be read as a harbinger of what would become a new formation of 'postmodern' subjectivity (1991, 419). “The most profound symptoms of the postmodern condition,” she writes, “[...] the disappearance of a sense of history, entrapment in a perpetual present, the loss of temporal referents—have been, I argue, caused at least in part by the implicit time travel of cinematic and televisual spectatorship” (Freidberg 1991, 420). In a commodity culture which is, increasingly, a



culture of the spectacle, everyday life for the postmodern subject is marked by simulated experiences, detemporalization, and the consumption of images. The gaze itself is a commodity, sold to us by the culture industry. Here the flâneur serves as the paradigm: his “mobilized gaze” was the necessary precursor of the cinematic apparatus, which relies on, as much as it encodes, particular “perceptual patterns” (420-421). Yet it is, in fact, the *flâneuse*—who emerges alongside the advent of *les grands magasins*—who, according to Freidberg, best embodies the subject positioning of spectator-consumer:

As the department store supplanted the arcade, the mobilized gaze entered the service of consumption, and space opened for a female flâneur—a flâneuse—whose gendered gaze became a key element of consumer address. And such spatial and temporal motility led to a unique apparatical sequel: the cinema (420).

This optical conjuncture reduces former ways of relating to and inhabiting space to ruins. Even Benjamin disclosed a certain ambivalence with regard to the enduring critical capacity of his protagonist, writing: “The department store as the last promenade for the flâneur. There his fantasies were materialized. The flânerie that began as art of the private individual ends today as necessity for the masses” (1999, 895).

Nevertheless, other theorists challenge such readings, which often assume a straightforward delineation between the public and private spheres, fail to adequately address the dimension of class, and ignore the critical insights that a more nuanced reading of *flanerie* might offer. Elizabeth Wilson, for one, seeks to complicate the divide

between public and private by pointing to the proliferation of semi-privatized spaces, including restaurants, clubs, theatres, and shopping centres in the Victorian era, while also highlighting that the home was far from “a safe haven, least of all for working-class women—domestic servants—confined within it” (1992, 98). She argues that the private sphere, even if feminized, ought to be conceived as “a masculine domain [...] organized for the convenience, rest and recreation of men, not women” for whom it was, rather, a space of domestic labour (98). Women and their activities were, according to Wilson, far from invisible outside the home (101). Working-class and poor women, in particular, were highly visible: “Having in many cases almost no ‘private sphere’ to be confined to, they thronged the streets” (104). The concern for women in public, as much as for “public women,” demonstrates an anxiety over ways in which gendered institutions and relations of power were being remade by the processes of capitalist urbanization: “The very presence of unattended—unowned—women constituted a threat both to male power and to male frailty” (93).

While Wilson considers the possibility that the prostitute might be considered the female *flâneuse* (105), she ultimately concludes that prostitution reveals an essential quality of flanerie—far from a position of male privilege, it is an expression of the insecurity and dislocation wrought by urbanization: “the interpretation of the *flâneur* as masterful voyeur underplays the financial insecurity and emotional ambiguity of the role” (106). For her, the urban landscape constitutes a petrifying spectacle which reduces the male figure to anonymity and impotence (109):

From this perspective, we might say that there could never be a female *flâneur*, for this reason: that the *flâneur* himself never really existed, being but an embodiment of the special blend of excitement, tedium and horror aroused by many in the new metropolis, and the disintegrative effect of this on the masculine identity. The *flâneur* [...] is a figure to be deconstructed, a shifting projection of angst rather than a solid embodiment of male bourgeois power (109).

For Esther Leslie, these dislocations must be traced back to the transformation of social relations under capitalism, and read as the subordination of gender to the imperatives of the market (1997, 72). The commodification of labour means that the *flâneur* is not merely a spectator of the urban spectacle, but actively on the lookout for a buyer for his wares (his journalistic writings): he is “producer *and* consumer, and as such subjected to the contradictions of the commodity society” (70). As such, Leslie argues that we cannot isolate gender from a class reading—one which emphasizes the outcomes of the traumatic encounter with capitalist modernity for men and women alike—for the *flâneur*'s “subjectivity is allied not with men, but with those who sell themselves” (70). Capitalism makes prostitutes of all its workers, and the *flâneur*, far from being exempt from its logic, was increasingly subject to precariousness: “Prostitution is, for Benjamin, not just a by-product of city culture, it is the way of life for all” (78).

The *flâneur* and the prostitute are, in a sense, two aspects of the same processes. The difference, as David McNally notes, is that while the female body is eroticized, “the

rise of capitalism saw a de-eroticization of the male body as the dominant male ethos shifted from luxury to industry” (2001, 205). Prostitutes are the embodiment of the commodity, and thus the object of desire and of male identification: “So significant is the eroticization of commodities, says Benjamin, that people in capitalist society secretly want to be commodities, that is, to be objects of mass desire” (208). As he goes on to suggest: “Men in bourgeois society don't merely “want” women, they secretly desire to *be* women, to be commodified objects of desire” (209). Yet, as McNally suggests, this feminization in identification, but also in practice (through prostituted labour), initiates

the breakdown of the defensive male ego—and its sustaining myth of the self-made man—as a precondition of revolutionary subjectivity. Male identifications with women as historical actors on a landscape of ruination are decisive to the temporal dislocations involved in revolutionary change (206).

The prostitute reveals our identification and equivocation with the commodity—the work of fetishism that renders the subject thing-like. Such a revelation is potentially revolutionary: “The recognition that in capitalist society we are all prostitutes shatters the mythical structure of reality, and this allows us to break through the naturalization of history and to enter onto the terrain of historical action” (McNally, 210).

## VIII.

The gleaner is, sadly, perhaps a more applicable figure when thinking about ruins and

modalities of survival within the conditions of late capitalism. The activities of the gleaner (gleaning or *glanage*) offer us a glimpse into the precariousness of existence fostered by the shift to the 'post-industrial' society seen in Western capitalist countries. During the last few decades, the transnationalization of capital has resulted in manufacturing jobs—once bastions of stable, unionized employment and a decent wage—being shifted overseas, leading to a major restructuring of Western economies. In the place of a manufacture-based economy, we have witnessed the rise of the service sector, a heavily polarized industry in which the majority of jobs are low-paying, part-time, non-unionized, and with few benefits, while the much lauded 'white-collar' or 'smart' jobs are awarded to a handful of individuals. Combined with neoliberal governance strategies—including massive privatization and deregulation of services and industries, alongside cutbacks to social programs and services—that have dominated capitalist regimes since the 1980s, many have found themselves un- or under-employed. Added to this, the basic means and services essential to social reproduction have increasingly been commodified. Given these conditions, those at the socio-economic margins are forced to forge their existence through various strategies that have the principle of gleaning at their core. Yet, gleaning is much more than a necessary survival tool of the poor, but is also an act of creative re-appropriation. Gleaning is a transformative practice that takes the very ruins of the capitalist system, “the rags, the refuse” as Benjamin put it (1999, 860), and uses them to fashion the self in ways counter to their intended purpose. Thus, gleaning speaks to the afterlives of things, that is, their

vicissitudes beyond the circuit of commodities. It is here that human-object interactions take on another aspect, one that is not necessarily characterized by the alienation fostered by the fetishism of commodities, but one more in line with what Marx meant by praxis.

A recent publication entitled, *Who's Hungry: Faces of Hunger*, based on a 2012 survey conducted in the Greater Toronto Area by the *Daily Bread Food Bank*, reported that the city saw over one million visits to the food bank in the last year. Hunger, it tells us, disproportionately affects immigrants and the unemployed, but interestingly, it also suggests that 28% of those using food bank services have a university degree. Such a statistic presents a very different portrait of the urban poor than we are accustomed to imagining: as educated, often under- rather un-employed, and increasingly unable to cope with the cost of housing, which, for the average food bank user, amounts to 71% of their income. The deregulation of services and the lack of funding for social housing and other forms of support, combined with a global economic recession, are increasing the precariousness of existence for a large percentage of the population. The resurgence of gleaning must be situated within this political economic context, as a response to, but also a critique of, the system. The common response that individualizes the problem, as one of having “fallen on hard times,” is being demystified by the sheer scale of the crisis. What is, as C. Wright Mills puts it, so often seen as a “private trouble,” is beginning to be understood as a larger social or “public issue” issue, one has its roots in capitalism itself (2000, 8). Precariousness is, in this sense, not an unfortunate side-effect, but rather, the intended outcome of a regime of accumulation that requires a flexible labour force and a

large reserve army of labour. Poverty, as a socially constructed reality, is not accidental, but deeply imbricated with the very functioning of the system. Those who turn to the practice of gleaning are doing so as an act of resistance: the refusal to be made vulnerable, subjected to systemic crisis, restructuring, or the fluctuations of the market.

“We used to make stuff here,” says one the characters in the film *Requiem for Detroit*, standing in the ruins of an old automotive factory. One is struck by the sense of powerlessness in his voice—and one intuitively grasps what Marx meant by commodity fetishism, that strange world in which the forces that rule production are outside of our hands, located in the columns of the business section or in the financial reports of major corporations. The desire and the capacity to produce are, in this case, out of synch with the forces restructuring the auto industry and forcing its workers into unemployment. Indeed, those affected by the decline of the manufacturing industry in late capitalist societies are suffering from much more than just the loss of jobs: the disappearance of factory work means the dissipation of the very conditions in which their skills made any sense. As work environments change, those 'skilled' labourers who once populated the assembly line find that they themselves have become outmoded; as specialized cogs in the Fordist wheel of production, in which their bodies were carefully trained to carry out one particular movement, their skills are suddenly out of date—no longer suitable to a regime of flexible accumulation being imposed by transnational capital. Thus, we hear much talk, especially here in Ontario, where the conditions are very similar to those of the Eastern United States, of initiatives to re-train these workers. Yet, what this situation

reveals is a deeper logic of capitalist production that, over the course of its history, has stripped human beings of a general 'know-how'—that is, of the knowledge and skills necessary for social reproduction. The entrenchment of capitalism in Western societies has brought with it the deepening alienation of individuals from any sense of self-sufficiency, as food and clothing production, the making of goods, even child-care, have been commodified. The mediation of the market has distanced us not only from an integrated understanding of and capacity for fashioning the tools and products of labour, but from the ability to actively fashion the self in the process. It is to these conditions that the modern day gleaner responds, out of necessity but also with a certain sense of empowerment, recuperating the skills of self-sufficiency and self-determination. Thus, gleaning can be situated within a larger DIY (do-it-yourself) culture, made up not only of marginalized populations, but also of those fed up with a culture built around passive consumption.

## IX.

Arjun Appadurai, in his introductory essay to the edited volume, *The Social Life of Things*, explores the vicissitudes of the cultural object in and beyond its commodity state. His aim, he suggests, is to “illuminate the concrete historical circulation of things. For that we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories” (1986, 5). He calls this work a necessary “methodological fetishism” (5) because it shifts the focus of analysis away from the site



of production, and back to the realm of circulation and exchange. It is humans, indeed, who attribute to things their value and meanings, he acknowledges, but to dismiss or ignore this dimension on the ground that it is fetishism or false consciousness would be to overlook a rich field of study. If “commodities, like persons, have social lives” (3), as Appadurai argues, this means that their life histories or biographies potentially tell us something about ourselves as a society, about the larger tensions, trends, and shifts that shape the cultural contexts in which they circulate (34-36). The enigmatic quality of *sociality* is what is perhaps most interesting about the object, for it reveals the complex interrelation between people and things, the way that our lives are interwoven with the objects that we produce. A social archaeology of things, of the kind proposed by Appadurai, can aid us not only in understanding commodities, but also their afterlives outside of the arenas of production and exchange: it can illuminate the ruins and the social practices that surround them. Ruins, as those things made obsolete or outmoded by shifting socio-economic contexts and regimes of value, have their own trajectories, in part as gleaned objects: they, too, have social lives, cultural biographies, that we would do well to explore.

For Appadurai objects have a “commodity *phase*” (15)—“things,” he writes, “can move in *and* out of the commodity state” (13). As a commodity, an object's exchange value is at the forefront; the commodity state is, in other words, one in which “*exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant future*” (13). Exchangeability is based on the fact that commodities have intended “use

values for others, social use values” (8), and as such, are embedded in networks of desire and demand. That things can enter a commodity state also means that they are able to exit that state, becoming “*ex-commodities*” (16)—a phase in their social life that is of particular interest to this study. There are multiple trajectories by which things become *ex-commodities*. The sudden diversion of objects from the commodity circuit is a function of capitalism's logic of forced and artificial obsolescence—fashion being here an exemplary case. Overproduction necessitates the stimulation of new desires and tastes that make existing products outmoded. Furthermore, capital flight or divestment can leave those structures destined for commodification in a state of suspended motion, subject to premature decay. “The diversion of commodities from specified paths is *always a sign of creativity or crisis*, whether aesthetic or economic,” writes Appadurai 26; my emphasis). Examples of aesthetic diversion are those in which new value is created by “placing objects and things in unlikely contexts” (28), creating, for instance, 'authentic' works of art out of ordinary objects through their displacement—think of Duchamp's 'Fountain'. These sudden diversions are, I would argue, part of the temporalities of ruination and recuperation in late capitalism.

When things enter a state of ruination they are considered to no longer to have an exchange value, or even any use value; that is, the socially-prescribed uses and functions of the object or structure in question are no longer valid or viable. Yet, clearly, they do have value for those who recuperate, reinvest, or reoccupy them in so many different ways. Their vision for the ruin inevitably competes with the dominant social narratives

that attempts to determine it as void and worthless. Thus Appadurai's suggestion, that putting an object to a use or function that strays from its intended purpose is a matter of political contestation, is quite relevant: “the flow of commodities in any given situation is a shifting compromise between socially regulated paths and competitively inspired diversions” (17). The act of gleaning must be viewed in this light—as creative diversion and revaluation. Gleaning is an intervention in the trajectory of the ruin: it is about salvaging things, often destined for total decay or destruction, for economic, aesthetic, or survival purposes. Economically, this may mean collecting scrap metal from abandoned buildings to sell on the black market or removing 'vintage' windows and doors for online auctions. Aesthetically, it could be gathering found objects to create artistic installations or gleaning photographic images of ruins for publication. When it comes to survival, it may involve any number of possibilities, such as dumpster diving to find a bite to eat, or going through trash bins for recyclable materials. Usually gleaning entails practices considered to illegal, socially deviant, or 'eccentric' precisely because they go against the regulated and normative pathways that structure both the circulation and valuation of things in our society. Particularly elicited, as we know, is the gleaning of those materials considered 'trash', at least in part because it is seen as a direct threat to a system that relies on wastefulness and the forcibly outmoded to maintain profits and address crises of overproduction.

The gleaner is positioned as a figure who understands the movements and trajectories of things in our society and can strategically intervene to divert them from

their normative pathways. She relies on the oversights of the system, on the very logic of wastefulness and rapid obsolescence that makes capitalism a system of ruination. She is, thus, a figure who succeeds in bridging the gap, at least in the realm of knowledge, between production and consumption that is one of the cornerstones of the experience of alienation: she understands where things come from and where they are heading to, and she is able to redirect them to her own ends and purposes. In thinking not merely in terms of exchange value, of the commensurability of things, but of the many possible uses and functions that objects can be made to serve, she resists the cultural texts inscribed in things in order to read them *otherwise*. Thus gleaning is less about the production and distribution of wealth, than about the *recollection* and *redistribution* of the materials necessary for social reproduction. It is a creative fashioning of the self, as an aesthetic, economic, ethical, and political being, through a practice akin to *bricolage*. Although she serves as merely an individual instance, for she is not part of a collective and organized movement, the gleaner nevertheless offers creative strategies for the re-appropriation of objects beyond their commodification. In practising a different form of relation to things and to people, she gives some indication of the possibilities for remaking of the self and social relationships, if not outside, at least at the margins, of the relations of capital. In her everyday practices of survival, the gleaner reveals the contradictions of the system that undermine it from within, making life at the margins a source of hope; in the discarded and outmoded she “recognize[s] the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled” (Benjamin 2008, 109).

## X.

For filmmaker Agnès Varda gleaning is a generative concept, unfolding in unexpected ways, and leading her on a series of adventures in which she is less the *auteur* than an enthusiastic participant. Her film-essay *The Gleaners and I* [*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*] (2001), takes us on a journey across France: from the fields of Avignon to the bustling streets of Paris, across vineyards and into artists' studios. As she demonstrates along the way, gleaning—of food, images, objects—is a practice which conjoins the social and political, the ethical and aesthetic, in and through the acts of representation, recollection, and redistribution. Gleaning opens up encounters with the refuse of capitalist society which are potentially transformative, as they happen outside of the sanctioned circuits of production and consumption. *Glanage* is the reinvesting of the terrain of everyday life through praxis, the remapping of space and of social relations beyond market mediation. Gleaning is, for Varda, a paradigm of hope: more than the recuperation of discarded objects, it is about imagining anew the possibilities of human community. Indeed, when carried out amidst the ruins, it becomes a creative means to overcome the melancholy imagination fixated on loss, to shift to the registers of life, love, and struggle. While gleaning does not directly challenge the social relations of production by attempting to seize power or capital, it opens up a field of experimentation for the cultivation of human capacities and relationships at the margins of this system. Furthermore, Varda's film, this time through its form more than its content, demonstrates that gleaning is also a model of

artistic practice: rather than being a detached observer, Varda engages directly with the subjects and material which interest her, participating in the lives and struggles of those she films.

Agnès Varda commences her film with the *Larousse* encyclopaedia's entry on gleaning: to glean is "to gather after the harvest," she reads aloud. Millet's painting *Des glaneuses*, set before the camera, presents poor peasant women collecting grain in simple dress. Yet, as Varda demonstrates, gleaning is anything but an antiquated practice: it is alive and flourishing in the present day, taking on a contemporary guise in the context of the transformation of the social-economic system by the rise and maturation of capitalism. Although the practice of gleaning what remains after the harvest persists on a small-scale, it is considered part of the "old way," outdated by the increasing mechanization and industrialization of agriculture. Varda nevertheless recognizes that the act of bending down, or reaching out, has far from disappeared: she sees it everywhere, in fields, urban markets, alleyways, and trash bins. As such, she re-situates the practice of gleaning within the spaces of theory and aesthetics which so often undervalue the sites and subjects of everyday life. In doing so, she casts light upon those persons usually invisible within both the spheres of artistic and political representation. In recuperating *glanage* from historical and conceptual ineptitude as a viable and potentially subversive activity, it becomes nourishment for the social and political imaginary.

As the film illustrates, modern gleaners are situated within relations of production

different from their ancestors: in the conditions of capitalism they depend upon the malfunctioning of machines or the vagaries of the market for their bounty, rather than upon the ancient French laws governing gleaning that make provisions for the 'weak' and 'wretched'. They forge their livelihood upon the surpluses of a society that are destined for destruction, collecting what has been discarded, whether intentionally (instances which, in the film, include potatoes dumped for failing to meet the market specifications of size, shape, or colour, and grapes left to rot in order to adhere to the strict laws that govern the appellation of wines by region) or by mechanical accident (a "field day"). Rather than seeking the charity of strangers, the generosity of landowners, or government assistance, gleaners make use of the excessive waste of a society of overconsumption and overproduction in which everything is, and ultimately must be, disposable. They rely upon the logic of forced obsolescence built into the system, that rapidly reduces its products to ruins. In advanced capitalist societies like France, the site of gleaning has shifted, in significant part, from rural landscapes to the heart of urban centres. Social dislocation, enclosures, neoliberal policies, and a host of other economic and political factors have created a climate in which people of many backgrounds find themselves impoverished. As a result, gleaners encompass within their ranks not only the rural poor and the urban unemployed, but a growing proportion of single mothers, immigrants, refugees, and those with mental illnesses, disabilities, or addictions. And yet, those who glean are no longer bound together, as in the past, by the social ties of kinship. As capitalism has devalued social relations outside of the nuclear family and promoted a

culture of self-interest and competitive individualism, those at the bottom are left more vulnerable, without the support networks that once existed among the poor. Varda is struck by the portrait of isolation and displacement presented by many of the gleaners she meets, which seems so contrary to the beloved paintings of Millet and Breton which celebrate the communal, and almost joyous, aspects of gleaning. Community, where it exists, has to be relearned: it is gradually forged anew, out of solidarity and compassion, and outside of the mediation of the market. The gleaners whom she encounters have had to piece together a life at the margins of society through their own resourcefulness. Their survival is a matter of an ongoing creative appropriation and negotiation of the ruins of the very system which has excluded them. By collecting and sharing what has been thrown away, abandoned, overlooked—whether potatoes or household items—they resist institutionalized forms of injustice, exploitation, and atomization, defining alternative ways of being in the world and living with others.

The poetic, allegorical, and metaphorical interpretations of *glanage* open up for Varda a slew of the thematic possibilities. To glean can mean to learn or to discover, in a piecemeal manner, and as such, is suggestive of the mediation, reception, or production of social knowledge. As Varda suggests in the film, “gleaning is defined figuratively as a mental activity. To glean facts, acts and deeds, to glean information.” Gleaning is, in this way, a modality of sensibility: a way of perceiving the world, of paying attention to certain sensuous details that beckon to us—to the traces and fragments that we are taught to overlook. In contrast to Benjamin's model of illustrative seeing, which, while



insightful, still suggests a certain detachment and emphasis on the gaze, gleaning is a more tactile gesture of reaching out, grasping for, piecing together. It is not only about learning to see things in their socio-historical depth, but also reclaiming the 'know-how', the ability to *do*, that capitalism has impoverished. The principles of *glanage* can equally be applied to certain artistic practices, like *bricolage*, in which discarded cultural material is retrieved and employed in found-object art or installation pieces. It is in this aesthetic mode that Varda herself is a *glaneuse*, immersed in a project of *cinéglanage*: the gleaning of images and soundbites, insights and objects, from her encounters: “Through Varda’s lens, the work of gleaning stands for documentary/ essayistic, anti-consumerist, democratic, empathetic filmmaking” (Chrostowska 2007, 120). During a scene in which the camera films her—posing first with a bushel of wheat upon her shoulder, and then placing it aside in order to pick up her small, hand-held digital camera—she remarks: “There's another woman gleaning in this film, that's me.” From the outset she implicates herself in her work, going as far as to tell us: “this is my project: to film with one hand my other hand.” Hers is, in other words, as much a portrait of the self as it is a portrait of others. Recognizing the position power that comes along with her role as a film-maker, she chooses to put herself on the line, exploring her own impressions, revealing her weaknesses, making herself a subject alongside the others she interviews. Yet, as a self-portrait, it is one which, as Emma Wilson argues in “Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse: Salvage and the Art of Forgetting,” continually shifts our attention from the individual to the social, from the personal to the collective. Varda does not expose herself in a narcissistic

or exhibitionistic manner, but rather reveals the constitution of subjectivity in its relationality, its interconnectedness with others; she offers up the image of “an identity in transaction and becoming,” emerging from an open-ended series of encounters in the world, one that perilously “resist[s] melancholy and self-absorption,” those twin traps of a postmodern age (Wilson 2005, 109).

Varda's *cinéglanage* features her, not only behind the camera, but within the frame, bending down to touch the objects and reaching out to meet the subjects that it captures. She emphasizes the hand as “the tool of the painter, the artist” (*indieWIRE*): it is the hand that gleanes, not the detached eye which possesses. Hers is film-making as a craft: a “handmade” labour of love. As Chrostowska has noted, Varda, as a *cinéglaneuse*, figures as a “keen participant-observer (transcending the gender divide)” of cinema, in contrast to the flâneur who “stands for classical, narrative cinema” (2007, 120). Her work intimately engages with others and seeks to inspire encounters between people, both those in the film and also the audience. As she states in an *indieWIRE* interview with Andrea Meyer: “it's not 'Audience'. For me it's 100, 300, 500 people. It's a way to meet her, meet him [...] I give enough of myself, so they have to come to me. And they have to come to the people that I make them meet [in the film].” Varda demands that the audience not remain passive observers, but share in the series of exchanges, and this intention appears to have been realized, for what is most striking to Varda in the countless letters that she receives from enthusiastic filmgoers is the language they use to describe their reaction to the film: the pleasure each took in “meeting the gleaners in the

film.” Varda's cinematic gleaning is characterized by a creative impulse uninhibited by the regulation, repression, and policing that other forms of gleaning are almost certain to run up against; as she tells us in the film: “On this type of gleaning, of images, impressions, there is no legislation.” Her work accords space to feeling, the body, the senses—the lived dimensions of experience so often excluded from intellectual endeavours: “You go to the right thing, to the right place, to the right image, with your own feelings” (*indieWIRE*). While this strategy may prove to take shape in an endless series of digressions, it is precisely these sojourns into the unexpected, or passages through the things she loves, that forge new connections, returning the viewer-participant to the subject matter enriched.

*Cinéglanage* is characteristic of much of the revolutionizing project work of the last few decades, as outlined by Gratton and Sheringham in *The Art of the Project: Projects and Experiments in Modern French Culture*, in its attempt to break down the boundaries between art and life. These theorists point out that project film-making is re-situated in the terrain of the everyday and often deals, in a creative fashion, with issues of socio-political import. It takes the form of an experimental and experiential fieldwork: an encounter with and reinvestment of material reality. With the exception of a few guiding principles and parameters that serve as a broad framework, the work is unplanned—emphasizing the process above the end result. The artist immerses herself in the conditions of everyday life, in which a series of unforeseen events, chance meetings, and surprises unfold. The distinctions are blurred between aesthetic and ethical practice,

autobiography (self-portrait) and quasi-ethnographic inquiry (documentary), projection and representation: “The space of the project is always poised between the physical and the mental” (Gratton and Sheringham 2005, 15). The result is a film that is more than a film, that takes on a life of its own; as Wilson suggests: “The film does not exist as fixed artefact or object, but works instead to set up a reverberating series of exchanges and encounters, to generate its own (after)life” (2005, 107). Indeed, Varda's follow up film, *Deux ans après*, no ordinary sequel, speaks to the reverberations of the original film, one that clearly had a profoundly transformative effect upon the lives of those who saw it and those who took part in it—at least as judged by the countless letters, stories, testimonials, and gifts that Varda receives after the screenings. The sequel, a gift on her part to her viewership, directly involves the audience as well: while she revisits several of the gleaners with whom we are acquainted, she also meets some those who wrote to her, whose letters touched her. She joins them for an exchange of words, thoughts, and sentiments; she tends to the sparks that her work as ignited. Thus Varda's art is performative, but in a genuine sense: it produces human intersections, personal encounters, and collaborative projects based on inclusivity and reciprocity.

“And for forgetful me, it's what I've gleaned that tells where I've been,” states Varda, as she displays souvenirs from her recent travels in Japan. For the worldly and sentimental *glaneuse*, what she carries with her reminds her of her adventures, journeys, projects. To carry something away suggests that one has left an experience changed. Thus, more profoundly, gleaning can be understood as a modality of memory, a way of

recalling the past, in and through the gleaned object. The gleaned object circulates within webs of personal and collective histories, by which it is imprinted with memories, souvenirs, failures, and hopes. In an era in which the dominant discourses of neoliberalism have achieved a self-proclaimed victory over history, at a time when we are told there is no alternative, objects of our collective past return to remind us that all systems of production become outdated, all empires rise and fall, all social formations are overturned. When discarded objects, charged as they are with symbolic and affective power, are welcomed into our perceptual field, they speak volumes, they tell stories. And, in doing so, they awaken history from a frozen dream, one in which the present is reified and the past out of reach. It is this ability to restore a lost temporality by acting as a denaturalizing and historicizing force that Benjamin implied when, in his essay “Surrealism”, he spoke of the “revolutionary energies that appear in the “outmoded”” (1986, 181). In providing a temporal bridge, the gleaned object—as residue, refuse, or ruin—not only enables creative reconstructions and re-memberings of our shared past, but also invites us, in imagining a future of possibilities, to start creating them in the present.

## XI.

We must, of course, be careful not to romanticize gleaning. In an era of neoliberal capitalism, it is, indeed, a strategy of survival for the poorest of the poor. Gleaning is most often undertaken when there are no other options. By the same token, it is all too

easy to victimize and dis-empower the poor—to view their activities as purely those of desperation and helplessness. Yet they too, like the proletariat, have the capacity for agency and even critical insight. The point here is not that gleaning constitutes a political practice or a social movement or anything of the kind. Rather, it is to show that everyday life, even for the most marginalized members of society, contains potential moments of revelation, however few. Even when immersed in the most appalling conditions—oppressed, impoverished, subsisting on scraps and garbage—people are still social agents, who reflect upon their condition, shape themselves, and actively engage with the world. It is to suggest that 'consciousness' may be a process that happens even at the level of our involvement with the materiality of the world. *Experience*, particularly when it eludes commodification, can plunge us back into the world. For Benjamin, experience is something impoverished by capitalist modernity: as Flatley remarks in this regard, “A range of historical processes, such as urbanization, the commodity, new forms of technologized war, and factory work required people to shield themselves from the material world around them, to stop being emotionally open to that world and the people in it” (2008, 69). Gleaning, if a compulsion, still compels people into contact with the world—in this case, with the refuse of the system, with the recent past of capitalism in the form of outdated and outmoded objects, and with other gleaners.

The creative dimensions of gleaning, such as those picked up by Varda in her film, affirm that human activity, if it is not praxis, is still a form of *poiesis*. Stephen K. Levine defines *poiesis*, which is drawn from the ancient Greek word meaning 'to make',

as “the capacity to respond to and shape the world” (2005, 10). He explains how, in Aristotle's conceptualization, *poiesis* gives rise to a form knowledge different from that produced by *theoria* or observation, and *praxis* or action (32). Poiesis is linked to imaginative and creative aspects of human nature which, as Michelle LeBaron argues, are essentially “world-building and self-building” (2011, 11). Human beings shape their environments as much as they are shaped by them, in a manner that some see as akin to artistic formation or aesthetic practice. Praxis, as informed and committed political action which seeks, as Marx put it in *Theses on Feurbach*, is not to interpret the world but to change it, is inseparable from *poiesis*—the capacity to imaginatively engage with, be attentive to, and respond to the world. This basic capacity is one that is damaged by capitalism, which in naturalizing itself, obscures the fact that the world is one of human making. The revitalization of the imaginary is crucial to recuperating our role as social and historical agents. Demystifying capitalism and exposing history as the result of human activities, reflexive or otherwise, is a first step. This chapter has sought to show that gleaning potentially involves such moments of demystification—a small victory, but powerful enough in its own way—through revealing the shaping power of human activity to transform the discarded into things that sustain, nourish, and sometimes feed the imagination.

This is perhaps why Benjamin used gleaning as the metaphor for the work of both the historian and poet. “Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse,” he writes (2006, 108). Like the gleaner, the historian ignores the official valuations of things—

history, as we know, is that of the victors—and searches through the detritus of history.

As he writes:

Like a poor and burdened man cleverly picking through the rubbish of the previous day, the materialist historian selects from amongst all that is disregarded and from the residues of history. At the library he is unconcerned with what has been accredited as precious and valuable, but rather is drawn towards historical refuse. Waste materials are to enter into significant connections and fragments are used to gain a new perspective on history (2007c, 252).

The figure of the gleaner, like that of the flâneur, reveals something about everyday life in late capitalism: as market imperatives penetrate previously uncommodified realms, existence becomes more and more precarious for all.



4.

## Beyond the Ruins of Representation

### I.

The challenge of representing the ruins raises important problems for the artist and intellectual, film-maker and storyteller. Ruins, as the wreckage of history, are as troubling as they are tragic. Modern and contemporary ruins—including those of war, atomic bombings, dispossession, and genocide—where they exist, are often the reminders of unspeakable atrocities and immense human suffering. In many cases, what is lost—human lives, hopes, dignity—leaves no trace. In this context, when considering an aesthetic practice that can work from and respond to these ruins, we are faced with questions that touch upon the relation not only of form to content, but also of aesthetics to ethics. Representation is intricately bound up with cultural practices of memory and mourning, of repetition and working through. It is a social and political act, situated as it is within networks of symbols, ideologies, and cultural meanings. Ruins, in particular, bring us to the heart of the debate surrounding the capacity, and even the necessity, of symbols to represent suffering and disaster. They point to the very dialectic of absence

and presence, raising the question of what is missing—of what resists or exceeds representation. At its limits, the production of ruins in the conditions of 'postmodernity', the logic of ruination at the heart of contemporary capitalism, points toward a deep cultural problematic of the possibility of representation *itself* being in a state of ruin. Entering into this debate will require that we consider a diverse array of texts, both literary and visual. This chapter will therefore traverse a great terrain, taking us from an analysis of key Frankfurt School writings, contemporary critical theory, and architectural practice, to a consideration of the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the artistic practice of Ori Gersht, and the photographs that form the series and book *The Ruins of Detroit* by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre.

Ruins are embedded in what Julia Hell and Andrea Schönle call “a transhistorical iconography of decay and catastrophe, a vast visual archive of ruination” (2008, 1). This is to say that, at least in the Western world, ruins are embedded within a viewing context that has a rich history. As the subject of centuries of art, poetry, and photography—mediums which privilege the visual, or at least the depiction of imagery—ruins are conveyed to us in particular ways, that is, through common and familiar tropes (some of which were discussed in previous chapters) which represent a symbolic stock-house that the artist draws upon to communicate his or her message, whether the latter be about history, the human condition, acts of god, and so forth. This “visual archive” informs the very optics of ruination, or how ruins are framed and mediated for viewing, packaged for spectatorship. Such a framing constitutes no less than a visual language which has

served to naturalize, or occasionally challenge, certain ideas about ruins and ruination, as well as to condition certain responses to catastrophe and horror. Thus, the beholding of the ruin is, or can be, akin to the reading of a text invested with cultural meanings, references, and indicators, and our very senses are conditioned to understand and interpret that information in certain ways through the narratives provided us. Yet the contradiction here is that in the contemporary world, dominated by news flashes and the ceaseless, rapid cycling of images of disaster, meaning is more often negated than proffered. Ruins in a spectacle society become so many empty images—decontextualized, fragmentary, and senseless—which dominate the sensory environment. This reinforces the beholder's passive position as a consumer of images of disaster: the spectator undergoes a visual bombardment that can ultimately lead to the anaesthetization of the senses and feelings of detachment, anxiety, malaise, or helplessness. The response elicited by the form of such images is not active or intellectual, but rather emotive, or even defensive, as the subject tries to shield herself from shock, leading to a state of apathy and withdrawal that has profound political consequences.

Ruins, in other words, have a certain hold over or power to shape, for better or for worse, our social, political, cultural, and historical imaginary. The representation of the ruins of our age profoundly impacts how we ascribe meaning to our world and how we understand its conditions of possibility, including the possibilities of collective action and of re-imagining the uses of space and the structuring of social relations. As such, Hell and Schönle argue that “ruin gazing” deeply informs the ways in which we perceive

history and position ourselves in relation to both the past and the rapid transformations of everyday life in the contemporary world:

Ruin gazing [...] involves reflections about history: about the nature of the event, the meaning of the past for the present, the nature of history itself as eternal cycle, progress, apocalypse, or murderous dialectic process. And as Benjamin—who transformed what Arendt called the “shock of experience” into an enduring and enduringly beautiful image—knew, the aestheticization of ruins is unavoidable (2008, 1).

It is this very “aestheticization of ruins” that we are concerned to problematize, as it is the aesthetic representation of ruin that we are addressing when we use such terms as the “visual archive” or “optics” of ruins. Aesthetics, as we will see, are bound up with politics—politics referring here more broadly to the contestation that surrounds cultural meanings and social practices, the struggle to define the possibilities of the present and the future in relation to the past, and the very battle over the political imaginary. I argue that the representation of ruins in popular culture, specifically the media, is contributing to a widespread condition of subjectivity that I call the *melancholy imagination*—here used to signify a damaged state in which praxis, or our ability to actively shape ourselves and our world, is paralyzed. While melancholy has its vicissitudes, and melancholizing is an activity that can be productive (as we shall see in depth in the next chapter), here it is taken to refer to a condition akin to a depressive state. Politicizing ruins and

representation—or politicizing aesthetics, as Walter Benjamin saw it—is perhaps a necessary response to the aestheticization of ruins for those seeking to challenge the dominant frameworks of interpreting historical events and catastrophes in order to seize upon the possibilities of the present. Seeking alternative forms of representing the ruins, which take into account the very ruin of representation, is an absolute exigency if we are to move beyond the depressive imagination—that condition of Left melancholy which Benjamin so lamented—and toward a meaningful project of social change.

## II.

In 1949, Theodor Adorno saw the final absorption of culture into totalitarian society as an achieved reality, expressing itself in the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust. For Adorno, as for many other critical theorists of the time, the forms of thought and rationality that produced the death camps were the same as those behind all cultural expressions: “The more total society becomes,” he wrote in his essay, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” “the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own” (1983, 34). In such conditions, he perceived the near total cooptation of cultural production and critical thought, which reproduce, almost necessarily and without being conscious of it, ideology and forms of domination. For Adorno, the critical capacity of art, as a negation of the reification of subjectivity, had been lost; horror and beauty were two sides of the same coin. Thus he pronounced his famous condemnation: “Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the

dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34). Later, in *Negative Dialectics*, he would slightly nuance his conclusion, acknowledging the primal right of suffering to self-expression, but the overall indictment nevertheless remained: “Perennial suffering,” he reflected, “has as much right to express itself as the martyr has to scream; this is why it may have been wrong to say that poetry could not be written after Auschwitz” (1990, 362). Adorno's powerful critique of culture still resonates today. His writings have clearly problematized the possibilities and the limitations of art for writers, artists, and architects alike living in the aftermath of the great catastrophes of the twentieth century, who have refused to read in the devastation of war and genocide the wholesale failure of aesthetic or artistic practice. They have opened up a debate around larger questions regarding the place and the role of art within a society that has orchestrated atomic bombs and death camps, just as it has symphonies and literary masterpieces.

In her preface to the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, dated the summer of 1950, Hannah Arendt, one of Adorno's colleagues, surveys the devastating debris that surround her, and makes a plea. It is a plea that the ruins should not be just swept aside, cleaned up, built over, and forgotten—and the parallels here with psychoanalysis cannot be overlooked. She writes: “We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion” (1958, ix). If we imagine we can sweep the past under the rug we are terrifyingly wrong, for it will return.

Slipping into forgetfulness, or into some idealized version of the past or future, is self-deception: “This is the reality in which we live. And this is why all efforts to escape from the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are vain” (ix). Much like Sigmund Freud who theorized the unconscious as the buried ruins of psychic life containing active elements (the repressed) which inevitably generate personal disturbances, Arendt's larger social and cultural interpretation argued that scattered among the rubble of recent events were the fragments of that “subterranean stream of Western history” (ix), which would invariably resurface—just as they had surfaced in recent history—to produce fresh catastrophes. Her words echo Freud's on the unconscious; he writes: “All of the essentials are preserved, even things that seem completely forgotten are present somehow and somewhere, and have merely been buried and made inaccessible to the subject. Indeed, it may, as we know, be doubted whether any psychical structure can really be the victim of total destruction” (1973b, 276). Thus, the metaphor of the historian/psychoanalyst as archaeologist, which both Freud and Arendt heavily draw upon, as a figure who must salvage these pieces of the past in the interests of remembrance:

[The analyst's] work of construction, or if it is preferred, of reconstruction resembles to a great extent an archaeologist's excavation of some dwelling-place that has been destroyed and buried [...] The two processes are in fact identical, except that the analyst works under better conditions and has more material at his

command to assist him, since what he is dealing with is not something destroyed but something that is still alive (Freud 1973d, 275).

For Arendt, representing the past must perform this work of uncovering ruins: “The main task of the historian as storyteller in Arendt's eyes is to descend into the rubble of history,” write Wessel and Rensmann, for it is there, as they go on to say, that “she hopes to bring to light the subterranean and presumably long buried histories” (2012, 200). In much the same way psychoanalysis seeks to find an expressive outlet for the unconscious in the 'talking cure', or the method of free association, through which what has been repressed is gradually interpreted, “worked through,” and placed in relation to the past, so too must the ruins of history be excavated, represented, and, hopefully, understood to break the cycle of repetition.

Arendt, like Adorno, recognized the project of representation, or aesthetic practice, as state of ruin, yet she saw it as one which must ultimately be redeemed. The Holocaust marked a radical rupture with all notions of history as linear, progressive, meaningful: as an event, it falls outside of existing frameworks of comprehension. As Wessel and Rensmann point out, “Auschwitz, Arendt insists, irrevocably destroyed all contexts of meaning, including those that had given history its sense and continuity” (200). What language could be used to describe the horrors of the death camps? What words or concepts could make sense of the senseless? What aesthetic form could transmit a knowledge of atrocity? Arendt was aware of the limits, even the dangers of



representation, when it comes to the question of human suffering and loss—and to the related problematics of memory and forgetfulness. Yet, in questioning the very notion of comprehension, she points as much to the necessity as to the limits of representation:

The conviction that everything that happens on earth must be comprehensible to man can lead to interpreting history by commonplaces: Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us—neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality—whatever it may be (viii).

The danger, here signalled to by Arendt, is one first identified by Freud: the possibility of forgetting, and thus repeating the past—what he called by the name of “repetition compulsion,” that “compulsion to repeat, which now replaces the impulsion to remember” (1973a, 151). As he writes: “the patient *remembers* nothing of what is forgotten and repressed, but that he expresses it in *action*. He reproduces it not in his memory but in his behaviour; he *repeats* it, without of course knowing that he is repeating it” (160). For Arendt, denial and ignorance are the handmaids of forgetfulness;

thus, the event that produces the ruins must be understood in its uniqueness, its specificity, at the same time as the underlying general trends and tendencies are also recognized. It must be intellectually confronted in such a way that its lived and felt dimensions are not negated. The work of the storyteller, the artist, the historian is essential in this regard. For understanding does not come immediately, from experience alone, but through reflection; it requires a labour, the work of tracing "the disparate origins [...] the threads, historical events, and discontinuities in this historical genealogy" (Wessel & Rensmann 2012, 201).

Arendt is concerned with transforming the "shock of experience" into a meaningful form, which requires mediation, without, however, mitigating its affective properties—its ability to move us. For horror to be understood it must be felt, even as it is mediated. As Freud writes of the practice of transference in analysis, through which our unconscious conflicts are presently enacted in relation to the analyst, and the patient's illness is treated "as an actual force, active at the moment, and not as an event in his past life" (1973a, 162): "no one can be slain in absentia or in effigie" (1973d, 115). The "therapeutic task [...] consists chiefly in translating [the repressed material which thereby comes to light] back again into the terms of the past" (1973a, 162). Raw experience must be translated into memory and the kind of understanding that brings with it the possibility of acting and choosing differently. History, in other words, like the events of our personal (pre)history, requires a creative and active reconstruction in order to open up a transformative space; the ruins must be pieced together—a task full of dangers and

pitfalls—so that they can stand at once as an interpretation of the past and an overture to the future.

It is thus that Arendt and Adorno, faced with unimaginable horrors that struck upon their personal lives, as well as the lives of those that surrounded them, opened up a great debate, not only upon the nature of evil, but upon the aestheticization of ruins: Should the catastrophes of history be represented, and if so, then how? What are the limits of representation? How can loss be presented? What aesthetic form does one give to disaster, horror, suffering? What is the relation of aesthetic concepts, particularly that of beauty, to the ruins of our age? Should horror be made beautiful, and if so, to what end? What are the ethical demands of representation? The responsibility of the artist? If we take for granted ongoing cultural production, even in the face of absolute catastrophe, how can it be carried out in a meaningful and engaged manner? How do we rescue representation from a state of ruin? I would like to suggest that there is an absolute exigency to respond creatively to the state of ruins which confronts us. Re-learning to respond, as we shall see, challenges the state of anaesthetization and political melancholia fostered by the mainstream media, everyday experiences of disempowerment, and the historical and political losses we have suffered. Thus, I am in agreement with Michael Sorkin, whom, after considering the challenges and the possibilities of representation in a short piece, entitled “Between Beauty and Horror,” concluded: “The difficult question is not whether to make art but how...” (1993, 74). Such a difficult task demands of those who work today, in the midst of all sorts of

cultural, social, economic, and political ruins, the aesthetic labour of giving them form. For it is only in inhabiting, sifting through, and recomposing the ruins that we encounter the enigma of loss and the problematic nature of the past as past, that we confront melancholy and recover our relation to time as the agents of historical change.

In the cultural condition that some have termed postmodernity, in which the depressive melancholy imagination, cut off from both the past and the future, frozen in its depths of reification, envisions no possibilities outside the eternal instant, clear and present is the danger of what Nietzsche once called 'eternal return'. The possibility of breaking out of the cycles of devastation that define our social and political world, as well out of the attitude of "self-satisfied contemplation," identified by Adorno (1983, 34), requires that we reconsider aesthetics as a political tool. Adorno and Arendt knew as well as any art historian that representation—the question of aesthetics and culture—deserves to be taken seriously. If not, it becomes deadly. Art, as I hope to demonstrate, can play a role in restoring us to perceptibility—enlivening and re-educating our senses. Art serves as a model of praxis, which Marx defined as a revolutionary human activity, based in critical thought and practical action, which transforms both the self and the historical-material world. Art, as a sensual engagement with the world, has the potential to be an active and transformative activity, one which teaches us to see the world in new ways. Representation is a social process that can be reinvested, and it is starting from the ruins that this will be achieved.

### III.

In a society—supposedly liberal, democratic, and free—that shares an uncanny resemblance with the total society feared by Adorno and the totalitarian regime decried by Arendt in the early Cold War years following upon the Second World War, aesthetics is a matter of the utmost urgency. In the Western world, images, which circulate like currency or commodities, are more than ever the vehicles through which public opinion is manipulated, war carried out, and political sensibility numbed. These writers that we associate with the Frankfurt School identified in fascism the harbinger of a frightening, and soon-to-be-generalized, tendency toward subtle forms of social control, and the achievement of what Walter Benjamin (2007a) would term the aestheticization of politics. Arendt, for instance, pointed to the power that a politico-aesthetics has to conjure up the symbols, narratives, and perceptions that appeal to the imaginary—that deep dimension of human experience—and seal it off from social reality:

Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations. The force possessed by totalitarian propaganda—before the movements have the power to drop iron curtains to

prevent anyone's disturbing, by the slightest reality, the gruesome quiet of an entirely imaginary world—lies in its ability to shut the masses off from the real world (1958, 353).

Arendt recognized the importance that the imaginary must be accorded in politics—had, in fact, been accorded by fascism and to disastrous ends. Aesthetics and power were, for her, interwoven: in compensating for the “shocks” of material reality, fascism was able to make a home for the masses in an imaginary world. Yet, while fascism no doubt achieved the alienation of the senses and the reification of the imaginary that enabled the emergence and survival of brutal and repressive totalitarian regimes, the capacity for perceptual and affective manipulation is one that has ultimately been perfected today in our hypermediatized advanced capitalist society.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin, another associate of the Frankfurt school, argued that the imbrication of technological innovations with modes of sensibility and sense perception had enabled a “total function of art” (2007a, 224): its capacity to “prescribe” meaning, to elicit predetermined responses, and to distract on mass. He argued, for instance, that the total identification of the spectator with the camera's lens—resulting in the absorption of subjectivity—leaves no room for critical distance. For Benjamin, this total function of art was symptomatic of what he termed the aestheticization of politics, and its consequences were disastrous. Aesthetics, he saw, had been an intrinsic part of the war machinery that wreaked havoc across Europe and its colonies over the course of the first half of the twentieth century:

“All efforts to render politics aesthetic,” he wrote, “culminate in one thing: war” (241). For Benjamin, it is in the Futurists' manifesto that this maxim finds its clearest expression: war, aestheticized, promises the gratification of the senses, the exaltation of body in metallic prostheses, the beautiful realization of the technological capacity for creation and destruction. He reads in this the ultimate form of alienation: “[Humanity's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art” (242). As such, developing a new conceptual language of aesthetics, one that counters the impulses of fascism, becomes, for Benjamin, absolutely essential to “the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art,” an issue to which we will later return (218).

From her contemporary perspective at the turn of the twenty-first century, Susan Buck-Morss, reading Benjamin, Adorno, and Arendt, recognizes the diagnostic value of their work for the social and political malaise of our times: she identifies in their writings a larger critique of modernity, one that “outlives fascism” (1992, 4). Buck-Morss is particularly interested in the intersection of aesthetics and subjectivity, in the political implications of our interactions with the highly manipulated terrain of everyday life. The empty parade of spectres that haunt the nightly news, that populate our television and computer screens, are an important part of the “phantasmagoria” of modern life—the spectacle which charms, distracts, intoxicates, and ultimately serves as a veil obscuring the real conditions of social life. Images participate in the conjuring up of a

dreamworld—or a state of mystification—described by Buck-Morss as “an appearance of reality that tricks the senses through technical manipulation” (22). This sophisticated capacity to act upon the collective imaginary through the manipulation of the senses she refers to as “technoaesthetics” (22). The contemporary landscape is, for her, one of total aesthetic environments which, by way of overstimulating the senses, end up deadening them—an outcome that has a devastating implications for political subjectivity. She writes of these techoaesthetic-scapes:

The perceptions they provide are “real” enough—their impact upon the senses and nerves is still “natural” from a neurophysical point of view. But their social function is in each case compensatory. The goal is manipulation of the synaesthetic system by control of environmental stimuli. It has the effect of anaesthetizing the organism, not through numbing, but through flooding the senses (22).

The problematizing of aesthetics, in all its political import, must return to the question of the senses as the “sensual condition of modernity,” as Buck-Morss argues: “Benjamin is saying that sensory alienation lies at the source of the aestheticization of politics, which fascism does not create, but merely “manages”” (4). We need to rethink the very concept of aesthetics which, according to Buck-Morss, has seen the reversal of its original meaning: aesthetics, which in ancient Greece referred to the body, to the sensorium with its perceptual capacities, has become an *anaesthetics*, the cultural forms that bombard



and overwhelm that same capacity for experience: “Its goal is to numb the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory” (18). This alienation of the senses, and, I would add, of the imaginary itself, is at the root of the depressive political melancholia that is the ruin of our time. Indeed, the ruin of representation is, on the subjective level, the incapacity to represent to ourselves alternative models of social, political, and cultural life, and take action toward achieving them, for, as Marx noted, “what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax” (1990, 284).

Susan Buck-Morss offers a way of thinking through the devastation wrought upon the imaginary by the alienation of the senses. The anaestheticization she refers to is the sensual bombardment that is part of the very fabric of everyday life in the contemporary world. It is not just life in the city—the daily onslaught of noise, crowds, traffic—but, moreover, the hourly parade of spectres that haunt the news, the images that populate billboards and television screens, that constitute the assault. The volume and pace of stimulation outstrips the capacity for reflection. Representation, rather than offering a frame of mediation, is experienced as direct and unmediated. As such, the “battlefield experience,” summed up in the word *shock*, initially circumscribed to the traumas of war, now describes the general conditions of existence in all domains, encompassing work, leisure, and intimate relations:

Perceptions that once occasioned conscious reflection are now the source of shock-impulses that consciousness must parry. In

industrial production no less than modern warfare, in street crowds and erotic encounters, in amusement parks and gambling casinos, shock is the very essence of modern experience (1992, 16).

To explain the significance of shock, Buck-Morss returns to the “Freudian insight” that consciousness will shield itself from trauma by making itself impervious to the intrusive stimuli: under stress, consciousness acts “as a buffer, blocking the openness of the synaesthetic system, thereby isolating present consciousness from past memory. Without the depth of memory, experience is impoverished” (16). Sensory bombardment results in the incapacity to register sensual impressions, which means that perceptions fail to resonate with the depth of experience, fail to connect us to the memories of the past and to the possibilities of the future. Thus understood, shock is intrinsic to the alienation of the senses, which in turn has a “cognitive” impact: “exploitation,” in this sense of perceptual manipulation and injury, “paralyzes the imagination” (17).

Freud, one of the first to develop an analysis and concept of cultural trauma, likened it to the neuroses he witnessed in many survivors of train collisions (1967, 84). He described the initial experience of trauma by emphasizing its quantitative element—it is experienced as the overwhelming incursion of stimuli that disrupts the psychic economy and puts the pleasure principle out of service (92). Trauma is an unassimilable shock which breaks through the psyche's defence mechanisms, resulting in a deep narcissistic wound which splits the ego (98). The effects of the shock, however, emerge only after a period of latency; that is, they are not experienced at the time of the event

itself, but develop only after the fact—the unconscious remainder of the event later becomes active as the return of the repressed. Unable or unwilling to properly recall and remember the event, and to mourn the losses incurred therein, the subject becomes mired in fixation and repetition-compulsion, a delayed response to catastrophe that takes an unconscious, and therefore, unmediated, form (95). Trauma—particularly the feature of narcissistic injury and its strange economy of remembrance and forgetting—thus appears to be bound with the emotional formation of melancholia. The melancholic is unable to properly mourn a loss that remains unconscious; she does not know what has been lost in or of the self (Freud 2006, 314). In melancholia, one's capacity for self-love, and love of others—the basis of human attachments and emotional bonds—is severely diminished, just as memory is impoverished. Shock, whether it is instigated by an accident, an event of war, the loss of a loved one, or even damage done to an ideal, deals a traumatic blow to the capacity of the imaginary to connect to the past, and therefore empties out the present and future possibilities.

And what is the paralysis of the imagination pointed to by Buck-Morss if not a depressive form of melancholy? Melancholy is more than just a passing mood or a romantic and fleeting sentiment. As a constellation of subjectivity, a configuration of the imaginary, it represents, in the words of Wendy Brown “a persistent condition, a state, indeed, a structure of desire, rather than a transient response to death or loss” (1999, 20). Melancholia is characterized by a state of inaction, of impossibility: it is the inability to remember, to reflect, or to formulate thought and action that most clearly signal the

atrophy of the depressed imagination. When applied to the domain of politics, to the political imaginary, one could argue that melancholy of this kind results in the impossibility of political praxis. As Brown, in her discussion of Benjamin's concept of "left melancholy," argues, it amounts to "a failure to understand history in terms other than 'empty time' or 'progress'" and resultant incapacity "to seiz[e] possibilities for radical change in the present" (20). Praxis, understood as the capacity to actively shape and respond to the historical conditions of possibility in the moment of their presentation, depends on the realization that history is of our own making—that we are not ruled by the world of things; paralysis, is just the opposite: a fetishized form of perception which renders the subject thing-like and blocks the dialectical imagination. If we locate the source of this melancholy in the sensory alienation described by Susan Buck-Morss which works through shock, then we will perhaps agree with the latter's conclusion that the act of recuperating praxis depends upon that "of restoring 'perceptibility'" or revitalizing the capacity for experience (1992, 18).

Within the context of the aestheticization of politics, representation itself is embedded within a logic of ruination. Representation, as repetition and sensory bombardment, attacks our very aesthetic capacities of perceiving, interpreting, and making aesthetic judgements. When the categories of phantasmagoria, reification, and shock are introduced into the conceptual language of aesthetics, representation is suddenly seen to be bound up with the production of ruins—the fragmentation of experience, the dissociation of history, the disintegration of memory, and, perhaps, above

all, the ruin of our capacity to imagine the world differently and to act accordingly. We begin to understand the intimate bonds that link subjectivity and aesthetics, representation and political life. Part of this process is the very way in which the ruins of history themselves are represented. While the aestheticization of catastrophe has become a normalized and somewhat banal part of everyday life in the contemporary age, the reportage of disasters, especially of war, is nonetheless at the centre of a great debate with political, philosophical, and ethical dimensions that deserve our attention.

#### IV.

Susan Sontag (2004) addresses the controversy surrounding the photographic image of ruins, particularly those of war, in her essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. The images of war or catastrophe, disseminated in newspapers and on TV, invite us to do just that, to become “voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be” of the suffering of others (34). For Sontag, this begs the question of the moral force of images, a subject of ongoing controversy, not only within the academy and the literary world, but also within the related professions. When speaking about the aestheticization of suffering, it is the impact of images, the way in which they aid or impair our capacity to respond, that is at stake. “War was and still is the most irresistible—and picturesque—news,” she writes (39); yet, the contradiction is that we fail to acknowledge precisely this aesthetic aspect of its representation. When it comes to the “news,” to the documentation of historical tragedy, we expect realism. That the ruins of war, from the moment they are framed by a

camera and frozen in time, are situated on the aesthetic registers of the beautiful, the sublime, or the picturesque is something we tend not to acknowledge or discuss. The photograph or the newsreel drive home the suffering of others, while, at the same time, objectifying it: “Photographs tend to transform, whatever their subject; and as an image something may be beautiful—or terrifying, or unbearable, or quite bearable—as it is not in real life” (76). The aesthetic form is, in other words, one that gives rise to varying responses on the part of the beholder, and we need to concern ourselves with these reactions if we are to understand the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of aesthetics.

Sontag asks us to acknowledge that when it comes to the photograph, the newsreel, the documentary film, we assume, expect, even demand, a certain realism. We imagine that, as Mathew Brady, a Civil War photographer put it, “The camera is the eye of history” (quoted in Sontag, 41). This is the assumption that the camera lens *documents*, that is it records and registers, rather than *represents*, reality. The photograph does not just tell us what war is like, it shows us how it *really* is; it says: “This is what war *does*. And *that*, that is what it does, too. War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War *ruins*” (9). At first glance it seems straightforward, if hard to endure. The images—of suffering, mutilation, ruination—are falsely assumed to speak for themselves; and, as Sontag argues, in doing so, they are said to call out for moral indignation, to demand our empathy. We forget that the photograph is, in fact, a representation—that it frames, even stages, its subject matter, according to aesthetic

principles as much as to political intentions. The image is, above all, a product, a commodity, and one of a particular set of socio-historical conditions: the context (of its publication or reception), the captioning, the content, all matter. War, as Sontag demonstrates, is never generic, and the same image could be used to evoke a set of different responses according to the context. But beyond the level of political discourse or rhetoric, beyond the particularities of a conflict, we must return precisely to the general question of the aestheticization of historical catastrophe: is it justified, and if so, to what end?

“The ultra-familiar, ultra-celebrated image—of an agony, of ruin—is an unavoidable feature of our camera-mediated knowledge of war,” writes Sontag (21). The ruin has a second life, an afterlife, as image in the spectacle society of contemporary capitalism—transmitted, diffused, and reproduced millions of times per day. The technological innovations that gave birth to film have transformed the context as well as the content of our understanding of the ruins of history. For millions of viewers, seeing bombs explode or towers crumble is a nightly affair; disaster is packaged for mass consumption. Realism, “the simple duty to record” (42) the gritty facts, facts that some might prefer to ignore, cannot be accepted as a justification in itself for turning ruination into a spectacle. As Sontag notes, realism of this kind—the kind that puts burning bodies on the screen—is designed both to *shock* and to *sell*; it is as much about making profits as it is about raising awareness: “to ask that images be jarring, clamorous, eye-opening seems like elementary realism as well as good business sense” (21). The idea here is that

we are in need of “shock therapy” (14): to be confronted with the raw, obscene details of suffering is to be awakened, necessarily if somewhat brutally, from our apathy, called upon to feel something. But given that we are exposed to hundreds, if not thousands, of such images in our media culture, the task of holding the attention of the viewer requires constant upping-the-anti. Sontag offers an insightful analysis of the impact of image bombardment on our capacity to respond:

An image is drained of its force by the way it is used, where and how often it is seen. Images shown on television are by definition images of which, sooner or later, one tires. What looks like callousness has its origin in the instability of attention that television is organized to arouse and to satiate by its surfeit of images. Image-glut keeps attention light, mobile, relatively indifferent to content. Image-flow precludes a privileged image. The whole point of television is that one can switch channels, that it is normal to switch channels, to become restless, bored. Consumers droop. They need to be stimulated, jump-started, again and again. Content is no more than one of these stimulants. A more reflective engagement with content would require a certain intensity of awareness—just what is weakened by the expectations brought to images disseminated by the media, whose leaching out of content contributes most to the *deadening of feeling* (82; my emphasis).



The outcome is anything but the “restoring of perceptibility” that Buck-Morss called for. As such, it is not surprising that Sontag, like many others, is skeptical of this reasoning. Shock is perhaps less a remedy than a tranquillizer—a point which Freud would readily affirm.

Yet, to imagine the news taking a form other than realism is troubling. To tinker with reality is to put into question its authenticity. To aestheticize horror in any way, by giving it form or beauty, is to commit a gross moral abomination, that of 'whitewashing' atrocity or 'romanticizing' suffering. Thus, in the representation of ruins, realism is assumed to be that which constitutes the difference between art and life, between the painting and the photograph. The photograph, as a document of authenticity, as a trace of reality, is not meant to be artistic: “Transforming is what art does, but photography that bears witness to the calamitous and the reprehensible is much criticized if it seems 'aesthetic'; that is, too much like art” (Sontag, 60). As Sontag points out, the horrors wrought by war and other catastrophes are the long-standing themes of religious paintings and icons, of works of literature and epic poetry, even of modern art, and thus have always, to some extent, been the subject of aestheticization. It is only when they become the themes of photography—for photography is presumed to present the real thing, to freeze an objective moment in time—that the question of ethics in its relation to aesthetics is introduced:

That a gory battlescape could be beautiful—in the sublime or awesome or tragic register of the beautiful—is a commonplace about

images of war made by artists. The idea does not sit well when applied to images taken by cameras: to find beauty in war photographs seems heartless. But the landscape of devastation is still a landscape. There is beauty in ruins (60).

Beauty, in contemporary culture is, according to Sontag, a “disgraced notion” (60). At best, we are mistrustful of beauty as naïve; whereas, where it concerns more seriously the representation of catastrophes, we condemn it as “frivolous, sacrilegious,” or even traitorous (60).

Why does Sontag raise the question of beauty? In acknowledging a beauty in certain representations of ruins, Sontag directs us to the traditional register of aesthetics. She wants reiterate the difference between reality and representation, one that is being blurred by new technologies, social media, and 'reality TV'. A photograph is, for her, a thing *apart* from reality. It is not the event—something we tend to forget when representation takes the form not of 'high art' but of 'news'—real events, actuality. For instance, in speaking of 9/11, she suggests that while the “site itself, the mass graveyard that had received the name "Ground Zero," was of course anything but beautiful,” the photographs taken of the event “*were* beautiful, many of them” (60). There is a crucial gap here between art and life. Ruins, in the romantic or classical view, gesture toward something outside of the picture frame—something beyond. Ruins, in romantic paintings or epic poetic descriptions, were, above all, symbols—reflections on the human condition, on the passing of all the things, the folly of human endeavours. Art has a

function which, according to this classical interpretation, is to impose form upon chaos, to provide a meaning to what seems senseless, to offer metaphors for different aspects of existence. Thus, Aristotle, one of the earliest theorists of aesthetics, viewed tragedy as catharsis—the purging or purification of fear and pity. While Kant, a key enlightenment thinker, argued that the beauty of art gives rise to “the free play of the imagination” in the act of contemplation (1987, 190). Whether in providing an education of the senses, in evoking an emotional response, or in offering the aesthetic distance needed to see something from another perspective, art leads to some form of understanding, interpretation, or transformation. In this sense, the medium itself—the artistic form—plays a crucial role: that of transfiguration. What is raw, painful, unassimilable becomes, if not comprehensible, at least bearable. Art, understood in the sense of the power to symbolize loss and give meaning to sorrowful events, is part of what makes life liveable.

If we accept, with Aristotle and Kant, the potential role and functions of art, we are still left with the problematic of conceptually distinguishing art from representation, particularly given a context in which the boundaries of art are continually expanding, and in which what is and can be counted as art are in constant negotiation. Of special relevance to this analysis are the questions: How do we differentiate the images—of ruins, catastrophe, disaster—that we see on television from those that adorn the walls of galleries? Are there just grounds for such a distinction? I would like to suggest that it is not only possible, but essential, to articulate these differences. The goal is not to reinforce the separation of high art and popular culture, but rather to consider the ways in

which different aesthetic frames, viewing contexts, and the element of beauty, serve to condition the potential impact of representation upon the beholder. A consideration of the photographic work, “The Ruins of Detroit,” of contemporary photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, will help to clarify the potential, as well as the limits, of a conventional, if contemporary, artistic approach to the ruins.

## V.

Looking at the images that form the series, “The Ruins of Detroit,” by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre (2012), one is immediately struck by their melancholy beauty and faded grandeur. Massive and architecturally stunning buildings—train stations, banks, theatres, hotels, production plants—built at the height of prosperity in the early- to mid-twentieth century, have been utterly transformed by the processes of decay. These ruins are wondrous and strange; in them, there is a blurring of the lines between nature and culture, life and death: a theatre resembles a stalactite cave, collapsed mansions become part of the natural landscape, an abandoned plant has the air of a mausoleum. There is an apocalyptic element to many these scenes: one has the impression that they were suddenly abandoned: drawers are flung open, papers scattered, chairs overturned. The ghostly inhabitants of the recent past—dancers in the ballroom, business men in suits, factory workers punching in—though missing are still palpable: they have left behind the traces of themselves and their former lives. Thus, the images seem to have frozen a moment in time; they are, as the artists put it in their official statement, “small pieces of

history in suspension.” The photographs, which travelled the world in an exhibition and are now brought together in a book, went viral over the internet, attracting critical acclaim for the young French photographers, and reminding us that beauty—for the images are indeed breathtaking—still has the power to captivate our imagination.

The language that Marchand and Meffre use to describe their work is very much in line with the romantic conceptualization of ruins as symbols of transience. They elevate Detroit, “capital of the XXth Century,” to the same level as the other great political and economic power centres of history. As they write on their website for the project: “Its splendid decaying monuments are, no less than the Pyramids of Egypt, the Coliseum of Rome, or the Acropolis in Athens, remnants of the passing of a great Empire.” The ruins of Detroit, whose rise and decline came to pass over the course of less than a century, are the remnants of a great vision, the industrial dream of Henry Ford, whose very fulfilment sowed the seeds of its own decay—when the automobile became the vehicle through which the middle classes fled the city for the suburbs, reinforcing already existing patterns racial segregation and prompting urban decay. We are led to view the ruins of a political-economic order under which many of us lived and worked, and which we still remember and even mourn, as we would those of an ancient and immemorial regime. The images, in other words, serve to estrange us from what is familiar: they teach us to see in the decrepit remnants of industrialization the monuments of a vision whose time is now past. What was once merely an eyesore awaiting demolition becomes a melancholic spectre of the sorrowful fate of empire—bitter-sweet

and tragic, but meaningful.

The ruins, as they are presented to us in this photographic work, are mediated by the photographic frame. They are representations of ruins; they function as narratives. Many of the scenes have obviously been staged, as they are in a state of carefully placed disorder. Moreover, the living human presence—of squatters, homeless, graffiti artists, teenagers—who presently use the ruins as spaces for a range of everyday activities and functions, has been completely erased. The artists have done what was necessary to achieve the most striking impact. The images are works of art: constructions. They reflect upon the moment they seek to document; they interpret the spaces captured by the camera lens. Realism, in the sense discussed above of recording reality *as it is*, is revealed as subjective. Marchand and Meffre are clearly not concerned with 'pure' documentation, if one can speak of such a thing, but with the epic qualities of history, and how these are embedded in spaces which can be made to speak their stories. Yet, their status as works of art does not detract from their visual authority; rather it is quite the opposite: their very power to move us is a function of their beauty. The ruins of Detroit come to us as visions of another place and time, almost otherworldly. The quality of light, mood, colour, and composition are each indispensable to producing what is, perhaps, a sense of the sublime: we stand before these images of time at a standstill with awe and wonder. The imagination is transported at once into the possible past and the possible future.

What is most interesting in these photographs is, for me, their capacity to

stimulate the imagination. The ruins of Marchand and Meffre invite the beholder into the picture frame to imagine what is beyond the frame—to reflect upon the lives of the lost inhabitants, the causes of the decline. They insist not only upon memory, but upon the possibilities of reclaiming or reimagining these spaces. Beauty serves as a crucial mediating factor in this regard: it gives us the distance necessary to look upon what is familiar in a totally different way, opening up a space for new ideas. This is the opposite of the visual and sensory bombardment discussed above as characteristic of the news media's coverage of ruins. Beauty encourages the engagement and response of the faculties toward synthesis and understanding, rather than alienating them through repeated shocks. Furthermore, the viewing context is structured: we are given a statement, titles, narrative, and contextual information which offer indications as to how these visual texts might be interpreted. They are the layers that make of the image a palimpsest. We can contemplate the images at our own pace, even come back to them repeatedly. These photographs, through the vehicle of aesthetic mediation and framing, which draws upon the principles of the beautiful and sublime, aid us in recovering our sense of history, as change and possibility, by estranging us from the present—a naturalized social and political order which so often feels eternal and unmalleable.

Yet, we must also pose the critical question: in looking at these images, what possibilities are we invited to imagine, and are they embedded in the real social and historical conditions of possibility? Like all representations, “The Ruins of Detroit,” reveal and conceal, illuminate and mystify. What is invisible are the ways in which the

spaces of ruins have already been reinvested and put to different uses and practices—a home, a garden, a canvas, a skateboard park, etc. As such, the artistic practice of Marchand and Meffre falls short of a genuine social engagement, in the fashion of Agnes Varda. The emphasis on contemplating the beauty of the ruins can also detract us from the larger questions concerning the economic and political logic behind the devastation of Detroit, and from the movements to creatively resist this trend, for instance, by initiating a cooperative system of production, or reclaiming the factories as social housing or community centres. Thus, beauty can function as another form of fetishism, of the aestheticization of politics, if it obscures the real social relations and implications that lie behind its subject, in this case, the production of ruination. Marchand and Meffre's work reveals this complicated and contradictory tendency, in which beauty serves as a mediator, offering us the space required to contemplate that which is before us, but can reinforce the tendency toward the “self-satisfied contemplation,” which so concerned Adorno. Thus, I would like to turn to a consideration of alternative forms of artistic engagement with the ruins, in particular, the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and the works of visual artist Ori Gersht, which rethink the relation of form to content in a more fundamental way by dealing with the themes of memory, violence, and catastrophe.

## VI.

A fascinating aesthetic approach to catastrophe and its remains comes in the form of the artistic practice of the London-based Israeli artist, Ori Gersht. Gersht's work, though it



deals with themes including the Holocaust and Hiroshima, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the aftermath of war and occupation, does not stop at representing catastrophe through alluring images, although the tension between beauty and violence is, indeed, one that is explored in his work. Instead, he is concerned with the larger ethical and social questions surrounding the remembrance and the representation of horror. His interest is in trying to hold onto the memories of atrocity in the face of forgetting, so that as a society we might not repeat the past. While his works often take the form of personal stories or abstract events of violence, they are deeply woven with the broader theme of the interconnectedness of history, time, memory, and landscape. His art performs the function of shaking us out of complacency, by confronting us with violence that cannot be safely situated in the past, but erupts out of the fabric of everyday life. While his work is photo and video-based (he trained as a photographer), many of his pieces are reminiscent of old master paintings or have certain characteristics of installation work, drawing the viewer into a participatory interaction with the piece.

As curator of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Al Miner, suggests in a conversation with Gersht on the occasion of the survey exhibition *Ori Gersht: History Repeating* in 2012, Gersht uses the camera as a tool to enact or perform memory: it is a metaphor for the complexities of memory and our propensity to forget. Gersht points to the fact that the camera, in a sense, fixes history by capturing what is in front of it and freezing the moment, yet this is inevitably a subjective process, full of omissions and even errors. As such, he pushes the technology that he uses to its limits, in an attempt to

add layers of meaning to an image—to capture what is not always visible to immediate perception. Playing with this tension between the visible and the invisible is just one such way that he addresses larger concerns about the perceptibility of history and violence. In the conversation with Miner, Gersht suggests that he seeks out the point when the image begins to decompose yet still holds together. Working at the frontiers of photography, he turns his images into ruins. In his *Ghost Series* (2003), for instance, he photographs ancient olive trees in former Palestinian villages in Israel. In overexposing the negatives, the images become faded, bleached, blurred, and ghostly. Written over, they are metaphors for landscape and history, a palimpsest of violence, dispossession, and occupation. As such, they gesture toward what cannot be captured by the camera: absence, the absence of the former Palestinian inhabitants that once tended those trees. In another series, *Chasing Good Fortune* (2010), manipulated with analogue and digital technologies to a poetic effect, Gersht photographs cherry blossoms in Japan. The beauty of the images is, at some point, interrupted by the revelation that many of them were taken in Hiroshima, where the trees are growing in irradiated soil. Once a symbol good fortune, then later, for kamikaze pilots who fell from the sky during the Second World War, the blossoms become traces of devastation and imperial decay. The photographs are thus a form of memorialization, but one that is entirely different from traditional expressions.

As suggested, Gersht's work explores the tension between beauty and violence. Beauty can be immersive, Gersht explains, lulling us into a state of tranquillity. It is this

passive state that his pieces disrupt, for instance when a bullet unexpectedly penetrates a pomegranate in a scene reminiscent of a Chardin painting (*Pomegranate*, 2006), or when the roaring sound of a falling tree breaks the silence of a wooded grove (*The Forest*, 2005). Viewers are seduced into witnessing an act of violence. In the video installation *Big Bang* (2006) the sumptuous beauty of the still life of flowers arranged in a vase invites viewers to peacefully contemplate it. When it suddenly explodes with a sharp noise, sending shards of glass flying, the unexpectedness of the event shatters their everyday perception, radically rupturing the continuity of their experience of time and place. The piece, in other words, enacts the experience of terror itself: unpredictable, unknowable, outside of any framework of comprehension. Like the traumatic event it arrives too soon; preparedness is not possible. The content is not the retelling of horror; instead the work is structured in such a way as to plunge the beholder into the event of catastrophe which unmakes and remakes both subjectivity and the world. It is a sudden awareness or awakening, the understanding of which can only come after the fact, if at all. It is clear that the indirect approach of these works differs from more traditional representations of violence which are more explicit in their content and depiction of horror. Yet, what lies behind them is ultimately Gersht's concern with our ethical being, for questions of violence and aesthetics are, as he recognizes, bound up with ethics. His search to find new ways of approaching such events as the Holocaust through personal stories—for instance in *Will You Dance For Me?* (2011) or *Evaders* (2009)—is an expression of his desire that our capacity to ethically and emotionally respond to others

should be revitalized, not dulled, by representation.

In 1959, the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, a collaborative project of Marguerite Duras, who wrote the screenplay, and Alain Resnais, the film's director, was released. While the film is about Hiroshima, the catastrophic event of the atomic bomb dropped on that city at the close of World War II, it is also not about Hiroshima. The film, that is, finds an indirect path of approaching its subject matter—a fictional encounter is used as a way into suffering. The film is an exploration of what it is to remember and to mourn, to love and to suffer. The storyline is of an affair between a Japanese man, who lost his family in Hiroshima, and a French woman, who lost her German lover at the close of the war in Nevers, France. It is the woman's recounting, and to some extent emotionally reliving, of the events that followed the loss of her lover—her experience of madness, of public humiliation, of grief—that connect her with the man. Thus, we only enter into the horror of Hiroshima peripherally, through the personal tragedies of the principal characters, in particular, that of the young woman who is trying to understand Hiroshima. Yet the fact that the events take place within the context of Hiroshima positions the film, and the problems with which it grapples, in a particular light. As Duras writes:

Nothing is “given” at Hiroshima. Every gesture, every word, takes on an aura of meaning that transcends its literal meaning. And this is one of the principle goals of the film: *to have done with the description of horror by horror* [...] (1961, 9; my emphasis).

Duras did not want to reproduce the atrocity of Hiroshima, an event she describes as

“sacrilegious” (9); rather, Hiroshima's story is mediated, displaced in a metonymic fashion onto other stories, other acts, other narratives. The beauty of the film is in its poetry—in the way that poetry never directly names, but rather multiples the associations and the possibilities of representation, to give depth and tone to its images.

As the film opens, we view the bodies of the man and the woman abstracted and twisted together in the act of love or the experience of pain—it remains unclear—glimmering in a dust that recalls the atomic ashes. Duras reminds us that our experiences are embodied—emotive as much as analytic—and lived in relation to others. She is exploring “the relation between history and the body,” the difference between the living and the dead (Caruth 1996, 26). One of the lovers, the unnamed woman, recites the horrors of Hiroshima in this initial scene in the bed, to the accompaniment of a montage of film and archival images of these horrors. Interestingly, Duras writes:

This beginning, this official parade of already well-known horrors from Hiroshima, recalled in a hotel bed, this sacrilegious recollection, is voluntary. One can talk about Hiroshima anywhere, even in a hotel bed, during a chance, an adulterous love affair [...]

What is really sacrilegious, if anything, is Hiroshima itself (1961, 9).

Duras suggests that it is, in one sense, easy to speak of Hiroshima. Horror, banalized, or reduced to commonplaces as Arendt put it, can be spoken of anywhere. Nevertheless, the event itself, the true horror of it, falls outside of any framework of understanding, even if the causes and consequences can be identified. In the same way that Arendt and Adorno

argued of the Holocaust, Hiroshima disrupts all conventional notions of morality and any sense of order; it breaks with the continuity of history. Indeed, Alain Resnais, when first asked to make a documentary about Hiroshima, declined. As Caruth argues in *Unclaimed Experience*: “In his refusal to make a documentary on Hiroshima, Resnais paradoxically implies that it is direct archival footage that cannot maintain the very specificity of the event” (27). He refuses the kind of representation that would be an erasure; instead, the film “explores the possibility of a faithful history in the very indirectness of this telling” (27). Thus, as we will see, the characters talk and they do not talk, they try to talk and fail. They are not able to get at Hiroshima through their idle chatter. Abstractions mean nothing; rather, the only way they succeed in approaching the past is by finding a way to make it resonate with the depth of their memory and experiences—to connect to it in the present.

The film questions what sort of knowledge might be gained by means of representation. The woman recounts to the man all of the things that she has seen of Hiroshima—the horrors, the suffering, the mutilation. She has been to the museum, the hospital—seen the photographs, the reconstitutions, the artefacts, the explanations—and thus, she 'knows' Hiroshima. The film shows us images of all that she names: piles of burnt stone, twisted metal, scarred bodies, video reconstructions of the event. Everything is categorized, factual, serious, and sober. The man repeatedly responds: “You have seen nothing of Hiroshima.” As Caruth argues, “the problem with the woman's sight is not what she does not perceive but *that* she perceives, precisely, a *what*” (28). The man is

thus suggesting that to view a representation of the event is not to understand the event, or better, that to understand the event, at least on this level, is not to grasp the horror of it. She knows nothing of Hiroshima: in other words, is it possible to *know* anything of horror? What is one speaking of when one speaks of Hiroshima? Does catastrophe translate into a knowledge that is transmittable through images, facts, remnants—through the ruins of Hiroshima? And furthermore, what knowledge is possible to those who did not experience the events directly? As Duras writes in the foreword to the screenplay: “Impossible to talk about Hiroshima. All one can do is talk about the impossibility of talking about Hiroshima. The knowledge of Hiroshima being stated a priori by an exemplary delusion of the mind” (9). Caruth echoes this in suggesting that the film explores the idea of “a betrayal precisely in the act of telling, in the very transmission of an understanding that erases the specificity of a death (27). Thus, it sets up an interesting dialectic between the *impossibility* but also the *necessity* of speaking about Hiroshima. It points at once to the impulse toward and the limits of representation.

To speak of the ruins, to remember and represent them, from whence does this necessity to arise? In the film the characters return almost compulsively to their wounds—to Hiroshima, to Nevers. They struggle to remember, but memory does not come easily. The curse their own forgetfulness and the forgetfulness of love; for them, to forget is the tragedy, the horror, of repeating loss. Thus, the man and the woman both fight against what they feel to be their innate tendency toward oblivion, even as at times they seem to embrace it, and this struggle involves repetition of the past, and eventually,

the effort to represent it. This tension, as Caruth has pointed out, could be located in the fact that memory itself is a form of forgetting—a necessary and inevitable forgetting. Indeed, only in madness, in refusing to acknowledge the difference between the living and the dead, is one “the faithful monument to a death” (31). Returning to life means “the inevitable movement from the literal to the figurative sight or understanding,” from madness to symbolization (32). Understanding comes at the expense of “the forgetting imposed by the sight and understanding of a larger history” (31).

In his 1914 paper, “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through,” Sigmund Freud introduced two concepts that would become critical to the cultural study of memory: repetition-compulsion and working through. Freud offers us the important lesson that what we cannot remember we will inevitably repeat. He writes:

the patient *remembers* nothing of what is forgotten and repressed, but that he expresses it in *action*. He reproduces it not in his memory but in his behaviour; he *repeats* it, without of course knowing that he is repeating it (1973a, 160).

In the film, the woman repeats the emotions and actions that belonged to the time of her loss, even going as far as to address the man *as* her lost lover—a repetition belonging to the difficulty and painfulness of remembrance. From a psychoanalytic perspective, one might say that love and transference are wedded, as the emotions of the past are awakened in those of the present—and thus superimposed. Indeed, Freud, through his concept of transference, is putting forward the rather radical, if romantic, idea of “turning



love into a cure” (Kristeva 1983, 8). As the woman narrates her story for the man, for he demands this of her, she is also working through it—and it is love, the emotional bond between the two, that is the medium in which this process unfolds. She is remembering the past—her lost love, her public shaming, her subsequent madness—through the mediation of representation, rather than just at the level of the emotional economy through repetition. She is placing the past in the past, at that same time as she regains it for herself in symbols, in a desiring language that is no substitute for her loss, but still resonates with affect. Thus, part of the necessity of remembering is about the healing of wounds, the restoring of perceptibility, the reinsertion of one's affective life into historical time.

The horror of forgetting is an ethical impulse, intimately bound up with mourning and melancholia, with repetition and working through. In his paper, “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud (2006) argues that the process of mourning involves a gradual forgetting, in the sense of easing the ties and the attachments, the emotional investments, that connected us with the loved one. Returning to life after a loss demands that the pain lessen in intensity and that we work through our loss. Thus, to mourn is also in a sense to remember through the mediation of representation, to relegate the loved one to the world of symbols: to tell our story. Freud sought to distinguish mourning from melancholia, which he defined as the disavowal of loss and the identification with the lost loved one. Melancholia, as he saw it, was a state without symbols or sense, a madness of suffering. While one might argue that it is also a form of remembrance, an unwillingness to let go

of the lost object, and thus an ethical position, Freud's writings show that such a faithfulness to the dead is a refusal to acknowledge the past as past. Nevertheless, years later, in "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," Freud (1973c) was less able to sustain the clear distinction between the two responses to loss. Mourning is never totally completed, there is always an element of melancholia in our attachments. Working through becomes a lifelong project of grappling with the senselessness of suffering and transforming it into something meaningful. It is thus that we are returned full circle to that place between the impossibility and necessity of remembering in which the characters of the film are caught. In acknowledging the forgetfulness of love and of history, which makes possible new beginnings, they also strive to remember, rather than repeat, the past. At last they succeed in finding a melancholy symbol to mediate their losses, to recall the horror of them but from the distance of time: at the end of the screenplay the woman says to man: "Hi-ro-shi-ma. That's your name" and he responds, "That's my name. Yes. Your name is Nevers."

*Hiroshima Mon Amour* is not a documentary film or a film about peace. To make such a film would be, from the perspective of Duras and Resnais, problematically complicit with a "self-referential reversal" of its meaning: "the perception of Hiroshima itself, from the perspective of an international history, turns the very actuality of catastrophe into the anonymous narrative of peace" (Caruth, 29). Thus, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* does not instruct us in the horrors of war. It is not tell us what Hiroshima was like, does not reconstruct the events for us. The film does not offer us the illusion of an

intellectual mastery or understanding of the event. It is not realism. What it is, on the contrary, is a film about representation, a reflection upon making a film about horror. As such, it is self-reflexive: it acknowledges and reflects upon its status as representation and invites the viewer to do so also. It does this in part through the relation of form to content: a film within a film. The woman is in Hiroshima as an actress in an international film about peace. In many of the scenes—of mangled bodies, protests against nuclear war—it is unclear to which of the two films what we are witnessing belongs. Are these people the real inhabitants and victims of Hiroshima or actors? Is their suffering real? Were the events captured by the camera's lens actually taking place in Hiroshima at the time of the filming, or were they staged? In witnessing the production of the fictional peace film, we recall that what we are viewing is equally a construction. We are reminded that representation is not the same as reality. Yet, clearly, both Duras and Resnais felt there was a certain value in making a film, this particular film, about Hiroshima. I would suggest that, for them, it is only by way of mediation—by the aesthetic frame that is present throughout—that the difficult themes of remembering and working through such a catastrophic event can be assumed. In approaching this task in a conscious way, their work of art rethinks the very parameters of what remembrance can mean, just as it opens up to reconsideration the notion of collective memory and function of collective monuments. It is to this issue of public memorialization that I would now like to turn.

## VII.

As a society, we are faced with the difficult question of how to collectively remember or memorialize many terrible and terrifying losses that have left behind only ruins. As we have seen, there is an ethics and a politics of representing catastrophe, particularly when it comes to erecting monuments or other structures that are designed to commemorate a disaster. What is to be commemorated, as much as what is left to be forgotten, reveal much about our ideological and political landscape. While, with those historical events deemed worthy of remembrance, *what* exactly is remembered—the message they embody—is another thorny issue. The knowledge gleaned from horror is, as we have seen, anything but straightforward. Thus finding the appropriate public forms or artistic expressions for representing catastrophe becomes an important and often highly contested endeavour. Indeed, the difficulties surrounding collective memory and mourning, even when rooted in the desire to learn from the past so as not to repeat it, rather than in an ideological agenda, are not easily resolved, as the past resists representation—what is gone, invisible, or eliminated stretches the very limits of the presentable. Nevertheless, many artists and architects are rising to the challenge of rethinking their practice through the lens of cultural criticism. Working against the grain of traditional memorial culture, which recounts history as something ultimately knowable, and most often from the perspective of the victor or through the dominant discourses of society, these practitioners have moved in the direction of “counter-monuments” (Young 1992) and “negative monuments” (Merewether 1997). In this vein,

many interesting responses to the practical and ethical dilemmas of remembrance are to be found in the various museums and monuments dedicated to antifascism and the Holocaust.

James E. Young (1992) discusses the complexity of memorial work in post-fascist Germany in his article, "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today." The intense debates over how to remember the Nazi past reflect the paradox of a state seeking to commemorate the victims of its own crimes, particularly given "the state-sponsored monument's traditional function as self-aggrandizing locus for national memory" (270). Critics have remarked not only the monument's celebration of a triumphalist version of history, but also its problematic relationship with memory more broadly. For one, there is their concern over the didactic function of monuments: what does a memorial commemorate and in whose name? Another, is the fear that when memory is embedded in an object it is somehow evaded or mythologized (270). Indeed, critics go so far as to express the concern that "conventional memorials seal memory off from awareness altogether" acting merely as compensation or consolation to the public (272). In this context, a new wave of "counter-monuments," which rethink the function of monuments and potentially revitalize public memorial culture, have emerged. As Young writes:

Ethically certain of their duty to remember, but aesthetically skeptical of the assumptions underpinning traditional memorial forms, a new generation of contemporary artists and monument makers in Germany is

probing the limits of both their artistic media and the very notion of the memorial [...] these young artists explore both the necessity of memory and their incapacity to recall events they never experienced directly (271).

Counter-monuments “challenge cherished memorial conventions” by undermining their own authority and permanence, for instance, in their self-destructing form, in their self-reflexivity, or through intentional provocation (277). Without providing any prescriptions, the artists creating such monuments respond creatively to larger social debates, exploring the complex interworking of memory and time and the relation of the present to the past.

One example that Young offers of a counter-monument is particularly interesting: Jochen and Esther Gerz's “Harburg Monument against Fascism.” The monument, originally a 12 meter high obelisk plated with soft lead, invites viewers to inscribe their names upon the surface in a commitment to “remain vigilant” against fascism (274). As names fill a section of the tower, it is lowered into the ground during public ceremonies, until it eventually disappears, “return[ing] the burden of memory” and the work of resisting fascism to those who have signed it (276). Rather than performing the task of commemoration, and thereby absolving the citizens of responsibility, the monument demands their direct participation: “In its egalitarian conception, the counter-monument would not just commemorate the antifascist impulse but enact it, breaking down the hierarchical relationship between art object and its audience” (279). It is, as Young suggests, antifascist not only in its message, but in its very form, countering what the

Gerzs see as the “fascist tendencies in all monuments”:

Their monument against fascism, therefore, would amount to a monument against itself: against the traditionally didactic function of monuments, against their tendency to displace the past they would have us contemplate—and finally, against the authoritative propensity in all art that reduces viewer to passive spectators (274).

The Gerzs do not shirk from the ethical necessity of remembering, but they shift the locus of memory away from authoritative representatives back to the people, at the same time demystifying the traditional role of monuments. Their piece does not offer an easy version of the past to its beholders, rather it confronts them and demands of them a response. Eventually vanishing from the landscape, the monument also enacts the complexities of the desire to build anew but, at the same time, never to forget, to bury fascism but to mark the permanent disappearance of its victims: “The best monument, in Gerz's view, may be no monument at all, but only the memory of an absent monument” (279). *An absent monument*, a seeming contradiction in terms, inscribes the conflicting and irresolute impulses that drive commemoration. Indeed, putting absence at the heart of memorialization might, in fact, be the best possible response: “How better to remember forever a vanished people than by the perpetually unfinished, ever-vanishing monument?” (277).

In a similar manner, contemporary architects, rethinking the ways in which form expresses content, have created a series of 'negative monuments'. The recognition of the

relation between subjectivity and space—one that is evocative of memory, feeling, and thought—has led them to take into consideration the relationality of space—that is, the visitor's interaction with the spatial form and the responses that interaction evokes—in the design of such monuments. As such, “negative monuments,” as discussed in the first chapter, “seek to frame what is missing—a voice or the space of loss” (Merewether 1997, 33). Such monuments gesture to loss as something irrecoverable, to horror as an experience that exceeds intellectual categories. Beyond producing commonplaces, 'negative monuments' aim at maintaining the specificity of the event. Thus, working with the ruins in contemporary architectural practice means pushing the possibilities of artistic expression in order to circumnavigate the dialectic between the necessity and the impossibility of representation.

Michael Sorkin (1993), in his short piece “Between beauty and horror,” discusses the various dilemmas and competing demands that arose in the conceptualization and realization of the US National Holocaust Memorial Museum. The underlying dictates of the project, outlined by the Memorial Council, centred around “the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the moral obligation to remember it” (74). As Sorkin points out, this is anything but a straightforward and simple task: “The central paradox of all Holocaust commemorations is the impossibility of representing the unrepresentable, of depicting a horror beyond imagination: both to specify and to generalize risk diminishing the unmeasurability of its evil” (74). On the one hand, such an act of commemoration runs the risk of banalizing evil, and on the other, of reawakening the trauma. Thus, the



architect must carefully consider the relation of the form to the content, must find ways to make representation stretch its very limits. As Sorkin writes:

What is to be the relationship between the beauty and the horror, between container and contained, between the container and its context. Shunning abstraction, the risk is kitsch. Perhaps the only way to approach the unrepresentable is to represent the impossibility of representing it, turning representation inside out to confront this horrific sublime (74).

For Sorkin, architect James Freed and his associates succeed in finding an aesthetic form that reflects its content—the museum monument to the Holocaust is discontinuous, estranging, incoherent: “Perhaps fitting for a problem that admits of no solution, the building is iconographized divergently, juxtaposing one mode of meaning with another, collaging to produce a measuredly inconsistent whole” (74). It does not aim at a false synthesis, at comprehension through commonplaces. Instead, the architect seeks to make the horror of the Holocaust resonate with the beholder, while at the same time, offering a certain distance through poetic framing; he “alternates abstraction and figuration, passages of repose and contemplation with the insufficient horror of representation” (74). It is in these metaphorical overtures that the very form leads the visitor outside of its limits, signalling to what is beyond the represented. In leaving gaps, blanks, things unstated, the viewer-participant is called upon to bring something of herself to the work. It is her imagination, her capacity for feeling and for empathy that

lifts her toward understanding: “In the most overtly artistic passages at the Holocaust Memorial, Freed looks to a sort of minimalism as a transport to the sublimity of the impossible” (74).

### VIII.

I would like to return to Walter Benjamin's “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Here he presents us with the image of the “Angelus Novus,” the angel of history, who sees the past as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (2007b, 257). What is strewn behind us is a century of the most unimaginable ruins. Is it any wonder that, amidst such ruins, we are paralyzed by the very weight of history? Is it so surprising that the imaginary is steeped in a depressive form of melancholia—unable to adequately mourn the past, and equally unable to turn toward the future? Benjamin's melancholic image of history does not exclude the possibility, however remote, of change in the present. The key to transformation lies in an understanding the historical conditions of possibility, a task which requires the critical work of interpreting the past and representing the ruins. “The past,” he writes, “can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (255). The imagination needs to be free to seize the moment of possibility when it arises, which requires working-through the losses of history, whatever they may be. As a collective, we need to find ways of representing the ruins that do not banalize horror nor reduce catastrophe to commonplaces.

As we have seen, artistic practice can find creative ways of reflecting upon or piecing together the ruins of our time. In doing so, such works of art, whether literature, painting, film, or architecture, offer us a framework for the critical contemplation of the past—a perspective from which to view history as always in-the-making. In a period in which we so often feel “stranded in the present,” to recall the concept of Fritzsche's (2004) book discussed in the first chapter, art can help us understand our collective history, mourn our losses, and acknowledge the structures of possibility that exist in the present. Aesthetic practice can be responsive to the historical and material conditions in which we live, and can offer solutions to our many of greatest cultural challenges. The complex challenges of remembering, mourning, and representing the past are not insurmountable obstacles, rather they require fresh approaches, just a handful of which have been discussed in this chapter.

5.

## A Melancholy Aesthetics

### I.

This chapter seeks to explore larger philosophical questions surrounding the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in the hope of making relevant an 'aesthetics of the ruins' to the pressing issues that characterize the contemporary socio-political landscape. Over the past several decades, the societies of both East and West alike have undoubtedly suffered profound political, social, and economic traumas—related to the Cold War, civil wars, colonization, genocide, and dispossession. The postwar era is one that is awash in debris which—like visible question marks or imperatives poised upon the landscape—demand some sort of active response, be it historicization or working-through. I would like to argue that one of the possible avenues for art is to effect a re-engagement with socio-political issues by intervening in these ruins. An artistic practice in and from the ruins can raise important questions relating to historicity, in particular those surrounding how the past informs both the present and the possibilities for the future. While there is undoubtedly a melancholy side to this work, dealing as it does with historical losses,

cultural traumas, and damages done to the political imaginary, I would like to suggest that it is, nonetheless, anti-depressive in character, and rather stimulative of agency. An aesthetics of the ruins is an aesthetics of fragments, traces, shattered bits, which reclaims the dissociated and disavowed parts of the past, and for some, redeems them. As for me, I prefer the more modest claim that such work is inspiring and hopeful, pointing insistently as it does to the gap between what has been achieved, for better or worse, and what is still possible. Whether this is, in its own way, a radical task, I leave that to others to judge, but it is undoubtedly political.

This work is driven by a concern to revisit the state of socio-political malaise that has especially afflicted the core capitalist countries of the West, a malaise which characterizes what has been called the “postmodern condition” (Harvey 1990) or the “cultural logic of late capitalism” (Jameson 1991). As both Harvey and Jameson have noted, while postmodernism or late capitalism, whose origins they situate in the early 1970s, is a complex and contradictory process, certain predominant trends can, nevertheless, be discerned. Among those discussed in previous chapters—the emergence of a global market, flexible ('postfordist') accumulation strategies, neoliberal restructuring, and austerity measures—are important transformations of the ideological and subjective terrain—the imaginary of capitalism. The 'postmodern turn' has much to do with changes to our experience of time and space and how these find cultural expression. Important for our purposes is the transformation in the sense of historicity. The postmodern 'moment' is obsessed with the *now*; it is characterized by its detachment

from the past, which only returns in the guise of commodities or spectres, decontextualized and thus emptied of any significance. The loss of historicity naturalizes capitalism—it is no longer understood as a social and historical process, in which we are all implicated and which we could, thus, challenge and change. As Jameson argues: “the breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time from all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis” (27). The present becomes isolated, cut off, from the past and from the future. We become, as Peter Fritzsche (2004) puts it, 'stranded in the present'. Beyond these generalizations, there are real, concrete historical events which must also be acknowledged, particularly for those on the Left, as constituting deeply felt losses that have done much to impoverish the imaginary. The decline of the Soviet Union, as we shall see, is one such blow to the political imagination, but one could also point to the devastatingly hostile climate toward labour in the last few decades, as well as the loss of spaces of Leftist organizing and practice and the memory of collective struggles. How such losses are tied to the discrediting of the 'project of modernity'—with its ideal of emancipation and the betterment of the human condition through social, political, and technological progress—will be seen below.

I would like take Žižek's definition of ideology as “generative matrix that regulates the relationship between visible and non-visible, between imaginable and non-imaginable” (1994, 1) and apply it to the imaginary, a concept that is perhaps more accessible, or at least more applicable to the present study. The political imaginary is, in

this sense, productive of forms of political agency and identity, and governs precisely this relation between the possible and the impossible. That we live, as Jameson (1991) framed it, in an era when it is easier to imagine the end of the world—think of all of the apocalyptic films that have come out in recent years—than a more modest change in the mode of production, the end of capitalism, speaks to the limited nature of our framework of the possible. Furthermore, the fact that we are headed toward an environmental catastrophe—one that threatens to unfold in the manner of many of those apocalyptic scenarios—yet remain prostrate before it, points to the insanity of such a position. It is suggestive of a profound malaise of the imaginary that has impoverished our understanding of the political terrain, our sense of historicity, and our ability to act, even in times of crisis. I would like to argue that this pauperization of the imaginary can be theorized in terms of *melancholia* in the Freudian tradition—which is to say that the starting point of this analysis must be an elaboration of loss and our relation to the past.

## II.

For Freud (2006), writing in 1917 his contemplative study “Mourning and Melancholia,” melancholia is highly enigmatic. While symptomatically and behaviourally speaking it presents a similar picture as that of mourning (depression, loss of interest in the outside world, inhibition, incapacity to find substitute love-objects), there are some puzzling differences. Unlike mourning, where loss is consciously recognized, and the bonds that once bound the ego to its love-object are gradually loosened by the knowledge and

recognition of the absence of the beloved, melancholia disavows such loss. Indeed, though the melancholic, much like the mourner, has perhaps has suffered a loss in the external world, some set-back in life, or damage to a cherished ideal, often this loss is not clearly identifiable. It is rooted in the furthest reaches of the unconscious, and is thus inaccessible to the reality principle. Thus, in melancholia, one does not know what has been lost in or of the self (2006, 314). As Freud suggests: “In mourning, the world has become poor and empty, in melancholia it is the ego that has become so” (313). The internal impoverishment, the lack of self-esteem, and the heavy self-reproach that characterize what remains of the psychic life of the depressed, all point toward this fundamental loss of the ego, of a sense of self. In melancholia, the lost object, highly invested with libidinal energies, has been incorporated or introjected into the structure of the ego itself. Here it is preserved, entombed, protected against reality testing. Any ambivalence in the attachment, including the reproaches that were destined for the object, are turned back upon the ego, expressing themselves in “the indubitably pleasurable self-torment of melancholia” (318).

Interestingly, Freud traces the mechanism of incorporation back to the identification with the object which characterizes of our earliest attachments, the mimetic processes by which we become subjects. We might “suppose that the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object cathexes and that it contains the history of those object-choices,” writes Freud a bit later in 1923, in “The Ego and the Id” (2001, 29). Moving away from a strictly normative view of mourning, Freud points to the idea that



subjectivity itself is built upon a series of ruins—the remnants of our earliest love, our first relation with the other: it is a palimpsest. Identification is followed by those “series of splittings [...] birth, weaning, separation, frustration, castration” that are, for Julia Kristeva, the “indispensable condition for autonomy” (1989, 132). Melancholia thus describes a crucial moment in process of individuation in each person's history, part of “the essential dramas that are internal to the becoming of each and every subject” (Kristeva, 132). As Jonathan Flatley explains, Freud recognizes the way that loss is not only 'out there' in the world, but “also *interior* to subjectivity” (2008, 42). Loss is part of our very constitution as related, dependent, emotionally attached beings. Intersubjectivity is at the heart of what it is to be human, as psychoanalysts like Jean Laplanche (1999) emphasize. The loss of the object, of the other, is what founds desire; it is what constitutes the desiring subject, able to make attachments and take an interest in the world. Loss, from this perspective, leaves a gap, making us incomplete and open, destined to seek out others, to love, to learn, to struggle, and to symbolize. This trajectory of thought ultimately leads Freud, in his more poetic moments, to gesture toward the notion that perhaps all mourning is, in some sense, impossible. “There is,” summarizes Flatley, “no nonmelancholic loss, no mourning that leaves the ego unchanged” (49). In the pivotal role accorded to loss, the straightforward distinctions between mourning and melancholia, like those between self and other, collapse, undoing any normative formulations found in Freud's early theoretical explorations.

Nevertheless, melancholia has been, as suggested above, used to describe an

ailment of agency or praxis, an inability to engage meaningfully with the world and to inscribe oneself within history. Melancholia, when it is of a certain quality or intensity, can be debilitating. The “preoccupation with this loss can become a problem [...] inasmuch as it leaves us living in the past, unable to create new emotional ties” (Flatley, 51). Melancholia, in this sense, is akin to a *depressive state*, of the kind diagnosed by modern psychiatry, whose features, as outlined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – IV (DSM-IV)*, include: “disorientation, a diminished ability to think and concentrate, an impoverished sense of the past and the future, fatigue, negative thoughts about the self” (Ross 2006, xx). “The depressed person,” Julia Kristeva writes in more metaphorical terms, “is a radical, sullen atheist” (5); which is to say, she has lost all sense of meaning, all faith in the world. As such, the world ceases to stimulate her interest and her passion, to awaken her desire. Unresponsive, she engages in a symptomatic repetition of behaviour: she goes through the motions belonging to a past that no longer exists. The depressed is an exemplary figure of one who has made mourning a permanent, backward-looking orientation, who is steadfastly devoted to the dead; as Judith Butler notes, he unconsciously clings to “what is lost, absent, or dead,” as though “one would rather will nothingness than not will at all” (1998, 187). This reification of one's relation to the world signals closure, a kind of living death. Such a depressive melancholia results from the failure to come to terms with loss; in fact, it is the *foreclosure* of loss, and as such, it means the refusal of desire, for the depressed person hangs onto an illusion of completeness, denies the separation which would lead

him into emotional engagement and toward symbolization, which is unfurled from the void. In this context, 'working-through' is a process, less of surmounting loss, than of making loss bearable: "psychoanalysis is about learning to invoke, manage, and happily live with ghosts" (Flatley, 62). Analysis is a ruin-work of collecting fragments, naming them, and putting them in their place (which is the past), and building anew (in the present). It is not about forgetting, but rather, about changing our relationship to the past.

### III.

Does the distinction between melancholia and depression characterize the difference between the affective, imaginary, aesthetic, and political terrain of modernity and postmodernity? Is depression the prevalent mood—mood defined broadly as an "atmosphere in which intentions are formed, projects pursued, and particular affects can attach to particular objects" (Flatley, 5)—of 'postmodern' society? If so, what does that tell us? I suggest that the use of the concept of depression, as a privileged category with which to understand affective life, is symptomatic of the impoverished imaginary of our times. It constitutes a radical rupture with the richness and depth of the concept of melancholia, which can capture a whole spectrum of states, experiences, and relationships to loss. In lieu of any attempt to assess the state of thought, agency, imagination, and praxis through historical experience and intersubjectivity, the recourse to the psychiatric formulation of depression encourages an understanding of malaise detached from social and political realities. The critique that psychiatry 'dementializes'

the subject, nearly doing away with the very idea of subjectivity (which searches for meaning), to replace it with the functioning of the brain, as discussed by Ross (xxvi), captures some of what is at stake. While the category of depressive disorder used by psychiatry may aptly *describe* the symptoms—loss of interest, hopelessness, problems with concentration and memory—this does little to address the underlying causes nor to position them in a broader contextual framework. As such, the discourse of depression, in disavowing loss, fails to identify possible sites of transformation or resistance. By contrast, the category of melancholia still carries a tremendous critical power, one recognized early on by major theorists like Walter Benjamin. Thus I disagree with the very premises of Christine Ross' assertion that “the understanding of mental illness as a form of subversion, and any practice associated with this understanding—be it art or psychoanalysis—collapses in the depressive paradigm” (2006, xxvii). First of all, melancholia, I will argue, should be viewed less as a “mental illness” than as an aesthetic and political approach to malaise—an interpretive framework which enables a tracing of its causes and consequences. Melancholy, as contemporary theorists, including Flatley (2008) and McNally (2001) tell us, is a *methodology*—a key point to which we shall return below. It is a form of critical *practice*. Second, to claim that psychoanalysis “collapses” in the face of depression is a defeatist position that only reinforces the psychiatric paradigm, rather than thinking against it. The critical power of melancholia, pointed to by Freud and Benjamin, and so integral to the modernist aesthetic, can be recuperated. I would like to show in this chapter how an 'aesthetics of the ruins', even if

it exists only as a marginal practice, performs such a recuperation, and how it differs from the 'aesthetics of disengagement' theorized by Ross.

In her book, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression*, Christine Ross (2006) argues that much of contemporary art should be viewed as an enactment of the veritable pandemic of depression afflicting Western societies. Ross argues that depression has become a central paradigm shaping social, artistic, and, most importantly, subjective formations: “depression is now one of the privileged categories through which the contemporary subject is being defined and designated, made and unmade, biologized and psychologized” (xvii). Postmodern art must be viewed through this prism, as participating in and “acting out of states of depression encompassing boredom, stillness, communicational rupture, loss of pleasure, withdrawal, the withering of one's capacity to remember and project, to dream, desire, and fantasize” (xv). Depression is less the content of the artwork than the *form* itself, which is characterized by “the slowing down, near immobility, opacity, and looped repetition of the image” (xv). Key features of this 'aesthetics of disengagement' also include the performativity of such psychologically 'pathological' conditions as repetition, inhibition, immobility, self-absorption, and fixation, all of which, in turn, presuppose a spectatorial subject whose faculties and capacities are impoverished and devitalized (xv). For Ross, contemporary aesthetics bespeaks the depreciation of the relational, the disintegration of social bonds, and the loss of non-verbal, affective forms of communication with others, even if it does so in a non-reflexive and unintentional—that

is, *symptomatic*—manner (xix). Performativity, in other words, does not equal interpretation or analysis: “[Contemporary art] participates in what it denounces so as to criticize it from within, inserting the viewer into the devaluation of connectedness without offering any critical distance from which to observe and act on this decline” (xxiii). Thus, the beholder is plunged into depressive experience, but without the possibilities of insight—“immersed,” she is, nevertheless, “at a loss as to what causes such an alienated state” (xxiii). It is artwork without emancipatory intention, intervention without analysis, which, Ross suggests, raises all kinds of questions as to what is critical and subversive in aesthetic practice (xxv).

Drawing on Alain Ehrenberg's periodization, Ross situates the ascendancy of the depressive paradigm in the 1970s when social norms underwent a major transformation, and self-sufficiency, independence, and individualism emerged as the new ideals (xxiii)—a period which, it is worth noting, corresponds to that of 'postmodernism' or 'late capitalism', in which neoliberal ideology and governance dominate. She argues that the loss of previous forms of social regulation, which emphasized discipline and conformity, resulted in a measure of freedom, but also a crisis of identity arising from the pressures for perpetual self-creation divorced from the social realm of interdependence and collectivity. She reads into much contemporary art practice an enactment of this struggle: “Depression—the *insufficiency of self*—could well be, as recent sociology has suggested, the fatigue that results from the individual's compliance with neoliberal norms of independence based on the demand for the *reiterated creation of self* so strongly

formulated in Lum's [contemporary art] installation” (xxii). Ross is well aware that depression is particular to the current socio-historical context, and to the particular demands made upon the individual in 'postmodern' society. She quotes Elisabeth Roudinesco: “In democratic countries, everything is as though no rebellion is possible, as though the very idea of social, even intellectual, subversion had become illusionary [...] Hence the sadness of the soul and the impotence of sexuality, hence the paradigm of depression” (xxiv). Ross concludes that psychological resistance is no longer subversive: depression has no political content; instead, it signifies the end of politics. It is a sad acceptance of the state of things in which change is no longer viable or imaginable. She not only diagnoses, but reinforces, a “withering of melancholia,” when she argues that it is no longer an appropriate framework of interpretation for making sense of affective experience (xxvii).

Ross' study reveals the impoverishment of the paradigm of melancholy, the depletion of its ethical and political dimensions. It has become depression—a clinical category of experience understood mainly in physiological terms—and therefore, with minimal historical, social, or political meaning. Depression, when theorized beyond neurotransmitters and chemical uptake, is conceived not in terms of loss, but rather, as a failure to adapt to the conditions of life—in other words, to accept the terms of neoliberalism and perform. Depressive symptoms, no longer read as clues that must be traced back to historical events or affective attachments in a person's life, are objectified, treated for the most part as indicators of pathology that become, as Ross writes, the target

of “pharmaceutical intervention” (153). Thus, the depressed person is cut off from any possibility of connecting his present affective state to the past, and thus of understanding his malaise; he is made isolated and thinglike by the inability to produce meanings and symbols that might cultivate praxis. Ross' analysis, much like the artwork that she charts, in remaining at the intersection of science and art as two mutually informing regimes of knowledge and power which actively participate in the constitution of the subjectivity, is circumscribed by the paradigms of the contemporary biological and medical discourses of which she makes use. She fails to see how melancholia is still an appropriate framework—perhaps more necessary than ever—in a context when, indeed, rebellion seems so impossible, resistance so futile. This leaves her blind to existing forms of melancholy artistic practice which counter the trend toward 'disengagement' and stimulate historical agency and praxis. Fortunately, other theorists have seized upon the critical power of melancholia, less as a state of being, than as an activity, a modality of interpretation and critique. This work, as we shall see, is intimately bound up with ruins, just as the alternative aesthetic practices, which will be explored below, originate in the ruins.

#### IV.

Jonathan Flatley's (2008) lyrical book, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*, raises the possibility of many different kinds of melancholia, or many possible relations to loss. He is interested in mapping the ways in which melancholia can



be, and has been, *productive*—of knowledge, affective bonds, interest in others and the world—rather than merely debilitating. While we often think of melancholia as inducing apathy and indifference to the social world, he points to quite the opposite: its political potential. In its capacity to generate knowledge of our shared pasts, of the causes of our losses, it exposes points of possible resistance to multiple structures of oppression. Melancholia becomes a way to take stock of the ruins of our collective and personal lives, to trace the lines of damage back to specific processes, institutions, and practices. As such, it produces a form of awakening, a politicized consciousness that seeks to actively engage with and transform social reality. In fact, melancholia provides us with a way of reading modernity as a series of losses which have, I argue, resulted in the depressive 'postmodern condition'; it is, in the aesthetic practices of modernism and psychoanalysis, “an allegory for the experience of modernity” (2). Instead of pathologizing and individualizing certain affective formations, this reading allows us to trace our subjective states—and I will add, the state of the political imaginary, which in the postmodern moment is suffused with a sense of impossibility and defeat—back to the shared and “specific experiences of modernization—urbanization, industrialization, colonialization and imperialism, modern warfare, the invention of “race,” the advent of the modern commodity and mass culture, the emergence of modern discourses of gender and sexuality, and the pathologization of homosexuality” that have been part of capitalist modernity (3-4). Thus Flatley reinserts the affective body, the imagining and desiring subject, back into politics and history: our affective lives can serve as important

indicators of the state of things, a potential starting point for the radical remapping of the political terrain in the contemporary historical moment and for addressing the ruins that litter the present. The postmodern 'depressive disorder' can, in this way, be traced back to specific historical, social, and political events and losses whose impacts are still felt and endured in the present.

Flatley's contention is that, while melancholia in modernity is intricately bound up with loss, "dwelling on loss need not produce depression" (1). He contrasts the state of withdrawal, the emotional detachment characteristic of one form of melancholy—one that is closer to the clinical category of depression—with other "*non- or antidepressive melancholias*" (1; my emphasis). Within the very affective economy of melancholia itself there exists "a dialectic between emotional withdrawal and its apparent opposite, the most intense or exceptional devotion of affective energy" (1). Melancholia thus has its vicissitudes and can undergo a transformation, particularly in and through aesthetic practices, by which we witness "the conversion of a depressive melancholia into a way to be interested in the world" (2). This is precisely what he seeks to probe, a conceptualization of melancholia as an *activity*, a verb: to "*melancholize*, long since out of use, suggests that melancholy might not just be a mood state into which one falls, or which descends on one like bad weather. Instead, melancholizing is something one *does* [...] It is a practice that might, in fact, produce its own kind of knowledge" (2). What kind of knowledge might 'melancholizing'—that reflective and contemplative activity which takes the past as its object—produce? He argues that, for the great modern authors

at least (James, Du Bois, Platonov, Freud, Benjamin), it offers “the knowledge of the historical origins of their melancholias” (3). This means an understanding that *our emotional lives have histories*; it is a revelation that affectivity is itself a site of power (3). Melancholia is therefore a socio-historical product: “In this view melancholia is no longer a personal problem requiring cure or catharsis, but is evidence of the historicity of one’s subjectivity, indeed the very substance of that historicity” (3).

Melancholia is the affective constellation from which our relation to the past can be explored, debated, and contested. It is a reflective activity in which one takes one's own affective life as an object of contemplation. Melancholia is, in this sense, akin to an 'aesthetic' emotion, much like the beautiful or the sublime, as Emily Brady and Arto Haapala (2003) argue in their piece “Melancholy as a Aesthetic Emotion.” Melancholy, as a complex *activity*, differentiates it from the passivity, withdrawal, and disengagement that characterize depressive states. The contemplative and reflective character of melancholy distances it from the more immediate emotions of sadness or despair: “in melancholy we refuse to give in to the urge to collapse into a heap and cry” (section 4, para. 4). Melancholy's object is indirect rather than direct, mediated rather than unmediated, for it has to do with the ways in which “losses [...] have penetrated into the very structure of subjectivity” (Flatley, 6). The causal relations between the present and the past, between subjectivity and history, must be traced, or better, reconstructed. Events whose reverberations are still felt in the present must be historically located. The melancholic attitude is a starting point from which to ask: “What social structures,

discourses, institutions, processes have been at work in taking something valuable away from me?” (Flatley, 3). Loss, rather than remaining something unnameable, vague and indefinite, becomes very concrete, linked to larger social and historical forces. Modernism was an attempt to perform such an alchemy of loss, to move from the depressed condition to a melancholy aesthetic practice—a gesture that can be recuperated in postmodern practice. Flatley argues, for instance, that Baudelaire's poetry, much like psychoanalysis, affects such a transfiguration—his is “a splenetic modernism, for it is his task to transform *ennui*, that “monstre delicat” that renders the world incapable of sustaining emotional involvement, into *spleen*: a state in which one is *exceedingly aware of, angry about, and interested in the losses one has suffered*” (6; my emphasis). Moving from the individual to the collective means recognizing the ways in which we share in these losses—the disappointments and deceptions, the violence done to us and to others. Aesthetic practices, when melancholy rather than depressive in character, can help us to reconnect with our sense of historicity, and thus, of historical agency.

## V.

Before outlining the parameters of an 'aesthetics of the ruins', it is worth pausing for a moment to reflect upon the melancholy character of contemporary social and political life. Following Harvey (1990), if we are to read in the transition between modernity and postmodernity as much continuity as discontinuity (capitalism being the major example), this justifies, to some extent, the continued applicability of modern concepts to the

postmodern context. The processes of creative destruction, destabilization, and dispossession are only intensified in the current era, which suggests that if “difficult-to-mourn losses [were] a central feature of life” in modern times, as Flatley argues (42), they continue to be so in our times. If we are to read the contemporary malaise—the impoverishment of the imaginary—through the framework of loss, as I suggest we do, then we must return to the enigmatic question posed by the melancholic: *what has been lost?* As we saw with Freud above, the character of loss, far from self-evident, is rather elusive. If we are to apply the categories of subjective experience to the collective, a practice well-established by cultural theorists from the Frankfurt school onwards, then we must think in terms of collective traumas that have influenced subject formations. A number of theorists have offered important insights in this regard. I would like to take a look at some of them to broadly sketch the parameters of loss and its impact on the political imagination.

Eric Santner (1993) is one such theorist who provides a reading of cultural melancholia in light of recent social trauma. He argues in his book, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany*, for an interpretation of “end-of-the-century” melancholia as the seemingly impossible work of mourning for stable forms of identity and relation in the post-modern and post-war context: the “destabilization of certain fundamental cultural norms and notions [within the space of the postmodern], above all those dealing with self-identity and community, cannot be understood without reference to the ethical and intellectual imperatives of life after Auschwitz” (xiv). From

this perspective, it is necessary to “think the 'postwar' under the double sign of the postmodern and the post-Holocaust” (9). In other words, Western societies are suffering from the reverberating trauma of a set of interconnected losses which have not yet been properly worked-through: those of the “narcissisms and nostalgias central to the project of modernity” (7), along with a “past dismembered under the sign of Auschwitz” (8). For Santner, and others, the postmodern condition is defined as a “perpetual leave-taking from fantasies of plenitude, purity, centrality, totality, unity, and mastery” (8). It involves the painful process of coming to terms with the shocking revelation that the possibility of completion and self-identity, which he reads as the fantasy behind specular identity formation, were always already lost: difference is irreducible, constantly disrupting and subverting any perceived totality. He emphasizes the indispensable work of mourning as the “task of integrating damage, loss, disorientation, decenteredness into a transformed structure of identity [...] [which] involves the labor of recollecting the stranded objects of a cultural inheritance fragmented and poisoned by an unspeakable horror” (xiii).

The loss of our utopian imaginings, however we define them, has a profound impact on progressive political praxis at all levels. Indeed, one might effectually interpret the disengagement of the postmodern subject as a deep-seated *political* depression, which finds its manifestations in hopelessness, feelings of ineffectuality and impotence, cynicism, despair, and disillusionment with the political in general. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Wendy Brown (1999) has noted that the untenable

losses suffered by those on the Left in the last few decades—the disappointed promises of Leftist analysis and revolutionary commitment—have dealt a bitter blow to the sense of moral certitude and righteous action that animated progressive movements, resulting in a 'Left Melancholy'. As she states:

We are awash in the loss of a unified analysis and unified movement, in the loss of labor and class as inviolable predicates of political analysis and mobilization, in the loss of an inexorable and scientific forward movement of history, and in the loss of a viable alternative to the political economy of capitalism [...] we suffer with the sense of not only a lost movement but a lost historical moment (22).

While some may disagree with her diagnosis (or that of Santner), the point is that loss is not necessary just political defeat, but damage done to an ideal. The withering of alternatives, of solidarity, of critical analysis are often less evident manifestations of loss. The inability to properly mourn past losses has meant, according to Brown, that any possibilities for a different future are held hostage by the “mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to a feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thinglike and frozen in the heart of the putative leftist” (21-22). Thus, the work of mourning must address not only failed struggles, but former modes of thinking and strategizing that may be inappropriate to given socio-political conditions. David McNally (2001) argues that regret is an integral part of the process of coming to terms with the

missed moment: “Benjamin knows that the revolution has thus far failed, and while he thinks against that failure in order to open the space of revolution, he acknowledges it, names it, and mourns its consequences. The very meaning of catastrophe for Benjamin is “to have missed the opportunity”” (163). Far from a defeatist position, acknowledging the defeats of the past becomes a way of reinserting ourselves as agents in history. McNally's reading of Benjamin, to which we will return below, suggests that by passing through “a space of mourning [...] we might find a way to commune with the ghosts of the past, to reenter the world of shattered hopes and broken dreams which is history” (176).

## VI.

I propose a theoretical excursus into a recent blow political imaginary—the demise of the Soviet Union—as an illustrative example of the deeper dimensions of loss, through an examination of Susan Buck-Morss' (2000) monumental study *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Assessing the contemporary socio-political landscape, post-USSR, Buck-Morss explains that what we have lost, and on *both* sides of the 'iron curtain', are the utopian ideals and dreams at the heart of modernity. The projects of both capitalism and socialism in the twentieth century were, she argues, inspired by the deep-seated impulse, characteristic of the most compelling aspects of modernity, to improve human existence, social relations, and everyday life. Those dreams that connected the all-too-often harsh realities of privation, alienation, and



personal sacrifice demanded by these political regimes to a larger social project were tragically deceived—unrealized, and perhaps, ultimately *unrealizable* given the material conditions and productive relations that were actually in place on both sides of the political-economic divide. Yet, in contrast to the proponents of postmodern thought who, embracing a stance of political cynicism, go so far as to celebrate the demise of all metanarratives and grandiose designs for the betterment of the human condition, Buck-Morss is more cautious in her assessment: while the dream did not translate into reality, this is certainly not a reason to abandon the former even as we condemn the troubling legacy of the latter. It is, she strongly affirms, important to recognize the intimate and tangled histories of dreamworlds and catastrophe, the ways in which the energies of social desires have been “used instrumentally by structures of power, mobilized as an instrument of force that turns against the very masses who were supposed to benefit”; wielded to nightmarish ends, she comments in the preface to the book, “the most inspiring mass-utopian projects—mass sovereignty, mass production, mass culture—have left a history of disasters in their wake” (xi).

The project of modernity is grotesquely mutilated in history's ruins. This loss must be recognized as such if we are to move beyond a position of depressive melancholy toward a critical assessment of the past and a re-evaluation of the possibilities of the present. History has not lived up to its promises, but has unfolded, since 1789, in a series of violent ruptures: “the French Revolution [...] produced, as the two catastrophic forms of modern political life, revolutionary terror and mass-

conscripted, nationalist war” (32). In the twentieth century, modernity's project became that of 'modernization', which in practice meant the “lived catastrophe” of industrialization (105): the transformation of workers into machines; the rationalization of time, movement, and bodily rhythms; the operationalization of culture; and the aestheticization of politics. Production, once envisioned, and explicitly so in the East, as eventually moving society beyond the realm of necessity and into that of freedom, was directed not towards meeting human needs, but towards militarization and commodity production divorced from real needs. Recognizing that these collective dreamworlds were systematically distorted by global political powers into phantasmagorias which acted as tools for the control and manipulation of the 'masses', Buck-Morss nevertheless maintains that it is important to distinguish between the two. While phantasmagorias anaesthetize the political subject, collective dreams have a critical function, if only that of negativity, or the promise that another world *is* possible: “Dreamworlds are not merely illusions. In insisting that what is is not all there is, they are assertions of the human spirit and invaluable politically. They make the momentous claim that the world we have known since childhood is not the only one imaginable” (238). In the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breaking apart of the Soviet Union, what is lamentable is not so much the loss of 'actually existing socialism', a system marred by terror and subjugation, but of an *alternative* to capitalism—the very notion that different systems and variants of modernity can exist alongside one another (239). It is the loss of dreamworlds *as such*—a foreclosure of the imagination, and one which has had radical

consequences.

The *capacity* to dream, to sustain a hope for the future, should not be conflated with the dream itself, nor with its manifestations—the forms and distortions to which the dream gives rise. To consign our most deeply held ideals to the trash bin of history because a particular political-economic system or systems failed to sustain or support them is to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Accordingly, Buck Morss writes:

There is real tragedy in the shattering of the dreams of modernity—of social utopia, historical progress, and material plenty for all. But to submit to melancholy at this point would be to confer on the past a wholeness that never did exist, confusing the loss of the dream with the loss of the dream's realization (68).

Melancholy, as the state of impossible mourning for a loss we do not understand or often even recognize, a pining for a mythic lost whole, carries with it the dangers of falling into inaction or cynicism. Moving beyond the static condition of melancholy toward an appropriate mourning for our real losses means identifying and coming to terms with them, and moving on. It is neither a wholesale abandonment or denial of the past, nor an idealization of it, which obscures the contradictions, tensions, and dangers it embodied. The wreckage of history must be sifted through, gleaned for its lessons for future struggles and new creative attempts:

Rather than taking a self-ironizing distance from history's failure, we—the "we" who may have nothing more nor less in common than

sharing *this* time—would do well to bring the ruins up close and work our way through the rubble in order to rescue the utopian hopes that modernity engendered, because we cannot afford to let them disappear (Buck Morss, 68).

In this account, ruins—those fragments left behind by our utopias and dystopias—can be pieced together to tell stories, to weave together a memory of the crimes committed in the name of or against our ideals, while at the same time sifting out the highest aims that were buried within them. With such knowledge of the experiences of history we can move forward, for “the utopian impulse that once animated mass production and mass consumption is capable of new configurations” (276).

Artistic practice has had an important relationship to nourishing and sustaining collective utopian ideals. Buck-Morss' historical reading of the Russian avant-garde is interesting in this regard. She describes how, in its early stages, the avant-garde acted as a critical and disruptive force, constantly throwing into question the direction of historical events and 'progress' as it was dictated by the Bolshevik party. So long as it maintained its autonomy, the works of the avant-garde were able to serve as the screens upon which collective dreamworlds were projected and explored. Its architectural and aesthetic designs, often “non-functional” or impractical, were largely unrealized in three-dimensional form; yet, even on paper, they “interrupted existing time and space as a non-functional, utopian presence *in* the present. By not closing the gap between dream and reality, the artworks of the avant-garde left both dream and reality free to criticize each

other” (64). The space of negativity opened up by avant-garde practice—that juxtaposition of the real and the possible—put into dialogue the dimensions of imaginary and material reality, making visible the distance between the two. In estranging people from their everyday experience of reality, and inviting them to partake in “new cognitive and sensory experiences,” it encouraged an open-ended conceptualization and negotiation of different futures. In contrast, the realm of politics dictated a tightly determined political project which, in turn, necessitated a carefully constructed imaginary; its “cosmology of history,” as advancing toward an already-known end, would increasingly “dictate to art” its perimeters (49). As such, politics and aesthetics, in the case of Soviet Russia, assumed different temporalities: “The “time” of the cultural avant-garde is not the same as that of the vanguard party. These artists' practices interrupted the continuity of perceptions and estranged the familiar, severing historical tradition through the force of their fantasy” (49). Aesthetics gradually became another instrument of politics. Similarly, she argues that abstract expressionism served much the same purpose in the US: carefully de-politicized, it could then be taken up as powerful weapon in the war of cultural imperialism and the spread of liberal ideology, “used as a marvellous exemplar of US commitment to liberty of expression, rugged individualism and creative freedom” (37).

The work of art is not unambiguous. It must be read contextually, that is, within the framework of its social and historical conditions which are constantly shifting. As emphasized by Buck-Morss: “The power of any cultural object to arrest the flow of

history, and to open up time for alternative visions, varies with history's changing course” (63). When soldered to a mass political regime, art often becomes the aestheticization of politics, marshalled into the service of myth and propaganda. Monuments provide a great example of how works of art can be used to valorize a particular project, legitimize historical events, and ascribe meaning to the past. However, at other moments, art provides dialectical images of society which can interrupt the dominant narrative, disturb our sensibility, and “shock us out of moral complacency and political resignation” (63). Buck-Morss cites a beautiful example of Pierre-Maxime Schuhl's to illustrate this dialectical power of images: “Bomber planes,” he wrote in 1938, “make us remember what Leonardo Da Vinci expected of the flight of man; he was to have raised himself into the air “in order to look for snow on the mountain summits, and then return to scatter it over city streets shimmering with the heat of summer”” (133). The contrast here is poignant: technological development, imagined to bring with it pleasure and fulfilment for humankind, arrives as a nightmare which enslaves it. The traumatic gap becomes a gaping wound of mutilated bodies, razed cities, charred corpses. The power of such an image as Schuhl's, be it visual or literary, lies in its capacity to insert itself in the historical trajectory in a way that opens up a dimension of critical thought and reflection. It acts upon the body, the senses, the imaginary—not in providing the blueprints for a future utopia, but rather in revealing at once the devastating ruins of history and the possibilities of human agency that nevertheless persist in the present. Thus, a truly avant-garde artistic practice is one engaged in “the historical task of surprising rather than

explaining the present” (69). Avant-garde aesthetics is “a mode of being “in touch” with reality,” a modality of responsiveness, rather than “a means of blocking out reality,” such as that achieved by the aestheticization of politics; the latter, an “*anaesthetics* [...] destroys the human organism's power to respond politically even when self-preservation is at stake” (104).

## VII.

I argue that aesthetics, in the radical sense suggested by Buck-Morss, is closely attuned to ethics, though this demands further theorization. The power of images is one which we need to take seriously. As suggested in chapter three, dialectical images in the Benjaminian framework within which Buck-Morss' work can be located, are made up of fragments that rise up from a shattered history, fragments that put into startling juxtaposition phantasmagoria and utopian social desire, dream and nightmare. They are ruins that speak: while they do not offer up a program for the future, they do tell us that other worlds are imaginable. 'Dialectics at a standstill', was the phrase that Benjamin used to describe the way in which such images embody and thus reveal the contradictions that exist within the social order. Uncanny, at once familiar and unfamiliar, dialectical images call into question the status quo, both by estranging us from the quotidian and uncovering the remains of an alternative set of social possibilities. Buck-Morss recognized the way that dialectical images or avant-garde art could interrupt the trajectory of global capitalism, stating that “[t]he juxtaposition of these past fragments

with our present concerns might have the power to challenge the complacency of our times, when "history" is said by its victors to have successfully completed its course" (68-69). But how might they intervene in other struggles (which may or may not be linked to capitalism)? Can images have a mediating function in conflicts like that between Israel and Palestine? What does cultural production concerned with the ruins and fragments of the past have to do with the political imaginary in postwar Lebanon? In a context in which we are called upon to address, better yet, to *redress*, historical traumas, the ruins of the imaginary, the catastrophes that have been wrought on bodies over this past century, can the kind of artistic practice associated with the avant-garde have a meaningful impact? What good is poetry, performance, or cinema when people are dispossessed and dying? Is it any more than either a distraction from or an expression of human suffering?

The role of 'images' (again, not necessarily visual, but constructed with words, gestures, sounds, or other materials—novels, films, performance, poems, paintings) should not be overstated, yet, nor is it negligible: limited in scope, circumscribed to the context and the audience of its reception, the image of the kind we have been speaking nevertheless has an important impact on the imaginary. Certainly the work of remembering and redressing historical wrongs must take place on numerous levels—social, economic, and subjective—and may involve, depending on the context, such measures as the restoration of land, the right of return, truth and reconciliation, environmental rehabilitation, and perhaps, a transformation of social relations. Yet the



dimension of the imaginary—that which invigorates social struggles, enables us to empathize with others, encourages us to reflect upon the past and even to rethink the dominant structures of the present—is one that is often overlooked. Depressive detachment and cynicism, as suggested above, are the dangers of the contemporary socio-political landscape, or inversely, sectarian war and identitarianism, as we will see below. An aesthetics that can respond to the troubles of our age, a cultural production that can connect to historical losses, even if it exists only on the margins, is worth exploring. While the work of Susan Buck-Morss has taken us a long way toward understanding the impact of aesthetics upon the political imaginary, particularly in the context of the 'mass societies' of East and West, I propose that a productive engagement with psychoanalytic thought and cultural analysis will allow us to further elaborate the possible role that 'images' may play in relation to contemporary conflicts and crises.

In particular, an 'aesthetics of ruins', or 'from the ruins', has ethical and political dimensions. It lingers upon the wreckage of history, demanding the work of mourning and remembering the past. Revisiting the site of conflict, loss, or separation recalls our encounter with the 'other', otherness, non-identity, difference. It means questioning the dominant narratives that have told history and creating a space for other readings and writings, for conversations between former adversaries, that challenge our inherited assumptions. It is the work of criticism. Facing the past also means assuming responsibility for it—at the most fundamental level this is the recognition that history is, to a large extent, the product of human agency and actions, but that it is, therefore,

possible to choose *otherwise*. An 'aesthetics of the ruins' is far from a backward-looking, sentimental stance toward history which prefers wallowing in loss to 'letting go', but is, rather, concerned with the ways in which the past is, for better or worse, *active* in the present. It is undeniably imbricated with the constellation of melancholia; yet, it does not foster a 'pathological' attachment to the past that leaves the bereaved paralyzed, emotionally petrified, and unresponsive. In taking the form of images, words, representations—already a step toward *symbolization* and therefore beyond the *asymbolia* that characterizes the lugubriousness psychological condition of depression—it allows a degree of 'working through' of loss. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, it recognizes that the work of mourning nonetheless leaves a remainder, and as such, is never completed. What is unassimilable in loss is also, as we shall see, that which challenges power, resists compulsion, which withstands the allure of hegemonic narratives and identitarianism. An 'aesthetics of the ruins', whose basic features we will sketch out below, is potentially transfigurative of the subject, of the socio-political imaginary, in that it opens up encounters with the past and its disappointed hopes, with the 'other' and the histories of violence that have been an intimate part of the experience of modernity.

## VIII.

An 'aesthetics of the ruins' is a melancholy, anti-depressive, aesthetic which returns again and again to the detritus of history to retrieve the fragments of forgotten hopes, traces of disappointments, half-ruins of loss. It is bittersweet, at once elegiac and hopeful, serving

as it does as a potent reminder of violence and oppression—damages done and losses irrecoverable—but also of the unrealized possibilities of the past that persist in the present. As a contemporary practice, though marginal, it stands in sharp relief to the 'aesthetics of disengagement', outlined by Christine Ross, which enacts withdrawal, boredom, and rupture. It is an aesthetics of engagement—a committed practice with emancipatory intent. Melancholia becomes a way of interpreting the ruins in order to trace them back to their socio-political sources. It maps the structures of power, the social relations of capitalism and imperialism, and the activities of war that have produced ruinous states. It is an activity of reflection and recollection that opens up the space for critical readings of the past.

There are, as Flatley has suggested, plenty of “images of unachieved happinesses floating around in that pile of catastrophes we call history” (75)—images of past struggles, of expressions of community and solidarity, that we can seize upon and make our own. It is ruins which cache these traces of forgotten desire: “The rubble of our historical being—the petrified objects, the smashed and broken things, the piles of corpses—still speak a mute language of broken hopes”; they give us “ intimations of what has been lost” (McNally, 176). These ruin-images contain an explosive power, which theorists like Flatley and McNally locate in their capacity to blast us out of complacency and into action. Revealing the interval between our highest ideals, fought for in bitter struggles, and the painful realities left by historical losses, ruin-images defamiliarize our everyday sense of being in the world in potentially liberating ways,

opening up historical narrative and meaning to new interpretations: “The trick is to find the fragments of desire and disappointment that might be joined together for emancipatory purposes” (McNally, 215). An aesthetics of the ruins allows us to read “history thus far as a field littered with the debris of failed struggles for freedom” (193). The realization that such struggles were for naught, while mournful in character, is, nevertheless, enough to make us angry, enough to drive us to recuperate the traces of the critical forces and impulses that animated that history. It revitalizes hope that the future may be different, that other ways of being and doing are possible.

A melancholy aesthetics of the ruins tempers unbridled enthusiasm—a kind of naive optimism which makes us deaf to the lessons of the past—by reminding us of the atrocities that have so often been committed in the very name of freedom. It recalls the stage of history as one scattered with corpses, the maimed and wounded, with burnt out villages and military occupations. It guards, in other words, the tension between the two positions—dream and nightmare—a dialectical tension which McNally calls the “dialectic of extremes” (220). Such overwhelming disappointments quite understandably threaten to result in depressive melancholia, the paralyzation of agency, and political cynicism—the 'Left-wing melancholy' that Benjamin so abhorred. As Flatley writes:

the utopian promises of modernity put the modern subject in a precariously depressive position. This is because the promises of modernity are never fulfilled [...] Silvan Tomkins has suggested that this kind of a situation, one between “Heaven and Hell on earth,”

between great hope and catastrophic disappointment, is the paradigmatic “depressive script” (31-32).

It is precisely because this tension persists between hope and disappointment that the cultivation of what Flatley calls “non- or antidepressive melancholias” is possible (1). And it is this tension that depression collapses, by failing to register the interval between present and future that describes the possible. The 'project' of modernity, in the aspect of its emancipatory ideals which called for a transformation of society, is not irretrievably lost—these ideals might still evoke an awareness of oppression, might invigorate “a tradition of the oppressed,” in McNally's words (217). It is from aesthetics as much as criticism that new, politically powerful, orientations to the losses and traumas of history might emerge to revitalize struggles for freedom and against injustice.

“[W]riting now consists in a new effort to “pile up fragments ceaselessly”” writes David McNally in his study on Benjamin in *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor, and Liberation*. With regards to such a technique, he goes on to write:

The task is to improvise, to experiment, to use montage effects; to juxtapose advertisements, dreams, images of childhood, fragments of history and fiction in order to create allegories of a society suffocating beneath the crushing weight of commodities and money. This requires a new mode of writing oriented to profane illumination of a disintegrating bourgeois order (180).

Writing is an aesthetic activity as well as a critical one. 'Piling up' the ruins in

representation is like piling up the tinder for fire: in a sudden flash we are “touched by the shock, as is the little heap of magnesium powder by the flame of the match” (Benjamin quoted in McNally, 186). McNally locates this inflammatory power of ruins in our emotional investment in things, in our immersion in the very materiality of the world; as objects that are often deprived of exchange value, ruins are nevertheless intensely charged with 'erotic' energies (183). Such moments of illumination reveal a startling state of things: the objectification of human life, the enchantment of things, the alienation of labour, the sad myth of 'progress', countless moments of repression and violence. The ultimate revelation is that “bourgeois society,” which seemed so stable, so *solid*—which everywhere celebrates its victory over history—is itself *in ruins*: “Bourgeois society is a society of mourning—for our forgotten pasts, for our unfulfilled wishes, for our deaths which have been foretold as the only real novelty we will experience” (204).

A critical aesthetics, a political aesthetics, should thus seek to expose the ruins. Its concern is with delineating the contours of another topology—of what lies beyond, in between, and underneath, of what exists only in fragments and traces. It does not map out monuments, but excavates the buried and forgotten. This involves not only alternative readings of space, but also of history, and reveals something of the way that these two are superimposed. Space is overwritten with texts and symbols—street signs, plaques, names of places, statues of historical figures—saturated with meaning. Who should be remembered and how, whose history is counted, who belongs and who does

not, are all messages encoded in space. Space as such is a highly political: a site of power and contestation. Ruins challenge such dominant encodings of space; an aesthetics which salvages the ruin returns the repressed, the voices and narratives that have been pushed aside. As such, it is not another attempt at totality, but rather a gathering up of the debris of memory, in the interests of radical, decolonizing, and liberatory historical, spatial, and aesthetic practice.

## IX.

Interesting in this regard is a wave of recent scholarship addressing the 'ruins of empire'. This literature tells us, in presenting the traces of violence embodied in both people and places, that colonialism is anything but past: it is an ongoing legacy, the sordid inheritance of ruined lives and livelihoods. Colonialism is active in the present; it is a shaping force that continuously structures lives and landscapes. Those who work in this field call us to the ethical task of exposing the lines and lineages that have led from the imperial past to the present state of affairs—economic, political, emotional, subjective. The critique of capitalism as productive of ruins must not neglect imperialism, those processes of aggressive geographical expansion, domination, occupation, and humiliation that have been its inextricable counterpart. Returning to the 'ruins of empire' teaches us to think about decolonization as much more than political independence: sovereignty does not erase the damages done, as these are passed down through the generations. The legacy of the residential school system and the colonial treatment aboriginal peoples in

Canada—who are still oppressed and still struggling for rights, recognition, and reparation, still without political or economic independence—is just one such example. For them, the violence of dispossession, the loss of language, culture, and an entire way of life are facts of everyday existence, and alcoholism and substance abuse, as well as the break up of families and communities, are among the continuing consequences. Decolonization—for those fortunate enough to have achieved statehood, or to be no longer living directly under the repressive mechanisms of an occupying force—is not something already achieved, even in those countries that have had decades of independence, but is an *ongoing process*: of the mind and heart, of the spaces and practices of everyday life, of the body itself, as much as of political-economic systems.

In her article, “Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination,” Laura Ann Stoler (2008) argues that it is necessary to understand empire as a process of ruination that lives on long after imperial powers have officially withdrawn from a particular geographical region. The “ruins of empire” is the term that she uses to signify, not the ‘monuments’ of colonial power, often celebrated by the colonizers themselves as ‘gifts’ or ‘improvements’ bestowed upon their wards, but rather, the devastating debris left in their wake. It refers to:

the enduring quality of imperial remains and what they render in impaired states. This is not a turn to ruins as memorialized and large-scale monumental “leftovers” or relics [...] but rather to what people are “left with”: to what remains, to the aftershocks of empire, to the



material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things”

(194).

Dwelling among the ruins is anything but nostalgic: it means to live with irretrievable losses, dispossession, and damage. Imperialism has 'afterlives'; it lives on in sites, bodies, and practices permanently altered. The structures it leaves behind continue to “impinge on the allocation of space, resources, and on the contours of material life” (195). Ruination, as such, is not merely a state, but a *practice*, not merely a noun but a verb: it is “a political project that lays waste to certain peoples and places, relations, and things” (196). As an imperial endeavour, it mobilizes great financial, political, and military resources toward the refashioning of the socio-political landscape:

Large-scale ruin making takes resources and planning that may involve forced removal of populations and new zones of uninhabitable space, reassigning inhabitable space, and dictating how people are suppose to live in them. As such, these ruin-making endeavors are typically state projects [...] that are often strategic, nation-building, and politically charged (202).

To return to the imperial practice of ruination is to highlight the ways in which the past has a present, and vice versa. In much the same vein as Flatley, Stoler suggests that retracing such lineages produces a knowledge of the genealogy of collective suffering and dispossession that is useful for social struggles.

Our interest is in dissociated and dislocated histories of the present,

in those sites and circumstances of dispossession that imperial architects disavow as not of their making, in violences of disenfranchisement that are shorn of their status as imperial entailments and that go by other names (193).

Recognizing the historicity of present helps us understand the structures and sensibilities, the embodied and felt traces of violence, that pertain to it. It enables us to identify seemingly unrelated phenomena, such as ““urban decay,” “environmental degradation,” “industrial pollution,” or “racialized unemployment”,” as, in fact, “patterned imperial effects that produce subjects with more limited possibilities and who are hampered differently by what is left” (200). Viewing the present as part of a longer historical trajectory still in-the-making reveals the future as indeterminate, open: as Stoler emphasizes, “these are unfinished histories, not of victimized pasts but consequential histories that open to differential futures” (195). Recognizing that history matters is the first step toward naming its enduring effects, identifying its ruins. These ruins can then undergo “reappropriations and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present” (196). Insisting upon the ruins counters a tendency toward forgetfulness, as well as any bent toward imperialist nostalgia (199).

This leads us to another important problematic: the invisibility of ruins. How ruins are covered over, hidden from sight, is also part of a political project which disavows the past and attempts to undermine the collective memory of traumatic events. If present struggles are informed by history, then there is a danger in being unable to

locate political agency within a longer historical trajectory. How can one seek the solution to an illness if one cannot name what ails one? Difficulties arise from the inability to identify the processes and outcomes of ruination, or even to recognize it as such. In particular, if a decolonizing project must address the remains of imperial practice, misunderstanding the roots of everyday problems and practices can lead to misdirected measures. Israel is a case in point. As Stoler argues:

the most enduring ruins in Israel are neither recognized as ruins nor as the ruination of colonialism; they are not acknowledged to be there at all. These are the ruins of Palestinian villages razed, bulldozed, and buried by the state-endorsed Israeli Afforestation Project, an intensive planting campaign that has literally obliterated the very presence of Palestinian villages and farmsteads on Jerusalem's periphery for over 50 years (201).

In such cases, remembrance of the past and struggle in the present are bound up with ruins. Eliminating all traces of the former Palestinian inhabitants—their villages, orchards, street signs, and houses—is an effort to efface history, and such efforts are, as we have seen above, well-funded, strategic, and highly systematized. Resistance can take the form of insisting upon memory, of affirming the past, of reclaiming the ruins. With this in mind, in the next section I would like to turn to some inspiring examples of what I call an 'aesthetics of the ruins'—a current in cultural production which, if marginal within popular culture, is nonetheless important in its attempt to return to the ruins in a gesture

of memory, resistance, and hope.

## X.

In Lila Abu-Lughod's memoir of her father, "Return to Half-Ruins: Memory, Postmemory, and Living in Palestine," ruins are intertwined with struggle in the present. Her narrative recounts a visit she made to her father after he made the decision to return to Palestine more than four decades after being forced to flee his home in 1948. He had long lamented, from his place of exile in the United States, the demise of his country, as irretrievably lost, totally gone, until one day one of his former students, now a colleague, said to him: "Ibrahim, Palestine is still there" (83). His return, in the last years of his life, became about discovering the ways in which Palestine, indeed, still exists: in "half-ruins" and material traces, in oral histories and the knowledge passed down from one generation to another. Abu-Lughod remembers her father telling the story of being happily surprised shortly after his arrival when, upon inquiring the directions to a street, its name in Arabic, that he had known as a child, the children knew of the place he speaking: "They immediately took him there, though he could see that the street sign said something altogether different. From this, he knew that Palestinian parents were still teaching their children the old names of things even as Palestine was being buried, erased, and rewritten by Israel" (84). During her stay with her father such instances multiply. He points out to her the remains of old Arabic houses, surviving field markers, and cacti hedges that delineated the olive groves and citrus orchards of his childhood:

another geography that persists in between, around, underneath, and on the outskirts. While she laments that it is a geography immediately visible only to those with an intimate lived knowledge of the place, he is, nevertheless, able to reveal it to her:

Where I, who never knew anything else, could see only the deep gouges in green hillsides made for Israeli settlements with garish red tile roofs, or miles and miles of highways criss-crossing the rocky landscape and claiming it with modern green signs in Hebrew and English, or non-native evergreen forests to hide razed villages, my father saw beyond, between and behind them to the familiar landscapes of his youth (84).

His is a living memory that contradicts the Hebrew texts that have been written over the spaces of his childhood. Recognizing the power of such counter memories, he wrote prolifically about his experiences, both of his childhood and the Nakba, and he encouraged others to do so, in the form of poetry, prose, memoirs. Gathering together such bits and pieces of individual and collective memory—insisting upon the ruins—serves as a reminder that resistance is possible, a practice that Lila Abu-Lughod herself picks up on.

Abu-Lughod emphasizes that this return, while sweet in some respects, was anything but a return to Paradise for her father. Clearly the occupation had deeply changed the material landscape and the political climate, and she sensed moments of fear and uncertainty on the part of her father, despite his cheerful optimism, during their

travels. Dispossession meant that he had lived the greater part of his life in exile, and that his children were not able to grow up in the places of their ancestors or with their language. It meant enduring many humiliations when he returned to live out his last years. He understood all too well that “exercising, in the end, his right to return” was only made possible by his American passport and his prominent status as a distinguished professor (99). His relative freedom of mobility, a position of some privilege, was sharply contrasted with the restricted movements or wholesale denial of access for other Palestinians, a point driven home on the day of his funeral, years later, in his home town of Jaffa, in the occupied territories: “I came to understand,” she writes, “there were many people who couldn't be there: all those with West Bank and Gaza identity cards. None were permitted to cross the checkpoints into “Israel”” (98). The inescapable irony of the situation is further expressed in the fact that someone in the party received word on that morning that the funeral procession would be monitored by US security forces: “my father protected, as a citizen, by the same government that he had always berated for supporting and arming the killers of his people” (97). To return—to this place between Heaven and Hell—was to live with all the contradictions, to embody them. As Edward Said wrote in a memorial to her father: “His life simultaneously expresses defeat and triumph, abjection and attainment, resignation and resolve. In short it was a version of Palestine, lived in all its complexity” (quoted in Abu-Lughod, 101).

Ultimately, Abu-Lughod interprets her father's return to Palestine as more than a nostalgic desire to connect with a lost past before his death; his life was, she writes, “a

genuine confrontation with the present” (101). In confronting the ruins of his former home and the brutality of an occupying force, he was driven neither to inconsolable melancholy nor inflamed to hatred and bitterness; instead, he saw the situation as a challenge, a challenge to all Palestinian people. The fragments were the material that he used to load his pen—his weapon of choice. Writing from the ruins was a practice that produced for him a knowledge of the present and how it is connected to the past, of the histories that have shaped him and the lives of his loved ones and community. He chose to remain active in his struggles, rather than accepting defeat, and returning to the rubble, tracing out the contours of the 'half-ruins' of his former home, was one of the sources of inspiration for this task. Reflecting on her father's life, Abu-Lughod concludes:

the Palestinian catastrophe is not just something of the past. It continues into the present in every house demolished by an Israeli bulldozer, with every firing from an Apache helicopter, with every stillbirth at a military checkpoint, with every village divided from its fields by the “separation” wall, and with every Palestinian who still longs to return to a home this is no more (103).

The Nakba is an ongoing disaster, a living legacy, not a closed historical fact. Yet, this openness means that the past can still be reworked: “Rather than something laid down once and for all, the past is a site of struggle *in the present*” (McNally, 191). The terrain of aesthetics is one such field of battle, upon which symbols, narratives, and memories are heaped and records made of the damages done.

For Palestinians, May 15, 1948, the day of Israel's Declaration of Independence, has become a national day of mourning. It is known as the *Nakba*, or catastrophe. Yet, the *Nakba*, while it recalls a particular day, is not considered to be something finished. It is, rather, a symbol for the ongoing state of displacement, dispossession, and dispersal of the Palestinian people. The great Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish described it, in his public statement on the 53<sup>rd</sup> *Nakba* anniversary, as “an extended present that promises to continue in the future.” *Nakba* is a concept that connects past, present, and future. It emphasizes the ongoing nature of the disaster—the catastrophic manner in which Israeli statehood was conceived, which sparked the War of Independence (or Palestinian War) and other subsequent conflicts, and ultimately led to atrocities, death, and the exodus of over 700 000 Palestinians. May 15, 1948, understood in this light, is a double exposure, a dialectical image: jubilation and despair; statehood and exile; Heaven and Hell. For Jews it meant the end of persecution, an arrival in the promised land; for Palestinians it marked their banishment, the beginning of decades of enforced wandering. Jean-Luc Godard captures this something of this idea in his controversial film *Notre Musique* (2004). Toward the end of a lecture on cinema, entitled “The Text and the Image,” that he gives to a group of film students in Sarajevo, he holds up two different, yet strikingly similar photographs—each a portrait of a suffering man, one entitled 'jew', the other, 'muslim'. “[I]n 1948,” he tells them, “the Israelites walked in the water . . . to reach the Holy Land. The Palestinians walked in the water to drown. Shot and reverse shot. The Jews become the stuff of fiction . . . the Palestinians, of documentary.” Sympathetic to



the tragic histories of both the Jewish and Palestinian peoples, Godard overlays these two images, not to suggest that their suffering is the same, but to set up a dialectical tension between the two conditions in order to provoke meditation on the issue. As Amir Eshel has suggested, the “formal collapsing together of divergent images,” an aesthetic strategy used by many artists working in and with the ruins, is not the equation of suffering, but rather an invitation to reflection and response (141).

The work of Toronto-based, Canadian Israeli artist, Nomi Drory, also attempts to deal with the dialectical tension of this founding moment of the Israeli state. *Dichotomy*, a series of works done in paint, charcoal, Mylar, paper, and wood, is exemplary in this regard. While formally the work explores the “independence and interdependence” of two structures—the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin and the Israeli West Bank Barrier—it is also a profound meditation on violence and the interrelatedness of suffering. As the daughter of a man who was a Yugoslav Holocaust survivor (the sole in his family), and whose “first home in Israel was the abandoned house of a Palestinian Arab family,” she is aware of the ways in which histories intertwine, and often tragically: “In juxtaposing Berlin’s Holocaust Memorial with The Israeli West Bank Barrier, I have attempted to represent viscerally the tragic dichotomy inherent in the founding of Israel: the creation of a safe home for the historically victimized Jewish people and the displacement of the Palestinian people,” she writes in her statement on the work. The visual juxtaposition highlights the “symbolic resonance” between the two architectural structures. It reveals how the past remains active in the present, for “while the memorial commemorates an

event in the past, the barrier functions in the present. The two edifices are, nevertheless, inextricably bound.” History is spatialized, whether commemorated in monuments or embedded in ruins; thus material structures resound with the memory of suffering and violence, captured in the title of many of the *Dichotomy* pieces: “Again and Never Again.” Her choice of materials reflects her intention of bringing these two faces of reality—Israeli and Palestinian—into dialogue: “I chose to incorporate bookbinding paper into this work because, although it is fragile, it also has a contradictory restorative purpose—an implicit suggestion of the possibility of resolution.” Her aesthetics of engagement is one that picks up the melancholy pieces of both past and present in the hope of performing a work of reparation.

In “Layered Time: Ruins as Shattered Past, Ruins as Hope in Israeli and German Landscapes and Literature,” Amir Eshel discusses several interesting examples of artistic interventions that work with the ruins to address ethical and political issues, particularly in Israel and Germany. These two states are of special interest because of their shared past (marked by trauma and violence) and the way that this past influences important decisions about their futures. He finds in these places “cultural and political discourses that are shaped to a large extent by debates surrounding questions of history and memory. At the center of many of these debates, we find the difficulty of deciding between alternative understandings of what the countries' pasts signify” (136). To speak to the case of Israel, the question of Palestine is ever present, for the Jewish experience of exile and persecution is shadowed by that of the Palestinians. The significance of ancient

Jewish ruins, a source of national mythology in whose authority much of the land claims lie, cannot, however, ignore the haunting presence of Palestinian “cenotaphs” (137). The past is one of competing claims, and the ruins scattered across the landscape are their persistent material reminder. Ruins, therefore, play an important role in this postwar, post-Holocaust landscape because they are sites where the past is negotiated and ethical questions raised. Such contemporary ruins, Eshel writes, “display the layering of time in space, what Koselleck calls *Zeitschichten* [...] historical time is rendered concrete through spatial metaphors” (137). As symbolic containers of the past, they are able to hold layers of meaning, multiple narratives, diverse and competing histories. They insist that there is always another side to history, that of the vanquished, the forgotten, the condemned. Indeed, Eshel goes as far as to suggest that “ruins *promote* conflicting notions of the past” (137; my emphasis). As such, they may serve as a meeting place, a point of potential encounter between adversaries, a bridge that encourages the thinking through of conflict. Ruins are able to serve as dialectical images precisely because of their ability to embody contradiction, to point at once to the past and the future, to call simultaneously for remembering *and* remaking: “they allow us to project onto them our wishes, desires, and hopes for the future: to see them as a space that is still in becoming rather than a site that merely marks what was” (147).

Works of art can add another strata to the composite that is the ruin: “Creating art [...] does not undo the past but rather suggests adding to it a new layer—a possible new form of life, the return of a vibrant community” (138). Eshel describes how the walls of

former Palestinian homes in the abandoned Arab quarter of Haifa are covered in art. One example is a poem entitled “Le'vad,” or “Alone,” composed by the poet Nava Semel, the child of Holocaust survivors, which was posted, in both Hebrew and Arabic, on the walls of one of the houses. This poem, written about Jewish suffering, when spatially dislocated to the context of Palestinian history, creates a juxtaposition of suffering, a comment on “the displacement and exile of those [Palestinian inhabitants] who used to live [there]” (139). Another piece, “Untitled,” by Israeli artist Igal Shtayim, features images of a woman in the cemented up windows, recalling the life of the former inhabitants and raising the possibility of future inhabitation. Yet another example, this time of “the textual ruin,” is the novella, “Hirbet Hizah” by S. Yizhar, a fictional account which invites the reader to consider how the process of Israel's state formation was bound up with the production of Palestinian ruins (141). Such artistic intervention, which recalls different histories of suffering, shows that ethical responsiveness to the other is possible, “that diverging memories can share a single space, and that those who experienced darkness can perceive the sufferings of those around them” (139). They work through juxtaposition—of one suffering with another, of the ruinous state-of-things with past life, of present decay with the promise of the future—which startles, jars, or invokes reflection on the part of those who contemplate them. These creative pieces make it possible to understand how the past persists in the “now”: it is through such artistic and “literary sites that the interdependencies between the occurrences of the past and the constitution of the present are made present” (141).

The final example of the 'aesthetics of the ruins' as a melancholy methodology comes from Ken Seigneurie's (2011) work on Lebanon. In his book, *Standing By the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon*, he points toward the ruins topos as an aesthetics of loss that counters the dominant aesthetics which emphasizes self-sacrifice and redemptive violence in Lebanon. An aesthetics of the ruins, though marginal within Lebanese popular culture, serves as an important form of resistance to the prevalent culture of war and identitarian politics. The images that circulate in popular culture constitute what he calls an aesthetic of "mythic utopianism," which mythologizes death, and necessitates suffering and sacrifice in the name of 'commitment'. It draws upon the codes of "social realism and a much older mythic aesthetic" to insist that the past can only be redeemed through violent acts (8). Here we are witnessing a form of the aestheticization of politics, in which parties demand "the gold standard of commitment—blood," in order to continue civil war and promote sectarianism (9). Seigneurie likens this aesthetic 'economy' to a blood-thirsty machine: "In the mythic utopian aesthetic, flesh and blood are value-quantities in an imaginary moral economy" (9-10). His interest is in exploring several works of Lebanese fiction and film which, taken together, constitute an alternative "aesthetic of resistance against a dominant war ethos" (1). This 'ruin aesthetic' counters what he calls the tendency toward 'memoricide': "the eradication of all memories of coexistence and common interests between Lebanese," which only serves to fuel violence and the process of othering (4). Through these works the wreckage of the past, stripped of its mythic qualities, is juxtaposed with images that

glorify war in order to reveal the real legacies of violence.

For Seigneurie, diverse as these expressions of a ruin aesthetics are, they share a humanist and elegiac quality. They draw upon the 'standing-by-the-ruins' or 'stopping-by-the ruins' topos, which has a rich history in Medieval Arab texts (26). These works are “humanist” in the sense of upholding the “general conviction that humans are uncircumscribable beings possessed of mystery and therefore endowed with “dignity”” (23). They are elegiac in their insistence upon loss as irrecuperable: “What has been lost is gone forever, and life is the less for it” (31). Violence will not bring back what is gone. As such, these works avoid the danger of readings of the past that insist upon “programmatically action” for the future (31). Instead, they “invite us to tarry over ruins as open-ended signifiers” (12). The very activity of lingering, the sentiment of longing, are significant in their capacity to interrupt the dominant discourses and ideologies which view history in a teleological manner, as a form of progress toward a fixed end:

A character's contemplation of a bullet-riddled statue or a narrator's musing before a dusty balcony strewn with dead house plants leaves open the question of causality and briefly halts the forward-driving narrative. Ruins here are metonyms of a complex, dubious past—the statue was once revered, the plants alive—pointing to loss without presuming to explain it. Ruins here do not concretize a *casus belli* according to a moralized syllogism, but unfurl time's tight progress and suspend cause-effect reasoning to evoke the ambiguity and

pathos of that which is forever lost (12).

While I would argue that there is a value to seeking an explanation, in naming the structures and that have resulted in loss, Seigneurie's point here is that ruins open up a space of reflection—they offer the reader or viewer the critical distance necessary to question “the logic of righteous retribution” (34). Rather than simply blaming the 'other', they call upon us to think through moral complexity and find new solutions to dealing with animosity. In the novels, films, and popular culture examples he discusses, memory is an ethical refusal to forget the past which opens up a transformative space, while the difficult and painful work of mourning is proposed as a way of learning to bear the past, and as such, to intervene in the cycles that have ensured that the future is always a repetition of the same.

What remains—the ruins—become the unassimilable fragments of the past that aid us in resisting compulsion. Melancholizing becomes an activity that resists hegemonic forces—of ideological and political coercion—that insist upon the will to power as a response to animosity. The melancholy nature of cultural productions evokes reflection upon the past; remembering counters those who would have us forget what has been lost—human lives. The aesthetics of the ruins becomes a way to think against the grain. Ruin fragments—the refuse, the leftovers of war and violence—insert themselves into the dominant discourses, imagery, and aesthetics, interrupting their narratives that lead straightforwardly from one version of the past to present sacrifices. As such, they have the power to stimulate meaningful reflection on cycles of violence and revenge,

even if they cannot break them directly.

This chapter has developed the concept of an 'aesthetics of the ruins' to designate alternative cultural tendencies that reject the depressive paradigm of withdrawal, disengagement, inaction, and hopelessness. Contra the postmodern evacuation of history, this aesthetics, in returning to the remains of past, enriches our historical imagination—of past, present, and future—allowing us to better understand the historicity of our affective, social, and political conditions. The revitalization of our sense of the possible, as well as a keen sense of what has been lost, is one outcome of such a practice. In acknowledging and working through loss, it becomes part of the subject, adding depth, richness, and complexity to her character. A ruin aesthetics, as we have seen, is characterized as much by its content as its methodology. Melancholy need not convey a depressive state; it is as much an activity of reflecting upon loss, an historical sensibility, and a framework for understanding ourselves both as historical subjects and agents as it is a psychological condition. As Eshel argues: “Ruins [...] enable us to think about the historicity of our condition and even experience hope. The significant ruins of our time indicate both the persistence of the catastrophic and the fact that humans—weak and restricted as we might be—are still agents of our histories” (135).



## Conclusion

This dissertation has attempted to speak to the fashioning and refashioning of historical awareness and possibility in and through our encounters with and elaboration upon ruins. The concern with subjectivity—with how we imagine our conditions of possibility, how we grapple with loss and build anew—has been at the heart of this analysis. Ruins are one index of how trauma and loss are experienced and assigned meaning. They serve as one of the privileged tropes through which, over the course of modern Western history, broader understandings of temporality, history, and human agency have found expression. The starting point for this thesis has been the premise that encountering the ruins of the catastrophe and disasters of the twentieth century—ranging from global and nuclear warfare to deindustrialization to the rise and fall of ‘actually existing socialism’—has undoubtedly had an impact upon the contemporary imagination. The full extent of that impact, of the reverberations on the social and cultural imaginary in the aftermath of these significant events, is still to be determined.

What is clear is that the ways in which ruins are perceived and interpreted changes in different historical periods. What ruins signify reveals much of the imaginary of the time, particularly the dominant readings of both history and agency. While ruins in modernity signalled a dialectical tension between loss and hope, between decay and renewal, between past and future, we must ask whether they still have that same significance in the current conjuncture, whatever we label it. “The losses of the past are irreversible; this is what constitutes the melancholy of history” Fritzsche writes in his study of the revolutionary period in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century France; yet, the people of the time actively sought out new ways to “connect their personal ordeals with larger social narratives,” including revolution and other historical dramas, in which they often participated (2004, 8). This modern melancholy view of history—the nostalgia evoked by the impossibility of returning to the lost past—as so many theorists, including Walter Benjamin, Marshall Berman, David Harvey, and Peter Fritzsche have demonstrated, was nonetheless tempered by a creative impulse directed toward shaping that same history. Modernity offered up the present as a site of possibility, unhinged from previous orderings of social, political, and economic life, even as it estranged people from former ways of being in and knowing the world. While the loss of traditions no doubt came with feelings of dislocation and rootlessness, the other side of this was a new freedom to invent, to redefine values, and to reimagine social relations. Modernity thus engendered committed practice in the spheres of art and politics. The deep-seated losses of everyday life were worked through and assigned new meanings. Ruins, in the

context of European modernity, “made it easier to consider the different ways in which historical conditions shaped the actions of men and women and thus to imagine (Western) people as historically active subjects” (Fritzsche, 125). Ruins were taken up by the imaginary as metaphors for a history in which it was possible to remake identities, forge political bonds, and incite change.

It was only in the twentieth century that a series of global atrocities came to overshadow the optimism, however tempered, that was part of the earlier modern period. Authors and poets saw Europe not as landscape of picturesque remnants, as in the Romantic period, nor even as the stage upon which the fragments of political turmoil were littered, as in the modern, revolutionary period, but instead as a wasteland. The rubble of bombing blitzes, the haunting remains of mass graves, and glittering atomic ashes altered the conceptualization not only of the ruin, but also of historical possibility and human agency. The work of mourning became complicated, and even seemingly impossible, in the aftermath of human-made horrors and catastrophes of a kind previously unimaginable. Even Sigmund Freud who, in his early essays, drew a clear line between mourning and melancholia and believed that the analysis and working through of loss could be achieved, began to doubt whether the process of coming to terms with our losses had an end—whether, in fact, loss might be rooted in the very subjectivity of modern beings. Modernity itself, vehicle for the Enlightenment project, was seen as responsible for these horrific events. The anti-modern impulse was perhaps an inevitable response to the barbarism of fascism, death camps, and nuclear war: a healthy stock-

taking of the dangers that accompany any rationalized schemas apparently dedicated to the advancement of ‘civilization’ and ‘progress’. Important cultural theorists, such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1986), raised important questions as to the role and the state of culture and cultural production (with which ruins are bound) in the post-war, post-Holocaust, post-atomic world. These critiques have been indispensable to the re-thinking of representation and memorialization in the last few decades. The question of how to remember and mourn is anything but straightforward, and raises philosophical issues surrounding the nature of presence and absence, the relation of form to content, and the kinds of memory available to those who never experienced the events directly. The pressing imperative that the past should not be repeated is one that has animated these discussions.

Yet the postmodern movement, which has followed on the heels of these anti-modern critiques of modernity and the Enlightenment, lacks the same critical power. In fact, rather than establishing its *raison d'être* in reference to the past—in the ethical concern to remember the past and to remain vigilant against barbarism, that is, in self-reflexivity—it is, as Frederic Jameson (1991) has pointed out, entirely self-referential. We might suggest that it has constituted itself in a narcissistic, specular manner. Any reference to the past—and indeed, past forms and styles *do* return as spectacles and commodities—is illusionary, for these forms are emptied of their content. They are not the surviving traces of the past that disrupt the present and call into question the status quo, not remnants of disappointed hopes that speak to the unfinished possibilities of

historical action, but *pastiche*, parodies of the “stereotypical past” (Jameson, 21). In postmodernism, there is an impoverishment not of a sense of historical continuity—something that was already lost in modernism—but of historical rupture and discontinuity, of history itself as in-the-making, as shaped by human agency, and therefore as open to transformative events such as revolution. In these ways it mirrors—and perhaps is even symptomatic of—the self-referentiality of that other system, neoliberal capitalism, which claims its victory over the social, political, and economic spheres. Both are self-affirming and supposedly triumphant. Both occupy the *space* of the *now*—that eternal moment—which suspends historical time as the time of agency and praxis. Capitalism, which has long been engaged in the process of remaking the world in its image, has perhaps only recently achieved the apotheosis of this refashioning process: even cultural forms, once the site of negativity and challenge, impassively mirror its features.

What becomes of ruins in this brave new world? Once the debris of the past still active in the present, evoking both loss and its counterpoint in possibility, ruins are now quickly cycled back into the circuits of commodification and consumption, and thereby stripped of their critical power: they are refurbished, gentrified, demolished, or otherwise erased. Ruins are hardly allowed to remain, especially untouched—that is, without the superimposition of some kind of message or political intention—upon the landscape. Indeed, even when it concerns the ruins of supposedly ‘natural’ events, like hurricanes or flooding, the ‘slate’ is quickly wiped clean. As Naomi Klein (2007) discusses,

catastrophe becomes an opportunity for selling off public assets, privatizing space, and re-engineering social relations. Profitability, in these cases, extends into the furthest reaches of disaster, making of ruins the latest frontier of accumulation and dispossession. Among those others that are still perceptible, that have left visible traces upon the landscape—the ruins, for instance, of the former Soviet Union or deindustrialization in Detroit—they often seem to signify the loss of the future, of any hopes for an alternative project that might enliven the present. In these conditions, is it any wonder that depression has become pandemic in Western countries, or that political activities often seem shadowed by cynicism or ‘left melancholy’?

“Not the ruin, but the ruin of the ruin is the hallmark of modernity,” Fritzsche suggests (102). This is a provocative statement, and one that has been and will continue to be debated by scholars. As he goes on to explain:

Nineteenth-century Europeans were increasingly conscious of the ways in which history enhanced the subject and enabled action. They fashioned their newly mobilized identities out of loss and displacement [...] The culture of remembrance became a political force. In this view, then, it was the perpetual present, the ruin of the ruin, the permanence and preemption of empire, that constituted the real destructive potential of modernity (128).

This “ruin of the ruin” never fully materialized in the period with which Fritzsche deals in his book. While the ruin of the ruin was threatened, it was never really an achieved

reality. But this begs the question, is the ruin of the ruin, in fact, the spectre that haunts *our* age? Have we departed from modernity's culture of remembrance that was so politically-charged to enter an era of forgetfulness? Is the 'empire of capital', to borrow the title of Ellen Meiksins Wood's (2005) book, the real destructive threat—the eternal return of the same? The answer is of course complicated. While perhaps more closely achieved in the contemporary moment than at the height of modernity, this ruin of the ruin remains, nevertheless, only a partial victory. Indeed, while capitalism consumes the past, *people* continue to remember.

Ruins, or at least the memories of ruins, the memories of loss, cannot be entirely effaced. They find expression in works of fiction, memoirs, films, paintings, and installations. Again and again, women and men return to the ruins of their former countries, to the ruins of occupation or of empire, to the ruins of their former residences and workplaces. 'Standing by the ruins', as Ken Seigneurie (2011) has shown, becomes an act of resistance, a way to think against the dominant discourses of society.

The forgetfulness of popular culture and of the spectacle is also in contrast to the marked interest displayed by contemporary scholarship in memory studies and in ruin studies. Art is another arena in which, while there are indeed many pieces that centre upon enactments of depression and the impoverishment of memory, as demonstrated by Christine Ross (2006), there is an alternative current, if marginal, of aesthetic practices that are concerned with the ruins. Furthermore, the very impulse to revisit, to theorize, even to mourn the *ruins of modernity*, as exemplified by Julia Hell and Andreas

Schönle's (2008) edited collection, should perhaps be read as a signal that modernity is an unfinished business—and that is good news. The ruins of modernity are our ruins. We have to grapple with them and decide what they mean for the future.

Confronting the disappointments and the catastrophes of the past is not an inert, backward-looking gesture, but rather a way of recuperating the revolutionary impulses or unrealized possibilities that rest there, at the same time as we learn from our mistakes. “Rather than something laid down once and for all, the past is a site of struggle *in the present*” writes McNally (2001, 191). We have to sift through the ruins of history, of our recent past, to find what is worth salvaging. As Susan Buck-Morss argues “we [...] would do well to bring the ruins up close and work our way through the rubble in order to rescue the utopian hopes that modernity engendered, because we cannot afford to let them disappear” (2000, 68). Nor does moving beyond the melancholy imagination mean the disavowal or foreclosure of loss and the adoption of an attitude of false or naïve optimism. Instead, it means that we use melancholy as a method, as Flatley (2008) has suggested, for tracing out the structures and institutions responsible for the production of mental, emotional, and physical ruins, in order to move beyond the paralyzation of agency and challenge the frameworks that are limiting our sense of the possible.

There is still an openness to history; the future remains undetermined. Everywhere capitalism offers opportunities for encounters with its recent past in the form of the obsolete and the outmoded, those “melancholy traces” of history that can spark moments of insight (Stead 2001, 11). Capitalism has not succeeded in stripping us of our



capacity to dream, to erect structures in our imagination even if they are not always realized on the ground. And this is important because there are many challenges ahead. We are called upon to reimagine our cities, to find new solutions to conflicts, to work out alternatives to the institutions and structures that are causing so much damage to our lives and livelihoods. While it was beyond the scope of this dissertation to document all of the dynamic and creative reappropriations of ruins, I have sought to introduce readers to enough interesting examples that demonstrate that ruins continue to be a site of contestation and struggle. They remain a privileged topos in debates over remembering, renewal, resistance, and even the revitalization of our social, political, and economic landscapes.

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