

Boredom in the Charnel House

Theses on 'Post-industrial' Ruins

John Cunningham

"Our capital of misery remains intact down through the ages; yet we have one advantage over our ancestors; that of having *invested* our capital better, since our disaster is better organised."¹

E.M Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*

1/ Suggestive Boredom

A friend recently sent me a poem that explained his dissatisfaction and boredom with urban decay and industrial ruins. He wrote much of the poem via one of the automatic text generators that often give the best lines:

"Sick of ruins/ sick of meaning of ruins/ ruined/ decay/ blight/ derelict/ poetry/ heavy bricks/ getting heavy/ sick of work/ getting sick/ labour history/ dead city/ history dead/ city labour/ dead city/ invading ruins/ my apologies/ my theft/ sick of poverty/ sick of ruins..."

And so on... I find it easy to share this bored, angry scepticism towards the fetishism of crumbling concrete, cracked windows and hidden wastelands. In the image world of hopefully 'late' capitalism the industrial ruin has acquired a fair amount of *cultural* capital and such spectacular over-determination is a major reason for ennui with corroded concrete. At the more rarefied end of this are the auteurs of ruin images, professional photographers whose work appears in the gallery and in well designed coffee table books to be displayed, gazed at and stroked as ruin pornography. A recent example would be *The Ruins of Detroit* by the photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, a book that documents the decomposition of the motor city.² Such books – in their capture of something as ephemeral as the ruin in a beautifully bound hardback – always

outlines of the new industrial architecture had the same "monumental force" as the "constructions of Ancient Egypt".⁴ Whereas photography was instrumental in adding impetus to this 'new age' it now documents the dissolution of the recent past and present.⁵ Images of 'post' industrial ruins are also diffused throughout the web on sites such as 'Artificial Owl' and throughout Flickr groups – the group pool 'Abandoned' has 502,641 images alone though my personal favourite is one called 'Rusty and Crusty'. Also, this contemporary imaginary of ruins feeds into a broader stream of more overtly apocalyptic representations of disaster and decay such as the TV series *Life After People* with its digitally enhanced images of empty metropolises simply disintegrating and returning to nature after the mysterious disappearance of humanity.⁶

For something as ephemeral as the ruin – the slow decomposition of spatial form in time – the best approach is a fragmentary one. The following is a series of provisional theses upon the decomposition of the contemporary ruin grasped through image and text. In line with this ephemerality and the over determination of everything in spectacular capitalism the following should be viewed as theoretical fictions, transitory attempts to formulate concepts of what is falling apart. This is the first thesis: 'ruins boredom' is a suggestive affect in that it is constituted by and through the contemporary metropolis. Walter Benjamin, connoisseur of the arcades – the ruins of 19th century commodity capitalism – wrote that, "Boredom is a warm grey fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colourful of silks."⁷ How might boredom with ruins be turned inside out and industrial ruin capital re-invested as anti-capitalist critique?

2/ Surrealist Slapstick

It's best to enact a Surrealist style of critical slapstick, knocking the fragments of ruins together in dysfunctional assemblages and then pulling them apart to see how they function. The term 'ruin' operates as both a noun and verb in that it describes an object – that lump of concrete over there – and also describes a process as in to ruin something whether its a building, discourse, socio-economic order or whatever. The critical task is to ruin the ruins and grasp the contemporary ruinscape as a contradictory object implicit to capitalism. Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image, the juxtaposition of past and present to provide revolutionary impetus and historical materialist understanding will be central to this. But there's an important revision to be made to the dialectical image in considering the so-called 'post' industrial ruin. Whereas Walter Benjamin pulled the decaying arcades of mid 19th century commodity capitalism out of the past to illuminate his then present the contemporary ruin doesn't leave us that luxury. The afore mentioned decaying Packard plant in Detroit dates from 1903 and was part of the vast movement of population that saw the population of the city leap from 285,704 in 1900 to 993,678 in 1920 but it would be a mistake to consign this to a long distant Fordism.⁸ Exploitation never goes out of fashion and in terms of this we are not 'post' anything as the temporal frame of the dialectical image draws in closer. The movement of labouring bodies to meld with technology continues massively in China and elsewhere even as the flight of capital to where labour is cheap leads to the evacuation of the older Fordist zones of the west. For instance Detroit, home of Henry Ford and the development of mass production had a population density of 14,400 in 1950 that had declined to 6,500 by 2007.⁹ Detroit is the most extreme example of such an emptying out

of population as part of a process of the ruination or becoming ruin of a city.

This too is part of our present and this evacuation of proletarian subjects is ably attested to by the formal qualities that define photographic representations of the contemporary ruin. The visual tropes are those of the *empty space* – there are rarely people photographed in such images – and any humanity is exhibited by the *trace* of their past presence. To this can be added an emphasis upon the monumentality of the ruins of contemporary capitalism as being as overbearing in their decline as they ever were as sites of production and social reproduction. All of these tropes are heavily represented in *The Ruins of Detroit* but are also standard in the flickering repetition of such images on the web. As such *The Ruins of Detroit* provides a good basis for considering the representation of the industrial ruin. Sure, ruins tend to be empty and exhibit traces of previous use but there's something suggestive in this conjunction of emptiness and a disappeared subject. So the second thesis: The *empty space* suggests in this absence the *traces* of the subject usually embodied in everyday detritus, graffiti, etc. The question is what kind of subject might appear in the decay of the factories, apartment blocks and shopping malls that characterise the capitalist metropolis.

3/ Ruined Passivity

Or it might even be a case of the formation of a particular subject through a diffusion of images since how we act and respond is partly mediated through such images in spectacular capitalism. The mechanical reproduction of the camera is a surgical instrument that can reveal landscape but with much documentation of this kind the urban body revealed is lump, inert and reified. The ruins of our present lend themselves in these very formal, panoramic and usually monumental images to an aura of the sublime that-like natural disasters – provide a compelling immersive spectacle. There's a sense in that they reproduce the viewing subject as a consumer of dereliction, the images mediating the ruin as a theme park to be drifted through. A certain distance is necessary to enjoy the accumulation of debris since who would want to live in a ruin? Images of the contemporary ruinscape present the *aestheticisation* of the destruction of the world in much the same way that 20th century avant gardes such as the Futurists enjoyed the bluster of warfare. Except what is lacking in these images of our dereliction is the passion and joy that animated the parodic virility of the Futurists. Aestheticised might be better read as anaesthetised affect since *The Ruins of Detroit* for all the wide screen flourish and detail of the images gives me the sense that all of this has simply been curated for the sake of distraction and gazing-or perhaps grazing – upon the ruins. The lack of affect present in such acts of curation is even more accentuated in the repetition of the curating impulse on the web. As the tags of urban decay, abandoned, trashed, etc. accumulate on the screen it's so much cool stuff to collect and some days I'd be tempted to agree. Even the descendents of the admittedly great street artist John Fekner who stencilled "Decay" (or DK) and "Broken Promises" on the debris of the South Bronx in the 1980s end up simply contributing to the affectless edginess of the cultural reproduction of urban decay; stencils and other forms of street art are so widespread in London that they add to the nausea of both pockets of gentrification and urban degeneration.

This process of the subjectification of a passive,



Yves Marchand, Romain Meffre: *The Ruins of Detroit*

have a permanence about them that can't help but remind me of the precarity attached to dwelling, health and jobs in the contemporary city.

The book is a fairly exhaustive – and often quite beautiful if ruins are your thing – documentation of the decline of Detroit from Fordist production with its monumental architecture of factories, department stores and apartment blocks hymning the myths of the modern to the decomposition of the city into monumental ruin. The image of the huge decaying Packard plant resembling a concrete and iron pre-historic grotto encrusted with stalagmites puts an entirely new spin upon Le Corbusier's view of "factories [as] the reassuring first fruits of the new age".³ But this 'new age' of industrial (re)production always carried with it a whiff of the archaic even if usually invoked to underscore the grandeur of modernism. Modernist architect Walter Gropius boasted that the sleek

Don Leicht, John Fekner's collaboration (1980) at the site of the People's Convention held at Charlotte Street, the South Bronx. Messages included *Decay*, *Broken Promises*, *Falsas Promesas*, *Last Hope*, *Broken Treaties* and *Save Our School*.

neutralised subject might seem too much to read from the diffusion of images of dereliction but the theme park or art space is also immanent to the contemporary ruin. For instance, photographer and ruin auteur Camilo José Vergara proposed with a kind of blank irony that the ruinscape of Detroit be preserved as a museum of US capitalism.¹⁰ It's worth noting that in Germany the industrial detritus of the Ruhr valley and the mining areas of the ex-Stalinist Eastern part of the country have already been transformed into such a museum of Fordism. In an essay upon this, Kirstin Barndt goes so far to write of a "transformation of the subject" from worker to leisured (or unemployed) consumer and a "new landscape of affect" produced through the aestheticisation of dereliction and its preservation as a post-industrial playpen with walkways, art galleries and perfectly preserved ruins.¹¹

The presumed non-identity of a ruined space with the day to day operations of spatial production and consumption is utilised – alongside other discourses and institutions, artistic as well as economic – to reproduce essentially passive subjects. The debris of the post-industrial ruin can be an element of the apparatuses – diffuse assemblages of discourses, institutions, economic processes, etc. – that produce both subjectivity and space.¹² Even the industrial ruin can be subsumed within the bio-political governmentality of contemporary capitalism that seeks to (de)form the subject and ensure receptivity and productivity. And what might be termed affective subjects are partially produced through such spaces. As Ganser, the project director of one of the 'post' industrial theme parks in Germany comments: "People feel better, even though objectively the economic situation remains unchanged".¹³ This can also be shaped as configuring nostalgia in the shape of mourning for the past, a past where the local population was not quite as surplus to the requirements of capital. "People feel better" is as good a motto as any for the disciplinary apparatuses of contemporary capitalism. The point of this is not to moralise or rant about the supposed emptiness, commodification or lack of meaning inherent in spectacular capitalism since all of that can be taken for granted. Instead, it's to place images of the dereliction of the present in wider field of images, discourses, institutions and economic processes that contribute to the management and production of subjectivity. What initially Michel Foucault and latterly Giorgio Agamben have termed apparatuses or *dispositifs* of bio-political governmentality. Agamben writes that an apparatus can be "literally anything that has [...] the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings".¹⁴ In this case ruin images are relatively marginal phenomena that can contribute to this: a ruin apparatus.

It's a fitting mirror image that the proto-typical bio-political sites such as factories that sought to reproduce proletarianised bodies as workers should contribute to the over-determination of subjectivity in their decline. No wonder Andre Breton linked the ruin with the mechanical mannequin in the first Surrealist manifesto as examples of the uncanny or 'marvellous'; though at this point there seems little of the 'marvellous' about the imbrication of the subject with the spaces of the metropolis. The mechanical mannequin can easily be seen as an image of the new industrialised bodies required by factories organised by the repetitive gestures of the production line and formed through this technology. But there's a trace of a more

oppositional subject-worker in this that used the concentration of population around these sites to discover new forms of resistance and organisation. The worker as mechanical mannequin was always on the point of malfunctioning and upending the sites of her own (re)production. This is another trace contained in these images of decomposing buildings and ruin theme parks. A melancholy anti-capitalist remnant of the figure of the mass worker who revealed the conflictual basis of the 'golden age' of Fordism in mimetic forms of a resistance – such as mass organisation – based upon the novelty of industrial production.

Thesis three can be: the image of the contemporary ruin is part of the apparatuses that seek a governmentality that produces neutralised and passive subjects. This is one of the *traces* of the subject always to be found in the contemporary ruin.

4/ Archaic Bio-Politics

Contemplating the ruins of the past led to the cultural pessimism of the early 20th century philosopher and apocalypse fanatic Oswald Spengler. In his *Decline of the West* the "exhaustion of forms (of civilisation) that have become inorganic or dead"¹⁵ reveals itself in cyclical forms of history that mirror the corrosive rhythms of nature. This is a prototype of bio-politics as Spengler writes: "Mankind appears to me as a zoological quantity. I see no progress, no goal, no avenue for humanity, except in the heads of the Western progress-Philistines..."¹⁶ This finds an echo in the melancholy of a ruin gaze that assimilates the abandoned or urban decay and emphasises the universal hubris to be found in the contemporary ruin. As one of the accompanying texts in *The Ruins of Detroit* notes, these ruins are, "A natural and sublime demonstration of our human destinies and of their paradoxes. A dramatisation of our creative and self-destructive vanities."¹⁷ Ideally for capital, we graze upon the ruins suspended between being passive consumers and easily managed forms-of-life that can be twisted around the capitalist dynamic partially revealed in the ruin. In this view ruins – like capitalism – will always be with us and this pessimism would be a stance that affirms this up to the 'zoological' negative bio-politics of human animals scurrying around in the rubble. This is a dead zone that dissolves the verticality of both buildings and rational human form into immersive 'zoological' cycles where nature and history become indistinct. Such a cultural pessimism just reflects the 'natural' cycles of economic creation and destruction that constitute a currently self destructing element in the self-image of capital.

An example of the naturalisation of the ruin is found in the work of the sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel. He wrote in 1913 that "it is the fascination of the ruin that here the work of man appears to us entirely as a product of nature."¹⁸ And Simmel – despite being an astute thinker of the urban metropolis – judged this decomposing reconciliation to be a good thing. The slow revealing through the ruin of the hubris of humanity in the midst of natural decay undercut the pretensions of human agency and autonomy. The ruin as a romantic remnant, where it's possible to glimpse an enclave of supposedly unmediated nature reasserting itself through a cessation of the production of things and buildings is part of both the past and contemporary phantasmagoria of ruins. Tendrils of nature insinuated into stone as the reconciliation of nature and humanity in decomposition is part of an essentially romantic concept of the ruin. This trans-historical pessimism finds its own natural resting place



in contemporary fantasies of a deep green restoration of Nature wherein hunter gatherers would play in the ruins of industrialism. There's a harsher version of this found in a short story by Detroit native Thomas Ligotti in the shape of a parable of non-reconciliation between nature and industrial production. In the story *The Red Tower*, the eponymous tower is a factory gradually being ruined by the entropic influence of the surrounding wasteland. The factories production of increasingly horrific novelties conflicts with a tendency towards nothingness embodied in the surrounding natural landscape. The story is marked by the lack of any human subjects as an interface between factory production and natural wasteland; a produced 'second nature' of factory and commodity is in irreconcilable conflict with a supposedly primary first nature. The nameless narrator and other human subjects are reduced to recording devices:

"[T]hey are always talking, in one deranged way or another, about the Red Tower [...] Unless, of course, they begin to speak about that grey and desolate landscape, that hazy void in which the Red Tower – the great and industrious Red Tower – is so precariously nestled."¹⁹

Images of the industrial ruin are similarly caught between the infusion of nature and



Yves Marchand,
Romain Meffre:
*The Ruins of
Detroit*

an equally inhuman economic order. What is suggestive about *The Red Tower* and *The Ruins of Detroit* is that both are characterised by a naturalised entropic drift into dissolution that elides any human agency or reduces such to the status of an eye or voice that simply records the process of ruination. More than this, the *trace* of the human is both passive and ineluctably subject to an erasure by inhuman processes that suggest an end to capitalism that is based upon an industrial ecological catastrophe.

All of this suggests that the industrial ruin is a wish image of contemporary capitalism. Like an inverted image of the 'utopian traces' that Walter Benjamin glimpsed in the commodity culture of the 19th century but rather than projecting a 'phantasmagoria' of the reconciliation of humanity and nature through the commodity these images of corroded factories and trashed apartment blocks suggest a fantasy of a ever returning non-reproduction of the cogs that keep production revolving. And these cogs aren't just the fixed capital of buildings and technology but also the human appendages of capital. The important point to grasp is that in the image it's all too easy to project this as a natural, frozen and neutralised process rather than one that is contingent and historical. The passivity and neutralisation of the gazing subject is mirrored by that subject's essentially passive role within the decomposition of the ruin. Thesis four: the pessimism of the industrial ruin dissolves the image of progress up to the destruction or decomposition of the 'human' into a 'zoological quantity'. The naturalisation of destruction is a naturalisation of capitalism. But this also leads to the question of how to denaturalise decomposition, underline its production within capitalism and discover within the dissolution of capitalist 'progress' a utopian trace not based upon 'Nature' and a pessimism not based upon a 'zoological' destiny. The decomposition of teleological narratives of human progress is not necessarily fodder for the endless cyclical creation and destruction of capital. The collapse of 'progress' as a piloting

device for history might also be a clearing away of a delusion that was always built upon labouring bodies anyway.

5/ Charm of Ruins

It's necessary to drift further away from the image in order to investigate the psychogeographical attraction to the ruin. This exists in an uneasy symbiosis with the mediation of post-industrial ruins through the abstraction of the photographic image. Psychogeography often functions as an index of dissatisfaction with contemporary urban space while simultaneously mapping its effects upon subjectivity and affect. A recurrent trace of this dissatisfaction is found in the psychogeographical penchant for the ruin, the decayed left over space that suspends the remaking of the city in the (self) image of capitalism. The Situationist Guy Debord wrote after discovering a disused 18th century tollhouse in the Place de la Stalingrad in Paris that it was a "virtual ruin left in an incredible state of abandonment, whose charm is singularly enhanced by the curve of the elevated subway line that passes at close distance"²⁰ Psychogeography has always thrived upon such juxtapositions between a projected image of the gleaming 'new' – heavily regulated spaces sponsored by capital – and the human remnants, memories and ruins of urban space. The 'charm' of the disused tollhouse for Debord probably arose from this but also from it being an 18th century neo-classical facsimile of the architecture of ancient Rome. But what might differentiate this from a simple aestheticisation of the ruin? This might be found in the 'charm' of time doing its work upon the pretensions of French state power that sought to enshrine its commercial transactions in the monumentality of past ages. It's in this that the more astute anti-capitalist utopian trace of the ruin resides. This is both in the revealing of the ephemeral qualities of socio-economic structure and in the merest hint of the possibility of non-productive spaces that might be productive of non-capitalist relations. Even if these utopian traces are only imaginary possibilities hatched out of the musings of a psychogeographer.

It's in this that the destructive 'charm' of ruins resides in suggesting that all such pretensions to monumentality can be dissolved by time and – even if only by re-imagining the city while drifting – through oppositional agency. It's difficult to rediscover such a charm of ruins in the contemporary metropolis. In London post-industrial ruins seem little more than urban degeneration in the midst of repetitive attempts to (re)inflate the property market and British capitalism through an increasingly desperate gentrifying 'regeneration'. Every decaying warehouse or graffiti adorned industrial shell has germinating within it a block of luxury flats. These usually contain the requisite – though slightly humble – 'affordable' or social housing apartments carefully cordoned off in case they infect the remainder of the development. Class relations that UK plc would love to elide appear in concrete lower down in the new development with smaller balconies or sequestered off in a separate section altogether. The surrealism of empty shop fronts – dismembered mannequins, commodity fragments, trashed cash registers – all too easily turn into a state subsidised collective art space that provides the illusion of cultural regeneration. It's this aspect of the ruin that is at the core of ennui with it. Boredom arises through this repetition-dead capitalised time endlessly repeating – and the capitalist processes that produce everyday space manifest in an all too obvious way.

Ruin divided by Gentrification equals Capital, and further down the line equals more ruin for those prole's excluded from this primitively accumulative equation. For instance, one of the most iconic contemporary ruins in London is the vast crumbling network of one thousand plus ex-social housing flats – though one or two tenants continue to hold out – called the Heygate Estate. It was evacuated of tenants in a series of classically 'democratic' local government 'consultations' – keep voting and consulting but you'll still be evicted at the behest of property developers – and capitalism's systemic dream of another empty space to fill with yuppie hutches was fulfilled.²¹

This particular ruin was summoned into existence by the systemic necessities of capitalism at the expense of any existing social fabric. When we see a post-industrial ruin we should also see the inhuman subject called capital winking and leering at us in its own cyclical reproduction. We can't even wear our boredom as a "sign of distinction" – as Walter Benjamin wrote of the 19th century flaneur – since our boredom with ruins often presages our own possible ejection from the neighbourhood. Even in Detroit – the alpha and omega of urban decay – the gentrification of the city centre continues at the expense of the expanse of a rapidly decomposing periphery. As Bill McGraw writes in his excellent overview of the decline of Detroit: "They might be pouring more designer beers in new downtown clubs these days, but elsewhere in Detroit, the bricks continue to crumble"²²

As such, thesis five *might* be: if predicated upon the aesthetic 'charm' of ruins psychogeography might be utterly exhausted as a tactical, theoretical resource. But this doesn't exhaust psychogeography and the critical potentiality of ruins altogether. This 'charm' also demonstrates that such cycles of the creative/destructive (re) production of capitalism aren't an eternal verity and are part of specific relations of production. There's a suggestive image in *The Ruins of Detroit* that reoccurs around three or four times from different derelict spots. It's of a window rendered opaque and cracked almost blocking out the view of further dereliction in the distance. Negatively, this suggests the regime of transparency that the contemporary capitalist metropolis aspires to architecturally in the reflective glass of offices and shopping malls, the dream of a space transparent to both control and the flows of capital. The contemporary ruin at least suggests the uneven qualities of such a transparent homogenisation of the city. Elemental to the industrial ruin as a wish image is that it might constitute a space that is opaque to the transparency of capital, unproductive on capital's terms, a splinter in the eye of the reflective surfaces of the metropolis. In actuality, one relies upon the other: no increasingly transparent space without the supposed opacity of disused buildings and urban degeneration. Gentrification, theme parks and the ruin-image apparatus demonstrate the industrial ruin is produced within the same spatial and economic regimes.

However, the myth of opacity – the memory or potential existence of spaces that are more opaque to the productive apparatuses of the contemporary metropolis – can at least provide a critical tool against transparency. This is used to good effect by the artist-photographer Jorge Ribalta who reconstructed and photographed scale models of the 'urban decay' of working class districts of Barcelona prior to their gentrification. As John Roberts writes, this is an elegy to "an area that once had a rich and variegated social and economic history" now designated by capital as "unproductive"²³ Such an approach mobilises the 'opacity' of urban decay – and memory – against the transparent homogenisation that capital desires for city space while emphasising the simultaneous production of both. In light of this Thesis Five can be: Psychogeography or photography as critique can puncture the inter-related phantasmagorias of both an opaque urban decay and transparency if one is utilised against the other. The utopian trace of the ruin is in the forms of decomposition revealed as immanent to capitalism and then utilised as critique. This rests upon the negative apprehension of the ruin rather than seeing in it the embodiment of a utopian aspect in the everyday. But where might this leave the starting point of the images of urban decay and the ruin?

6/ Fantasies of Non-Reproduction

None of this is to say that the representation of such ruins can't also carry a certain melancholic jolt to the imagination. *The Ruins of Detroit* contains images of a cop station left abandoned as though it had just been assaulted by insurrectionists, bureaucratic documents and id photographs left scattered. What could be termed the apocalyptic 'shock-value' of the ruin image resides in something like this. Were

it not the simple result of cycles of capitalist (de)valorisation then such an image might be subtitled 'We are not afraid of ruins' as the Spanish Civil War anarchist Durutti famously stated. A similar pessimistic delight in the ruin is found in the Surrealist Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant*. As he contemplates the everyday life of the decaying arcades and the rapidly approaching 'modernisation' that will destroy them Aragon imagines an encounter with the player of an accordion upon which is written 'Pessimism'. As the instrument is played "the whole thing starts wailing from left to right pessimism-pessimism [...] pessimism [...] pes-pe-p-p... nothing more".²⁴ While in the phantasmagoria of the 20th century the regeneration of the metropolis occurred under the sign of 'progress' our own urban renovation is blunter and has no need for such metaphysical niceties. Aragon excavated and examined the 19th century arcades of Paris for subversive potentiality as though they were a buried ancient civilisation. The obsolescent remnants of an earlier form of commodity capitalism were an unbidden spatial unconscious. Thus, "when the pickaxe menaces them" the arcades suggest to Aragon that "Future mysteries will arise from the ruins of today's" and the ephemeral decomposition of commodified space becomes evident. 'Progress' for Surrealists such as Aragon was already undercut and outmoded without the intercession of a mythical nature. This is another image of the ruin – different from the capitalised cosmological cycles outlined above – that needs to be attended to, the hubris of the outmoded commodities and buildings of capital.

Through its abstraction of dereliction in the image of industrial dereliction there's revealed a similarly pessimistic but critical element of the way capitalist abstractions – labour, commodity, value – work in the world. The standard trope of most such images – and this is very prevalent in *The Ruins of Detroit* – is the monumental, looming depiction of emptied out factories and apartment blocks as being totally devoid of people. What can be apprehended in these emptied out images is the actuality of the contemporary industrial ruin as the decomposing embodiment of capitalist abstraction in the shape of dead labour. And rather than being the unconscious aspects of space that harboured the 'marvellous' for Aragon and the Surrealists this is a banal secret that *The Ruins of Detroit* underscores in its details of dereliction. That is, these derelict buildings depicted in *The Ruins of Detroit* have accumulated the sweat of living labour over the generations then been destroyed as the reproductive cycle between capital and proletariat is cut by the necessity of capital to valorise itself either in a more fictional, financial form or to begin its flight elsewhere. A surplus but proletarianised living labour is still dominated – if not exploited – by the ghost of capital continuing to animate the corpses of past dead labour in the shape of a repetitive refrain of 'This world was not built for you'. Or what Georg Lukacs memorably described as a 'charnel house' of reified subjectivity, frozen as second nature.²⁵ While Lukacs risked missing the essential transitoriness that such second nature always carries this formulation catches much of the banal, monumental qualities of urban decay imagery and is the last trace of the subject within it. And while not actively built for a labouring (or non-labouring) proletariat – except to reproduce humanity as labour – the ruin as dead labour restores a more contingent element to the industrial ruin by underlining its produced quality. The essential trace of the empty space are the proletarianised subjects who originally designed, built, worked in and inhabited these ruins realised in this absence. Industrial ruins are a signifier of the becoming surplus to capitalism of a significant part of this proletariat.

The contemporary ruinscape as depicted in books such as *The Ruins of Detroit* and the repetition of such images on the web are in their emptiness redolent of such a surplus population in both the developed zones of the west and more strikingly in the global south. This is to make absolutely clear a population surplus to the requirements of capital – unemployed, marginalised, precarious – not to itself and this is the negative 'utopian trace' of post-industrial ruins.²⁶ To put it plainly, the severing of the

reproductive cycle between proletariat and capital as a structural necessity for capital opens up the potentiality of a future without capitalism. This is also part of the 'charm' of ruins though whether it's also an element in our contemporary phantasmagoria of wish images only time will tell. Thesis six is: the ruin as an empty space that might herald the non-reproduction of capitalism is a seductive image and certainly constitutes part of any utopian trace it might have for the present. Perhaps, Benjamin's (in)famous 'angel of history' – as much as being horrified by the accumulated debris he sees behind him – might not be able to resist a sly smile and a wink as the debris is piled ever higher.²⁷

Notes

- 1 E.M Cioran, Trans: Richard Howard, *A Short History of Decay*, UK: Penguin, 2010, p.184.
- 2 Yves Marchand, Romain Meffre, Robert Polidori and Thomas J Sugrue, *The Ruins of Detroit*, Steidl, 2010.
- 3 Le Corbusier quoted in Gillian Darley, *Factory (Objekt)*, London: Reaktion Books, 2003, p.136.
- 4 Walter Gropius, *ibid*, p.138.
- 5 As the *Architectural Reviews* editor Philip Morton Shand said in 1934, "did modern photography beget modern architecture or the reverse?", *ibid*, p.136. Though Eugene Atget's photographs of ragpickers in the late 19th century suggest that an awareness of dust, decay, detritus and the marginal workers who worked amongst such was already a concern with photographers.
- 6 See Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*, UK: Zero Books, 2010, pp.174-179.
- 7 Walter Benjamin, Trans: Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge (USA)/ London (UK): Belknap Press/ Harvard University Press, p.105.
- 8 Bill McGraw, 'Historians in the Streets', *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 63, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007, p.292. An excellent article by a Detroit resident, journalist and historian that traces the history of Detroit and has much to say about both ruin pornography and gentrification.
- 9 Bill McGraw, *ibid*, p.293.
- 10 See Gerry Coulter, 'Ruined America', *EuroArt and Beyond*, Issue 14, 2011, available here: <http://www.euroartmagazine.com/new/?page=1&content=129>. Also: <http://invinciblecities.camden.rutgers.edu/intro.html>.
- 11 Kirstin Barndt, 'Memory Traces of an Abandoned Set of Futures', in Julia Hell and Andreas Schonle (Ed), *Ruins of Modernity*, USA: Duke University Press, 2010, pp.273 and 277.
- 12 This is outlined in Giorgio Agamben's text 'Metropolis', available here: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/69377415/Agamben-Metropolis>
- 13 *Ruins of Modernity*, *ibid*, p.277.
- 14 Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus*, US: Stanford University Press, 2009, p.14.
- 15 Oswald Spengler, quoted in Dylan Trigg, *The Aesthetics of Decay*, New York: Peter Lang, 2006, p.225.
- 16 Oswald Spengler, *ibid*, p.115.
- 17 Yves Marchand, Romain Meffre, Robert Polidori and Thomas J Sugrue, *The Ruins of Detroit*, Steidl, 2010.
- 18 Georg Simmel, 'The Ruin', *Hudson Review*, USA, 11:3 (1958:Autumn).
- 19 Thomas Ligotti, 'The Red Tower', *Teatro Grottesco*, UK: Virgin Books, 2008, p.76.
- 20 Guy Debord in Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City*, USA: MIT Press, 1998, p.72.
- 21 See the excellent website Southwark Notes for much bile, whinging and critique of this: <http://southwarknotes.wordpress.com/>
- 22 Bill McGraw, *ibid*, p.14.
- 23 John Roberts, 'Photography, Landscape and the Social Production of Space', *Philosophy of Photography*, Vol.1:2, p.140.
- 24 Louis Aragon, Trans: S.W. Taylor, *Paris Peasant*, UK: Picador, 1987, pp.61 and 29.
- 25 Georg Lukacs, Trans: Anna Bostock, *The Theory of the Novel*, UK: Merlin Press, p.32.
- 26 For more detail on the concept of surplus population see 'Misery and Debt', *Endnotes* here: <http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/1>
- 27 "His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread [...] His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed." Walter Benjamin, Trans: Harry Zohn, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, UK: Harpocollins, 1992, p.249.

Yves Marchand,
Romain Meffre:
*The Ruins of
Detroit*

