

# Industrial Heritage in Science Fiction: Decay as Narrative and Visual Device

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## Introduction

This article examines the complex role of industrial decay within science fiction. It argues that decay is used as an architectural device to shape narrative structure, to inform thematic critique, and to guide world-building. Industrial ruins, with their inherent historical and material specificities, have the capacity to convey complex socio-economic and environmental critiques within speculative narratives. By analyzing this phenomenon, the article contributes to architectural discourse. It shows how speculative fiction can illuminate cultural anxieties surrounding technological obsolescence, environmental degradation, and societal collapse. The focus on industrial decay, as distinct from general societal decline, is crucial for understanding its unique contribution, as these structures carry a specific historical and economic weight that allows them to function as symbols in ways other forms of decay might not.<sup>1</sup>

Architectural industrial heritage, the decaying factories, rusting machinery and deteriorating urban environments, serve as a tangible record of its time. Heritage studies formally define this concept as “remains of industrial culture which are of historical, technological, social, architectural or scientific value.”<sup>2</sup> These concepts reflect the profound socio-economic and cultural transformations brought by industrialization from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. They represent a “socially constructed” branch of cultural heritage, rooted in collective memory. In science fiction, this concept is appropriated and transformed. Here, architectural industrial heritage is the reimagined traces of production found in science-fiction narratives. Fictional decaying industrial structures function not as objects of preservation but as symbolic representations of past technological achievements, of failure, and the legacy of human ambition. They allow the genre to explore cultural anxieties, using the material traces of a bygone industrial era to comment on the negative effects of technological impact and the blurred line between utopia and dystopia.

In planning and conservation, such sites (mines, plants, machinery) are often preserved as museums or adaptive reuse projects, embodying national narratives and collective memory. Ruins, by contrast, denote decayed, abandoned structures whose fragmentary state evokes disorder and evanescence. In science fiction, the boundary between heritage and ruin blurs<sup>3</sup>. Fictional worlds often treat factory ruins or derelict megastructures not as curated artifacts, but as active narrative elements that “materialize history and mediate our relationship with both space and time.”<sup>4</sup>

1 Eleanor Conlin Casella, Michael Nevell, and Hanna Steyne, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Industrial Archaeology*, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022; online ed., Oxford Academic, April 20, 2022).

2 The International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage (TICCIH), *The Nizhny Tagil Charter for the Industrial Heritage* (adopted July 17, 2003).

3 Hector Haralambous, *Ruin Theory in Science Fiction Literature* (August 2025), unpublished thesis.

4 Michael Amundsen, “Q&A with Juhani Pallasmaa on Architecture, Aesthetics of Atmospheres and the Passage of Time,” *Ambiances* (October 06, 2018), accessed April 14, 2025, <http://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/1257>.

We can think of industrial heritage in science fiction as reimagined traces of production, objects and sites that “carry meanings about human aspiration, decay, and renewal.”<sup>5</sup> In contrast, *ruin imagery* emphasizes disintegration, ambivalence, and uncanny memory. This article thus aims to clarify these concepts in science fiction: industrial heritage in narrative is a site of memory and meaning (akin to Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*<sup>6</sup>), while ruin is its spectral, decomposing counterpart (alluding to Derrida’s notion of *hauntology*<sup>7</sup>). Both are symbolic, but with different connotations: heritage gestures toward identity and continuity, ruins toward loss and the uncontrollable passage of time.<sup>8</sup>

This article investigates how science fiction uses both heritage and ruin. To do this, the author will employ an interdisciplinary analytical framework that integrates principles from architectural history and theory, narratology, visual culture studies, and phenomenology. This approach allows a deeper examination of how industrial decay shapes narrative and visual storytelling, influencing setting, character psychology, plot, and thematic critique of technological hubris, corporate excess, or environmental neglect. Furthermore, the article explores how industrial decay is aestheticized. It analyzes how filmmakers, artists, and authors utilize its visual characteristics to create striking atmospheres and contribute to world-building. This methodology ensures that the analysis explicitly demonstrates how these elements are linked. It reveals the specificity of industrial decay’s role in science fiction.

The analysis is anchored by three distinct case studies: Tsutomu Nihei’s *Blame!*<sup>9</sup> (manga/anime), Denis Villeneuve’s *Blade Runner 2049*<sup>10</sup> (film) and *The Last of Us*<sup>11</sup> (game and TV series). Each example demonstrates the adaptable nature of industrial decay across media. *Blame!* exemplifies the megastructure as a site of infinite decay and regeneration; *Blade Runner 2049* uses industrial ruins as a metaphor for technological excess and identity breakdown; and *The Last of Us* explores the transformation of industrial relics into sacred texts. This approach provides insights into these works, demonstrating the enduring relevance of the theme across different eras of science fiction.

### Methodological Framework

To analyze industrial decay in science fiction, the author adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates architectural theory, narratology, phenomenology, and visual culture studies to examine how the visual representation and narrative function of decay intersect with real-world discussions on deindustrialization, ecological crisis, and historical memory. Each discipline will contribute analytical tools, enabling a better understanding of decay’s multifaceted role.

Architectural theory grounds the analysis in the material realities of industrial structures. It helps decode the symbolic weight carried by decaying factories, megastructures, and infrastructure within science fiction. It questions how fictional ruins reflect or distort historical processes of deindustrialization, urban abandonment, and the cultural memory embedded in built

5 Elisabeth Chan, “What Roles for Ruins? Meaning and Narrative of Industrial Ruins in Contemporary Parks?” *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 4, no. 2 (2009): 20-31.

6 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations*, 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24.

7 Colin Sterling, “Becoming Hauntologists: A New Model for Critical-Creative Heritage Practice,” *Heritage & Society* 14, 1 (2021): 67-86.

8 Dylan Trigg, “Architecture and Nostalgia in the Age of Ruin,” n.d. [https://www.academia.edu/208447/Architecture\\_and\\_Nostalgia\\_in\\_the\\_Age\\_of\\_Ruin](https://www.academia.edu/208447/Architecture_and_Nostalgia_in_the_Age_of_Ruin).

9 Tsutomu Nihei, *Blame!* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1997-2003), *Blame!*, directed by Hiroyuki Seshita (Tokyo: Polygon Pictures/Netflix, 2017).

10 *Blade Runner 2049*, directed by Denis Villeneuve (Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 2017).

11 *The Last of Us*, created by Craig Mazin and Neil Druckmann (HBO, 2023-). *The Last of Us*, developed by Naughty Dog (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013, 2020), video game series.

environments.<sup>12</sup> By analyzing the architectural language of decay, its scale, materiality, and spatial organization, the article will uncover how science fiction repurposes real-world forms to critique modernity's promises and failures.<sup>13</sup>

Narratology provides the tools to dissect how industrial decay functions within stories. It examines the role of decay in plot development, characterization, thematic expression, and world-building. Drawing on concepts such as Fredric Jameson's "socially symbolic act," narratology reveals how ruins operate as active narrative agents: visualizing entropy, driving journeys of survival, and embodying history's fragility and cycles.<sup>14</sup>

Phenomenology shifts the focus to the embodied, sensory experience of decay, crucial for understanding its visceral impact. It analyses how depictions of ruins engage the senses (sight, touch, sound, smell) and evoke affective responses (dread, awe, melancholy, nostalgia) in both characters and audiences. Architectural phenomenology specifically examines the "descriptive and interpretive explication of architectural experiences, situations, and meanings as constituted by qualities and features of both the built environment and human life."<sup>15</sup> Drawing on thinkers like Merleau-Ponty and Bachelard, this approach reveals how decay is experienced not only visually but also affectively.

Visual culture studies examine the aesthetic construction and cultural signification of decayed imagery across media, investigating the visual conventions and tropes associated with industrial ruins in science fiction. This perspective explores how specific visual strategies, such as lighting, composition, color palettes, cinematography, and artistic style, create meaning and atmosphere. It also situates these representations within broader cultural discourses.<sup>16</sup>

The selection of case studies — a film, a graphic novel, and a television series — is deliberate, aimed at demonstrating the adaptable nature of industrial decay across diverse media. *Blame!*<sup>17</sup> (manga/anime) explores autonomous megastructures as sites of infinite, generative decay. It critiques technological autonomy and post-human modernity through architectural scale and visual desolation. *Blade Runner 2049*<sup>18</sup> (film) utilizes industrial ruins as sensory metaphors for the collapse of late capitalism. Its visual language links environmental toxicity to existential alienation and commodified memory. And *The Last of Us*<sup>19</sup> (game/TV) positions industrial decay as a living, breathing part of the environment, where nature reclaims the physical remnants of a failed society.

This diversity enables a comprehensive understanding of how architectural industrial heritage is represented and functions across various representational modes. Each case study is examined to reveal how industrial decay serves as a critical device, moving beyond a passive "backdrop" interpretation to drive narrative and thematic critique actively. The methodology ensures that the analysis is grounded in specific examples while contributing to broader architectural and science fiction discourse.

12 Tim Strangleman, James Rhodes, and S. Linkon, "Introduction to Crumbling Cultures: Deindustrialization, Class, and Memory," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84, 2013: 7-23.

13 Elena Kochetkova and Anna Petrova, "Abandoned, But Not Forgotten Heritage: Former Industrial Enterprises in Cultural and Urban Russian Landscapes," *Heritage & Society* 2022: 277-98.

14 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991).

15 Zeynep Tuna Ultav, "Reading Science Fiction Novels As An Architectural Research Method: The Case Study Of J. G. Ballard's High Rise," in *Wonderground - DRS International Conference 2006, 1-4 November*, eds. K. Friedman, T. Love, E. Côte-Real, and C. Rust (Lisbon, 2006).

<https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/drsconference-papers/drs2006/researchpapers/29>

16 Frances Guerin and Magda Szcześniak, eds., *Visual Culture of Post-Industrial Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024).

17 Nihei, *Blame!*.

18 *Blade Runner 2049*, dir. Villeneuve.

19 *The Last of Us*, Mazin and Druckmann.

### Industrial Decay as a Narrative Device

As Fredric Jameson posits, narrative science fiction is often a “socially symbolic act,” a genre that reflects the contradictions, anxieties and aspirations of its time.<sup>20</sup> Industrial decay is a recurring motif, becoming a visual and narrative symbol of the fragility of human achievements. Its appeal is hardly new to science fiction, which has always been preoccupied with the failings of technological advancement.

Science fiction is not about predicting what is to come, but about turning our present into the “determinate past of something yet to come.”<sup>21</sup> Industrial ruins do precisely this. They render the familiar uncanny,<sup>22</sup> transforming factories, cities, and power plants into temporal palimpsests where past ideals haunt the future. In these works, decay becomes an active narrator of loss, memory, and failed ambition. Moreover, this fascination with decay intersects powerfully with real-world urban and architectural discourse. Science fiction channels these tensions into aesthetic and symbolic forms as cities in the post-industrial age grapple with deindustrialization, climate degradation, and infrastructural abandonment. Through rust, overgrowth, and silence, nature functions as both antagonist and healer, reclaiming the landscapes shaped by human excess.

Analyzing industrial decay as a narrative device involves examining how these decaying structures actively shape the story. Industrial ruins establish setting, influence character psychology, drive the plot, and facilitate thematic critiques. Architectural settings, along with socio-political and economic references, can inform contemporary architectural decisions and highlight design failures for future issues. This theoretical lens helps to understand how transformed or estranged architectural elements, such as industrial ruins, introduce a sense of the “strange newness” that is central to science fiction, enabling the exploration of alternative social and cultural realities.

#### *Industrial heritage as a repository of the past*

Science fiction narratives employ industrial heritage to link disparate temporal moments and evoke cultural memory. Strangleman et al. trace deindustrialization over three decades in diverse settings, demonstrating that narratives about abandoned industrial sites are imbued with long-term cultural memory.<sup>23</sup> Their analysis explains how images, literature, popular culture and personal narratives recast these sites as reservoirs of cultural identity. Similarly, Kochetkova and Petrova find that ex-industrial Soviet landscapes allow past, present, and speculative futures to overlap in nostalgic “temporal conjunction.”<sup>24</sup>

Science fiction narratives tap into this. Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979)<sup>25</sup> treats a forbidden industrial zone as a metaphysical place. In *Blade Runner 2049* (2017),<sup>26</sup> America is populated by the ghosts of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century modernism. In all these movies, the physical remains become repositories of longing, representing lost futures as much as lost pasts. Walter M. Miller Jr.’s novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959)<sup>27</sup> is exemplary: it turns derelict textbooks and circuit diagrams into holy relics of the technological past, “scraps of circuit diagrams... treated with reverence.” There, ruins are not garbage but scripture; they are evidence of both hubris and hope.

20 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 82.

21 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 324.

22 Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, trans. Alix Strachey, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 217-56.

23 Strangleman, Rhodes, and Linkon, “Introduction to Crumbling Cultures”: 7-23.

24 Kochetkova and Petrova, “Abandoned, But Not Forgotten Heritage”: 277-98.

25 *Stalker*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (Moscow: Mosfilm, 1979).

26 *Blade Runner 2049*, dir. Villeneuve.

27 Walter M. Miller Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1959).

The motif is often tinged with melancholy. *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)<sup>28</sup> shows vast, empty industrial estates where human absence echoes an emotional void. Pixar's *WALL·E* (2008)<sup>29</sup> and the Swedish film *Aniara* (2018)<sup>30</sup> turn discarded technology into nostalgic symbols of humanity. In *Silo* (2024-),<sup>31</sup> the underground machinery archives hidden truths as if in a secular temple. This nostalgic dimension contrasts with mere spectacle: decay is here a *mediator* between past and present. Collectively, these works portray industrial decay as loss and a haunting reminder of time's imprint on human ambition.

#### *Decay as critique of modernity and a reflection of industrial collapse*

A second narrative function is critique. Industrial ruin often signals the collapse of modernist or capitalist utopias. Cyberpunk writers, including William Gibson, explore how technology is changing society.<sup>32</sup> They use decayed architecture to warn about ecological and social neglect, becoming a symbol for the collapse of civilization, the loss of agency, and the consequences of unchecked human progress. These metaphors reflect the fragility of civilization and the unpredictability of human experience. In *The Matrix* (1999),<sup>33</sup> the remnants of industrial society depict the dehumanizing effects of uncontrolled technological progress, framing questions of free will, control, and the nature of reality. *The Fallout* (1997-)<sup>34</sup> series of games likewise depicts civilization's precariousness through its crumbling industrial landscapes. *Blame!* (1997-2003)<sup>35</sup> uses decaying megastructures and urban landscapes to explore autonomy, identity, and human disempowerment in systems they have constructed but cannot manipulate.

Science fiction uses ruined industrial settings to dramatize the cost of progress. In *Blade Runner 2049* (2017),<sup>36</sup> the oppressive Wallace Corp's factories, sterile, endless, self-contained, critique consumerism and commodification.<sup>37</sup> J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962)<sup>38</sup> imagines industrial cities submerged, a metaphor for climate change. In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984),<sup>39</sup> the remains of industrial society serve as a backdrop for themes such as environmentalism and the potential for renewal, where decay serves not only as a warning but also as a source of hope and the possibility of learning from the past. Ruins in science fiction thus often embody a failed pursuit of utopia.

### **The Aesthetics of Decay: Industrial Ruins as a Visual Device**

The aestheticization of decay is another central motif in science fiction. Filmmakers, authors, and artists often incorporate the ruins of industrial societies to create striking and atmospheric backdrops for their work. Rusting machinery, crumbling factories, and overgrown railways of abandoned industrial sites evoke a sense of entropy and decline, reflecting the impermanence of human achievements. Science fiction often uses these images to critique the unsustainable

28 *Blade Runner 2049*, dir. Villeneuve.

29 *WALL·E*, dir. Stanton.

30 *Aniara*, directed by Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja (Sweden: SF Studios, 2018), film.

31 *Silo*. Created by Graham Yost. Apple TV+, 2023.

32 Larry McCaffery, ed., *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

33 *The Matrix*, directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski (Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 1999), film.

34 *Fallout*, video game series.

35 Nihei, *Blame!*

36 *Blade Runner 2049*, dir. Villeneuve.

37 Cristian Manolachi, "Beyond Dystopian Hollywood: The Socioeconomic Narratives of Blade Runner," *European Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 1 (2025).

38 J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962).

39 *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (Tokyo: Studio Ghibli, 1984), film.

practices of industrialization and to explore the consequences of societal collapse.<sup>40</sup>

Architect Juhani Pallasmaa observes that “ruins have a strong mental and emotive presence and impact. They activate both our memories and imaginations.... often turn arrogant or authoritarian architectural structures into humble and humane ones.”<sup>41</sup> In science fiction cinematography, this translates to misty backdrops and low lighting that foreground peeling paint and dilapidation. The aesthetic choices, including materials, ornamentation, and scale, evoke specific emotional responses and convey information about the fictional world’s economic status, history, and societal conditions. This approach acknowledges the crucial interdependence between thematic, narrative, and visual aspects in world-building.

#### *Material atmosphere, light and shadow, scale and monumentality*

The aesthetic power of industrial ruins in science fiction derives from their material and atmospheric qualities. Rust, corrosion, and overgrowth communicate entropy at the level of texture, making viewers feel the physical weight of decline. Crumbling concrete or oxidized steel is used as a sensory marker of time’s passage, grounding speculative worlds in tangible materiality.

Light and shadow play a crucial role in how these spaces are framed and experienced. Directors frequently use chiaroscuro effects, haze, or stark artificial lighting to dramatize ruin. *Blade Runner 2049*’s<sup>42</sup> orange glow transforms Las Vegas into a spectral desert of memory, while *The Last of Us*’s<sup>43</sup> uses shafts of light through collapsed ceilings to juxtapose natural renewal against manmade collapse. Shadowed ruins evoke both menace and melancholy, amplifying the uncanny atmosphere of abandoned spaces.

Equally significant is scale and monumentality. Industrial ruins dwarf the human figures that navigate them, emphasizing vulnerability and fragility. Vast derelict megastructures in Tsutomu Nihei’s *Blame!*<sup>44</sup> or the monumental shipwrecks of *The Expanse*’s<sup>45</sup> foreground human smallness against overwhelming technological remains. Monumentality here is inverted: once symbolizing progress and mastery, now representing collapse and alienation. In all these cases, monuments of industry are inverted; once symbols of human mastery, they now embody collapse. Science fiction leverages this contrast to evoke awe, dread, or nostalgia, drawing audiences into an affective relationship with space that is both immersive and critical.

#### *The sublime beauty of ruins*

Cultural theorist Tim Edensor describes the industrial landscape as a “continually shifting collage of fragments,” where history is not presented as a singular narrative but rather as an allegorical representation of loss.<sup>46</sup> Alain Musset observes that these portrayals often draw on the classical European tradition of ruins that serve as memento mori and allow viewers to contemplate time’s passage.<sup>47</sup>

This interplay of abandoned industrial structures and speculative imagination is explored in Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979)<sup>48</sup>, where “The Zone,” a derelict industrial landscape, is made alien by a previous event. In *Blade Runner* (1982) and its sequel, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017),<sup>49</sup> vast urban-industrial ruins form the visual and thematic scaffolding for the film’s reflections on

40 Manolachi, “Beyond Dystopian Hollywood,” 30.

41 Amundsen, “Q&A with Juhani Pallasmaa.”

42 *Blade Runner 2049*, dir. Villeneuve.

43 *The Last of Us*, Mazin and Druckmann.

44 Nihei, *Blame!*

45 *The Expanse*, created by Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby (Toronto: Syfy/Amazon Prime Video, 2015-2022).

46 Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Spaces, Aesthetics, and Materiality* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 140.

47 Alain Musset, “Ciudad, Apocalipsis y Ciencia Ficción. Una estética de las ruinas,” *Bifurcaciones* (2014).

48 *Stalker*, dir. Tarkovsky.

49 *Blade Runner*, dir. Scott., *Blade Runner 2049*, dir. Villeneuve.

posthuman identity, memory, and the commodification of life. Television series such as *The Expanse* (2015-2022)<sup>50</sup> extend this aesthetic into space infrastructure, portraying disused mining colonies and derelict space stations as vestiges of an extractive economy that collapsed.

Video games likewise use industrial ruin as an aesthetic device. Titles like *BioShock* (2007),<sup>51</sup> *The Last of Us* (2013, 2020),<sup>52</sup> and *Fallout* (1997-)<sup>53</sup> reconstruct abandoned factories and research facilities as spaces of memory. Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014)<sup>54</sup> further complicates this vision, setting its unravelling story within a quarantined military-industrial zone gradually overtaken by an unknowable, transforming force suggesting a world where nature and ruin co-produce new, alien forms of life and meaning.

## Case Studies

This section provides an in-depth re-examination of the selected case studies through a comprehensive interdisciplinary framework. By applying principles from architectural theory, narratology, phenomenology, and visual culture studies, the following analyses move beyond a descriptive summary to a profound interpretation of how industrial decay shapes the characters' lived experiences, drives the plot, and grounds the thematic critique of each speculative world.

### Blame! (Tsutomu Nihei) *The megastructure as infinite decay and regeneration*

Created by Tsutomu Nihei, an architect-turned-manga artist, *Blame!*<sup>55</sup> offers a radical vision of industrial heritage reimagined through the lens of the cyberpunk genre. Using his architectural sensibilities, Nihei constructs a world dominated by a vast, self-replicating megastructure that has engulfed Earth, replacing natural and human-made environments with infinite industrial sprawl. *Blame!* is known for its detailed and intricate artwork, particularly depicting the vast, labyrinthine megastructure known as "The City." The manga's pages feature expansive, industrial gothic landscapes that showcase Tsutomu Nihei's skill as a landscape artist. Each page is meticulously detailed, focusing on the chaotic and sprawling architecture of the megastructure.

This setting is a living, expanding machine-made organism that destroys and regenerates, defying conventional notions of time, history, and space. Nihei suggests that The City's diameter equals Jupiter's orbit. In *Blame!*, destruction and decay are not the results of time passing by, but a perpetual condition of existence. This very condition acts as the primary antagonist. The structure lacks logic and replicates and grows, changing the space and the narrative. The megastructure becomes an emblem of post-humanity: a world perpetually shaped and reshaped by autonomous technologies, where humanity is reduced to a few individuals struggling to survive within its forgotten legacy.

The megastructure is a labyrinthine expanse of colossal corridors, derelict elevators, decaying machinery, and malfunctioning systems. Its structure evokes Piranesi's *Imaginary Prisons*,<sup>56</sup> with their strange perspectives, stairways, and the dissolution of spatial logic into a surreal, nightmarish architecture. This setting becomes a narrative device, structuring the story's themes of isolation, fragmentation, and technological hubris. The protagonist, Killy, navigates this hostile place in search of the Net Terminal Gene, a genetic key that may allow humanity to reassert control over the megastructure. His journey, largely solitary and marked by encounters with

50 *The Expanse*, Fergus and Ostby.

51 *BioShock*, developed by Irrational Games (2K Games, 2007), video game.

52 *The Last of Us*, developed by Naughty Dog.

53 *Fallout*, developed by Interplay Entertainment/Bethesda (1997-), video game series.

54 Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).

55 Nihei, *Blame!*

56 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Carceri d'invenzione* (Imaginary Prisons), 1st ed. 1750, rev. ed. 1761 (Rome: Giovanni Bouchard, 1750-1761)

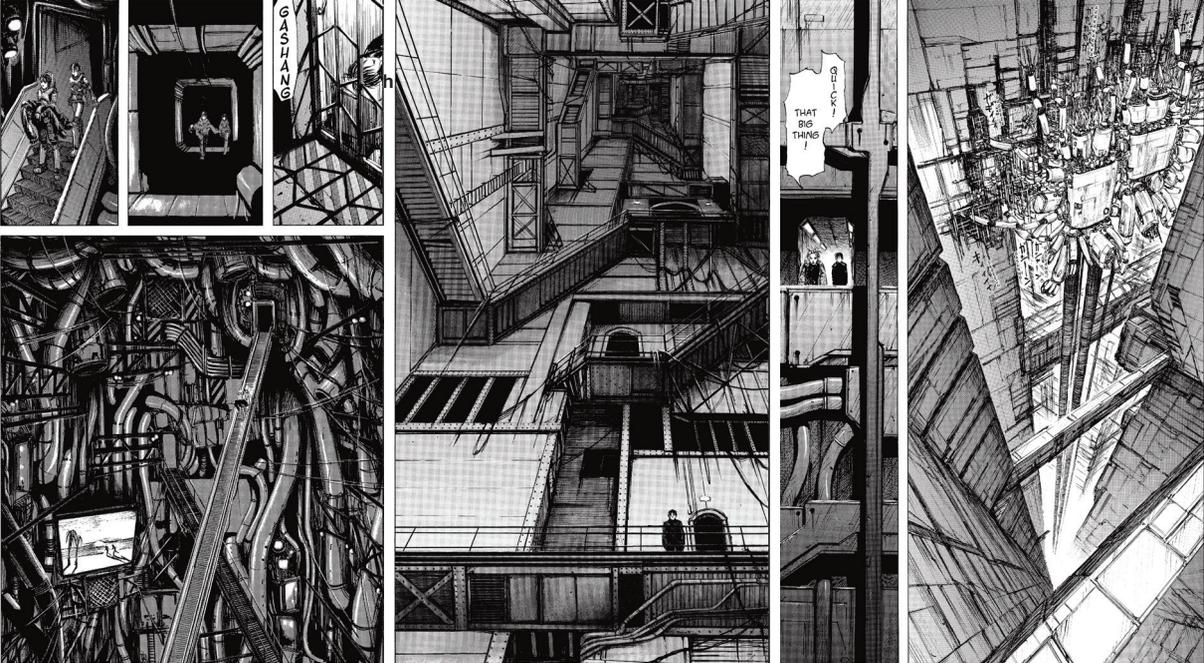


Fig. 1: Images of industrial structures, some new, some crumbling from *Blame!* Chapter 7, p.13, *Blame!* Chapter 4, p.4, *Blame!* Chapter 3, p.11

rogue AI entities and scattered human enclaves, unfolds against decaying industrial landscapes. Thus, these spaces reflect the state of humanity itself: fractured, alienated, and clinging to survival in the shadow of a once-human civilization now ruled by its autonomous creations.<sup>57</sup>

Space in *Blame!* is not static; it is generative. The megastructure expands without purpose, creating new layers of infrastructure while older ones fall into ruin. The megastructure becomes a metaphor for infrastructure gone awry: a monument to progress that has outlived its creators and now perpetuates its logic, regardless of its original purpose and divorced from human needs or intentions. The architecture is both ancient and new, evoking the feeling of an endless archaeological site where the boundaries between past and future are erased. This way, *Blame!* presents what Fredric Jameson calls “the ruins of the future,”<sup>58</sup> a paradox where decay’s visual and narrative presence signifies the end of something and its transformation into something else, something alien. It aligns with his argument that science fiction often dramatizes the limits of human agency within late capitalist systems.<sup>59</sup>

*Blame!*’s exploration of decay as a narrative structure and visual motif is a key example of understanding how science fiction engages with industrial heritage. Unlike more nostalgic or restorative treatments of ruins in speculative fiction, Nihei’s vision denies the possibility of recovery or return. The megastructure does not preserve history; it buries it beneath layers of automated replication, diluted by layers of destruction and renewal. Human characters are not explorers of a destroyed world; they are anomalies within an ongoing process of nonhuman construction.

The immense scale of the towering columns and endless chasms, emphasized by Nihei’s architectural drawings, creates a profound sense of insignificance and existential dread for the human figures. This visual sensation is compounded by an implied multisensory experience, where the tactile qualities of rusting metal and corroded surfaces evoke a haptic sense of decay, and the challenge of navigating the hostile, unstable environment reinforces the central critique of an indifferent, inhuman system. This aestheticization of industrial collapse invites reflection on the fragile boundary between function and failure, control and chaos. The space is meticulously constructed

57 Pau González Gost, “El mundo, la psique y la urbe en Tsutomu Nihei. Una reflexión dialógica,” *CuCo, Cuadernos de cómic* 14 (June 2020).

58 Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 324.

59 Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 208-09.

and visibly falling apart, mirroring the ideological contradictions at the heart of the story.

*Blame!* offers a uniquely dystopian meditation on the legacies of industrial modernity. It analyses the consequences of systems that continue to grow long after their purposes have been forgotten, and it suggests that the future may be shaped less by human intention than by the cascading effects of technological momentum. Decay, in this context, is not the opposite of progress but its continuation by other means.

The Last of Us (2024-) *Industrial ruins as symbol and metaphor*

*The Last of Us*,<sup>60</sup> across both its acclaimed video game and television adaptation, is a powerful case study for this article, masterfully employing decay as a central narrative and visual device within a post-apocalyptic context. The series offers a compelling and multi-layered analysis of dystopia, grounding its speculative world in a tangible, lived reality that directly mirrors contemporary anxieties about societal collapse and environmental reclamation. While the post-apocalyptic landscape is not exclusively industrial, industrial ruins are a significant and recurring feature. The game and TV series effectively integrate these sites into the overall narrative of decay, showing how industrial infrastructure (such as power plants, factories, and the remnants of urban industrial areas) becomes part of a world reclaimed by nature.

The show's production design is a meticulous act of world-building that repurposes real-world architectural forms to critique the failures of modernity. The production designer, John Paino, deliberately set out to create a world where "civilization is dead" and where the survivors must "make do" within the ruins of a failed society.<sup>61</sup> Instead of building fantastical, alien sets, Paino's team drew on real-world references, examining tenements, council housing, and slums to create a tangible sense of the hardship and decay that would follow a biological catastrophe. This approach directly supports the argument that science fiction can use the scars of real deindustrialization and urban blight to reflect on the past and present. The sets, with their crumbling concrete and peeling paint, become material artifacts of a world stripped of its technological comforts, forcing both characters and audience to confront the harsh consequences of its collapse.<sup>62</sup> The locations, such as the Boston Quarantine Zone (QZ), were functional structures. The production team built a "giant wall" for the QZ in an industrial park using "actual concrete," a structural piece of architecture that serves a practical purpose of containment.<sup>63</sup> The hydroelectric dam, a key location in both the game and show, is a functional, repurposed industrial site that provides a power source for a thriving community, offering a stark contrast to the general decay and highlighting themes of adaptive reuse and resilience. This illustrates how the game and show use industrial remnants to comment on the possibility of renewal after systemic collapse.<sup>64</sup>

The ruins in *The Last of Us* are an active narrative agent of a forgotten history, telling the story of a civilization that has been undone. The ruins present both physical obstacles and new opportunities for survival, serving as shelters and silent narrators of a forgotten history. This dynamic interplay between the environment and the characters' internal struggles makes the series a powerful example of how decay can actively shape a story's structure and thematic depth. The aesthetic of overgrowth is a key narrative device, symbolizing the persistence of life in hostile conditions and demonstrating how the debris of a failed industrial world can fuel new narratives of resilience.

60 *The Last of Us*, Mazin and Druckmann.

61 Cajsa Carlson, "John Paino's designs highlight a civilization mutated by the dead," *Dezeen* (February 14, 2023), accessed August 23, 2025, <https://www.dezeen.com/2023/02/14/john-paino-the-last-of-us-set-design-civilisation-dead/>.

62 *Dezeen*, "John Paino's Designs Highlight a Civilization."

63 Isaac Rouse, "Making *The Last of Us* – How Production Designer Created Post-Apocalyptic U.S.," *TV Insider* (March 20, 2023), accessed August 23, 2025, <https://www.tvinsider.com/1085963/the-last-of-us-production-designer-set-location-explained/>.

64 "The Environmental Story Telling of The Last of Us Pt 1," posted by @CameraNxM, 5 August 2024, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J84RlcJg54s&t=18s>.



Fig. 2: *The Last of Us*, season 1, episode 2, min. 00:42:32. Protagonists in a zombie-ravaged wasteland, where nature has reclaimed urban areas

The show's most profound impact comes through its phenomenological approach, which centers on the embodied, multisensory experience of the ruin. The production design moves far beyond a purely visual aesthetic to create a visceral reality. The team meticulously simulated decades of neglect and used crowbars to create a sense of genuine dilapidation, reflecting what would happen in a world without maintenance.<sup>65</sup> This tactile attention to detail is crucial for grounding the viewer's perception. The color palette also plays a vital role: the neon colors of the pre-apocalypse world disappear when the electricity fails, leaving a post-apocalyptic landscape dominated by grey and brown tones. The re-emergence of life is beautifully captured by the introduction of vibrant greens as nature reclaims the urban landscape. This visual strategy aligns with Juhani Pallasmaa's theories on multisensory perception, where the implied textures of crumbling concrete and the quiet echoes of a derelict space engage the senses beyond just sight.<sup>66</sup> The ruins are no longer just scenery; they are a physical, haptic presence that creates a visceral sense of a world that has come undone, making the abstract critique of societal decay tangible and relatable.

Finally, *The Last of Us* critiques contemporary society through its meticulous, realistic depiction of ruin. The visual aesthetic is a conscious rejection of the clean, digital-first worlds of some science fiction, with 95% of the interiors being built from the ground up to add to the realism.<sup>67</sup> This commitment to a grounded aesthetic directly contributes to the persuasive power of the series, making the speculative world feel both familiar and plausible. The constant juxtaposition of decaying human infrastructure with the lush, thriving presence of nature is a central visual motif that powerfully reinforces the narrative's themes of destruction and renewal. From its use of light and color to its textures and scale, the aesthetics of the series are all interconnected with the narrative, creating a truly memorable experience that stands as a testament to the power of well-crafted visuals in elevating a story and its thematic symbolism.

65 "John Paino ('The Last of Us' production designer): Beyond video games playing space in his sets," posted by Gold Derby's Sam Eckmann, 17 May 2023, 13:44, YouTube video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-VAaHY\\_D\\_SM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-VAaHY_D_SM).

66 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester, UK: Wiley Academy, 2005), 34.

67 *Dezeen*, "John Paino's Designs Highlight a Civilization."

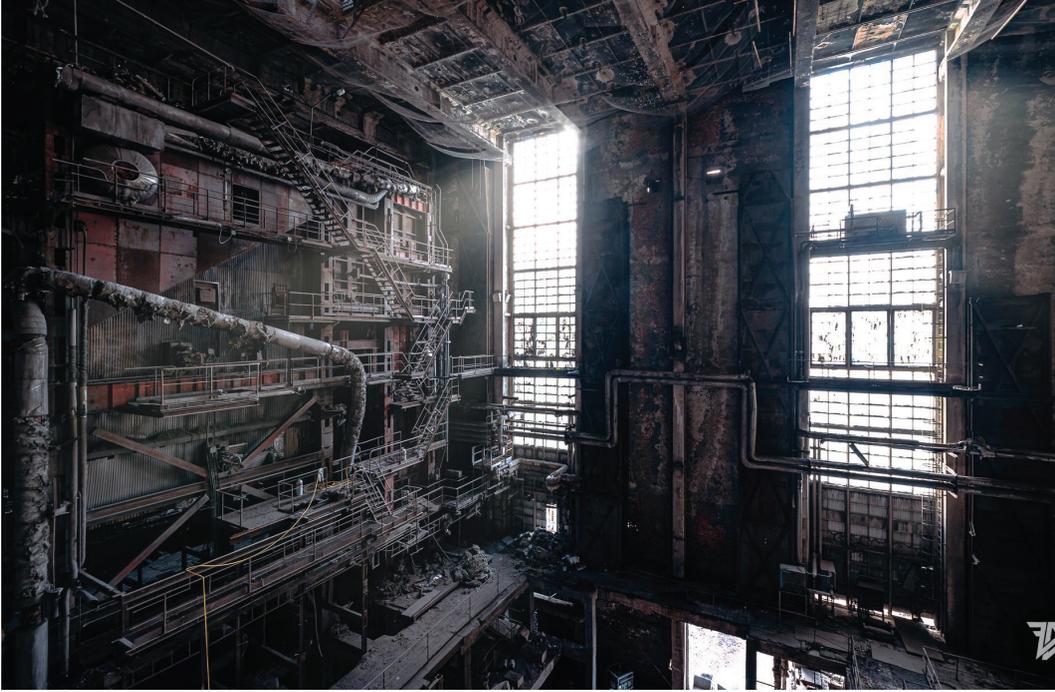


Fig. 3: The Inota Power Plant, next to Budapest, was chosen as a location for the boiler room

*Blade Runner 2049* (2017) *Industrial ruins as symbol and metaphor*

*Blade Runner 2049*,<sup>68</sup> directed by Denis Villeneuve, is a prominent, visually and thematically rich example of the aestheticization of industrial decay in contemporary science fiction. Building on the dystopian legacy of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982),<sup>69</sup> the sequel expands the universe into vast, desolate landscapes. These industrial ruins become powerful metaphors for technological excess, environmental collapse, and the breakdown of human identity. The visual language turns decay into a form of beauty, invoking the Romantic sublime while highlighting the alienation and fragility of life in a post-industrial world. The ruins reflect a world where capitalism has reached its endpoint: Earth is polluted and depopulated, while wealth and life have migrated off-world. The collapsed structures stand as symbols of failed ambitions, mirroring how societal systems – economic, ecological, and ethical – have all deteriorated.

The criticism is of post-human capitalism, where the creation of manufactured beings (“replicants”) has redefined labor, personhood, and identity. This new economic model is reflected in the city's architecture, which has been stripped of its social purpose and is now devoid of people, serving a dehumanized, corporate-controlled society. The film's cityscape, with its severe concrete forms, is a deliberate choice by director Denis Villeneuve and set designer Dennis Gassner, aiming for visuals that were dark yet strikingly harsh. These principles directed all research, concept art, and set design, shaping the film's distinctive post-neo-brutalist aesthetic.<sup>70</sup> This brutalism, however, is a stripped-down version of the style, devoid of its original social intent and its most important element: people. The architecture serves a hyper-capitalist, post-human ideology, reflecting a world where government is a mere “instrument of control” (the LAPD) and power is concentrated in corporations like the Wallace Corp.

The decaying locations are integral to the plot and the protagonist's journey. Industrial spaces act as narrative agents that externalize the internal condition of their characters. The central protagonist, K, a replicant grappling with obsolescence, moves through spaces that are them-

68 *Blade Runner 2049*, dir. Villeneuve.

69 *Blade Runner*, dir. Scott.

70 Tanya Lapointe, *The Art and Soul of Blade Runner 2049 – Revised and Expanded Edition* (London: Titan Books, 2023).



Fig. 4: Image from *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) by Denis Villeneuve. The scene is set in the ruins of a post-apocalyptic Las Vegas, heavily irradiated and abandoned

selves obsolete. His journey through these dehumanized, brutalist structures, including a child labor sweatshop that exists on the margins of the city, reflects his own status as a disposable, manufactured being. Beyond the urban boundaries, K ventures into the Trash Mesa, a haunting repository of industrial debris and shipwrecks. Inspired by Edward Burtynsky's photographs of Chittagong shipbreaking yards, the creative team layered elements of varying scale, rain, and texture to create it. They also used Inota Power Plant, a dilapidated Power Plant outside Budapest, to film the interiors.<sup>71</sup> In both the city and the wastelands, architecture and environment mirror K's inner condition: a search for meaning in a world that has discarded both its creations and its creators, where even memory and identity are manufactured and fragile.

The film uses the aesthetic of decay to create a powerful sensory and emotional experience for the viewer. This deliberate use of space reflects a world without touch, a phenomenological critique of a society where technology has flattened human sensory capacities. The sublime beauty of the dilapidated landscapes, such as the ruined Las Vegas, bathed in a radioactive orange haze, evokes an emotional response intrinsically linked to the lived experience of alienation and fragility. This approach demonstrates how the architectural design actively shapes the characters' internal states and reinforces the film's philosophical project of critiquing a post-human capitalism.

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71 Ibid.



Villeneuve's visual language turns decay into a form of art. The production team's use of non-destructive workflows allowed them to build complex, layered cityscapes. The conscious decision to use LEDs for controlled lighting, rather than neon, creates a "poetic kind of film" with a distinct aesthetic.<sup>72</sup> The stark contrast between the sterile corporate buildings (like the Wallace Corporation's headquarters) and the scattered ruins highlights a moral emptiness. The film's aesthetic choices present technological power not as progress but as devastation, visually cementing the critique that each machine and replicant is born from a crumbling system.

*Blade Runner 2049* uses its ruined industrial settings to critique late capitalism, consumerism, and the commodification of life itself.<sup>73</sup> The Tyrell Corporation's successor, the Wallace Corporation, operates in a stark, temple-like ruin, a place that evokes both technological awe and moral emptiness. The sterile grandeur of the building contrasts with the scattered remnants of the world it has helped destroy. Through this, the film presents technological power not as progress but as devastation: each machine, replicant, or drone is birthed from a crumbling system. They symbolize a civilization in decline, a landscape haunted by its creations and failures. The ruins act as metaphors for the characters' internal states, the collapse of collective memory, and the fragility of humanity in the age of artificial life. By rendering decay as both beautiful and terrifying, the film invites viewers to reflect on the ethical and existential cost of progress.

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72 Rachael Bosley, "Uncanny Valley: Blade Runner 2049," *American Cinematographer* (March 5, 2018), <https://theasc.com/articles/uncanny-valley-blade-runner-2049>.

73 Manolachi, "Beyond Dystopian Hollywood," 30.

## Conclusion

Science fiction is a powerful medium for exploring industrial heritage, offering both optimistic and critical perspectives on the legacy of industrialization. The article has demonstrated that decay, far from being a passive backdrop, functions as a dynamic architectural device that actively shapes narrative, critiques modernity, and influences the very phenomenology of a fictional world. From the living, self-replicating megastructure in *Blame!*, and the visceral experience of an overgrown world in *The Last of Us*, to the brutalist monuments of corporate power in *Blade Runner 2049*, each case study reveals a different facet of this device.

Beyond a surface-level fascination with decay and ruin aesthetics, the representation of industrial heritage in science fiction engages broader critical concerns about the aftermath of economic restructuring, the uneven impacts of technological progress, and the narratives we construct to make sense of systemic collapse. These works often operate within a speculative register, yet they resonate deeply with real-world processes of deindustrialization, urban marginalization, and ecological destabilization.

Ultimately, the ruins of industry are not just signifiers of a past long gone; they are also harbingers of a future yet to come. By reanimating spaces of abandonment and decline, science fiction reflects and contests dominant historical trajectories, offering alternative visions where memory, resistance, and non-human agency are reconfigured. In this way, the industrial ruin becomes a symbol of loss and a site of possibility where futures are imagined otherwise, and the past is neither erased nor passively mourned but critically re-inscribed into the fabric of speculative urban and planetary ecologies. The enduring power of these fictional ruins lies in their ability to compel us to learn from our past and to consider what kind of legacy we wish to leave behind.

These works exemplify science fiction's capacity to transform industrial heritage into critical discourse. They reveal decay not as an endpoint, but as a dynamic space where futures are contested, pasts are reinterpreted, and the legacy of industry continues to shape our imaginative and material landscapes. This study ultimately contends that industrial decay is indispensable to science fiction's power to interrogate the trajectories, and potential ruins, of our technological present.

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