

Dirty Ruins and Their Online Afterlives

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In summer 2021, discussing over lunch with a group of mechanical engineers in Bayonne about the many German bunkers on the ocean shore, the last segment of the *Atlantikwall* (with the imposing *Barbara* on the north of Adour estuary), I expressed – hoping to receive some tips – my intention to discover them from the inside as well. The Basque engineers warned me in unison: *Mais non! C'est pas une bonne idée d'entrer! C'est dangereux!* As locals – I thought – they must possess vital information regarding the dangers lurking inside those bunkers. Might they collapse and trap you inside? Are they private property and the daring visitor-intruder might be apprehended by one of the rich owners in Biarritz? Is there any munition left or do venomous snakes live inside? I couldn't figure out what for them was an obvious reason not to enter the Second World War ruins. I was told by a kind Basque accompanied by the wise nodding of his colleagues: *Mais ils sont sales! Il y a de la merde dedans! Les gens utilisent les bunkers comme toilettes.* Indubitably, the safe, silent, and dark bunker has the *affordance* to be used as a toilet.

This was not the first time that I had been confronted with the contemporary danger of German bunkers. At the other end of Europe, during the first years of the Second World War, German bunkers and anti-aircraft posts had been built to protect the petroleum oil fields against the Allies. As a child, I had repeatedly been denied access inside the cunning casemate on the top of a hill on the periphery of my hometown for the same reason the Basques urged me to stay out; the second reason was the fact that I was a girl.

Our imagery of ruins is tragic, nostalgic, melancholic, and clean, although many un-musealized ruins have a similar faith as the bunkers in the Pays Basque. They are dirty, smelly, and dangerous in many ways. They also appear to be – unless musealized – on the verge of losing their meaning, because, as objects (similar to orbital ruins¹) have lost their functionality and historic or aesthetic significance. However, by becoming hosts for animals, plants, and microorganisms, as well as humans – such as the daring ones who descended into German bunkers –, ruins can bear unimaginable meanings.

In this paper, which is divided in three parts, I aim to discuss ruins from the perspective of their materiality and their circulation in media, and to approach the following topics: in the first part, the material reality of ruins, their possible meanings and the act of perception which shape these meanings. I will further investigate how ruins can not only receive meaning(s), but also affect the sense of time and space. In the second part, I will discuss the phenomenon of *ruin porn* and how we relate to matter under the influence of the imagery of porn; and in the third, depictions of ruins in other media such as anime by analyzing the box-office hit *Suzume* (Japanese release: November 2022, European release: April 2023).

¹ Ruins exist not only on earth, but also beyond its atmosphere, in “the super-synchronous or ‘parking’ orbit, where satellites go to die,” if they do not fall back on Earth. In Lisa Parks, “Orbital ruins,” *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies* 2 (2013): 419–420.

Ruins

The subscribed attributes, which constitute the classical ruin imagery, are overwhelmingly visual and less sensuous: we approach ruins similarly to texts that operate as mediums to another realm. Surrounded by sand (Ozymandias) or neat green grass (Whitby Abbey), ruins are contemplated from the outside and tell the story of the past. They offer pieces of information for the viewer to reconstruct the loss and fill the gaps: “absorbed by the historical legends and the visualizations of what the place had once looked like.”²

Literature theorist Wolfgang Iser considers the gaps or blanks (*Leerstellen*) in texts places of activation of the reader’s imagination, which also ask her to exercise autonomy. Through the gaps, the reader crafts the consistency of the text herself. Ruins are fragments of architecture and an ensemble which lacks consistency. The ruin viewer de-automatizes (*Entautomatisierung*) her expectations and, similar to Iser’s reader, in order to grasp (*aufnehmen*) the text, she will reformulate it for herself. Gaps require a higher engagement from the viewer/reader, allowing the “imaginative power” to completely unfold.³ Therefore, the encounter with ruins or texts becomes effervescent, stimulating the viewer to generate representations which will – again through gaps – collide and generate secondary grade representations (*Vorstellungen zweiten Grades*). This arduous process asks the viewer/reader to detach herself from her habitual dispositions, elaborate meanings, and – through gaps – dive into the text (or ruin).⁴

On the same line of thought, when writing about ruins and ruin porn, André Jansson states that “the ruin can be seen as one of the most powerful sites of imagination,” where “after people have left, only memories and a peculiar kind of materiality remain; a materiality marked by escalating *porosity*.”⁵ He picks up the concept of *porosity* from Walter Benjamin’s writings on Naples and correlates it with the “imaginative force” of the ruins. He goes on: “Ruins can hardly be grasped in any purely intellectual sense. They urge us to speculate and fill in the blanks. They urge us to fantasize and dream, and to improvise, just like children do in their play.”⁶ Jansson distinguishes between three types of ruins:⁷ *named ruins*, such as Knossos – which I have called *musealized ruins* – with “fixed or controlled porosity,” *transitory ruins* such as demolitions with the scope of urban regeneration, and *open-ended ruins* – “human-made structures that have been abandoned and with futures unknown.” The latter two correspond to the category I called *un-musealized ruins*. Porosity, just like Iser’s gaps, “implicates that there is an invitation to construct one’s own meaning of the place”⁸ or “explore, fantasize, and lose ourselves in alternative pasts and alternative futures.”⁹

Ruins, more than architecture, are meeting the viewer halfway and require her active participation. Thus, ruins can generate meaning through the gaps: be it the meaning supported by institutions and the discourses involving historical heritage, or a self-knitted meaning any viewer would craft for themselves. The missing part from the ruin offers the space to engage with it.

2 André Jansson, “‘This Is Not Ruin Tourism’: Social Media and the Quest for Authenticity in Urban Exploration,” in *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay*, ed. Syobhan Lyons (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 218.

3 Ibid., 288.

4 Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* [The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response] (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1984), 290-293.

5 Jansson, “‘This Is Not Ruin Tourism,’” 219.

6 Ibid., 220.

7 Ibid., 220-221.

8 Ibid., 226.

9 Ibid., 221.

Another way of finding meaning in ruins is by exploring their *affordances*, a term coined – and a word invented¹⁰ – by the American psychologist James J. Gibson. “The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either good or ill” and imply “the complementarity of the animal and the environment.”¹¹ According to Gibson’s ecological approach of visual perception, “the ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ of things in the environment can be directly perceived.”¹² Somehow similar to Lser’s theory, the affordance results from the conjoined contribution of the viewer and the object. It “cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer.”¹³

The various German bunkers afford the privacy of a hiding place where the position of one’s body “is concealed at the points of observation of other observers.”¹⁴ The enclosure of these ruins inspired some of the visitors to use them as toilets. Other ruins, though perceived as inhabitable for humans, afford animals, plants, and microorganisms to use them as an ecological *niche*.¹⁵ Further ruins, strapped – not like Shelly’s Ozymandias, but like Oscar Wilde’s Happy Prince – constitute a source of building material. Spolia are a proof of this affordance of ruins since ancient times. Furthermore, the first thirty-one barracks built in Auschwitz from October 1941, used bricks from demolished houses of the expelled Polish inhabitants of the surrounding villages.¹⁶ The material of the barracks didn’t finish its journey: during the musealization of the concentration camp, conservators dealt with a substantial problem: between 1945-1946, material from the barracks had been used by villagers to rebuild their homes destroyed by the German occupiers.¹⁷

An additional example of the possible affordances is offered by the ruin of the Geartoglu church in Târgoviște, the old capital of Wallachia. Both a hiding place (not of humans, but of treasures)¹⁸ and a cold medium,¹⁹ the church was the ideal place for the inhabitants of the surrounding old neighborhood to store jars of pickled vegetables.²⁰

By being perceived visually, ruins engage the imagination of the viewer either through its gaps or pores and convey through their “composition and layout of surfaces [...] what they afford.”²¹

The absence of matter is doubled by the absence of humans, because ruins are born “when maintenance and caring activities are lacking, that is, when infrastructures are left to themselves.”²²

10 “I have made it up.” James J. Gibson, *The Theory of Affordances. The Ecological Approach to visual perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 127.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 129.

14 Ibid., 136. For more detail, see subchapter *Places and hiding places*.

15 For further reading regarding the affordance of niches, see also Gibson, *Affordances*, 128-129.

16 Anna Łopuska, “Conservation and preservation of barracks in the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau” (Workshop held at the Auschwitz Conservation Center, as part of the 3rd International Student Conference of Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art, Cracow, Poland, March 17-20, 2016). Information also available in the published conservation report of the museum: Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, *To Preserve Authenticity. The Conservation of Five Wooden Barracks at the Former Auschwitz 11-Birkenau Concentration Camp* (Auschwitz-Birkenau w Oświęcimiu: Państwowe Muzeum, 2012), 23.

17 Ibid., 25.

18 Gibson distinguishes between the operation of hiding oneself and hiding an object or a treasure. In Gibson, *Affordances*, 136.

19 For the affordance of mediums see Ibid., 130-131.

20 For this information I am indebted to the custodian of the church, Mr. Adrian Baicu, who shared information about the history and the soon-to-begin restoration project of Geartoglu, as well as for his family histories related to the now demolished surrounding neighborhood.

21 Gibson, *Affordances*, 127.

22 Gabriele Schabacher, “Abandoned Infrastructures. Technical Networks beyond Nature and Culture,” in *ZMK Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung. Mediocene*, 1, 9 (2018): 136.

Ruins are attractive for being empty. The absence of humans is echoed by the absence of the matter and “things” which they had built, used, and presumably cared for. As a witness of the past lives and a memento with didactic, historic, and aesthetic purpose for the contemporary and future viewers, the surviving material evokes the spooky presence of the absent humans, precious artifacts, or mundane objects. The open-air museum of Oradour-sur-Glane is exemplary for the commemorative quality of decay or vanishment.

However, though abandoned by humans, ruins are not empty, but full; in some cases, full *de la merde*. They are also full of life: algae, bacteria, fungi, plants, animals, and sometimes humans live in the apparently empty ruins. Though seemingly quiet, a ruin is an active place, where, similar to a laboratory, many chemical and physical processes take place. Without conservation measurements, matter unfolds and many of the reader/viewer-engaging gaps are generated by its metamorphosis.

The above-mentioned, starkly visualized approaches towards the imagination-exalting ruins stand under the sign of anthropocentrism; it is the human who finds meaning in the ruins by mainly looking at it. Matter, though complementary according to the theory of affordances, “offers,” “provides,” or “furnishes” in a passive way. Gaps are the opportunities for more profound engagement between text and reader, yet, though they activate, it is the reader who acts. This view is not shared by post-humanists, who reject the *human-nonhuman* (or *less-than-human*) hierarchy. As places where matter unfolds, where the shape of architecture dampens its expression, and where materiality comes into the foreground, ruins cannot be meaningless and do not need human contemplation in order to become meaningful.

For physicist and feminist philosopher Karen Barad,

“Matter is not mere stuff. It is not an inanimate givenness. Matter is not in need of some supplement to put it in motion, to enliven it, to give it agency. It is not inaction incarnate—the remainder of remainder of a body once inhabited by a spirit, or substance not even worthy of inhabitation. It is not some unresponsive indifferent stone-cold dispassionate inertness that makes even death look lively, that which isn’t even worthy of the grip of death, of pain, pleasure, joy, suffering. It is not an inert canvas for the inscription of culture and meanings, a static thing without memory, history, or an inheritance to call its own. It is not simply some thereness available for the taking. A mere backdrop to what really matters.

Matter is substance in its iterative intra-active becoming—not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency. It is morphologically active, responsive, generative, articulate, and alive. Mattering is the ongoing differentiating of the world. Matter plays an agentive role in its ongoing materialization.

Physical matters, matters of fact, matters of concern, matters of care, matters of justice, are not separable.”²³

Barad backs up her poetical argument with interpretations of quantum field theory and Niels Bohr’s interpretations of quantum mechanics. She sees matter “inextricably fused together”²⁴ with meaning. However, the act of perceiving is not a one-way action with a preexistent separation between knower and known, but an *intra-action* of things and means of measurement within a phenomenon. Roughly put, the outcome of what a ruin is, is entangled with the observer.

From her elaborated agential realist account, I will select two relevant ideas which can be seen as post-humanist homologies of the previously discussed theories. The first one concerns gaps: as a consequence of ontological indeterminacy and vacuum fluctuations, the void is not empty as in Newtonian physics (without being occupied by something), but a “spectral realm” with

23 Karen Barad, “Ma(r)king Time: Material Entanglements and Re-memberings: Cutting Together-Apart,” in *How Matter Matters: Objects, Artifacts, and Materiality in Organization Studies*, ed. Paul R. Carlile et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 17.

24 Ibid., 23.

“an infinite number of possibilities” where, at the same time, “not everything is possible.”²⁵ This conception has affinity to Iser’s Reading Theory which fructifies the empty blanks of a text and resonates with Janssen’s imaginative potential of the porous ruins.

The second concerns hospitality as a matter of identity, which Barad discusses in her paper “After the End of the World.”²⁶ Drawing from Quantum Field Theory and Jaques Derrida, she rhetorically asks “Is not matter a matter of hospitality, in its very constitution in its very un/doing of ‘it/self’?”²⁷ and develops the idea of “radical hospitality,” which characterizes nature and is, in a way, a capacity of welcoming endless, unknown “others.” Ruins offer a home and a refuge for living creatures, but also for graffiti or pickles (Fig. 2).

As an intermediary conclusion, it is clear that no matter the approach, meaning can be attributed to ruins – be it generated through the human gaze or as an intrinsic trait of materiality itself. However, I hold as more important than the meaning *per se*, the way in which meaning stems, a difference which has both epistemic and ontological implications. For the humanist theorists, the agency is in the hands of humans who search for or ignore the possible preexisting meanings of ruins. Thinking with post-humanists such as Barad, for whom agency is a relationship and is not owned by one side, ruins – pieces of (sometimes formless) matter – are a good place to start grasping the ontological indeterminacy which characterizes matter, to take distance from the Newtonian object-observer distinction, and take into consideration the entire apparatus which constitutes a phenomenon, including the act of measurement as well as the observer.

Ruins seem to impact the meaning of concepts such as temporality and space. From the perspective of the Anthropocene, human and non-human distinction washes out when the outcome of human actions is as impactful as natural processes. If decay is seen as a tedious and long-lasting process, then ruins are one of the consequences of the long-lasting and deep-reaching human actions, which impact temporality. In her paper about abandoned infrastructures, Gabriele Schabacher argues that “infrastructures exhibit stability and durability only on the level of human and historical times; on geological or ‘long historical’ scales, however, infrastructures and nature present themselves as gradually less distinguishable from each other, up to the point of their identification where ‘nature’ is (the ultimate) ‘infrastructure’.”²⁸ She considers *stability* not an inherent quality of buildings, but the result of acts of care and long-term maintenance. Ruins therefore become “infrastructures [...] left to themselves”²⁹ which “resist being gotten rid of.”³⁰ Stability (of architecture) is a western myth, which, according to Schabacher, ignores the reality of the Global South where “the ‘broken’ status of technical systems presents a ubiquitous experience in everyday life.”³¹ She points out that a building “actually never stays the same over time” or, quoting Yaneva and Latour’s *Give me a gun and I will make all buildings move*, “it is a flow of transformations.”³² Therefore, the lack of care and obduracy of the matter are key ingredients in creating a ruin.³³ In “their hybrid, precarious state,”³⁴ the zombie-like³⁵ ruins impact the meaning of temporality and nature. By playing in different registers of temporality and being both present and absent, they become meaningful in the understanding of “the temporalities inherent to the

25 Karen Barad, “Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-membling, and Facing the Incalculable,” in *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 92 (2018): 76–79.

26 Karen Barad, “After the End of the World: Entangled Nuclear Colonialisms, Matters of Force, and the Material Force of Justice,” *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics* 58 (3/2020): 85–113.

27 Ibid., 107.

28 Schabacher, “Abandoned Infrastructures,” 144.

29 Ibid., 136.

30 Ibid., 144.

31 Ibid., 133–135.

32 Ibid., 134–135.

33 A phenomenon which she illustrates with the example of *Atlantikwall* German bunkers evoked by Paul Virillio (Ibid., 137–138).

34 Ibid., 128.

35 Ibid.

notions of the anthropocene and the mediocene.”³⁶ They simultaneously dispute distinctions “between nature and culture, life and death, humans and non-humans”³⁷: “Deprived of their function for society, these structures no longer belong to the realm of culture in the way they did before. But neither do they belong to the realm of nature in the way a plant, for example, does.”³⁸

Ruins queer space too. If culture is – “contrary to Adorno’s anthropocentric assumption” – a “humanoid-technoid hybrid,”³⁹ then the distribution of the power of agency between humans, things, and chains of operations is balanced and does not “privilege” the human (anymore).⁴⁰ According to Bernhard Siegert, one of the technical objects, which already “decentered” the “human actor”⁴¹ is the door. Doors operate the fundamental cultural distinction⁴² between the inside and outside. Ruins, however, take the inside-outside dichotomy off its hinges, because many have no doors, and therefore no cultural technique to operate this “primordial difference of architecture,” which lies, according to psychoanalysis, “at the basis of the constitution of reality.”⁴³ Possibly, the uncanniest feeling “inside” of a ruin is the fact that you can’t tell if you are inside or still outside. Here, with “the symbolic order [...] repudiated (as in the case of psychosis), reality takes on hallucinatory features.”⁴⁴

Nonetheless, many ruins still have doors or are locked in some way. These locks are an addition to the ruin and a mark of the fact that somebody reclaims ownership over it. Such places are isolated in the urban tissue and – if sprawled by vegetation – will function as a Burnettian secret garden. However, locking is not only an operation of guarding and caring for the object. It can seal a tragic fate of the abandoned building. Older constructions, which are classified as historical monuments and consequently under restriction of demolition, are evicted and left to crumble because an empty lot would become more profitable on the real estate market. When locks and chains do not suffice in keeping intruders out, those in power appeal to the dramatical act of brick-laying the entrances. Such was the case of Matrozou 45, an Athenian abandoned building used as a squat in the quiet and quasi-gentrified neighborhood of Koukaki. After a controversial first raid in January 2019,⁴⁵ the police, assisted by helicopters, evicted the squatters on 11th January 2020. Next morning, the entrance and the windows had been closed with concrete-bricks by policemen (Fig. 1).

According to Siegert, doors have a nomological function:⁴⁶ “To step through a door, in turn, is to submit to the law of a symbolic order, a law – be it the law of the polis or the paternal *oikos* – that is established by means of the distinction between inside and outside.”⁴⁷ If the open, doorless-ruin gives an eerie feeling (there are signs – such as the standing walls – telling there should be an inside different from the outside, but there is no symbol to operate the demarcation) then ruins that have doors are marked as forbidden (either as an act of protection against vandals or as a demonstration of force of the state institutions). Whatever the reason for enclosing and locking a ruin might be, the act of visiting a ruin changes: opening a door, cutting the chain, or breaking the lock will imply the submission to a law.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 144.

38 Ibid., 128.

39 Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real* (New York: Fordham University Press), 2015, 192-193.

40 Ibid., 193.

41 Ibid.

42 According to Siegert, “every culture starts with the introduction of distinctions,” in Ibid.; also: Ibid., 14-15.

43 Ibid., 203.

44 As Siegert observes by Freud and Lacan; Ibid., 203.

45 Police resorted to violence and inflicted injuries to inhabitants of the neighboring buildings, the film director Dimitris Indares and his family.

46 “[...] the law is constituted in the first place by an opening that grants access to the law. A door is a place where the difference that constitutes the law has to negate itself in order to become effective.” Siegert, *Cultural Techniques*, 194.

47 Ibid.



Fig. 1. Matrozou 45, Athina 117 41, Greece; 12 January 2020. Policemen guarding the freshly blocked entrances in the Athenian squat after eviction

Fig. 2. Ruin of Valea Lungă church, South Romania; 10 December 2010



Ruins are not empty but crowded, lively places, always transforming. An un-musealized ruin is a place of permanent change, where matter will always unfold. They are dangerous; one can be crushed by dislocated stones and bricks from the crumbling margins of the walls. They are an ambiguous territory with a fuzzy demarcation between inside and outside, and also nexuses of temporalities. Ruins engage all the senses. In a ruin, you need to watch out for your ankle by feeling and listening to the sounds of the unsteady rubble you are stepping on. While walking like that and gazing at the walls, you might miss the almost invisible spiderweb, which will stick on your face (and reappear on the same spot on your way back). Places where soil built over the rubble smell like mold and grass. Blackberry branches become natural traps, tying your leg like a lasso and piercing it like in a Grünewaldian crucifixion. Back “outside” itching thistles still hang on your clothes. (Fig. 2)

Ruin porn

Ruin porn – similar to food, landscape, flower, architecture, and earth-porn – is an already established photography genre, of which almost every active internet user is aware. Ruin porn was born in Detroit and the term is considered to have been coined after the 2008 economic crisis by Thomas Morton in his *Vice*-article *Something, Something, Something, Detroit: Lazy journalists love pictures of abandoned stuff*.⁴⁸ It is associated with deindustrialization and shrinking cities by capturing the now abandoned construction of the golden age of Fordism. Detroit's ruin porn was saluted for "lending a visual voice" to silently dying buildings, but also criticized for exposing decay and deepening the injustice towards people already impacted by the architectural and urban downfall.

As part of the internet folklore, ruin porn lacks a clear definition. However, it is easy to identify a ruin-porn-photography. In order to reduce the ambiguity of the term, I will define a perimeter for ruin porn by firstly distinguishing it from other photographic genres depicting ruins.

To start with, I do not consider ruin photography as synonymous with ruin porn. Not all photos or ruins and decay – which might arouse the viewer⁴⁹ – are ruin porn. Ruin photography can be seen as an umbrella term for illustrations of ruins obtained with a photographic camera. However, the yielding of the camera and the post-processing of the obtained image play a key-role in the outcome of those photographs and decides which sub-genre the photograph of the ruin will belong to. I support Pétursdóttir and Olsen⁵⁰ in their view that photography doesn't deserve the mistrust in sciences such as archaeology and is considered – unlike text – subjective. I would, however, call to distinguish between subgenres.

I argue that there are at least two other distinguishable ruin genres besides ruin porn which I (metaphorically) called *the restorer's (or archeologist's) hard drive* and *artist photographs of ruins*. A restorer's hard drive(s) is full of high-resolution ruin photographs, which are the naked, scientific, objective, boring documentation of ruins they will soon (or never) conserve. Most photographs are frontal and in case the aura of the ruined space would arouse any feelings of nostalgia, the omnipresent ruler and color scale⁵¹ will quickly disrupt the "magic" revelation of the past. To the latter genre belong photographs taken by artists, which reflect an individual vision and often explore the unexpected possibilities of the medium.

According to Siobhan Lyons' genealogy, ruin porn could be the successor of the "seventeenth century sublime,"⁵² which was "always acquainted with the threat of death."⁵³ The intention of ruin porn authors is indeed to depict the dyeing of buildings, the decay of architecture. They do so by visiting usually inaccessible places but also by adhering to a rather strict aesthetic which turns ruin porn into a manneristic genre. Unlike the restorer's hard drive, it has aesthetic pretensions, but they are – unlike the artistic ruin photography – limited and prescribed. Furthermore, just like porn nowadays,⁵⁴ ruin porn is intrinsically connected to internet and hardware development, which allow to take, edit, and disseminate images easily.

48 Vice, 16(8): <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ppzb9z/something-something-something-detroit-994-v16n8>.

49 A ubiquitous theme in the literature about ruin porn, which is not reduced to the arousal of desire but also of anger. In Susan Crane, "Take Nothing but Photos, Leave Nothing but Footprints: How-to Guides for Ruin Photography," in ed. Siobhan Lyons, *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 86.

50 See Póra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen, "Imaging Decay: The Aesthetics of Ruin Photography," *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 1 (2014): 7–56.

51 Or at least a coin, if the conservator spontaneously encounters a ruin during her off-hours.

52 Siobhan Lyons, "Introduction," in *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay*, ed. Siobhan Lyons (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1.

53 Idem, 1-2.

54 Srinivassan, after giving an overview on the main feminist debates on porn, concludes by touching the issue of media through which porn is distributed: internet which "has settled the [feminist] porn question"

Ruin porn is mostly produced by urban explorers, who offer virtual visitors the possibility to access those places comfortably through their devices at any time. The process of producing ruin porn is relevant for its aims and means of expression. The most information about ruin porn production and guides either published or released on the internet boil down to an expressively written paragraph by Susan A. Crane, which I will quote in full below. In her paper “*Take Nothing but Photos, Leave Nothing but Footprints*”: *How-to Guides for Ruin Photography*, she speaks of impulses towards “routinising desired types of ruin photography and ruins encounters.”⁵⁵ Crane’s condensed *how-to* with “a taste of the genre’s flavour”⁵⁶ reads:

“Take your camera to an abandoned site of human industry, preferably a building which is fenced off or locked up and in front of which is a sign that warns ‘no trespassing.’ Do not trespass. Once you have gained access, find a chair, preferably one formerly used for the type of medical examination that most people would rather avoid. Barring that, any decrepit chair will do. But don’t move the chair; that would violate a cardinal rule: do not disturb the site. Look for a chair in an otherwise empty place. Place the chair in a shaft of light, or on a floor covered with litter or weeds. Once the chair is where you want it, let the chair be silently eloquent: an empty seat in an abandoned site ironically reveals the absence of humans on the location of human abandonment of responsibility. Take the photograph – and nothing but the photograph; no other souvenirs should be brought home with you.

At home, on your computer, you can adjust the light, manipulate the colour, and create the perfectly eerie image which ideally recaptures, without misrepresenting, the uncanny feel of the place. Your point is to replicate the feeling you had while you were there, the sense of unique and special access to the ruins of modern civilization.”⁵⁷

The empty chair is the materialization of the human absence. Thus, ruin porn seems to be another *ruinenlust*-ful anthropocentric take on ruins. “These images make us reflect on the human condition,”⁵⁸ “they threaten the illusion of humans invincibility [...] and the reign of capitalism.”⁵⁹ The arguments of both its defendants and critics focus on humans: though it attempts to expose social problems, it does not do anything in this sense.⁶⁰ Furthermore, devastation is meaningful in as much as it is “striking to humans.”⁶¹ In the case of ruins too, matter is the background for unfolding humanity.

Urban explorers are in a way paying special attention to matter. Similar to other adventurers, such as climbers, they must follow a deontology: their expedition should not be invasive and they should leave minimal traces behind. However, the access is gained through a locked door which holds a nomologic function and forbids trespassing. Siegert sees operating through the “ominous door in the story of Bluebeard” the logic of prohibition, which activates desire.⁶² How much of the “feel of the place” reproduced at home emanates from the space as a ruin and how much from the space as the forbidden chamber or from the adrenaline released through trespassing?

In ruin porn, the aura of the photographed place should be authentic. Hence, the adjustments made “at home” are supposed to calibrate the realism of the photography. Two of the recurrent

for us” in Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 35.

55 Crane, “Take Nothing but Photos,” 89.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.: Chapter: *How Not to Ruin your Ruin Shot: Urban Explorer Photography Guidebooks*.

58 Melanie Joy McNaughton, “Reimagining What Images Can Achieve,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 28 (2013): 142.

59 Lyons, “Introduction,” 3.

60 Kate Wells, “Detroit Was Always Made of Wheels: Confronting Ruin Porn in Its Hometown,” in *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay*, ed. Siobhan Lyons (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 14.

61 Crane, “Take Nothing but Photos,” 83. Quoting Mayor: “Traces of devastation,” he wrote, “have always been striking to humans.”

62 Bernhard Siegert, “Türen. Zur Materialität des Symbolischen,” in *ZMK Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung. Kulturtechnik*, 1 (2010): 157.

technical topoi of the ruin porn are: wide angle lenses and stark contrasts, the aesthetic being based on hard-core visual stimulation. Ruin porn is also very explicit. The wide-angle perspective catches a pseudo-inventory of the space; by engulfing a bigger perimeter, these pictures display a greater amount of information about the various broken and dusty objects, otherwise intermingled and undiscernible. The wide-angle lenses embrace a bigger area, and, almost as if a camera hovers over the place, it creates a narration. Moreover, by adjusting contrast and shadows, ruin porn conveys the dramatism of the desolated interiors. Through the impactful chromatic which enhances effects from the specter of dramatism, space can be also perceived as irreal, though the intention is to convey the genuine feeling of the place.

It seems that many aesthetic decisions have a technical justification in porn as well. Anna Arrowsmith, a porn director, explains in *My Pornographic Development* that exaggerated moans are a technical solution, because the porn director “only has sight and sound” and has to compensate for the other three missing senses.⁶³ The repetitive soundtrack is easier to edit and makes it facile to sell the rights for the tape on an international market.⁶⁴ Moreover, bodily positions are dictated by camera access, because, while in real sex “the viewer finds it difficult to see where one body ends and the other begins,” pornography – with some choreographic adjustments – “present[s] the body in its best light.”⁶⁵

Ruin porn can also be better understood by taking a look at its older sibling: food porn. The term was coined in 1976 by Michael Jacobson, who divided food into “Right Stuff” and “Food Porn.” The latter is supposed to be “a food that was so sensationally out of bounds of what a food should be that it deserved to be considered pornographic.”⁶⁶ By intensifying chromatics and space, ruin porn displays ruins *out of bounds*.

As a contrasting example for ruin porn aesthetics, I will introduce the works of two contemporary artists: Nicholas Sinclair and Jill Quigley.⁶⁷

The first, Nicholas Sinclair’s photograph of an abandoned building in Berlin’s neighborhood Prenzlauer Berg in 2005 (Fig. 3) is “a finely wrought example of how the camera might be used to negotiate the textures of history.”⁶⁸ Near a window, a wilted plant touches the wall; it invaded the abandoned space and lived undisturbed until it dried up. The photograph shows cracking walls, flaking paint, and broken window frames, which are subjects of ruin porn as well. Yet, both the approach and the outcome are different. Writing about the “eloquent Berlin photographs”⁶⁹ from the monograph *Berlin: Imagining the Tri Chord*, David Chandler observes that “the range of Sinclair’s camera rarely extends beyond the reach of his own hand. He dwells mainly on the tactile evidence of walls and surfaces.”⁷⁰ Without capturing the ensemble and the extent of the abandonment, the viewer is taken on a “journey from the realm of the sight alone [...] to one of sensory overload: into the heart of Henri Bergson’s notion of simultaneity, with sound and smell rushing into play.”⁷¹

Sinclair’s photographs of *Berlin* are far – if not the opposite – from the panoramic view offered in ruin porn. By not extending beyond the “reach of his own hand,” they exclude most of the building. However, in the ruptured, disorganized space of a ruin, the act of seeing is fragmentary itself. The gaze doesn’t naturally embrace the entire view but shifts between

63 Anna Arrowsmith, “My Pornographic Development,” in *Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography*, ed. Hans Maes (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013), 295.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., 295-295.

66 anne e. mcbride, “Food Porn,” in *Gastronomica* 10 (2010): 38.

67 Many thanks to Nicholas Sinclair for making me aware of the *Abandon* exhibition in Bristol.

68 David Chandler, “Mapping Time,” in *Berlin: Imagining the Tri Chord*, Nicholas Sinclair (London: Royal Academy Publications, 2007).

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.



Fig. 3. Photograph by Nicholas Sinclair in Berlin: Imagining the Tri Chord

attention-catching points, in an act which can be verbalized as: “Look at this! Look at that!”. Only in a later phase, the view of the visitor enlarges to perceive the space unitarily. As a consequence, these photographs convey a true experience of visiting a ruin.

In her book *Cottages of Quigley's Point*⁷² and exhibition *Abandoned*,⁷³ Irish contemporary artist Jill Quigley has a distinct approach to ruin photography. She pictures interiors of abandoned cottages in Donegal. However, not only does she record, but also intervenes in these spaces (ignoring the tabu of urban exploration). The many photographed stoves or other furniture pieces have received bright paint strokes, colorful strings, or confetti. Her interiors have an atmosphere of festivity. As explained in the exhibition description, Quigley purposefully emphasizes her presence in the abandoned houses and shifts the attention to the present. By juxtaposing the colorful materials, the now-bygone-life of the cottage interiors fades into the background.

Notable is that Quigley uses the same main instrument for her photographic works as the ruin porn authors, namely the contrast. The vivid pink, blue, green, orange hues oppose the gray

72 Jill Quigley, *Cottages of Quigley's Point*, Photolreland, 2016.

73 At the Martin Parr Foundation, Bristol, UK, 28 September, 2023–22 December, 2023. Together with Adrian Tyler.

and molded rooms. Nonetheless, she operates with contrast differently, not only visually (bright color versus gray palette), but also rhetorically. Contrast gives the palpable measure of the decay and enhances the tragedy of the houses. Yet, contrast is also a means of generating humor. The viewer is confronted with the dilemma if the photographs are either sad or jolly. In Quigley's photographs, ambiguity is enforced as an artistic tool which will lure the viewer – who wobbles between sadness and an involuntary smile – to engage with the images.

If ruin porn is a subgenre of ruin photography, is it also a subgenre of *porn*? Porn triggers what Mumford calls the “immediate and irresistible urge for the same.”⁷⁴ However, ruin porn unlike food porn doesn't do the same.

Firstly, ruin porn inherits aesthetic strategies from porn, which, as a less realistic representation, “find(s) a way to overcome its own Brechtian devices, its own ways of distancing its viewers.”⁷⁵ It can use narrative as “one way to naturalize the sex acts”⁷⁶ and has something which appears as “genuine” and “cuts across the anti-realism of the genre.”⁷⁷

The assumption that, by being porn, ruin porn must be arousing emotions like either pleasure, anger, or nostalgia, relies on the (mis)conception that porn works as a means of “erotic arousal,”⁷⁸ “egocentric pleasure,”⁷⁹ or “for the purpose of sexual excitement.”⁸⁰ However, not all scholars agree that this is the functionality of porn. “Porn is not pedagogy, yet it often functions as if it were.”⁸¹ In her essay, *Talking to My Students About Porn*, Amia Srinivasan notices that young boys don't use porn to get off, but to inform themselves about sex.⁸² “[...] porn does not inform, or persuade, or debate. Porn trains. It etches deep grooves in the psyche, forming powerful associations between arousal and selected stimuli, bypassing the part of us which pauses, considers, thinks.”⁸³ As an argument, she quotes porn stars, as for example Stoya, who is kept awake at night by the unwanted responsibility of teaching about sex in a world with insufficient sex education and unlimited access to porn via the internet.⁸⁴ Furthermore, porn turns a “five-senses-experience” (see Arrowsmith) into one mediated by screen. Srinivasan observes that many young people had their first sexual experience in front of the screen or with somebody else who did. Writing about her students after the feminist seminars on porn, she assesses that their psyches “are products of pornography. In them, the warnings of the anti-porn feminists seem to have been belatedly realized: sex for my students is what porn says it is.”⁸⁵ Porn seems to be a “built-in feature of [our] existence”⁸⁶ which does “things in the world.”⁸⁷

Graduating from high school a couple of years after Srinivasan, I recall the same fashion (which can also be seen on the cover of Sinclair's *Berlin: Imagining the Tri Chord*) and same complaints

74 Stephen Mumford, “A Pornographic Way of Seeing,” in *Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography*, ed. Hans Maes (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013), 63.

75 Sheldon Waldrep, *The Space of Sex* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), chap. 3, Kindle.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 Crane, “Take Nothing but Photos,” 86: “Whether the viewer's response is to be erotically aroused, or to have anger aroused, may depend on the positionality of their viewing, rather than on the photographer's intentions.”

79 McNaughton, “Reimagining,” 141.

80 It is important to note that Mumford considers as generating pornography only the way of *seeing* and not necessarily the porn material. The full quote: “To view something pornographically is to see it sexually for the purpose of sexual excitement.” In Mumford, “A Pornographic Way of Seeing,” 62.

81 Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 44.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., 64.

84 Ibid., 47.

85 Ibid., 41.

86 Ibid., 50.

87 Ibid., 41.

regarding the “thong” and victimized male-colleagues,⁸⁸ who were thereby hindered to focus on the quadratic equation or other *hard* sciences (nobody complained they won’t be able to focus during literature classes). Some years and thousands of kilometers apart, lives of adolescents were deluged by porn riding the wave of the internet.

In school, the overwhelming majority of students (and teaching staff, I suppose) was somehow familiar with porn. However, you don’t have to watch porn in order to know what it was about or what you could see in it. How come? My take is that, porn aesthetics had already been, by that time, common knowledge and that the imagery had already been established and was circulating. An average teenager, who neither sought nor avoided the topic of “porn,” could involuntarily build an idea about it prior to watching it. Pieces of this imagery might have gathered with time in someone’s mind enough to reconstitute the porn film(s) in their head (which should not be a difficult process taken the technical topoi Arrowsmith wrote about).

If it is true that the porn imagery had already been established and became common knowledge, then I can not only sustain Srinivasan’s observations regarding the influence of porn on our reality, but draw a particular conclusion: the porn imagery birthed an aesthetic that cannot be contained within the realm of porn anymore and imbued other compartments of our everyday aesthetic. Regardless of how unwise drawing a conclusion based on a pseudo-anthropological, autobiographical observation is, I would argue that porn establishes a universal visual language which expands beyond women and sex.

Thus, I argue that in ruin porn matter is objectified. From an anthropocentric, humanist perspective, my assertion sounds pleonastic. However, my claim becomes meaningful from a post-humanist perspective, like the one of Barad, a physicist with an intimate knowledge of matter. She opens up further possibilities of thinking about matter, another *ontological other* besides women and children.⁸⁹

Objectification (of humans) is, according to Mari Mikkola, either “reductive” or “non-reductive.”⁹⁰ In the first is a “category mistake” through which people are made into things; in the second “persons are treated as if they are less than fully human.”⁹¹ Objectification implies a lack of responsibility⁹² and is characterized in the view of feminist authors by – to choose just a few traits – lack of agency and autonomy, inertness, fungibility.⁹³

Depending on what the concept of *object* is, matter is or is not objectified. As a convention I use *object* as a word of the anthropocentric vocabulary and maintain its meaning in this paper. For thinkers like Barad and Siegart, *things* have agency and *response-ability*. Thus, despite the declared fascination for ruins, ruin porn – through its aesthetic sensibility – does not see matter as possessing agency or being able to speak for itself inside the photographic frame. Furthermore, objectification involves “not merely seeing but also doing something”⁹⁴ – which is *making* a photo. However, considering matter as not being less-than-human should not be mistaken with *personification*.⁹⁵

88 Ibid., 48–49.

89 Vultee, who refers to Shelly’s Ozymandias too, remarks a similar affinity: “The victim – city, child, or building – cannot help itself or speak for itself, so it must be spoken for,” Fred Vultee, “Ruin Porn and Virtue Porn. Licensing How We Talk About Perceptions of Urban Decay,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Poverty*, ed. Sandra L. Borden (New York: Routledge, 2021), 137. *Speaking for oneself* is a theme for feminists and for porn. The ruin porn photographers claim to “humbly offer a visual voice to the beautiful, mute, attempting art” in Crane, “Take Nothing but Photos,” 100.

90 Mari Mikkola, “Why Dehumanization is Distinct from Objectification,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization*, ed. Maria Kronfeldner (London: Routledge, 2021), 326.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid., 327.

93 Ibid., 327–328.

94 Ibid., 328.

95 For personification of objects, see Lina Papadaki, “Treating Pornography as a Woman and Women’s Objectification,” in *Beyond Speech: Pornography and Analytic Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Mari Mikkola (New

Ruin porn gauges how humans relate to matter. It is supposed to allow the viewers to enjoy ruins, but what they interact with is an image displayed on a screen. Moreover, it trains how to view and sense matter; inheriting the qualities of porn, it produces *maker's knowledge*.⁹⁶ Both ruins and ruin porn seem to stimulate imagination or fantasy, but aren't they just a step away from violence?⁹⁷ Also, the aesthetic of ruin porn reiterates a visual grammar – already coded by porn – of exacerbated sensations, claiming to be *in situ* reality and not a subjective tableau. There is no (visual) code to decipher in ruin porn and also no pickle jars.

As a conclusion, the aesthetic effect of ruin porn recalls Roland Barthes' critique in his essay *Photo-chocs*.⁹⁸ Differently than the restorer's hard drive, which has a forensic character, or the artistic photographs, which "oblige the spectator to ask violent questions, push him on a path of a judgment, which he develops by himself unimpeded by the demiurgic presence of the photographer,"⁹⁹ ruin porn is charged by the author with "over-indications,"¹⁰⁰ comes from a "will for language, which hinders," and it has a weak impression on us, as "our interest does not surpass the time of an instantaneous reading."¹⁰¹ Barthes criticizes the failure of the exhibited photographs depicting atrocities to move the viewer. Similar to ruin porn, the discussed photographs in the Orsay gallery show the photographer's "big technical ability,"¹⁰² but considers that "it is not enough for the photographer to *signify* us something horrible, in order for us to perceive it like that."¹⁰³

Not only that the ruin porn authors portray matter in an objectifying manner, but they also "dispossess the viewer of their own judgment."¹⁰⁴ They do not "leave us anything besides the right to consent intellectually and we are bound only through a technical interest to those images."¹⁰⁵

Ruin Porn Aesthetic in Other Media: The Example of Suzume (2023)

Animation has been creating ruins: both real and fantastic. Director Hayao Miyazaki's *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986) features the homonymous flying ruin of an abandoned technologized-magical castle. Laputa – hidden in the clouds and hunted by humans – is actually the symbiosis between the ruin, a weapon of mass destruction, and a tree. Moreover, there is also something similar to ruin porn: Pazu's father, a passionate sky explorer, captured a picture of the flying castle. The ruins of Tokyo are a recurrent theme in the Japanese anime and *Akira* (1988) is one of the most iconic depictions of post-apocalyptic ruins of the futuristic Neo-Tokyo. The famous *Sailor Moon* series, streamed all over the world in the 90s, presents the extraterrestrial ruins of the Moon

York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

96 Mikkola writes about Rae Langton's concept of *maker's knowledge*, a kind of knowledge which works like "a blueprint, rather than a mirror," is self-fulfilling, and shapes the reality according to the perspective of the groups possessing social power, and through which porn objectifies women. In Mari Mikkola, *Pornography: A Philosophical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 133-136.

97 For the relation between fantasy and see Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence* (London: Verso, 2020), subchapter *Relationality in Life*, 141-149.

98 Roland Barthes, "Photo-chocs," in *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes (Paris: Seuil, 1957), 98-100.

99 "[...] ces images obligent le spectateur à une interrogation violente, l'engagent dans la voie d'un jugement qu'il élabore lui-même sans être encombré par la présence demiurgique du photographe," in *Ibid.*, 100.

100 *Ibid.*, 98.

101 "[...] issue d'une volonté de langage encombrante, et ces images réussies n'ont sur nous aucun effet ; l'intérêt que nous éprouvons pour elles ne dépasse pas les temps d'une lecture instantanée." In *Ibid.*, 99.

102 *Ibid.*

103 "[...] il ne suffit pas au photographe de nous *signifier* l'horrible pour que nous l'éprouvions." *Ibid.*, 98.

104 *Ibid.*

105 "[...] le photographe ne nous a rien laissé – qu'un simple droit d'acquiescement intellectuel : nous ne sommes liés à ces images que par un intérêt technique [...]." *Ibid.*

Kingdom. In episode 44 of the first arc, the *Sailor-Senshis* visit the selenic site made of ancient Greek-Roman collapsed columns – although the original castle was a replica of the Taj Mahal.

Suzume no Tojimari (すずめの戸締まり, Engl.: “Suzume’s Locking Up”), a film directed by Shinkai Makoto, has become in April 2023 the fourth-highest-grossing Japanese film of all time and was screened at the Berlinale at the 73rd annual Berlin International Film Festival.

The film tells the story of Iwato Suzume, a seventeen-year-old high school student, who lives together with her aunt in a coastal town in Kyushu, South Japan, in a house on the top of the hill, safe from the dangers of the ocean. She encounters Munakata Sōta, a pedagogy student and door-closer. He is looking for *hayko* (ruins). As Suzume will soon find out, he searches and closes the doors connecting the human world and *Tokoyo* (Afterworld¹⁰⁶). These doors allow a mythical worm to come out, rise to the sky, and then fall on earth determining earthquakes. Sōta is soon transformed into a wooden, yellow, three-legged chair by a speaking cat – Daijin – another mythical creature responsible for hindering the escape of the worm. Suzume and Sōta follow the cat North and, on their way, prevent earthquakes by closing doors. The film is designed as a journey where beautiful landscapes, rides with a multitude of vehicles, and Japanese dialects alternate with stops in ruins with magical doors and a walking chair.

The doors Sōta and his lineage had been closing – and locking with a key – are located in abandoned infrastructures. They are the connection to Tokoyo, impermeable, however, from the human side. Suzume tries to pass through them first out of curiosity and later out of desperation, but though she crosses the threshold, she is led back to the same space she left. Tokoyo shifts the side of the door as soon as she enters. There is only one door for every person to pass. Suzume, who lost her mother in the 2011 Tōhoku catastrophe, is able to pass once again through a blue door in her hometown to rescue the trapped Sōta. When the door is finally closed, the worm/cloud blasts. The explosion and the subsequent rain seem to recall an atomic bomb detonation. The doors, though symbolically marked as open, decline access to the other space and puzzle the human perception or create hallucinations (Ferris wheel door). These doors had lost their function in the architecture (except for the first white house-door under the metal cupola which lacked one from the beginning). It seems that without humans, the empty spaces of the ruins attract supernatural creatures, bursting through the inoperative doors. Closing the doors creates the necessary “information gap” (Siebert) to keep the world safe.

In the world behind the door, the viewer encounters pieces of Japanese mythology. Tokoyo – a scenery recalling the Tōhoku natural disaster – is supposed to be the realm of the dead. However, there are nuances to it, which help better understand the operativity of the doors in the ruins. Tokoyo might have been “a one-way transmitter,”¹⁰⁷ “as a carrier of southern cultures and people” and “what brought Tokoyo into existence was nothing other than this sense of ‘waiting.’”¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, “our [Japanese] ancestors also strongly held the notion of “returning to Tokoyo the things that are of Tokoyo, which is similar to the phrase ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.’”¹⁰⁹ The incantation for sealing the worm back in Tokoyo does precisely this. *Mimizū*, the worm escaping through the doors, is presumed to be the mythological catfish shaking the islands of the Japanese Archipelago. However, there is another Japanese myth that is connected to oranges. The scene where Suzume and Sōta rescue Chika’s rolling oranges might be a hint to this other myth. Citrus fruits had been seemingly brought from a land beyond the seas or from Tokoyo together with a worm parasite, which ended up being worshiped as a *kami* (divinity).¹¹⁰ The reason why the trees and the worm became so precious was that their aroma was embedded – through their ancestors – in their unconscious and “caused them to

¹⁰⁶ *Lumea de apoi* in the Romanian subtitles and *Immer und Ewig* in the German.

¹⁰⁷ Kenichi Tanigawa, “Tokoyo (The Eternal World) – The archetype of the Japanese World View,” in *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 1 (1986): 88

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 87-88.

recall Tokoyo, their native land.”¹¹¹ This myth, finely woven in the tissue of the film, is not only telling for Suzume’s story, longing for her mother and encounter with her old self or inner child to whom it returns the yellow chair. It also shows how a memory can be conveyed through or a connection established sensorially through *smell*.

Closing the doors requires – besides considerable muscle work – something which people seek to do in the ruins: imagine, fantasize the lives of their fellow human beings who lived, worked, or died there. When closing the sliding, glass door of the school in Ehime, abandoned after a landslide, Sōta, still a chair and incapable of closing it by himself, instructs Suzume: “Close your eyes and think of the people who lived here. The keyhole will appear. Please, I can’t. Now feel all the energy which should have been here. Listen to the voices.”

In *Suzume* too, ruins and their doors function as mediums connecting the past and the present, the dead and the alive. It materializes the experience which people and urban explorers seek in the both musealized and un-musealized ruins: to listen to the voices, to get a glimpse at the lives of humans who passed through those doors.

Suzume shows how ruins are born: through natural catastrophes (landslide, earthquake, tsunami) or abandonment (shrinking cities cut off places like the resort or the amusement park). It also shows how earthquakes impact not only architecture, but also the people, who, in an instant, go back and forth from angst to mundane life. Furthermore, smartphones play a major role in the film and, through the seismic alerts, become interstices between humans and nature. They are a part of the ecology. They also are a part of the human body. The characters in *Suzume* spend a great amount of time in front of screens. Moreover, the animation beautifully shows how surprise had become a different bodily reaction. When encountering a yellow, running chair, people in awe quickly reach for their smartphones – always at hand – and take photos of it.

Surnamed “the second Miyazaki,” Shinkai steps on the foots of his predecessor and submits his creation to the Berlinale (after a twenty-years break in the attendance of the Japanese animation). He inserts references to other Studio Ghibli films, such as Yumi Arai’s 1975 song *Rūju no Dengon*¹¹² Instagram posts of the cat Daijin traveling by train quote *Whispers of the heart* (1995). Other topoi of Ghibli (and especially Miyazaki) animation are: *Howl’s Moving Castle* (1986) especially the scene when the heroine jumps through the magical door to rescue her love interest (the shot is almost identical with the door on the left of the heroine) and *Spirited Away* (2001), where a girl wonders among broken paper lamps of a deserted resort. However, there are some questionable similarities to other films such as *Princess Mononoke* (1997): the catastrophic fall of the worm recalls the movement and texture of the *Shishigami* (Forest Spirit). Furthermore, the drive in a chic red car towards northern Japan, the place of childhood trauma, recalls the Oscar-winning *Drive my car* (2021). The film also begins with what could be a Shinkai-recipe: the heroine wakes up from a dream in the warm morning light and is called for breakfast before going to school. *Suzume* builds up on other films, without making visible the quotation marks. This creative solution seems like a bridge to the topoi of ruin porn, where imitation or replication of the same is a definitory strategy.

Despite the overwhelmingly lifelike aesthetic, there are moments when the realism of the film fails. After the funny car crash, the aunt recovers a ruined bicycle from the nearby field and pedals the next twenty kilometers with her niece on the carrier. How come the rusty, squeaking bicycle buried in vegetation still has enough air in the tires? Rewinding the film: when Suzume runs for the first time to the desolated resort, why doesn’t she get caught in any spiderwebs neither on her way through the woods, nor in the ruins? Low budget animations leave such details out, however, here Suzume looks as if jogging through the park.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 88.

¹¹² Engl. *Message in Rouge/Lipstick*. A reference to *Kiki’s Delivery Service* (1989).

Furthermore, the ultra-realistic, overwhelmingly detailed architectural backgrounds of *Suzume* seem less convincing than, for example, those of *Akira*. Akira's futuristic architecture has two qualities *Suzume* lacks. Firstly, being drawn by hand it bears the texture of paint. The quality of the surface of the depicting medium and the depicted object overlap and thus, the materiality of the brush stroke is transferred to the buildings of Neo-Tokyo. Secondly, *Suzume's* architectural backgrounds have less depth. The reason regards the illustration technique. Anyone who took drawing classes can tell the difference between a drawing made in front of a still life or landscape, or by "transcribing" photography.¹¹³ In the artist's slang, a drawing needs to "stand" and it is never sufficient to only draw the visible surfaces, but understand the entire volume. The animator has to "get in the shape" she is looking at – or imagining – and "pour it" on paper. Shinkai uses photographic material which he transfers in animation and does not draw backgrounds from scratch. Though very precise in content, this sort of hyper-realism makes the ruins look like a visually-opulent *féerie*.

In Barthes' words, the ruins in *Suzume* are "too literal" and do not provoke visceral reactions in the viewer. A counterexample is the less detailed and more cartoonish ruin in Miyazaki's newest film *The Boy and the Heron* (Japanese release: 14 July 2023; German release 4 January 2024). Mahito's (the young hero) first attempt to enter the abandoned, forbidden tower on his grandfather's estate is no different than the trespassing of *Suzume* or any urban explorer. Lured by the heron and hoping to meet his dead mother, he sticks his head in a gap between a masonry arch and what looks like a spiral staircase. Though he pushes his body through the deposited dirt, which was narrowing this former entrance, he can't advance. Called by the anxious old women, he withdraws dragging with his head the alluvial, dried dirt dangling from the arch. Mahito returns, balancing on a slope of shaky rubble. Though these background drawings are further away from a realistic depiction than the ones in *Suzume*, it is hard not to perceive the ruin from *The Boy and the Heron* as real. Although it is not a verbatim replica of the reality, it feels more accurate because the aesthetic allows the viewer to fill the gaps while the stone, dirt, rubble (the matter) do not seem inert, but as having agency themselves.

Suzume feels familiar: it illustrates with great sensibility and accuracy our contemporary lives, the use of smartphones and means of transportation. It also feels familiar because it overtook the visual language of ruin porn, which trained our perception of matter. The empty, inert ruins are the façade, or the background, anyhow, a scenery without texture, depth, or smell. In *Suzume's* walk, there is no *kumo no su kugutte*.¹¹⁴

Conclusions

Both clean and dirty, ruins live today their mediated afterlives and travel to the screens of ruin fans from all over the world. Not only the cultivated public can savor the beauty of ruins by indulging in the delights of a Piranesi exhibition, but also the masses. They only have to reach for their phones. As Michel Serres observed, one doesn't need to travel in order to discover "big and rare knowledge," since, nowadays, it has become accessible and overabundant, and it is to be found in one's pockets, under the handkerchief.¹¹⁵ Today, ruins are an experience in front of the screen and less of a reality that is supposed to be sensorial.

A look into the online afterlife of ruins is very much telling for architecture theory because it reassesses the concept of ruin, but also for social sciences, because it depicts the humans' approach to matter.

113 Some might argue that old masters used *camera obscura* to create masterpieces; however, though camera obscura is the core-machinery of photography, the evanescent projection on the screen is a different object than a photograph, be it printed or in digital format. This difference shapes the final drawing.

114 Engl.: *Passing under the spider web*. In *Sanpo (A Walk)* – song in *My Neighbor Totoro* (Studio Ghibli, 1988).

115 Michel Serres, *Petite Poucette* (Paris: Marabout, 2012), 39.



Fig. 4. Photograph by Jill Quigley: McIlhinny's 02, from the series Cottages of Quigley's Point, 2013

Ruins undermine the Western myth of architectural stability and queer our concept of space. They shelter lives and undergo physical and chemical transformations, being the place where matter unfolds.

The online proliferation of ruin porn proves that the interest humans have in ruins didn't diminish and was not a fashion of the Romantic movement. However, the same phenomenon that gives a voice to the ruins simultaneously silences them. Overtaking the tradition of mainstream porn, ruin porn objectifies matter and teaches how matter and ruins are: empty, lifeless, and awaiting to be revealed. Furthermore, it substitutes an experience, which should be highly sensorial, for one in front of the screen. This wouldn't be a hindrance in experiencing the space through an image if the photographer would choose other aesthetic solutions instead of solely overwhelming with information. As porn, ruin porn has a teaching function. Furthermore, its imagery has escaped the niche of porn genres and can be traced in other media such as animation.

While the real – especially dirty – ruins appeal to the senses, the images of ruins can either touch beyond visibility or can flood our attention with rich visuals of objectified matter.

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