

## **Temple of Industrial Devotion**

**Ruins put to work: the utilisation of the ruin as a symbolic medium of history's traces and prospective futures.**

*By Steven Ingman.*

Underpinned by my experience of a ruined lime kiln near Buxton, Derbyshire, this essay will investigate how artists utilise the properties of ruin-aesthetics to convey notions of change and time. I will examine a number of artists' practices and consider how they engage with the ruin in order to identify its function in society and the transition in the role of the building to ruin. I will also consider the message that the ruin can deliver, how the physical aesthetic qualities of the ruin are embodied through creative means, debate its chronological point in time and consider the ruin for its narrative and historical content.

Earlier this year, during a wet spring day, I took a walk. The ground of the path was muddy and loose sections of bricks suggested it been a road or track at some point. In the distance there was the sound of cars passing on the A6 Bakewell road, running parallel down in the valley. Access up and along the track was now only possible on foot due to a fallen tree, and evidence of recent landslides made it even less inviting. The further up I went along the footpath, weaving between the trees, the less the road became evident. My first glimpse of the structure was at a distance, a gray towering mass seemed to emerge from nothing; my eyes deceived by the crisscross of branches and the structure's mergence with the cliff face. On a closer inspection the aesthetic qualities of decaying, stained concrete and fallen rubble, made it apparent that the structure was a ruin. My immediate thoughts and curiosity questioned the purpose of such a monolithic structure: what was it, who built it and what was it for? It wasn't until afterwards that I discovered that it had once been a working lime kiln.



Lime kiln ruin near Buxton, Derbyshire

When thinking of the ruin we see it as having a tangible connection with the past, yet ruins have a vast and complex history and their ideology allows them to be sited in the past, present or the future. The definition of the ruin and its meaning can be interpreted in many ways and we ask a lot of them. This is outlined by Brian Dillon in his introduction to the catalogue for *Ruin Lust*, Tate Britain 2014: ruins can be a demonstration of decay and collapse, of one's mortality or a portent of the future consequents facing our civilization. They allow us to contemplate aesthetic beauty, elicit a nostalgic feeling for past greatness or present a sight of nature in the process of reclaiming the built environment. They can be a monument to the dead of a past battle or disaster, a representation of the decline of an economy, a vision of our future or a positive sign of change and technological advancement (Dillon, 2014).

The ruined lime kiln, in its present state of decay and placement, made me question its position in time. It felt as if its fabrication could have happened at any point and it was through this reflection that I considered the work of Paul Virilio. In 1958 Virilio began to document the ruined bunkers known as the Atlantic wall or 'Atlantikwall' built

by Nazi Germany in the Second World War. In his essay and documented photographs entitled 'Bunker Archaeology' (1975) Virilio wanted to change the outlook and cultural thinking regarding the bunkers. Virilio contemplates the bunkers present position in time, remarking on the aesthetic qualities of the bunkers' architecture, their location and the change of use in society now that their purpose is defunct. This line of enquiry and thinking enables the bunkers to have a sense of implacable chronological time, allowing the bunker to come from the past, yet appear almost as though seemingly placed by a futuristic race, whilst they sit in the present. (Virilio,1975).



Paul Virilio, "Bunker Archeology"



Lime kiln ruin near Buxton, Derbyshire

The development and construction of the lime kiln structure was completed in stages over the course of a hundred years. The most recent feature was constructed in concrete and of Modernist design, similar to that of a World War Two bunker. Five buttresses equally spaced and counterfort against the cliff face form a line of columns that support a top section of indented concrete squares. A beam runs horizontally, connecting the columns, creating a mammoth structure that has a sense of significance, power and grandeur similar to that of a church nave. On first encounter the structure itself seems almost futuristic, even science fiction of design, yet at the same time could be attributed to South American architecture of ancient Aztec, Inca and Mayan civilizations. I felt it was in these qualities, and the ideas of Paul Virilio, that the ruin could gain a greater sense of potential narrative and meaning, as well as suggest changes in chronological time. J G Ballard, like Virilio, observed the bunkers of the 'Atlantikwall' and saw the ruin's ability to be sited in the past, present and future. Ballard remarked on the present use of the ruined bunkers and made a comparison with the aesthetic of the 1950's post war concrete structures of British car parks and tower blocks. Through this connection Ballard states that these structures of Modernist utopian living are in fact forewarning of their own ruin. Ballard reflected on the past

Modernist utopian ideas of the 1920's and 1930's and considered the future of what might have been, whilst also considering that though the Modernist ideology is lost the structures remain (Ballard, 2006)



Unité d'Habitation in Briey-en-Forêt France

The Modernist apartment block Unité d'Habitation in Briey-en-Forêt France, was the inspiration behind a body of paintings by Peter Doig entitled 'Concrete Cabin'. The paintings were produced between 1991 and 1999 and they were influenced by the then derelict Modernist building. The building was constructed within woodland and opened in 1961, though the building went through a period of uncertainty and was derelict by 1973. Its architect Le Corbusier envisioned it as a way of bringing together culture and nature, as well as creating an ideal living space (Searle, Scott & Grenier, 2007). In a twist on Le Corbusier's utopian concept of the unification of culture and nature, Georg Simmel (1911) considered architecture a product of culture and argued that the interaction of nature on a building, and its eventual decay, signifies the only time art would directly battle with nature.



Peter Doig, Concrete Cabin, 1994. oil on canvas, 198 x 275cm

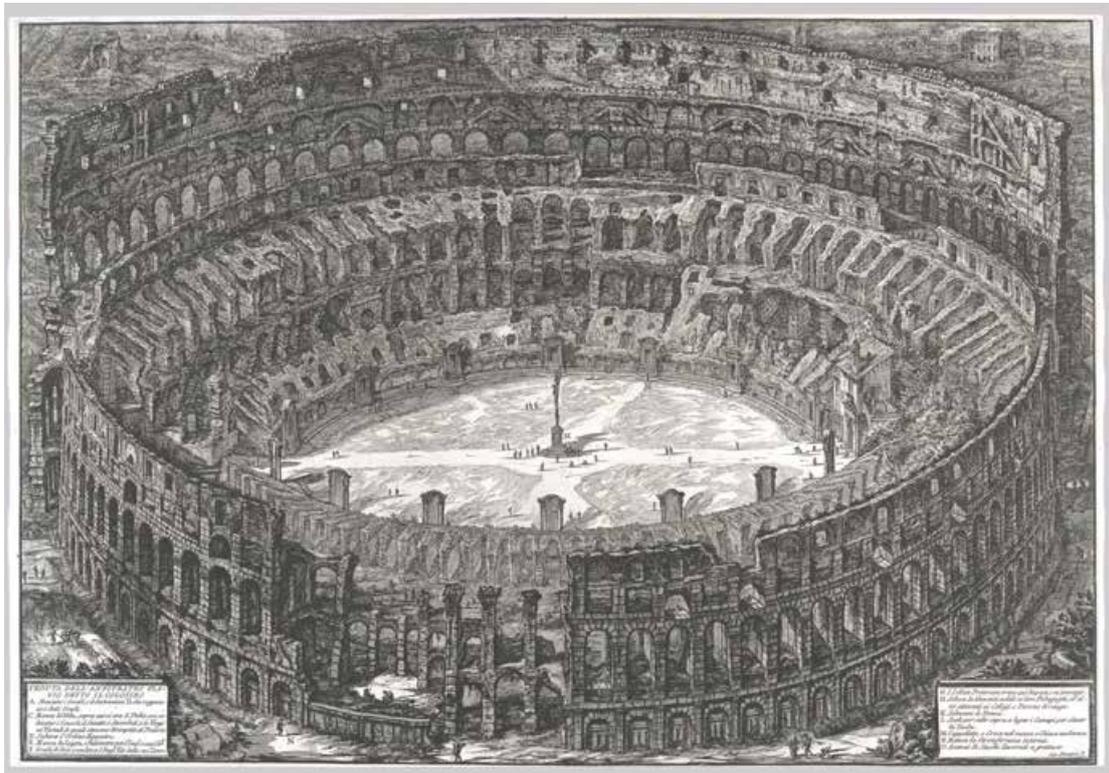
Doig visited the building in the early 1990's as part of a team to help regenerate the apartments and he documented it in a partially abandoned state ([www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)) It is suggested by Adrian Searle in *A Kind of Blankness* (2007) that in Doig's paintings he is not only showing us the passing of time but also the passing of Modernism. In a Guardian interview Doig discussed his early work, he remarked on the way the building appeared to erupt out of the woodland and how he was surprised by the way the building transformed itself from a piece of architecture into a feeling (Adams 2008). Within the series Concrete Cabin there is a tension between the foreground and the background, a change within the dynamics of the straight, formal architecture and the natural woodland. Like Doig I was amazed by the relationship between the trees and the ruined lime kiln and its sudden materialisation in the landscape. I was struck by the effect of nature reclaiming the ruined lime kiln and how the vegetation had begun to take hold, even growing between the cracks of the mineral stained concrete beams and platforms.



Unité d'Habitation in Briey-en-Forêt France

In the eighteenth century Italian artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi was a groundbreaking figure in depicting the ruin. In his etchings, Piranesi shows us vegetation reclaiming the ancient buildings of Rome, with broken columns becoming overrun and slowly beginning to disintegrate. In this period through his etchings he enabled the process of nature's reclaiming of the ruin to be made understandable and this became a topical theme within his work. Some of his etchings included human figures, a physical presence of man who acts as a witness within the work to nature's reclaiming of the ruin (Roth, Lyons & Merewether, 1997). Piranesi considered nature's position of the ruin and in a bird's eye view of the Colosseum allowed for the ruins spectacle to be marvelled from a detached perspective (Dillon, 2014). Its radical view point was at the time impossible to achieve in reality and therefore enabled the viewer to consider the Colosseum as a figment of nature, constructed not by man but by something mythical. (Woodward, 2002). It has been argued that Piranesi bird's eye depiction of the Colosseum is in fact showing the end of an empire (Dillon, 2014). Piranesi felt that there was a chronological conversation happening between the ruins and aspects of his work enabled the viewer to become detached from time. He

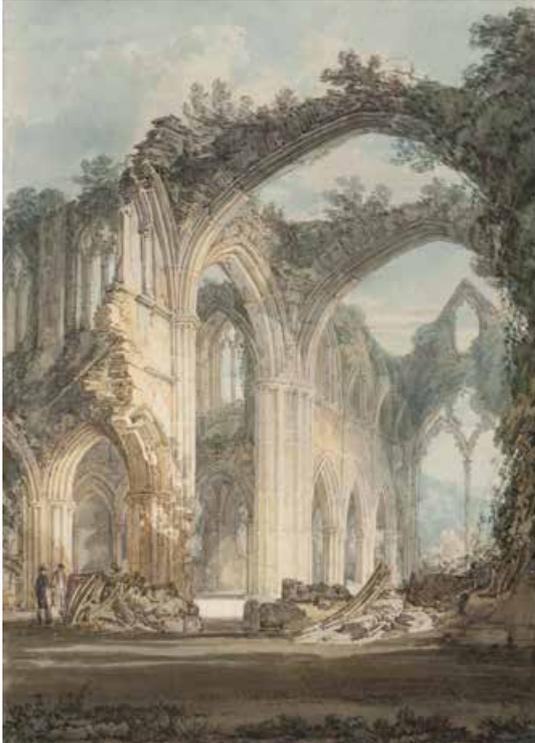
achieved this by the juxtaposition of a range of architectural elements from different places and chronological times, thus enabling the viewer to switch between past, present and future. (Dillon, 2014).



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Veduta dell'Anfiteatro Flavio detto il Colosseo, from: 'Vedute di Roma' 1776, etching, 76.2 x 101.6 cm

In encountering the lime kiln, its proud structural forms are evident and are a marvel of human engineering and craftsmanship. I feel in its relationship with nature, and nature's ability to modify the form, a new perspective on its physical aesthetic beauty is created. Layers of natural erosion also heighten the time element associated with the ruin. In his poem 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey' William Wordsworth (1798) suggests that nature is not destroying the chronological endeavours of humanity but in fact enhancing it, welcoming humanity back to gaze at the marvel. Wordsworth suggests that we should find strength within the ruin because what remains is the creative sole of humanity (Roth, Lyons & Merewether, 1997). Tintern Abbey was also a source of inspiration for several key creative figures in the

18<sup>th</sup> century. A young J.M.W. Turner produced a series of watercolor paintings based on the abbey, attempting to capture and evoke a feeling of the picturesque. His painting alludes to the medieval past, its eventual demise, and nature's conquest over past culture. (Dillon, 2014).



J M W Turner, Tintern Abbey: The Crossing and Chancel, Looking towards the East Window, graphite and watercolour on paper, 35.9 x 25 cm

It was during this period of the eighteenth century that ruins rose to prominence in European culture and creatives began to formulate ideas surrounding the ruin and Romanticism. This early enthusiasm for ruins culminated with the development of a Romantic aesthetic of fragmentation, failure and picturesque decline (Dillon, 2011). A wealth of artist, writers and creatives took influence from the ruin during the Romantic period through the Picturesque, Sublime and Gothic. They are representatives of the zeal for picturesque ruins, the conquest of nature over vestiges of civilization and the notion that a natural landscape was enhanced by a souvenir of human time (Dillon, 2014). They also highlighted that this brave new world would have an eventual decline and that there was a sense of loss, but also of a time of change and moving forward (Murphy, 2014). The efforts of artists and poets enabled ruins to become fashionable within the high society of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Garden architecture of fake ruins (or follies) were constructed across Britain and France and landowners would

sometimes even employ a poet or hermit to reside within the structures. In building a ruin, the gentrified proprietors wanted to make a statement of their cultural awareness of the value of the ruin (Dillon, 2014). Although fake, these ruins would attempt to evoke the artists' and other creatives' endeavours. They would be a tangible reality that would allow for philosophical debate that had an air of history and sense of enlightenment, becoming a beacon of inspiration and merging fantasy, fiction and reality (Woodward, 2002). These false ruins were also constructed as a signifier of change. Gentrified proprietors would commission ruined sections of medieval architecture depicting religious places of worship or castle battlements, not purely for aesthetic delight but because of what they represented in a ruined state. The owner enjoyed the visible destruction and decay of the obsolete archaic medieval religious and royal institutions (Williams, 2010)

In Germany, Medieval Gothic ruins featured in the work of Romantic landscape painter Casper David Friedrich. Within his work Friedrich wanted to create an emotional response to nature that contained a sense of spirituality (Wolf, 2003). In Friedrich's painting 'The Abbey in the Oakwood' (1808–10) he evokes ideas of the Sublime and uses the landscape as a way of contemplating ideas around time, human mortality and the divine. In this somber image, the coffin and ruin are significant in representing human mortality. The old oak trees signify nature's endurance in time and echo an older history, which pre-dates Christianity, becoming symbolic representations of past nature-worshipping faiths. The sky in the painting is a reminder that time will endure and preside over the chronology of all things on Earth, moving beyond notions of death. Both the light of the sky and the new crescent moon give a sense of new life and of the future, a rebirth, and the change in season from winter to spring. The religious iconography of a crucifix in the cemetery signifies resurrection and the possibilities of rebirth. In the painting Friedrich is evoking serious questions that contemplate our role in the universe and of our time on earth. His painting presents human time and shows how short our lives are. He gives a sense of nature's time and its endurance and then he offers a sense of an immortal God's time that is everlasting. (www.khanacademy.org, 2012).



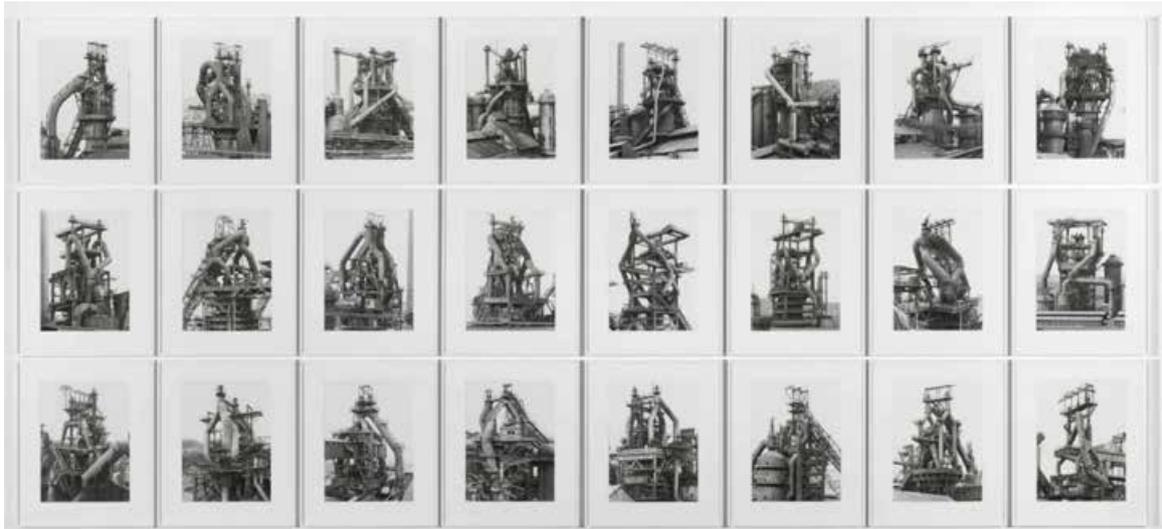
Casper David Friedrich, *The Abbey in the Oakwood*, 1809–10, oil on canvas, 110 cm × 171 cm

Ideas about the transition from old to new are evident in 'The Fighting Temeraire' (1838) by J M W Turner. The painting depicts the ship HMS Temeraire, in a dilapidated and ruined state, in the process of being tugged to her last berth to be broken up. With the loss of its sails and the ability of self-propulsion, the ship is being towed, powered by the new steam technology of the period. In this, Turner is reflecting on the time of change of the Industrial Revolution. There is a sense of loss and a nostalgia for the past and its military history, not only depicted in the old warship being towed but also in the ship with full sails in the background ([www.nationalgallery.org.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk)). Looking at the painting from a contemporary viewpoint, and knowing how paintings are not static in time, we can say that Turner is alluding to the future and the potential in technological development. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that the pioneering steam power itself would be superseded and eventually replaced.



J M W Turner, The Fighting Temeraire,  
oil on canvas, 91 cm x 122 cm

Further reading around the history of the lime kiln ruin revealed that it was built in the 1860's and discontinued in 1954. At the time of its disuse it was the last traditionally coal fired shaft kiln in Derbyshire (<https://historicengland.org.uk>). Technological advancements and the move away from coal have seen the closure of industrial sites, many of which if not demolished became ruins. The work of Bernd and Hilla Becher helped to change the perspective on industrial heritage and develop a new way of seeing and perceiving the aesthetic nature of these industrial ruins. In the late 1950's the Bechers began their documentation of the disappearing industrial architecture of Germany's Ruhr region, a place undergoing structural change and a move away from heavy industries to a service economy. (Hell, & Schonle , 2010). This was the start of a project that would last for more than four decades and would see the Bechers document the disappearing industrial landscapes across Europe and the United States (Becher, Becher & Lange. 2002).



Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher, Blast Furnaces, from Group of 6 Typologies, 1969–95, 24 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper, 169.2 x 371.5 cm

The Bechers wanted to explore an interest they had in industrial architecture, as these buildings were considered to be functional, calculated to be efficient and lack creative design (Lingwood, 2002) It was in these characteristics that they placed an importance on the architecture, regarding them as “anonymous sculptures” (Hell & Schonle, 2010 pg274). The Bechers developed a stringent, obsessive working method of documentation, often researching beforehand and used photographic equipment that would allow for exceptional detail (Lingwood, 2002). In the photographs, they presented these architectural structures as primary forms, detailed and clear as to allow architectural differences to become apparent (Lingwood, 2002). In then sequencing the photographs into sets determined by their industrial functionality and presenting the images close together they allowed the structures to become one, but also amplified their subtle differences enabling a greater appreciation in the individual architectural design (Lingwood, 2002). The Bechers knew that the structures had a short lifespan due to their design and function and through their photographic documentation of industrial monuments they allow the buildings to have the feeling of timelessness, whilst simultaneously imbuing a sense of historical time (Lingwood, 2002)



David Schnell's, Gelbe Scheune, 2005, oil on canvas, 210 x 330 cm.

The change and rejuvenation of an industrial site is a theme that runs through the work of contemporary landscape painter David Schnell. His paintings explore the regeneration of monumental scars in the landscape created by industrial processes whilst considering the positive and negative changes on the landscape by economic forces (Daniels, Hartup & Ruhrberg, 2007). Schnell's paintings reflect the landscape surrounding the city of Leipzig, a former site of cold war industrial open-cast coal mining. Through his work Schnell combines the chronology of this landscape: the forest that stood before its industrialization, the physical industrial work of the mining and then the post creation of lakes and the building of commercial infrastructure (Daniels, Hartup & Ruhrberg, 2007). In Schnell's painting 'Gelbe Scheune' (2005) he immerses the viewer within a ruined hut-like structure. The ruin's aesthetics are conveyed by the gaping holes, fallen slats and signs of vegetation growth. Schnell's choice of composition positions the viewer in such a way that is reminiscent of Turner's 'Tintern Abbey: The Crossing and Chancel, Looking towards the East Window' (1794). This emersion of the viewer is also similar to the experience I perceived at the lime kiln ruin. In Schnell's painting, the scale of the work and composition makes the audience become similarly positioned as the figures depicted by Turner. It could be argued that Schnell offers a contemporary take on the 18<sup>th</sup> century concept of the Sublime (due to composition, scale and grandness). However, Schnell describes the

lack of human figures as a way of making the viewer ask questions of who lived there and who built the architecture in his work (Daniels, Hartup & Ruhrberg, 2007).



Lime kiln ruin near Buxton, Derbyshire

In surveying the lime kiln ruin, I found myself pondering the history of human activity at the site and the society before its demise. I began to think of the ruin's potential for future encounters and the narrative and messages they can carry. This was considered by German architect Albert Speer who pioneered the theory of the 'ruin value' or 'Ruinenwert'. Speer's theory was born when he witnessed the demolition of buildings in Nuremberg in the 1930's, as part of the Nazi rebuilding. He remarked that these buildings did not make good ruins and because of this he would construct his buildings out of materials that would endure. He wished for his buildings to signify greatness and contain a sense of Imperialism, even in a state of decay, much like that of ancient civilizations such as Rome. The ruins of the future in Speer's ideology would be a reminder of Germany's mighty imperial past. Speer even produced a drawing in the style of 18<sup>th</sup> century romantic artists, which imagined a future with one of Speer's

architectural achievements presented as a romantic ruin, overgrown yet still signifying its imperial stance. (Hell & Schonle, 2010).



Lime kiln ruin near Buxton, Derbyshire

The materials used in constructing the lime kiln would not have featured in Speers 'Ruinenwert' concept. The choice of concrete in the construction of the lime kiln has not endured the long-term effects of weathering, yet there is a sense of aesthetic beauty in the staining and drips that run down the concrete buttresses. This physical alteration of the surface gives greater evidence of the structure's demise and becomes a tangible link to time. The drips make me think of the possibilities in recreating the building through the material reality of oil paint. The artist Frank Auerbach is well known for producing paintings that evoke a true reality through the substance of oil paint. In the 1950's and 1960's Auerbach became interested in capturing the feeling of London in a state of transformation. The Blitz bombing had seen large parts of the city destroyed and post-war saw its re-building. The derelict bomb-sites became scenes of action, the ruins were knocked down and new constructions emerged. (Hughes, 1992). His fascination bore from the architectural process and the sense of change between the bombed ruin and the construction of a new building (Lepine,

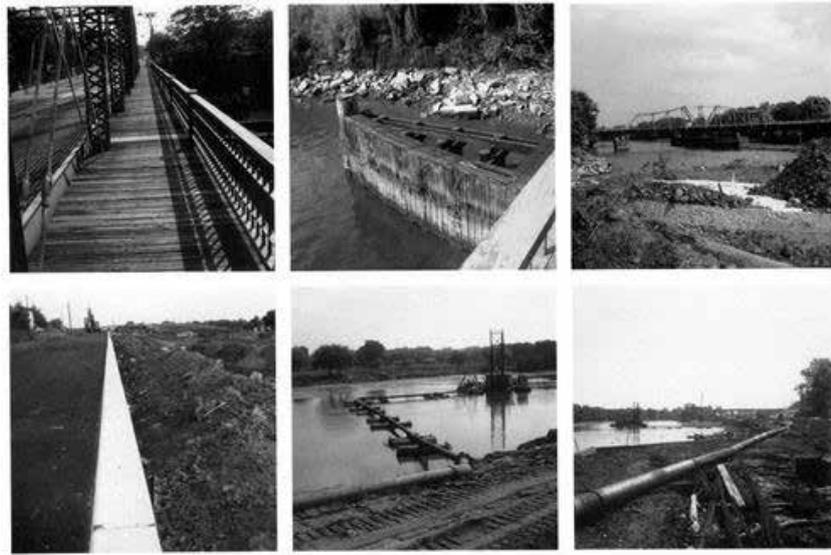
2009). Auerbach became fascinated by the structural qualities of the machinery, scaffolding and the excavations of the mud. In his paintings the earthy pigment makes a connection with the excavations and the physicality of the mud, while the overlaid emboldened crisscross of structural lines give weight to the scaffolding (Hughes, 1992). His paintings are built up by a multitude of layers and he is constantly reworking the surface (Vilk 2009), embodying in the thick paint the archaeology of the artist's revisions (De Mille, 2009). The physicality of the paint is almost sculptural and appears to emulate the rise of the new construction out of the building site (Lepine, 2009).



Frank Auerbach,  
'Rebuilding the Empire  
Cinema, Leicester  
Square', 1962, oil on  
board, 152.5 x 152.5 cm

Within Auerbach's paintings there is a physical embodiment of the construction site within the thick layering of paint which expresses the process of change. This consideration of the transformation of the construction site and the notion of buildings becoming ruins and the ruins becoming buildings is similar to the ideas Robert Smithson proposed in his essay 'Monuments of the Passaic' (1967). He describes his trip to Passaic, New Jersey, USA where he surveys the landscape and reflects on the intensified American urbanization of the 1950's and 1960's. Smithson's describes various industrial relics and these 'monuments' consist of buildings such as a sandpit, an old bridge or a half constructed road. These buildings can be considered banal and conventional, as they are located in the suburbs and will never embody grandness, unlike the ruins of Rome, however they demonstrate Smithson's preoccupation with time and entropy. Smithson considers aspects of the monuments by comparing the

construction of a half-finished highway and the remains of the old road, half bulldozed. He explains that these are in fact 'ruins in reverse'. He argues that new architecture will rise into ruin before it has ever been completed. In this Smithson presents the idea of entropy, a chronological merging that keeps the ruin in a stationary period, freezing the element of change, allowing us to consider the future that will never arrive and a past that is in the present (Smithson, 1967).



Collection of photographs taken by Robert Smithson in Passaic, New Jersey

Brian McHale (2015) argued that Robert Smithson's ideas and photographic documentation surrounding the ruin pioneered the idea of 'Ruin Porn'. The term is mainly associated with the region straddling North-Eastern and Midwest United States termed the Rust Belt, with Detroit being considered a 'Ruin Porn' haven. The catalyst for much of this current focus on ruins is not the result of war but rather the fall in economic industries, for example in Detroit ruins have results from the economic decline related to the slowdown in the motor industry of the 1970's (McHale, 2015). Whilst there has been debate on the ethical use of the term 'Ruin Porn' (Woodward, 2013), there is clearly a contemporary interest in the ruin which has seen Chernobyl, the site of the worst industrial nuclear disaster in history, attracting 12,000 visitors a year. (Nazaryan, 2014). The debate into our contemporary fascination of the ruin, and the mass of internet 'Ruin Porn' and photographic sites, is potentially driven by ideas of time, mortality and our consideration of potential post-apocalyptic futures resulting

from impending global disasters. (Apel, 2015). A key artist in depicting apocalyptic visions is the nineteenth century painter John Martin, who in many ways could be considered ahead of his time. His choice of colour and use of the sublime in dramatic effects created scenes that made his work the Hollywood blockbusters of his time. Comparable to films such as '2012' (2009) and 'The Day After Tomorrow' (2004) Martin gave the Victorian spectators scenes of catastrophic events from history and the Bible to enthral his audiences ([www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)). His paintings still have the power to make us contemplate our own future and consider the possibilities of its downfall and ruin (Jones, 2011)



John Martin, The Great Day of His Wrath, 1851-53, oil on canvas, 240 x 340 cm

Through various means creatives have used the aesthetic qualities of the ruin to explore ideas around change. The artist Frank Auerbach embodies the physicality of the construction site through the material reality of paint, encapsulating the transition from ruin to a new building. The Bechers document the change in technology and economics creating a historical record that considers the subtle changes in industrial structural forms, highlighting the beauty of the industrial ruin. In Piranesi's work he explores the effects of nature reclaiming the ruin and the changes in aesthetic structural form. This notion of change and process of transformation in the aesthetics of the ruin also enables us to debate time and consider our own mortality. Paul Virilio's concept developed through observations of ruined bunkers and their role in society allows us to site the ruin in the past, present and future. In this he allows us to think of

the ruin as timeless. In Speer's 'Ruinenwert' he considers the potential of the ruin and the message it can evoke to future generations. J G Ballard uses the ruin to describe the passing of an ideology, while Smithson debates entropy within the modern ruin with constructions rising into ruin before they are built. John Martin evokes the dramatic possibilities of the apocalypse, the end of all time and a future of ruins and ruination. It is clear in the debate surrounding the ruin that they are put to work in considering time and change. Through this consideration of ideas my work will position the ruin in a state of flux between its emergence and its disappearance. Through this the ruin evokes its history and its potential, allowing us to both look back and be a window into what might become. In this process of change the ruin redefines its chronological placement in time, evoking a deeper ambiguity in its narrative.

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