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Ruins: Between Past and Present, Between Culture and Nature

Abstract:

The main question of the essay is: do ruins need a new definition?

Ruins are not only destroyed architecture, but also everything that has been associated with it in the process of life. From the perspective of the question, the concept of ruins should be understood much broader than just architecturally, and they should be assigned not to the past but to the present, or rather between past and present. If we consider ruins from the standpoint which situates them between culture and nature, there opens up another opportunity: here ruins are found on the juncture of nature and culture, becoming a nature-culture hybrid. Here, degradation encompasses the cultural sense in the first place and the expectations it involves, but not from the perspective of nature. The order of nature translates into a new “life” of the ruin, which is attributed a new functionality, subordinated to other – non-anthropocentric – goals and values.

Concluding, ruins require a new approach and a new definition that does not condemn them to degradation, but sees hope in the revitalizing forces of nature that ensure for them a new status and a different ontological significance.

Keywords:

ruins, ruination, nature, culture, Simmel, hope, ontological significance

Ruins are an old subject of literary descriptions and aesthetic considerations that seem to be subject to melancholic moods indebted to romantic perceptions of the past. As such, ruins have also received a coherent defini-

tion, informed by the concepts of architectural degradation and devastation, which links them exclusively to architecture; since the metaphorical symbolism of their depiction is dismissed, the process of falling into ruin can be situated in other domains of culture and human life as well. Ruins as a concept and a phenomenon have had dedicated and relatively abundant though scattered writings, both in cultural studies and in literary narratives or artistic representations, which nonetheless revolve around the “traditional” understanding that maintains a link with romantic reflection.¹ One could cite many publications, including Polish ones, which discuss ruins in the context of their Romantic heritage (it is enough to mention Jan Białostocki.² Alina Kowalczykova,³ and Grażyna Królikiewicz⁴). It may be worth recalling that Romanticism made ruins an enduring iconographic motif, having discerned and underscored their sometimes mystical substance, which guided thought towards the metaphysical rather than the tragic, although as a *memento mori* the ruins were indeed associated with human fates. In Romanticism, this was vividly expressed in for example painting (with the oeuvre of Caspar D. Friedrich as a prime example), which produced a vision of mystical ruins. However, as Andreas Huyssen noticed: “Indeed, romantic ruins guaranteed origins and promised authenticity, immediacy, and authority. However, there is a paradox. In the case of ruins that which is allegedly present and transparent whenever authenticity is claimed is present only as an absence; it is the imagined present of a past that can now only be grasped in its decay. This makes the ruin subject to nostalgia.”⁵

Ruins (and their derivatives: rubble, debris, wreckage), have invariably been a part of our landscape and as such they are a subject of landscape studies. Examples may be found at almost every turn: as “traces of the past” to be preserved and serve as a reminder, partly preserved historical objects (“permanent ruins”) functioning as tourist attractions to be visited, or as sites which have been forgotten and therefore excluded from cultural, aesthetic, or social circulation (e.g. abandoned houses, factories, “ghost towns,” etc.), which have come to be known in literature as “ruins of modernity”⁶ although, they most often derive from the industrial, as Tim Edensor argues.⁷ Many are encumbered by the romantic cult of ruins and its connotations, which soften the tragic overtones, and mitigate the often underlying disaster. To a large extent, the melancholic turn towards the past they embody obscures the process of falling into ruin, leaving only the ruined object to be seen.

Thus, one cannot avoid speaking of ruins which have not been produced by the passage of time, but resulted from any kind of disaster (nuclear, war, natural) that affects the cultural and the natural alike. The tragic connotations of ruins in the aftermath of a catastrophic event seem inescapable yet it seems possible to discover hope in this kind of ruins as well. In a sense, it would be an attempt to follow the message of Novalis, who anticipates the moment when new hope is forged from disaster:

Then the old alienated families will find each other and every day shall witness new greetings, new embraces; then will the ancient inhabitants of the Earth return to her, on every hill the ashes will kindle anew, everywhere the flames of life will blaze high, old habitations will be rebuilt, ancient times will be renewed, and history will become the dream of an infinite everlasting Now.⁸

1) I write more about it in an article: “Historyczne formy waloryzacji ruin.”

2) Białostocki, *Symbol i obrazy w świecie sztuki*.

3) Kowalczykova, *Pejzaż romantyczny*.

4) Królikiewicz, *Terytorium ruin: ruina jako obraz i temat romantyczny*.

5) Huyssen, “Nostalgia for Ruins,” 12.

6) Hell, Schönle, *Ruins of Modernity*.

7) Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*.

8) Novalis, *The Disciples*, 105.

Meanwhile, ruins belong not only to the past, but also to the present, which determines their up-to-date status. What is more, more and more often we come across ruins that have nothing to do with the past, because they are the work of the present times and our everyday life. From this perspective, even if ruins – the process of falling into ruin – has been associated with time, or rather the passage of time, what we should be aware of is that time is also a moment that makes what has been functional before, in the blink of an eye, turn into ruins. Most often it concerns the sort of catastrophe that turns the existing world into ashes.⁹

History and the present have continually added their own footnotes to the discourse of ruins, introducing a correction as important as it is tragic: it shows that the metaphorical heap of rubble can at any time become the reality of everyday life touching accidental people or catching the eye on the TV screen and causing a shock, after which some re-evaluations should be made. Probably Michael de Certeau did not expect that his article on the rhetoric of a walk in the city, beginning with the sentence: “Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center,”¹⁰ might lose its literary location after the terrorist attack on the skyscrapers.

The ruins of modernity turn out to be real ruins of the postmodern trust that the aesthetized world will not be covered by a herd dust, the ashes of burnt buildings, or the ashes of a bomb explosion. It is difficult, when writing about ruins not to have, in the eyes of everyday media, images of wars still going on in our world. When writing about ruins, it is impossible not to recall images of ruined places and cities (Warsaw 1945, WTC 2010, Fukushima 2011, to name but a few), or the ruined towns and villages of Ukraine today: a proof of the tragedy of death epitomized by ruins. This is a circumstance which calls for a rethinking of the notion of ruins, the real, actual ones as opposed to the metaphorical, romantic, or aesthetic. Therefore, one should inevitably consider both distinct items (e.g., “house in ruins,” destroyed objects), and landscapes or entire urban structures (e.g., “city in ruins,” devastated environment), focusing on the realness rather than on the abstracted, metaphorical references.

Such ruins express a kind of tragic mystery of life, which Walter Benjamin would call an allegory.¹¹ However, the Benjaminian allegory may be read in every item, every detail, which can be recognized in the ruins: furniture, personal pieces, and toys to mention some random examples. In fact, ruins are not only destroyed architecture, but also everything that has been associated with it in the process of life and use, as well. It concerns everything that has so far filled everyday life and was its unnoticeable part. From this perspective, the concept of ruins should be understood much broader than just architecturally, and they should be assigned not to the past but to the present.

The standpoint which places ruins between past and present situates them in the realm of culture, which gives them their senses and meanings, but at the same time gives them functionality: through reconstruction, restoration, or assigning them the status of a monument. One way is to restore the ruins and return them to their original state, or another way: to protect ruins by having them officially recognized as monuments or relics. In this instance, the remains of ancient architecture are seen as material traces, remnants of history, cultures, and civilizations which are no more and have been included in the discourse of heritage conservation. The situation changes when the ruins do not gain institutional care, and they themselves disappear into oblivion with the passage of time. This is the fate of many ruins, in particular those that filled our everyday life, and then lost their functionality, just like the garbage that is close to them conceptually.

However, if we consider ruins from the standpoint which situates them between culture and nature, there opens up another opportunity. This means venturing beyond the historical, established notion in which ruins

9) Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory*.

10) de Certeau, *Everyday Life*, 91.

11) Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*.

are situated between past and present, and symbolize melancholic, romantic insight into the past toward an approach formulated from a standpoint which locates ruins closer to nature. This is in line with the premises of culture studies, where ruins are found on the juncture of nature and culture, becoming a natureculture hybrid,¹² which unequivocally determines their ontological status. A renewed reflection on ruins creates a possibility of having the core issues realigned. What is more, this is the position from which – metaphorically speaking – ruins are closer to nature than to culture. A noteworthy proposal was advanced by Ann L. Stoler, who underlines the difference between the ruin as an object and the process of falling into ruin. In her opinion, “ruin is both the claim about the state of a thing and a process affecting it. It serves as both noun and verb. To turn to its verbal, active sense is to begin from a location that the noun too easily freezes into stasis, into inert object, passive form.”¹³ The “active” aspect of ruin, understood in terms of the processual dimension of the degradation/regeneration of ruins, is aptly reflected in Stoler’s description of the notion of “ruination”:

By definition, *ruination* is an ambiguous term, being an act of ruining, a condition of being ruined, and a cause of it. Ruination is an *act* perpetrated, a *condition* to which one is subject, and a *cause* of loss. These three senses may overlap in effect, but they are not the same. Each has its own temporality. Each identifies different durations and moments of exposure to a range of violences and degradations that may be immediate or delayed, subcutaneous or visible, prolonged or instant, diffuse or direct.¹⁴

The new possibilities appear already in reflection of Georg Simmel. When we listen to Simmel in his already classic essay *Ruin*, one can hope that ruins still have undiscovered potential: a kind of salvation for ruins may be subjecting them to the rule and power of nature, which makes them natural when united with it, and even organic. Simmel says: let us leave ruin in the hands of nature. The process that the ruin undergoes makes it possible to perceive it as something primal that blends into the landscape like a tree or a rock. Nature, on the other hand, takes its own actions over what was created by the hand of man and what has been handed over to it, causing the ruin to release a “new” meaning that falls under the metaphysical and aesthetic order. The destructive power of nature, affects what is ruined. But, as Georg Simmel emphasized, “so long as we can speak of a ruin at all and not of a mere heap of stones, this power does not sink the work of man into the formlessness of mere matter. There rises a new form which, from the standpoint of nature, is entirely meaningful, comprehensible, differentiated.”¹⁵ This suggestion makes the analysis of the status of ruins in relation to nature all the more legitimate. Another noteworthy factor is that nature – through its action and vitality – becomes the custodian of what the human has abandoned. One thing to be done in this respect is to determine the character of such custody. Is it appropriation or patronage and care?

However, the realm of nature, which takes custody of what has been abandoned and ruined, pursues an entirely different “agenda” with regard to ruins. It is there – paradoxically – that hope, resting on a different foundation, may assume a stronger expression, lending new life to what has been discarded not in the sense of recovering the lost for culture, but “rising” what has been abandoned.

Not coincidentally, Simmel said that a ruin draws on and reifies completely different values than any building which is structurally and formally intact. Hence, despite the paradoxical meaning of this assertion, it

12) Zucker, “Aesthetic Hybrid.”

13) Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 11.

14) Ibid.

15) Simmel, “The Ruin,” 381.

is architecture which is closest to ruins among all the arts. In architecture which is “falling into ruins,” there is a moment that other things lack: in all cases, there is a disturbance in the original form, which brings forth something new from what is there now. Ruin is wreckage, debris, remnants; at the same time, it is a new form, absorbed and devoured by nature, which does not recognize this fragmentation and state of disrepair. These are the two sides of the same phenomenon, hitherto considered one-sidedly: from the perspective of culture, in which ruin denotes destruction, collapse, and fragmentation or incompleteness in relation to the original state, an irreversible order in whose structure destiny is already inscribed. Still, characteristically enough – especially when an architectural ruin is concerned – things created by the human are detached from their intentions and subsumed under a different order, succumbing to the laws of nature, which have nothing to do with human categorizations. In this sense, the ruin represents a state of return to nature, which obeys its own laws and rules, which may in turn signify a new stage in the “life” of the ruin as a non-ruin.

Given the above, ruins require a new approach and a new definition that does not condemn them to degradation, but sees hope in the revitalizing forces of nature that ensure them a new status and a different ontological significance. It may be assumed that ruins are close to becoming a natural ruin (although it is doubtful whether one can really speak of it, since a primary, old-growth forest may be recognized as such a ruin), or rather gravitates towards it in the process of its transformation. It is a kind of “degradation,” which deprives the ruin of its cultural status and incorporates it into the order of nature, eluding historical time. Reducing the ruin to natural forms means that it is no longer subject to cultural values, and its current status situates it in the natural world, which is governed by a different paradigm. In its architectural and symbolic dimension, ruins subsumed in the order of culture combine the past, the present, and the future, the tangible and the intangible, the constructed and the manufactured. Cultural “decay” does not only mean material degradation, but also a shift of the meanings and senses inscribed in what has hitherto successfully fulfilled its function, (e.g., a house connotes a multiplicity of senses and meanings which vanish when it is deserted and slowly falls into disrepair). Degradation encompasses the cultural sense in the first place and the expectations it involves. The order of nature translates into a new “life” of the ruin, to which is attributed a new functionality, subordinated to other – non-anthropocentric – goals and values. One can imagine the same abandoned house as a habitat of insects, rodents, plants, mushrooms, and so forth; it remains a ruin in human eyes, but it is no longer one from the natural perspective in which it is elevated to a biodiverse ecosystem (Kowarik,¹⁶ Tsing¹⁷). This involves a regeneration effected by the natural system: the ruined matter is taken over and subsequently undergoes “creative processing” and repopulation by that which is other-than-human.

Consequently, it may be presumed that ruins do not constitute a passive entity which is subject to external processes, but a living creation processually transformed into an active hybrid (culture and nature, the organic and the inorganic, etc.). Undoubtedly, the conjunction of ruins and natural processes is significant, as Simmel pointed out, and offers a key clue to the interpretation of the processes taking place. Merged with nature, ruins lose their static, passive character, transitioning into a process which lasts as long as they can draw life-giving forces from nature. Although the entanglement of ruins and nature is taken for granted, this very aspect seems insufficiently explored, especially given the fluctuating notion of nature, in which its subjectivity and agency are now widely acknowledged.

Acknowledgement of the potentiality resulting from the action and impact of nature on ruins is a consequence of a shift in the notion of nature argued by post-humanist and post-anthropocentric scholars (Latour, Haraway, Braidotti, and Hayles), and the so-called nonhuman turn in humanities (Grusin), focused on the other-

16) Kowarik, “Cities and Wilderness.”

17) Tsing, *The Mushroom: Life in Capitalist Ruins*.

than-human. This particular framework includes theory of affects (Sianne Ngai), actor-network theory (Latour), new materialism (Braidotti, and DeLanda), animal studies (Haraway), systems theory, and certain varieties of speculative realism. New materialism involves the so-called “turn to things” (Olsen and Gonzalez-Ruibal), which bears on the conception of things and objects, including modern ruins (Olsen and Pétursdóttir). In the wake of such conceptions, the anthropocentric model of reality has been undermined in favor of a non-human perspective which grants voice to other forms of organic and inorganic life. Currently predominant in theoretical reflection, the post-humanist perspective (Thomsen, and Wamberg) departs from an understanding of nature as a neutral, fixed, and isolated backdrop to human activities to an agential and subjective force which directly influences our lives, establishing a new political-axiological order (Bińczyk¹⁸).

From this perspective it needs to be ascertained in what sense ruins are construed as natureculture hybrid and what consequences it has for their notion. Here, one can draw on Bruno Latour and his definition of the hybrid, (i.e. an entity in which various orders are brought together: biological, cultural, economic and political), which is why it must be considered to exist at the intersection of discourses (Latour). Yet, Paul Zucker envisioned the ruin as a hybrid of nature and culture as early as the 1960s, noting that ruins do resemble the works of nature and approaching this aspect as the main characteristic of ruins. However, there is a difference between “coming to resemble” and crossing the boundary of nature, which determines the way in which the ruin endures and lives, its ontological substance.

A renewed reflection on ruins creates a possibility of having the core issues realigned. Here, the overarching motif is the question whether ruins – something that is subject to constant devastation, decomposition and decay – harbor any hope? And if so, where should it be sought? Is it nature that gives them a new life and a new hope?

18) Bińczyk, *Epoka człowieka*.

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