

The Aesthetics of Decay

Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason

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Introduction

Among Europeans today there is no lack of those who are entitled to call themselves homeless in a distinctive and honorable sense...for their fate is hard, their hopes are uncertain; it is quite a feat to devise some comfort for them—but to what avail? We children of the future, how could we be at home in this today? We feel disfavor for all ideals that might lead one to feel at home in this fragile, broken time of transition; as for 'realities' we do not believe they will last. The ice that still supports people today has become very thin; the wind that brings the thaw is blowing; we ourselves who are homeless constitute a force that breaks open ice and other all too thin realities.

Nietzsche (1974, p. 338)

I

To begin with, a question: considering the history of the twentieth century, a legacy of destruction which looks set to increase into the present century, can we still maintain that reason is the mechanism by which progress can be realized? On the surface, the answer is positive. Despite the West's fall into cultural pessimism, the sovereignty of reason has apparently resisted exhaustion. If this claim is doubted in abstraction, then it is evident in the notion of a philosophical principle as static and absolute. Conflict invariably ensues when the principle, led by the claims of reason, exceeds its universality in relation to a temporal present, so becoming distinctly fetid. The divergence between universality and the temporal present is compounded as ideas are mistaken to be intuitive, humanistic, or otherwise innate: terms which justifiably warrant suspicion. In the absence of such suspicion, the familiarity of reason prevents it from disbanding. The implications are twofold. Disillusionment and dogma are the likely consequence as a society adjusts to the void between a static principle and the mutable world in which that principle exists. Secondly, in the face of destruction and ruin, a reconfiguration of the principle which resisted such forces would only concede to the sovereignty of the former principle. Instead of this retreat, the employment of reason gathers greater violence, until a dialectic is formed whereby anti-progress and reason become inextricably, if falsely, bound.

Without a definite presence, the concept of reason becomes unclear. By way of substantiating this ambiguity, reason resorts to defining itself negatively. A lack of reason, led principally by "irrationalism," generally, but imprecisely, suggests anti-intellectual emotionalism and vague intuitionism. The inclusion of emotion and intuition provide a clue to the foundation of

what reason aspires toward. If intuition is reactionary, then being overly exposed to contextual circumstances, its judgment is said to be contingent. Reason, meanwhile, is said to derive from an atemporal and placeless (non)environment in which context is subjugated by necessity. Kant's aesthetic formalism testifies to this lack of contextual content in its claim to disinterested delight. Through suppressing the particularity of context, aesthetic universality is acquired at the expense of actual experience. Similarly, rational progress is won as reactions and instincts, particular qualities, are suspended. Precisely what this progress entails remains an obscurity characterized by conceptual insecurity. Yet into this space of obscurity, a vague set of themes united by their commitment to the idea of permanency, be it political or philosophical, take precedence.

II

The topic of this book is not the insidiousness of specific political and philosophical regimes. Commentaries on this, and even commentaries on those commentaries, are already in overabundance. This book is an attack on the notion of rational progress which underlies those regimes. My usage of the term "reason" is limited to the mode of rationality as a homogenizing agent which defines and identifies the particular in accordance with a static principle already established in the past. Such a use of reason does not entail an attack on methodological reason. So long as absolute reason lays claim to universality, then the presence of permanence is simultaneously implicated. Universality evades contingency and temporal mutability as it strives toward the absolute. Yet if this entails reason being a pernicious presence, then the conflict is accentuated, in that reason predominantly depends upon an image evoked in the already-lived past to construct an indeterminate present. The past as superior to the present is thus central to reason's attraction and to the faith it tacitly attests in progressively returning to that past.

In this book, I criticize the claim that reason is the guarantor of progress. As the notion of reason becomes ever vaguer, its (non)-presence undergoes doubt. That this unfolding is met with violent resistance is symptomatic of its centrality in romantic, modern, and consummately postmodern thought. As such, its presence persists. About this continuity, Paul Feyerabend speculates: "We may surmise that the idea is a leftover from times when important matters were run from a single center, a king, or a jealous god, supporting and giving authority to a single world view" (Feyerabend, 2002, p. 11). For Feyerabend, a benefit of reason is its lack of content, since, "it enables special groups to call themselves 'rationalists,' to claim that widely recognized successes were the work of Reason and to use the strength thus gained to

suppress developments contrary to their interests” (*Ibid.*). Feyerabend’s comments correctly identify what is fundamental to reason: firstly, the mythological lineage, which implicitly testifies to a once unified perspective. Secondly, the supposed legitimacy reason confers upon thought and praxis. Thirdly, the absence reason creates in its fall from certainty. That the reality of the myth has now eroded does nothing to lessen the enthusiasm of “rationalists.” On the contrary, if reason is thought to be timeless, then its absence is not a matter of it being annihilated, but lost. The struggle for reason relies on the supposition that its strength can be rediscovered and so resurrected.

Despite the persistence of reason, this book undertakes the task of reaffirming the decline of reason, so exploring the space deserted by this decline. My point of departure is that progress is compatible with the absence of reason and that the supposed antithesis of progress—decline—is the means by which a critique of progress is possible. How will this possibility be realized? Since reason, after Kant, has sought to be essentially placeless in its universality, depending, as it does, on formal rather than particular properties, placing reason in a spatial and temporal context will establish the conditions under which the ambiguity of reason gives way to the clarity of its absence.

Through lived experience of the built environment, what is unconsciously implicit is rendered self-consciously explicit, as Siegfried Kracauer writes accurately, “The surface-level expression...by virtue of their unconscious nature provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. Conversely, knowledge of the state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions” (Kracauer, 1995, p. 75). For Kracauer marginalized space, hotel lobbies and employment agencies for instance, becomes the platform through which ideas concerning the inversion of secular space are manifest. As a result of this manifestation, space becomes the extension of thought and so allows thought itself to be objectified, as he writes in a celebrated passage: “Spatial images are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyphics of any spatial image are deciphered, there the basis of social reality presents itself” (cited in Leach, 1997, p. 51). In Kracauer’s formula, space implicates the events which take place in that context. In doing so, a hermeneutic relationship evolves in which the disclosure of ideas is possible through a phenomenological analysis of the built environment. In the present work, this formula underpins my analysis of space, place, and the absence of reason.

This relationship between space and the ideas which unconsciously embed themselves in that space requires careful consideration. Putting reason in a spatial context means identifying what grounds reason, and thus what constitutes its disbanding. Mere analysis of space alone will not constitute a sufficiently thorough examination of the structure of reason. Instead, reason

must precede space. Only in that way can the displacement of reason be identified. Yet at the same time, the representation of reason in space is merely that. When we speak about classical architecture in terms of it being triumphant, we are conferring an association upon a specific physical feature, principally an arch, column, or pillar. In this instance, the bond between space and idea is contingent. That is, nothing can prevent a temple, as Heidegger noted, from losing its depth, and so being reduced to mere matter. This is evident in how monuments become anti-monuments as soon as their symbolic association has been subverted. Nonetheless, if an idea and a particular spatial configuration share the same property inherently, then the bond between them can be said to be intimate and necessary. In the following pages, I will argue that the unifying property which binds space and the absence of reason is nothingness.

In the present context, the term “nothingness” does not refer to outright negation or a simple absence of presence, less even an active force which annihilates things. Instead, it will designate a specific and temporal dynamic which relies on the context that preceded it. Here, nothingness is the vantage point in which the absent past is traceable in the unformed present. Although indebted to Heidegger’s analysis of the Nothing, for the present investigation of nothingness, any such existential investigation in which freedom is defined against the conscience of the anxious subject bears no relevance and is rejected at the outset. Rather than being defined by a strictly redemptive dimension, the aspect of the Nothing which concerns us presently is its position as a mediating agent to contest the presence of reason. Nothingness is thus a volatile and active force, which gathers thought rather than destroying it. The scope for this inquiry into nothingness is aesthetics.

If architecture embodies ideas, then aesthetic consideration of that space withdraws those ideas from their dormancy. This is what permits Kracauer’s urban flâneur to unmask the significance of the hotel lobby, as Kracauer writes: “The person sitting around idly is overcome by a disinterested satisfaction in the contemplation of a *world creating itself*, whose purposiveness is felt without being associated with any representation of purpose” (*Ibid.*, p. 176). Thereafter, the hotel lobby becomes an aesthetic artifact emerging against a Kantian backdrop. While outright aestheticism remains a questionable prospect, not least because it supposes itself to be autonomous from morality, the correspondence between the idea and the mind which is receptive to that idea means that aesthetic experience creates a fortuitous opening in which recognition is affirmed. This interplay between space and time testifies to the ontological value of aesthetics, and so justifies the epistemological value of aesthetics in the first instance.

How then does the inquiry into nothingness proceed? Since nothingness is particular, it is also finite in its embodiment; as the temporal conditions alter, it loses its clarity. Thus, if reason is centered around the will to permanency, then the space which resists that drive will be vulnerable to mutability, uncertainty, and fragmentation. Moreover, if reason prevents progress from being open to criticism, then the space, or as we will discover, *place*, which opposes this dynamic will likely be marginalized if not wholly vilified. Accordingly, this dynamic converges in the place of decay, and so fulfills the embodied absence of reason.

III

Through falling from its previous function, and thus outliving the use originally conferred upon it, the ruin transgresses and subverts our everyday encounter with space and place. In the space of order and regulation, boundaries are delimited and linear. Being in place means knowing the limits of that place. So long as those limits are respected, then indeterminacy is evaded and the impression of space as productive can be maintained. At the same time, urban space undergoes domestication until it gathers a sense of how it ought to be. Rendering its structural properties apparently *a priori*, the space for malleability automatically assumes a deviant quality. If delimited space is productive, then space which broaches those boundaries will be termed wasted or otherwise expendable. In the ruin, the elements of waste and marginalization are crystallized.

Here, the ruins of principal concern are those found on the fringes and in the center of the urban landscape. Though classical ruins feature in this book, abandoned asylums, derelict factories, and decayed piers take precedence. Since they have been reduced to aesthetic artifacts and that alone, Roman, Grecian, and other such ancient ruins can no longer serve as objects which subvert our philosophical assumptions concerning rational progress. This is not to say that their aesthetic merits perish with this absence of discordance. Instead, it means that they have been entrenched, so domesticated, in the sphere of the heritage trail. Monumentalism remains, after all, another commodity of social servility which strives to maintain an abstract impression of the past. Through being “rationalized” as historically significant, they sacrifice their original potency only to be redefined as delimited and prohibited spaces. In the docility of ruins, preservation is enforced as the justified response. As will be evident, this ethics is only tenable so long as reason is said to be sovereign.

The ruins of contemporary society, latent on the urban landscape, are privileged spaces, which simultaneously invoke reactions of repulsion and

sublimity. Temporally intimate with our own age, they have yet to submit to simple aestheticism, which annihilates their potential to disrupt convention. Instead, these ruins are close enough to the present to mirror an alternative past/present/future. A derelict factory testifies to a failed past but also reminds us that the future may end in ruin. Their use outmoded, the negative associations of the ruins are enforced. Nonetheless, the apparently unaesthetic quality of the ruin belies a force which disproves accusations of it being “ugly” and “wasted.” Instead of being relegated to the wastelands, literally or otherwise, the ruin proves its epistemological value as it undermines the residue of certainty and so forges a new criterion for knowledge.

The aesthetic pleasure which derives from modern ruins, broadly a post-industrial form of the sublime, is inextricably bound with the ontological assertion that the ruin tacitly embodies. As this balance between ontology and aesthetics is understood, so the aesthetic quality of the ruin emerges. Instead of being marginalized as pernicious or otherwise antithetical to productive space, the ruin creates a center of its own. Celebrating ruins does not entail domesticating and nullifying them. A central objective of this book is to instigate a reappraisal of the relationship between place and memory. Aestheticizing ruins without being heedful of their eventual dissolution means aspiring to own them either through preservation or by dint of abstracting them from their context. Such a beautification of the ruin succumbs to a wholly romantic perspective. Instead of opening the space in which rational progress is contested, the static identification of ruins, through rendering them novelties, implicates a detachment whereby the ruin’s powers are diluted. Mere delight means truncating the ruin’s dissolution.

IV

Despite being a marginalized topic, the present literature, research, and interest in ruins is broad, and becoming more so. While much literature on ruins proves successful in terms of evoking the visceral atmosphere of the ruin, the failure to situate these evocations against an ontological background means that the same literature often limits itself to cultural studies, in a literal sense. We are told much about the “feel” of ruins but little about what they might imply conceptually. Can one speak of a philosophy of ruination? I will demonstrate its application here.

By allowing the ruin to exist on its own terms, without affixing to it a determinate social end other than its own collapse, the subversion of reason forces the question of dwelling to emerge. If rational progress undergoes doubt by way of the ruin, then the prospect of our being-in-place needs to be called into question. In doing so, the ruin takes on a significance which ex-

ceeds its aesthetic merits and impressionistic evocations and becomes a symbol able to redefine the concept of dwelling.

A disclaimer, then: while the representation of ruins and their social significance play an important role in this book, my concern is not so much with ruins in a social context as it is with the idea of the ruin in a philosophical context; the ruin finds its place in this book insofar as it embodies a challenge to the notion of rational progress. The concern is not with what occurs in the ruin, or the social fallout, but how we (by which I mean post-industrial Western culture) relate to an object fallen from its supposed permanency. Readers who feel that a discussion of urban decay ought to consider economical and political considerations *primarily* risk disappointment here.

In writing this book, my overarching aim has been to address the relationship between reason, memory, and dwelling. My rationale has been inspired by philosophy's reluctance to address the connection between a dominant past now absent and the notion of dwelling in the present which is nevertheless determined by its past. Dwelling, not only a relationship between poverty and future prospects, is considered in terms of what it entails for a principle of thought in general, not only the manifestation of that principle. Thus, my analysis of dwelling takes up a theory of consciousness and a theory of being-in-place. This has meant that an analysis of reason, memory, and dwelling has preceded the discussion of ruin and decay. Phenomenological recourse to the ruin is the method of argumentation adopted in this book. The ruin becomes an ally in its ability to demonstrate the absence of reason. This does not entail a utilitarian application of the ruin, nor does it mean that the ruin gains its identity through philosophical analysis. Instead, it means working alongside the ruin in a manner that does not suggest either transforming or redeeming the ruin from its present state. In effect, this method precludes the subsequent theory of ruination from being comprehensive. This is deliberate. The laudable task of uniting the experience of ruins would not be possible here because the ruin is considered from a distinct perspective. With this said, a final note about Walter Benjamin, and how the present project differs from an approach characterized by critical theory.

Benjamin's study of the allegory of ruins, principally in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* but also in *The Arcades Project*, is insightful and influential. According to Benjamin, in the absence of a theology which centralizes mutability, by the act of falling from completion, the ruin beckons the truth of the earth: that human existence is determined by its lack of determinacy and that the allegorical context of the ruin mirrors rather than disproves this fall into indeterminacy. He writes: "The allegorical has its existence in abstractions; as an abstraction, as a faculty of the spirit of language itself, it is at home in the Fall" (Benjamin, 1988, p. 233). At home in the Fall, the finite

narration of human life forms a reciprocal bond with the ruin. For Benjamin, meditation on the ruin does not entail a morbid fatalism but an engagement with the encoded message implicit though hidden in society. In turn, the unraveling of this encryption gives way to aesthetic pleasure: “In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are...Others may shine resplendently as on the first day; this form preserves the image of beauty to the very last” (*Ibid.*, p. 235). The fragmented and incidental become central motifs in Benjamin’s writings on history and progress. This is especially evident in his writings on capitalism and socioeconomics.

In the decaying arcades of pre-war Paris, Benjamin saw the reflected image of surplus commodity. Just as the value of commodity is removed from the labor that brought about that object, a theme central to Marxism, so the ruin appears to suffer from a lack of inherent value. Instead, market relations dictate the value of a commodity; the origin of the object, meanwhile, falls into obscurity. The purely cosmetic meaning that commodities evoke is countered by the ruin in that the place of decay constitutes a fundamental break with that which preceded it, allowing it to conceive a new “origin” which refuses the capitalist logic of novelty and supposed improvement. Under the veil of this logic, the past is effectively erased while progress is equated to the refinement of the already-lived.

A critical dialectic is at work in Benjamin’s account of the ruin. Ruins remain marginalized from the space of production and commerce and so appear surplus. But by dint of their wasted constitution, ruins shatter the myth of rational progress and permanency, in their abundance and in their necessity. Whereas the capitalist logic classifies things in terms of their productive value, thereby rendering entire industries obsolete not long after they began, the logic of the ruin contests this assumption. In dereliction, the ruin attests to the inherently tenuous foundations of the logic of capitalism: what was once built to testify to a singular and eternal present becomes the symbol and proof of its mutability.

Although Benjamin’s analysis of the ruin proves successful in terms of identifying the socioeconomic mechanisms which determine the logic of capitalism, his neglect to confront the question of dwelling is notable. Hence, while the present book is implicitly indebted to Benjamin’s analysis of capitalism, along with his theory of history, which I will examine in due course, I deviate from Benjamin in seeking to phenomenologically situate ruins in the center of dwelling rather than maintain them as objects capable of catalyzing social reform. My focus is not on the social significance of decay and waste, which reduces them to a utilitarian purpose, but rather the ontological value of that decay. Whereas decay and ruin have predominately been employed in

a transformative guise, conferring a supposed legitimacy upon them, in my consideration they require no further justification. In their incompleteness, they are already complete.