Susan Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson. Meaning and Material in Western Culture*

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Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been no shortage of publications on ruins: their elusive meanings, formal variety and complex temporalities have drawn the interest and fostered the intellectual creativity of art historians, philosophers, cultural historians, anthropologists, cultural geographers and literary scholars alike. Much of this literature focuses on contemporary ruins, which are shown to be emblematic of the economic short-termism of our times, but also of the apparently indelible impact of human activity on the environment. It may partly be driven by what Pierre Nora describes as the “imperative of our epoch [...] to preserve every indicator of memory,” to isolate material traces from the accelerated flow of history, in order to keep a semblance of continuity with the past (Nora 7-24). But ironically, it mostly presents us with banal vestiges, the product of industry or rampant property development. As Bruce Bégout has recently argued, one may wonder whether the rapidly decaying constructions of contemporary societies may properly be considered as ruins, a notion which entails at least a form of aesthetic value (what Alois Riegl called “age value”).

Susan Stewart’s *The Ruins Lesson* provides a more classical perspective on the subject, in a broad, masterful panorama of the Western tradition of ruins representations and ruins sentiment. While the emphasis of today’s academic discourse is on the waste products of consumer society, Stewart revisits ruins whose aesthetic quality is
undisputed, and which have inspired poets and artists since antiquity, starting with ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt and ending with the Romantics – with the concluding pages briefly venturing into the 20th century. As this time frame suggests, Stewart’s interest lies in vestiges with added value: vestiges which, through the slow erosion of centuries and seen with hindsight, have provided formal pleasure and creative inspiration while prompting a variety of reflections, and lessons, for example about human temporalities, the rise and fall of empires, or the succession of religions. Stewart’s account stops in the early 19th century, when the status of ruins becomes more uncertain, as the rhythm of urban modernity accelerates architectural decay.

But The Ruins Lesson is still valuable for our times. By demonstrating the multilayered hermeneutic uses of ruins at various points in history, it also suggests ways for us to find meanings in the vestiges of our own times, however incomprehensible they may still appear. Few cultural objects have articulated as well as ruins the way societies construct their past, understand their present and assess their own achievements. "The ruin’s extensive relation to time stretching beyond the span of not only a human lifetime but also the extent of the rise and fall of particular cultures, gives it a certain power" (Stewart 15). As Stewart reminds us, many of the ruins that fascinated writers and artists until the beginning of the late modern era reflected the violence of human events (the sack of Rome or that of Antwerp are important moments in this narrative), and ruins representations have often flourished in troubled social contexts, the Reformation or the revolutions of the late 18th century being noteworthy examples. Depicting ruins, meditating about them, endowing them with memorial functions, comparing human temporalities with the deep time of ancient monuments, were ways to make sense not only of human history, but also of human existence itself. Our own concerns, our own fascination with the ruins of our times, are no different.

The book combines a mostly diachronic progression with a thematically structured analysis of some of the most significant cultural manifestations of the fascination for ruins and ruination, allowing Stewart to approach the topic from a variety of contrasting angles, while covering much ground. Thus, the chapter entitled “Marks” discusses the way the fragments of ancient Rome were reappropriated, as construction materials, ornaments or models, with a special emphasis on the Christian church’s appropriation of pagan remains for its own architectural production, but also for the construction of its own narrative of rebirth and regeneration. “Mater” provides an original perspective by examining the gendered use of the motif of ruination in a long tradition of literary representations where it is connected to the theme of the integrity and corruption of the female body (works like the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, Spenser’s Faerie Queene or Blake’s illuminated poetry are discussed). “Matrix” examines the early development of the theme of ruins in the visual arts, as backgrounds and ornaments, and then as invitations to meditate about deep time and the course of history. The emphasis is on printmaking, as it emerged and became established in Northern Europe, the ruins prints of Hieronymus Cock, and the fluid allegorical meanings of the motif at a time of marked social and religious conflicts. “Mirrors” reexamines the flourishing of multi-purposed ruins imagery in the second half of the 18th century, the vital role played by architects’ schools and circles in Rome, the dissemination of classical models in Britain and France, as well as the development of imaginative play and historical meditation in fancy pieces (for instance by Hubert Robert and Joseph Gandy). Naturally, the 18th century’s unprecedented aesthetic interest in ruins is given its expected share, with several pages on William Gilpin and the picturesque, as well as a stimulating
interpretation of Piranesi’s work, whose moody depictions and understanding of the hermeneutic value of ruins (169-72) are shown to have played a significant part in the Romantic appreciation of Roman ruins. There is much to commend about this ambitious book, not least of which are its scope and erudition. Stewart explores social, political and artistic practices from classical antiquity to Romanticism, offering a remarkable demonstration of the use of ruins as an entry point into Western cultural history. Far from privileging one type of artistic expression, she takes the reader through a variety of media (literature, architecture, architectural drawing, printmaking and painting), making sure to show how the specificities of each relate to the forms of ruins. Naturally, the book, given its broad ambition, may be reproached for neglecting ruins that lie beyond Europe and the Mediterranean region. Only a few of them are – briefly – mentioned, in the introduction and the conclusion. But the subtle ramifications of the analysis might have been stretched into less manageable directions, and Stewart’s selection makes for a coherent, brilliantly written and always compelling study, that will be an essential reference for scholars in the humanities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works cited


NOTES

1. A non exhaustive list could include Michel Makarius’s comprehensive art historical study Ruines. Représentations dans l’art de la Renaissance à nos jours (2004), Tim Edensor’s Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality (2005), an example of cultural geography’s take on the topic, philosopher Bruce Bégout’s Obsolescence des ruines: Essai philosophique sur les gravats (2022), as well as work by historians (Nick Yablon’s Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of Urban Modernity, 1819-1919, 2009, for example) and literary scholars (Miles Orvell’s Empire of Ruins, 2021, may be mentioned). Two noteworthy interdisciplinary anthologies are Ruins of Modernity, edited by Julia Hell and Andreas Schönhle (2010), and Ruins, edited by Brian Dillon (2011).

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Hélène Ibata is Professor of English and visual studies at the University of Strasbourg. Her work on Romantic visual culture includes The Challenge of the Sublime: from Burke’s Philosophical Enquiry to British Romantic Art (2018, Manchester University Press). She has also published articles on the sublime, panoramas, illustrations, artist travellers, William Blake and J.M.W. Turner, in journals like Word and Image, The European Romantic Review, Romanticism on the Net and The British Art Journal. Her most recent research focuses on the idea of landscape and its evolution from Romantic times to the current environmental crisis.