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The ruin revisited

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The Ruin Revisited

Everywhere, it seems, a fascination with the remains of the past, with its remainders, is in evidence. But what happens to ruins in this process is less certain. Sometimes discarded if they are of little interest or dressed in the garb of annotation, indexing and interpretation if they have some appeal, ruins appear to be visible only if they can be written within a heritage story. Ruins now have conservation and heritage written all over them (see Miles 1997; Dicks 2003). Societies now rarely just tear down the past to make way for the new as they did in earlier, more progress-oriented times. Now when a part of the built environment needs regeneration because of decline or because of new opportunities, one will often find a museum, heritage trail, or some kind of visitor centre dedicated to interpreting the past at the heart of it. The success of the Guggenheim museum in transforming the old declining industrial city of Bilbao is the often cited case study for success. The regeneration of Berlin after reunification is another (Till 2005). But there are many other cases.

No doubt, the economic crisis of 2008–9 will have an impact on this process of managing the past for a while; slowing down investment in regeneration and development schemes in some places, squeezing public funding in the arts and heritage sector, and creating new areas of decline, new discarded spaces, in others. But once recovery comes, however slow, partial or geographically uneven, the cultural concern to conserve the past, at least the best or most interesting of it, and to incorporate it into the cultural life of the present in a way that is understandable as a heritage narrative of time and place, is likely to remain for the foreseeable future.

We have been living with a version of the culture industry informed by issues of heritage for some decades now and most commentators on it have sought to address it through a critique in which the museum as an

institution and the heritage industry in general is seen to create a consumer-oriented, fetishised, dead story of the past. Simply just letting things be, letting them fall into decay or be appropriated outside of official heritage discourses informed by a desire to regenerate, is offered instead as an alternative and more living version of how we might respond to the past (Lowenthal 1985; Wright 1985; Hewison 1987; Samuels 1994; Huyssen 1995; Smith 2006). There can be no doubt that what Huyssen has called the memory industry (1995) is at work in towns and cities across the western world repackaging forgotten fragments of the past for diverse audiences who find fascination in the storytelling approach to earlier times (see Degen 2003). For this critique of the writing of the ruin into the museum – seen as a source of amnesia and alienation of a true, living past informed by issues of inequality, injustice and marginalisation – asserts an alternative, counter-memory of an unwritten appreciation of the ruined past as found object, just awaiting discovery as event in itself. Promoting the cultural and political power of evocation as a resource for historical awakening is the underlying the aim here (see in particular Benjamin 1973a; 1999).

From the late eighteenth century, this Romantic perspective, that first found fascination in the ruins of classical antiquity, saw ruins as an historical topos for the modern subject's self-recognition as a judging subject. The ruin in this tradition is the pre-eminent space of political Romanticism (Schmitt 1988), the space of the occasion, or event, in which that subject comes to recognise him or herself as a *flâneur*-subject, separate from the material world as (political and cultural) agent of history; producer of a bourgeois critique of the alienation of bourgeois culture in the process.

From the pedagogic and aesthetic power of ancient civilisations emerging out of the jungle, to the haunting effect of lost cultures, to the surreal potential of the overlooked juxtapositions and fragments of the discarded city, the evocative relationship between materiality and history is at the centre of this fascination with the ruin that has developed in the European imagination since the late eighteenth century.¹ The making of this subject-

1 Antiquarian ruins had been of interest before the eighteenth century with early topographical guides that discussed the ruins of the ancient past becoming a feature

as-*flâneur* often celebrates the evocative power of a past as the terrain of an oppositional, counter-modern subjectivity that can speak to us directly through chance encounter with the found object or ruin. From Baudelaire (1960) to Breton (1961); Aragon (1987) to Benjamin (1999); Debord (1989) to Sinclair (1998), the tragedy for this emancipatory approach to the past is inevitably that it becomes a form of curatorial mediation, against itself, even when the intentions are of direct, unmediated contact with the past through a found materiality or broken and discarded fragments. Surrealism was always, foremost, a form of curatorial practice. A chance encounter with the past through the figure of the ruin rather than the discourse of the ruin can have a powerful, evocative effect but only for the person who was there. To broaden knowledge of that effect requires that it be communicated discursively in some way. Therein lies the betrayal of its translation from something evoked, a distant voice from the past, into something known and curated.

Why, then, at the beginning of the twenty-first century should this earlier interest in the ruin come to prominence again? It is around the issue of the occasion, expressed through ideas of the powers of evocation and event, where something from the past can have the power to alter perception, that we have seen a recent resurgence of interest in ruins, the discarded, disposed of, the ghostly and the remaindered (see Derrida 1994; Huyssen 1995; 2003; Gordon 1997; Ladd 1997; Jaguaribe, 1999; Edensor 2005; Hawkins 2006). It is not as if this approach has the same kind of confidence in the Romantic subject as before. But what is perhaps at stake is not so much Romanticism's conception of the subject as alienated maker of history but rather its fascination with the past as a source of refuge in uncertain times.

Ruins as evocations of a hidden or lost past are always written as such, translating their figural power into something else (Lyotard 1997). The main issue that is of interest here has to do with the power of the materiality of

of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, as a cultural phenomenon associated with ideas of nostalgia and loss that were a key part of the neo-classical revival and later Romantic Movement, they are a later phenomenon.

ruins as a means of evoking the past as an event and what that might have to say to us and the relationship that it has to the idea of heritage and the museum. In capturing what this relationship might be about André Malraux perhaps put it best: the reception of culture from past times should be about giving voice to silence (1978). That is what evocation is all about; about allowing absent presence, traces, ghosts, expressed in the materiality of cultural artefacts, the opportunity to tell their story and thereby evoke the silent lives of previous generations, their hopes and dreams, their sensuous human activity, so that that might be allowed to live again in ways that can enrich our own lives and challenge some of our complacent pre-conceptions about the present.

The challenge for me in all this has to do with the tension between curation and disposal in the writing of the event of the ruin. This tension at work around the ruin, between practices of curation and disposal, might at first glance appear to have a directly oppositional character. Critics of the museum have always sought to give voice to silence by leaving ruins in situ as found rather than curated objects. Others, and Malraux is their leading advocate, have seen the potential in the museum and in museum practices to do this instead. This is something we need to explore.

A good starting point for considering these issues is to revisit Simmel's well-known essay on the ruin (1959). It encapsulates an early but still significant attempt to understand the cultural power of the ruin developed around a theory of alienation. Simmel provides an outline of the ruin's significance that concentrates on the question of the relationship between aesthetics and creative agency that is central to this issue of evocation. Furthermore, he situates the ruin as a key topos through which to explore culture as a whole as something inherently tragic and alienated.

Culture, he believes, develops out of a conflict between process and form (see also Goudsblom 1980; 1992). Once forms of culture, artworks for example, stand outside the human creative process as things, Simmel believes, they become alienated abstractions – ossified forms – in which the capacity for expression contained in their making is somehow lost (1959: 263). Except, he suggests, in the ruin. At first glance, then, Simmel's position appears to be a typical expression of the Romantic view of culture as one of alienation. While Simmel's theory of alienation was developed

independently of Marx (and was to be a key inspiration for the Western Marxist approach to alienation and fetishism in Lukács and Benjamin, see Arato and Brienens 1979), his conception of the Romantic subject as a sensuous, creating subject is similar. However, there is another side to his approach that gives it a continuing relevance. Not only is the human capacity to produce something lost in the formal properties of the artwork, Simmel believes, but so too is the ongoing material agency of nature alienated in the process of becoming, in which culture and nature come to be seen as articulated in one another. In other words, it is not just the sculptor's blows against a piece of stone that express this creative process, but the stone's ability to resist and to respond to those blows that contributes to this making of culture as a process.

It is clear that Simmel privileges human agency over that of the agency of nature in this perspective, yet recognises nevertheless that the latter is needed for an artwork to be formed. It is only when a building falls into ruin, he believes, that this dual process of human-material creation is recognised and the tragic character of our desire to express ourselves over and against material form is revealed:

This unique balance – between mechanical, inert matter which passively resists pressure, and informing spirituality which pushes upwards – breaks, however, the instant a building crumbles [...] the balance between nature and spirit, which the building manifested, shifts in favour of nature. This shift becomes a cosmic tragedy which, so we feel, makes every ruin an object infused with our nostalgia; for now the decay appears as nature's revenge for the spirit's having violated it by making a form of its own image. (1959: 259)

He goes on to suggest that other types of art do not fully convey this power of the ruin as they just decay; nature is not seen to return in them. While patina on metal (or wood) might be said, on the contrary, to convey something of this effect, its power is certainly less significant to all but the most trained eye all the same – probably because of issues of scale and visibility rather than material substance. For in the ruined building, what is evoked for Simmel is not simply nature growing in the cracks as another form – a weed – but more generally nature's agency as a reassertion against the human creative spirit that subdued it for a while in the work of art.

The ruin is a thing with power. For Simmel, this is tragic because what it shows is that human agency, which seeks to reveal itself as the sole form of agency, can never be separated from the agency of matter with which it is engaged:

That the overwhelming of a work of the human will by the power of nature can have an aesthetic effect at all suggests that nature has a never completely extinguished, rightful claim to this work, however much it may be formed by the spirit [...] For this reason the ruin strikes us so often as tragic – but not as sad – because destruction here is not something senselessly coming from the outside but rather the realisation of a tendency inherent in the deepest layer of existence of the destroyed. (1959: 262–263)

What Simmel seems to be saying here is that in the ruin we see culture as process and culture as form not as separate but as the same thing. However, we only do so in the tragic state of decay after human investment in that process has gone.

It would be wrong to suggest Simmel's approach as some kind of proto-actor-network theory (Latour 1993; Law and Hassard 1997) in which there is symmetry between human and non-human agency. Indeed, he remains very much within the humanist tradition of celebrating the creative powers of human agency. However, his approach does suggest something akin to an idea of affordances, in which humans and the material world work together in agentic creativity (see Gibson 1986) in making cultural things meaningful to human subjects. And this is revealed in particular, Simmel suggests, under a key condition: that there remains enough human expression in what is left of the ruined building so that what it once was can still be shown, but in a state of decadence. Half a column is a ruin in Simmel's sense but just a bare stump is not. The main question, then, is how what is remaindered can persist as a trace that reveals this relationship between human spirit and material force, between process and form, that was forged in its making. Within that relationship, the past relationship with the world as a range of material forms can continue to find expression in ways that resonate in our cultural present.

What is important here is not just the complex question of agency but the relationship between materiality and time. Most cultural forms are tragic, for Simmel, because the creative spirit expressed in them is forever

lost in a process of formal separation and alienation. The ruin, however, is tragic but not alienated precisely because it offers up, as a trace, the possibility of a return of that agency in the tension revealed between nature and culture in its decayed composition.

Whereas the creative expression of most cultural works exists in a register of time-as-*chronos* in which the singular act of making something has passed, ruins which resist such chronology open up a different perspective: time-as-*kairos*, anachronic events (see Koga 2008), in which the possibility for a recovery through recognition of the creative moment is revealed as an opportunity for ongoing cultural imagining. Such a theory of culture is not one that dwells on successive stages of development and improvement (Winckelmann 1972), but on the power of a decadent decline to act as a source of cultural renewal (Bernheimer 2002).

A key theme for this decadent theory of material culture lies in the idea that the ruin is a source of temporal voice or evocation of a forgotten past. Through the ruin that voice somehow speaks, not to the ear (as discourse), but to the eye (as figure) and it does so in material form. Such a voice demands that social science become more poetic in its imaginings of the material world haunted by that past if it is going to be able to address it. That is Malraux's voice of silence. It is the event in which process becomes real again within form. It is as if History, bound up in the material past as a medium, could somehow speak to us through ruins in ways that allow us to see things differently once we have become attuned to hearing what it has to tell us. It can do so, it is believed, because the power of the thing comes into view as some kind of absent present force, or process in the materiality of the ruined form. In sum, culture-as-process is revealed as a ghost-like trace in culture-as-form when that form can be understood as a ruin.

We see something similar to Simmel's perspective in more recent approaches to ruins, rubbish and the detritus of culture. Edensor, for example, searches for an evocative poetics (and politics) in the industrial ruins of UK manufacturing towns and cities that have gone into decline. There, in the abandoned factory with its broken windows, labour process detritus and machinic remains, he sees evoked previous material orderings – often otherwise hidden from view – that underpin social relations (2005). The factory system is more apparent in the detritus of a ruined factory, he

suggests, than in a working one. As a mode of ordering it is laid bare, made visible as such. As with Simmel, only when the social relations that made these factories and for which they had significance have gone into decline and become a shell-like ruin, Edensor suggests, do we see a trace of what held them together materially in the ruined remains (2005). Similarly, in her work on waste Hawkins (2006) suggests that when something, a commodity, loses its value, when it becomes rubbish (see also Thompson 1979), only then do we start to see it again as a material form, embodying once more the social relations that made it, rather than as an abstract sign-value. Before that time we see its value rather more easily than we see its materiality. Once that materiality is revealed again and value is translated, things can have affect as things rather than as values and we can relate to them in a different way (2006: 84). Waste, she suggests furthermore, operates through this source of recognition as a provocation to act in relation to the material world and it affords the possibility of an ethical engagement with social issues through the micro-politics of waste-related practices.

But to tell us this, to speak of the power of the ruin effectively as event, and that is what evocation is all about, still requires some kind of curatorial discourse surrounding the ruin. For Edensor, that comes in the form of a mix of evocative text and accompanying photographs (2005), for Hawkins, more conventional academic text will do, though reference to image in film is also important to her approach (2006: 21–23). A central tenet of this broadly Derridean interest in the trace, the remainder and the ghostly, is a sense of honouring a debt to the past by evoking the materiality that remains behind the discarded and unrecognised (1994; see also Gordon 1997). To dispose of something effectively requires that act of honouring a debt (to the past, to the ancestors) if one is to avoid being haunted. The ghost, after all, is the figure of unfinished, unmanaged or untimely disposal (see Hetherington 2004). And yet it is in Benjamin's work in the earlier part of the last century, from his study of seventeenth-century tragic drama (1985a) to the commodity culture of nineteenth century Paris and its arcades (1999), that the evocative voice of the past found amongst the ruins reaches its clearest theoretical expression as a key element in a developed (if itself ruined) philosophy of history (1973a).

Benjamin, as is now well known, constructs a whole methodology for engaging with this past-evoking form of recognition – dialectics at a standstill, or dialectical images (for a detailed discussion see Wolin 1982; Buck-Morss 1989; Cohen 1995; Lindroos 1998), through which he develops his own unorthodox theory of the fetishism of commodities in capitalism (see Hetherington 2007). Benjamin understands dialectics at a standstill as a way of bringing the material culture of the ruined past and the optimistic, progressive present together in the form of a monad or constellation in which the acts of creation that are involved in the making of cultural forms are recognised as the outcome of a history (sensuous human activity in the Marxian sense) rather than of Capital, as appears to be the case. His aim is to de-fetishise our ‘phantasmagoric’ understanding of (commodity) culture. He shares with Simmel a tragic view of culture – this fetish character is its tragedy for Benjamin – and his approach to it can be seen as something of a synthesis of the theories of alienation found in both Simmel (1990) and Marx (1938). But whereas for Simmel it is a universalised human agency that is evoked as tragedy in an encounter with the ruin, for Benjamin that tragic agency takes on a less universal human character and a more historical one befitting the Marxist influence on his thinking.

Such constellations produce, Benjamin believes, the possibility for a shock of recognition and an awakening to the sensuous, material history that is obscured by the phantasmagoric sign of value. As he puts it:

It's not that what is past casts light on what is present, or what is present its light on what it past; rather image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation to what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images. The image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now of its recognisability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded. (Benjamin 1999: 463 [N3, 1])

As Lindroos has shown (1998), the key to understanding Benjamin's approach to ruins and discarded cultural forms and the importance they play within his methodology of dialectical image is to consider the kind

of time he associates with the ruin in material form and its relation to the past as cultural process. While Benjamin remains ultimately wedded to a Romantic utopianism in which time-as-*chronos* informs his belief in historical materialism, his attempt to separate that dialectical approach to history from a contagious bourgeois ideology of progress, by which he thought it had been overly influenced, led him to develop a Baroque sensibility on issues of time. This sensibility was drawn from theological debates around the idea of the event-as-monad that created moments of shock and recognition (on the difference between Romantic and Baroque perspectives see Kwa 2002). Benjamin applies both Marxist-linear and non-linear modernist-collage thinking to this issue, but underlying it, hidden within, is a much older Jewish theological concern with the evocative event, symbolised most notably in the idea of the event of the Messiah's arrival on earth and His intervention in human affairs (1973a; Wolin 1982; Lindroos 1998). The secular understanding of this event that he sought to articulate was to emphasise its singular character and it is an interest in singular temporalities, moments of *kairos*, in which Benjamin locates his approach to ruins and their relationship to the *chronos* of commodity culture.

Kairos, in this sense, is a singular event that disrupts the flow of time-as-*chronos*. It is an evocative point at which Benjamin believes an awakening to a true reality behind a false, phantasmagoric veil is made possible because in that event (historical) process is revealed as implicated in (commodity) form. While his language is theological, centred on the redemptive power of this awakening event in which the human activity that created the forms of the past is made visible in its ruined state (pace Simmel), it is the recognition of historical agency rather than the Messiah that is really Benjamin's concern.

Kairos in Greek thought referred to the idea of the qualitative time of a single revealing moment rather than chronological passing of time as a sequence of moments that become linear and directional. The event, the singular moment, has a qualitative and revelatory potentiality in this tradition. Arising from the idea of the singular moment as a device of rhetoric emphasised within Greek thought and represented as the God of Opportunity, a moment of *kairos* is a moment in which the opportunity for making a convincing argument is articulated (see Smith 2002; Kinneavy 2002).

Western thought is imbued with the figure of *kairos* as opportunity that comes in the form of the power of the singular moment that somehow condenses all that surrounds it into a point of recognition and revelation. The event as *kairos* is evocative; figural rather than discursive.

The Jewish theological tradition of Messianism that Benjamin drew on in his understanding of the power of the ruin does not emphasise this figure of opportunity as such. Rather, Benjamin sought to couple it to the Jewish idea of redemption (*Erlösung*). Through this move he develops the idea of an event as an opening in which the past can be redeemed by being restored in the moment of recognition (Lindroos 1998: 37–38). In redeeming the past, Benjamin believes, we also redeem ourselves from capitalism. Benjamin draws on parallel attempts within the work of his contemporary, Paul Tillich, who was seeking answers to similar questions on the possibility of revelatory awakening in modern culture from within the Christian rather than the Jewish tradition (1951). In that approach, Tillich associated this question of awakening with the idea of the moment of recognition of God's eternal presence on earth. In that opportunity for recognition he saw the possibility for awakening to repentance from a sinful cultural as well as individual state. In effect, that moment of awakening is, for Tillich, a moment of divine *kairos* that challenges linear, chronological and secular understandings of history in which time only exists as a *chronos* of human events (Lindroos 1998: 43–45).

Benjamin's key term for addressing such issues of history is neither *Erlösung* nor *kairos* but an attempt to synthesise the two into an idea of the moment of recognition and redemption in which elements of the past and the present come together: *Jetztzeit* ['now-time'] (1973a). The dialectical image, for Benjamin, creates a singular, dense, revelatory, shocking, evocative monadological and condensed moment of now-time in which the past can be redeemed through awakening to its tragedy of alienation. In so doing he believes there is an opportunity for the future to be made whole, arising as it does out of that revelatory shock as a shattering of the power of the fetish. Such a process is, above all, revealed in the form of the ruin – Benjamin's main emblem for the ruin is the Arcade (1999) – as it is in such a material form that an opening onto the past in the moment of the now is most clearly achieved within the commodity culture of capitalism.

The ruin, for Benjamin, opens up a perspective on the materiality of history. The forgotten materiality of the past, when brought into contact with the chronos ideology of progress through which capitalism is understood, will reveal, he hopes, the latter to be phantasmagoric (fetishistic). It is an archive awaiting exploration, not as a series of texts or discursive statements (pace Foucault) but as a singular dialectical image manifest in the evocative power of ruined material remainders.

In many respects this whole approach to materiality and history runs counter to the Marxist historical tradition that Benjamin sought, somewhat uncomfortably, to operate within.² He made clear that he saw this theological sensitivity to the past not as a break with secular philosophical thought but as its puppet master that worked the puppet of historical materialism hidden from view (1973a: 245).

This is not the view of the past typically and confidently presented by Marx. In his most famous statement on the relationship between the social relations of the past (and their cultural forms) and their relationship to the present at the beginning of the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Marx presents the past as follows: 'The tradition of all the generations of the dead weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living' (1978: 9). He gives this a material twist. In moments of revolution, the past of tradition tends to reassert itself in heroic Roman clothing and thereby deflects change from its true emancipatory path. To do that, Marx believes, requires a complete break with tradition. That is the failure of revolution in the nineteenth century for Marx. Process is ruined by form – old material cultural forms and expressions have to be discarded, swept away, if new processes are to escape their conservative hold. Yet this is also the way in which a capitalist commodity culture treats the forms of the past as well. It also seeks emancipation from the dead weight of the past to offer us novelty, fashion and progress that we want to buy. Marx's view of progress seems to mirror that of the capitalism he sought to critique (see Baudrillard 1975).

2 His ongoing exchange of letters around his methodology and approach to fetishism with Adorno are testament to this (2002).

And yet, in one of his more unguarded, note-book moments Marx offers us, against the grain of his philosophy of history, a somewhat different and more receptive (we might almost say more Benjaminian) view of the relationship between the past and the present. Using the example of Greek epic poetry and the different relationship between culture and history that the non-disappearance of the sublated past reveals, he expresses a doubt that challenges his more famous *Brumaire* position (see Lowith 1949). Sometimes, he suggests, earlier cultural forms are revealed as examples of a still higher achievement than anything that arises from later, more advanced social relations despite their formal creation within what are now outmoded social conditions:

Is the view of nature and of social relations on which the Greek imagination and hence Greek [mythology] is based possible with self-acting mule spindles and railways and locomotives and electrical telegraphs? What chance has Vulcan against Roberts & Co., Jupiter against the lightning-rod and Hermes against the Credit Mobilier? All mythology overcomes and dominates and shapes forces of nature in the imagination and by imagination; it therefore vanishes with the advent of real mastery over them [...] From another side: is Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the Iliad with the printing press, not to mention the printing machine? Do not song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer's bar, hence do not the necessary conditions of epic poetry vanish? But the difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. *The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model.* (Marx 1973: 110–111, emphasis added)

This is not the dead weight of tradition but fragments of the (ruined) past that still live on, albeit in tragic form, because of their outmoded placement. Marx does not elaborate such a point but Benjamin works it up into a philosophy of history centred on the ruin that, while Marxist in inspiration, works against the grain of an acceptance of the bourgeois trope of progress that underlies all recent attempts to develop a philosophy of history, including those of Marx (1973a). In the ruin, then, we see another relationship to the past, a counter-memory of sorts in which the event affords the possibility of a kind of awakening to its forgotten, silent voice.

The problem for Benjamin, however, is the problem of the event as a source of revelatory and de-fetishising evocation. We are all capable of experiencing moments of shock when we encounter something seemingly out of time – ‘uncanny’ in Freud’s terms – and it may lead to a subtle reorientation towards that which we see. But making that into not just a methodology for studying the past but a revolutionary one capable of social change requires that it be communicated effectively. And in so doing much of its power is lost. The half-life of evocation is a short one. The form of *The Arcades Project*, albeit unfinished – made up of a palimpsest of bits of text from the past – with the intention that their appearing out of time will have an awakening effect on the reader, is not one that works particularly well. The aphoristic model of his more accomplished book *One Way Street* on which it is based (1985; see Buck-Morss 1989) does not in this later Arcades case convey the power of evocation as effectively because it requires too much interpretive, archival work on the part of the reader. Benjamin might have done better if he had turned to film in which to present images from the past in constellation form. But even then in turning the event into filmic discourse, or into any form, the power of shock is going to be quickly subdued. A description of the event, the moment of singular time, is never the same as the actual experience of it. A new de-fetishised way of seeing does not automatically emerge from his methodology except as a utopian ideal.

If this is the case then what power does the ruin have? Does it provide any opportunity at all for cultural critique? Ruins, as Lyotard shows, are nothing without stories attached to them. What is left behind from the past, what is remaindered, can speak to us but in so doing and in our recognising that in any way beyond immediate embodied sensation, requires that it be made discursive in some manner – so that what is left behind as a forgotten remainder be turned into a meaningful trace. For Lyotard, this is not a betrayal of the ruin but its real power and its real potential significance, even if it is a significance somewhat removed from the hopes of those who look to ruins to evoke an alternative sense of the past that might overturn the present:

Disappeared as existing, durable as written. They must be written in order not to forget that they are forgotten as existing. Such is the metamorphosis of the remainder into a trace. Trace: the nothingness of the existent is transformed into the being of the non-existent. (Lyotard 1997: 170–171)

When Lyotard wrote these words he was principally engaging in a dialogue with the ghost of André Malraux in trying to understand the importance of the museum as a space for appreciating artefacts from the past and from a range of different cultures (Malraux 1978). While it is Malraux's suggestion that the photographic reproduction of artworks as images in books creates the possibility for a new kind of museum experience – the *musée imaginaire* – and this is what he is best known for when we think of his writing on museums, he nevertheless had a broader understanding of museums and their role than that. Malraux's approach to the museum was one that focused not only on the possibilities of access derived by technological advances in copying (notably photography) and in making available access to the truth of artworks through reproduced images of them (he shared an optimism with Benjamin around the liberating effects of the loss of aura in this respect, see also Ivins 1953), but also a celebration of the bourgeois museum's monumentalizing of art out of context.

For Malraux, the museum takes the artefact out of its everyday context. Whereas for the cultural critics of the museum and other heritage spaces this is precisely the problem with their role, and this is why they seek out ruins and their evocative power beyond the spaces of heritage in order to recapture a sense of authentic history out of time, for Malraux it is the museum that is the space of the event; a space where the voices of silence within art might be heard. For Malraux, decontextualising artworks provides the opportunity that they might assume the character of the event rather than the betrayal of the event. Unlike most critics of the museum for whom process and form are alienated from one another in culture, Malraux has a different view. This is Lyotard's view too; of engaging with a past outside of the flow of time such that the event might be written and recognised as such:

The museum monumentalizes. It is the mind concerned about what it might have been and done. It sets up and hangs its remainders. It turns them into traces, which are remainders snatched from inattention. (Lyotard 1997: 167)

And yet Lyotard openly acknowledges that in presenting artefacts within this space as monuments to the past in the ways that the museum does, the event does not speak unaided, such display is an act of writing the event. But to not engage in such writing, to seek instead the evocative power of the event outside of writing, is an impossibility:

It is said that works of art are imprisoned in the museum. On the contrary, they are incarcerated within reality, within cult or cultural objects; and the museum, by distancing them from the contingency of their occurrence, can write and deliver what there is of writing and of the cry within them. Monumentation suspends the course of the deaf and blind world that cast the work, like every object, into the inert. (1997: 175)

This is a rather different approach to the relationship between the museum and history to that found in Benjamin or in the work of more recent commentators on museums and heritage, who take inspiration from him in developing a critique of the museum and heritage as an embodiment of a bourgeois ideal of cultural heroism in which the past is saved from oblivion and bourgeois culture monumentalised in phantasmagoric form as the culmination of history (see for example Saisselin 1985; Huyssen 1995; 2004; Maleuvre 1999).

If we were to take at face value the conceited bourgeois story that museums, most notably history and art museums, have told about themselves and sought to practice – that they are spaces for conserving and preserving culture, whether in universalist or nationalist form; that they are places of interpretation of artefacts where a better understanding of the past can be gained; that they are conservers of things against ruin so that future generations might be able to see and appreciate artefacts from their past – then we would want to agree with the critique of the museum and side against Malraux and Lyotard. This kind of historicism, often associated with an over-interpretation of artefacts, has the event as its enemy as Lyotard himself acknowledges (1997: 175–177). But that is not all that

museums do. What Malraux and Lyotard have in mind instead is a challenge to the museum such that the event might be allowed to live, not as event, but precisely as a written event – as a trace rather than a remainder – within their walls.

It is certainly the case that few museums always do this work very effectively. The collecting imperative creates a curatorial space in which the conservation of things, as much as the opportunity for encounter and interpretation, is often seen as paramount. The question is: how might museums engage in a self-critique of this position without losing their significance as museums? Lyotard does not provide us with an answer in the way that Malraux does (the art-book full of photographic reproductions of artworks) other than to suggest that to monumentalise art (*monu-mentum*) has the capacity to ambiguously produce a space that can reflect either the mind of a guard or its opposite – a guard of the mind (1997: 166–167). It is the latter, of course, that he wishes to acknowledge while challenging critics who reduce the museum function in their critiques to the former role. But he at least poses the question, to which we might answer: how can we find the event within the museum? How can we write it as a trace such that the past might speak and alter our perspective – even if that does not lead to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist society? An answer to this is to suggest that museums should see themselves primarily not as *chronos*-spaces of conservation but as *chronos*-spaces of disposal in which their custodianship of artefacts is recognised as temporary rather than eternal.

There are very few museums that are more than two hundred years old, even fewer that have a history of more than three hundred years unaltered. Yet these modern museums typically see themselves as space of perpetuity – spaces where things will be conserved forever so that the past will remain available to whatever kind of visiting public might enter through their doors in the future. And yet we know that this must be a false hope, a bourgeois fantasy of eternity that can never be fully realised. The museum is always-already a space in ruins before the fact. The history of that much older and longer established institution, the library, is instructive in this respect (see Polastron 2007). In long historical perspective and, despite the clear and conscientious intentions and practices of generations of librarians, if you want to destroy books, erase them from existence and leave

only a few remains, then the best way to do so is to collect them together in one space and call it a library. War and revolt, fire and flood, humidity and aridity, looters or careless cataloguers will do the rest.

The same is the case for museums where it is artworks and other material artefacts that are collected rather than books. Whether it be the library of Alexandria in 48 BCE or the museum in Baghdad in 2003, bringing things together in one space can ultimately only have one effect: it makes it easier for them to be disposed of in some way or other. Museums, like libraries, while they do not always become incinerators (though they can be very effective in that role when the flames take hold) or sites of final burial, are, above all, spaces-between, conduits of disposal (Munro 1998). In particular, they are spaces between first and second burial (Hertz 1960); between the removal of things from their living social and historical context (first burial – usually in the site of the market, shop or auction house) and their final irrevocable destruction and loss to the world (second burial). That space-between is the space where the dead, the artefacts, are honoured (interpreted) so that they can pass on in a culturally managed way. As conduits of disposal (from both the things as material forms and as culturally and historically specific values and interpretations), museums are spaces where artefacts become ruins over time and where that ruined state invokes the possibility of recognition as such.

In long historical perspective we can only know cultures through the few ruined remains that are left behind in the charred rubble of libraries and palaces or dug out of the ground in spaces of ritual disposal. History is nothing but that which radiates from the barely warm glow of these cultural embers. Over time, few collections escape the fate of decay, partial destruction or dispersal in some form or other. It is through disposal rather than conservation that we know what cultures are, certainly literate and artefact-rich cultures.

The reason we can say this is because disposal means two things: to get rid of something – to dispose of it – and to make something available, to have it at our disposal (Hetherington 2004). It is this ambiguity of removal/availability that is central to the role of the museum. We know civilisations through their catastrophic fires (Goudsblom 1992), their plunder and commoditised booty. The cultural biography of things is such that

it is disposal in some form – an act of placing in some kind of abeyance as much as irrevocable removal – that inscribes their character, rather than conservation and holding in place for all time. Things move, and they change as they move in time if not in space. As Mauss (1990) and Bataille (1991) knew, to dispose of something in societies that are characterised by an abundance of goods is always the most socially creative of acts. It is above all creative not just because of what it gets rid of but because of what it leaves behind as a remainder. Culture is that which is turned from a remainder into a trace, and that requires that there be an acknowledgment that what is there is already a ruin or will become one. In societies of the utmost abundance known, capitalist societies, it is museums that assume this culturally significant role (Hetherington 2007).

As all collectors know, all the hard work and investment they have put into building their collections is likely to be undone at some point in the future: by theft, the need to sell, because of some destructive event in their lifetime, or through dispersal to, or disposal by, their philistine heirs after they are gone. That is why so many try to stall that from happening by bequest of their collections to places like museums where they think they will be safe.³ Museums risk assuming the role of the over-protective collector too. Our task must be to ask them to relinquish that role in the long term and see their position as a transitory and inherently tragic one – as creative betrayers of the idea of perpetuity rather than its guardians. That is where a radical critique of the museums that defends their importance rather than castigates them for existing might develop. What such a perspective might argue is this: culture is not the event itself but the writing of the event in such a way that its *kairos*, or moment of opportunity, is revealed as a part of the *chronos* story and not just as a point of critical departure from it.

3 Something that is increasingly unlikely as most museums no longer have the space to store new collections let alone display them. Most museums now have to develop de-accessioning policies whereby they can effectively and legitimately get rid of things in their collections.

It is not, then, that process becomes alienated form and that this is revealed in the ruin, but that process and form are inextricably the same thing when taken in a temporal rather than simply spatial context. That is what the ruin shows us, that is what the voice of silence tells us. The opportunity of the museum, then, is to recognise that it is a conduit for the disposal of things – a transit lounge for objects awaiting departure into oblivion – and thereby the revealer of cultural process, and that it may find ways of writing that into our culture so that we might better know not only the past but perhaps even our own future too.

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