

## The Value of Ruins: Allegories of Destruction in Benjamin and Speer

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### Introduction: the ruin and the aestheticisation of politics

This paper seeks to explore some of the theoretical implications of the ruin as it emerged contemporaneously, but in very different guises, in the work of Walter Benjamin and Albert Speer. In Speer's 'Theory of Ruin Value', the aesthetic fragmentation he imagines in the future ruins of his buildings is belied by their continuing ideological totality. Conversely, in the context of Benjamin's philosophy of history the ruin provides an emblem, not only of the melancholic worldview presented in Baroque tragic drama, but of allegory as a critical tool for historical materialism. Benjamin's concept of the ruin, especially as adumbrated in his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, is valuable because it delves beyond the aesthetic of the ruin as an object, and reads it as a process, a means of demythifying and stripping away symbolism - a means of approaching historical truth through reduction, at the *expense* of romantic aesthetics. For Speer the ruin provides an established conduit to aesthetic affect, a means of adding or accumulating 'age value' not in pursuit of historical truth, but rather a mythological history, supported and authorised by the ruin's picturesque aesthetic.

Many of the issues of the political culpability of architecture have already been played out in reference to Speer's work, which has been largely excluded from the architectural canon on the grounds that its problematic political program remains somehow inherent in its material. Architectural history, with the notable exception of Leon Krier's efforts at historical rehabilitation,<sup>1</sup> tends to relegate Speer's oeuvre to a historical footnote on Nazi megalomania.<sup>2</sup> It is categorically not my intention to act as an apologist for either the political or architectural program of Nazism. But the problem with any attempt to analyse a phenomenon deeply engaged in the political and historical realm in anything other than political and historical terms is that it can be read as, at best, a trivialisation of the 'real' moral issue, and at worst a justification of heinous crimes. This is particularly true of an analysis based in aesthetics, which is often taken, falsely, to imply that appearance can be divorced with impunity from content. So this paper treads the dangerous ground of the overlap between the ethical and aesthetic realms. I would justify this by recourse to the material itself - Speer's architecture could be said to manifest precisely the 'aestheticisation of politics' that Benjamin decried. Speer's architectural propaganda machines, the Reichschancellery, the Great Hall, and the Zeppelin Field, would thus be aesthetic vehicles for the enforcement and propagation of Nazi ideology.

My aim is not to set up a dichotomy between Speer's concept of 'Ruin Value' and Benjamin's account of allegory in the ruin - even though this may be tempting in political terms - because this would be a simplification into binary opposition of a relationship which is considerably more complex. Of course, it is only possible to make a comparison between these two figures after first establishing that much of Walter Benjamin's critical thought, especially late in his career, was developed in direct opposition to the fascist ideology which Speer exemplifies. In turn, Speer's role as official architect and later armaments minister for the Nazi party dictates that his interest in the ruin is as a vehicle for perpetuating the ideological nationalist romanticism of the party. I will attempt to address this schism by subsuming Speer's 'Theory of Ruin Value', which

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<sup>1</sup> See Leon Krier (ed), *Albert Speer – Architecture*, Brussels, Archives d'Architecture Moderne, 1985; Leon Krier, "Forwards, Comrades, We Must Go Back," *Oppositions* 24, Spring 1981, pp. 27-37; and Joan Ockman's refutation 'The Most Interesting Form of Lie,' *Oppositions* 24, Spring 1981, pp. 38-47.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Peter Blundell-Jones, 'Architecture and Political Legitimation,' *Architectural Review*, vol 200, no 1193, 1996, pp. 64-68; Barbara Miller Lane, 'Architects in Power: Politics and Ideology in the Work of Ernst May and Albert Speer', *Art and Art History: Images and their Meaning*, ed Robery Rotberg and Theodore Rabb, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 283-310; Wolfgang Schäche, 'Nazi Architecture and its Approach to Antiquity,' *Architectural Design*, vol 53, no 11/12, 1983, pp. 81-88; Robert Taylor, *The Word in Stone: The Role of Architecture in the National Socialist Ideology*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1974; Colin St John Wilson, 'Speer and the Fear of Freedom,' *The Architectural Review*, vol 173, no. 1036, 1983, pp. 22-25.

is hardly a developed critical position and really little more than an anecdote, within the framework of Benjamin's more sophisticated conception of the same motif. I will therefore be reading Speer through Benjamin, and taking the 'law of ruins' as a glancing point of intersection. The relation between the two is thus reworked into an opposition between the tragic, transient specificity of Benjamin's theory of allegorical history, and the homogenising atemporality of Speer's concept of ruin value. The paper concludes with the idea that ruination, conceived as a means of revealing the bare bones of truth, stripped of myth and spectacle to a positive state of 'poverty', remains a valuable critical tool.

Given that the aestheticisation of politics and the manipulation of mythology for political gain are still frighteningly prevalent in the present day, and given also the increasing popularisation of quasi-fascist ideologies throughout the world, there could hardly be a more pressing justification to re-visit Benjamin's work. Likewise, the complex interrelations between architecture and politics bear continuing analysis, and the culpability of architecture in representing totalitarian political regimes, as relevant today as it was in the 1930's, requires constant vigilance. My purpose here, then, is fourfold. Firstly, I aim to point out and analyse an historical curiosity – that Walter Benjamin and Albert Speer, two figures who could hardly be further separated on the political spectrum, employed the same emblem – the ruin - to illustrate their relative conceptions of tradition, history, and the place of the individual within them. Secondly, I aim to examine what can be derived from this use of the built environment as a metaphor for much broader political, aesthetic, and philosophical questions. Thirdly, I aim to reiterate Benjamin's warning, so timely and yet so tragically unheeded, of the dangers of allowing spectacle to infiltrate politics, and to disguise the workings of totalitarianism. Fourth and last, I wish to open a speculation on architectural monumentality, and the possible relationship between ruin and monument. This last point was the question around which this paper was originally conceived – as a means of approaching monumentality from its 'other'. It soon became apparent, however, that the ruin is not simply the remnant left over when monumentality has withered away, and that ruination does not necessarily entail a *loss*, but rather a *shift* in the meaning and monumentality of architecture. This paper is part of a larger study into museums, monumentality, and architecture as representation.

### **Albert Speer's 'Theory of Ruin Value'**

Ruins, and images of ruins, have held a moral, emotional, and aesthetic fascination throughout history.<sup>3</sup> This is partly due to their ambiguous status as half building, half nature, but also their unique value as physical manifestations of the destructive effects of time, and thus as representations of history itself. Throughout history, ruins as historical documents have consistently been balanced, and often eclipsed, by their affective emotional impact, their capacity to stir melancholy, eerie, or sublime moods.<sup>4</sup> During the Baroque period, ruins came to be seen as a rich field of allegorical reference, and I will return to Benjamin's conception of the ruin as an expression of the transience and frailty of human life. Later, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the ruin reached its romantic apotheosis in the aesthetic of the picturesque. Whether real ruins or fake, or fakes assembled of real archaeological fragments, ruins appeared in the picturesque as a compositional element in the constructed landscapes of both heroic painting and garden design. Dilapidation and decay became the subjects of legitimate aesthetic appreciation. Speer's Theory of Ruin Value is thus a conservative adaptation of a long tradition of aesthetic appreciation of ruins, and the theory's interest lies not in its intellectual acuity but its insight into the value of ruins to the mythology of Nazi self-presentation.

Speer first developed his 'Theory of Ruin Value' in 1934, and described its formation in the memoirs published later as 'Inside the Third Reich'.<sup>5</sup> After discussing Hitler's belief in the role of Nazi architecture, to 'transmit his time and spirit to posterity', Speer begins,

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<sup>3</sup> See for example J.B.Jackson (ed) *The Necessity for Ruins and Other Topics*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent analysis of the conspicuous absence of the ruin from Kant's writings on aesthetic affect and the sublime, see Karen Lang, 'The Dialectics of Decay: Rereading the Kantian Subject', *The Art Bulletin*, v. 79, September 1997, pp. 413-39;

<sup>5</sup> Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, London: Sphere Books, 1970.

The building of the Zeppelin Field was begun at once, in order to have at least the platform ready for the coming Party Rally. To clear ground for it, the Nuremberg streetcar depot had to be removed. I passed by its remains after it had been blown up. The iron reinforcements protruded from concrete debris and had already begun to rust. One could easily visualise their further decay. This dreary sight led me to some thoughts I later propounded to Hitler under the pretentious heading of 'A Theory of Ruin Value'. The idea was that buildings of modern construction were not suited to form that "bridge of tradition" to future generations that Hitler was calling for. It was hard to imagine that rusting heaps of rubble could communicate these heroic inspirations which Hitler admired in the monuments of the past. My "theory" was intended to deal with the dilemma. By using special materials and by applying certain principles of statics, we should be able to build structures which even in a state of decay, after hundreds or (such were our reckonings) thousands of years would more or less resemble Roman models.<sup>6</sup>

Speer goes on to describe how he presented the 'Theory' to Hitler in the form of a 'romantic drawing' of the Zeppelin Field as it might look as a ruin, 'overgrown with ivy, its columns fallen, the walls crumbling here and there, but the outlines still clearly recognisable.' Remarking that many of Hitler's retinue found the drawing blasphemous, Speer finishes his account with Hitler's affirmation, the order that 'in the future the important buildings of the Reich were to be erected in keeping with the principles of this "law of ruins".'<sup>7</sup>

It is clear from the beginning that for Speer the most offensive aspect of the demolished remains of the streetcar depot is not the concrete rubble itself, but the steel reinforcing rods which protrude from it. His objection is plain; the ruins are too much of the moment, their rusting steel situates them in a specific, modern, period, and precludes the equal effects of timelessness and excessive age that the classical ruin demands. By describing the rubble as 'dreary' Speer immediately positions it in the realm of aesthetic affect. He doesn't say that the rubble is 'ugly', which would imply that it is a subject of abstract aesthetic judgement, but that it intrudes into the psychological realm. In other words, he finds the ruins not only ugly, but *depressingly* ugly. This negative affect originates in the demolition's uncovering of modern construction materials and techniques, and is compounded by the fact that the steel is rusting, decaying in a way unique to itself, that is, an equally modern form of decay. The rubble is precisely dated by the modes of construction revealed in its destruction. Furthermore, Speer's dismay seems to spring as much from the fact that he can 'easily visualise [the steel's] *further* decay' as from the material itself.<sup>8</sup> Steel's accelerated rate of deterioration serves even further to situate the ruins in the now, in the short and 'artificial' cycle of violent destruction and rapid degeneration characteristic of modern materials. It is clear from Speer's illustration of the projected ruin of the Zeppelin Field that his ideal ruin is a classical type, on a long cycle of growth and decay attuned to the cycles of nature. The instantaneity and violence of the 'artificial' ruin, demolished by dynamite, stands in contrast to the 'natural' ruin of Speer's vision. By representing the future ruins of the Zeppelin field as having merged with nature, weathered gently by the effects of wind and weather over a long period, he places his ruins on the scale of geological time, rather than the ever more rapid rate of change in human history, continually accelerating in response to new technology.

The new aesthetics of technological innovation, revealed in the exposed reinforcing rods, is the aspect of the ruins that Speer finds most distasteful but which Walter Benjamin would have found most fascinating. A new aesthetic, or more pointedly a subversion of aesthetics, is unveiled by the arbitrary processes of decay. In the dialectical image is also revealed the new ways of seeing produced by new technologies and materials.<sup>9</sup> For Benjamin, it is through such violence that the present can be revealed to itself. Speer's concern, however, is not for a specific and fleeting 'now', but for atemporality. The sudden presence of the present, glimpsed

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<sup>6</sup> Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, p. 97.

<sup>7</sup> Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>8</sup> Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, p. 97, emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Detlef Mertins, 'Walter Benjamin's Glimpses of the Unconscious: New Architecture and New Optics', *History of Photography* 22, no. 2, Summer 1998, pp. 116-126.

in the rusting reinforcing rods, is for him an unwelcome excision and framing of a moment from within a temporal continuum. Speer thus unwittingly reveals a truth crucial also to Benjamin - the temporality of a ruin is produced not only by the means of its destruction, but its original construction as well. Speer's use of archaic methods and materials in constructing the Zeppelin Field attempts to ensure a 'natural' ruin by building a certain mode of destruction into the construction itself.<sup>10</sup> Steeped in the romantic tradition that Benjamin specifically opposed, Speer can only see the ruins of the modern as ugly and out of place, or rather, out of time. Without an aesthetic built up over time, which can be bent to the expression of mythological history, Speer's dreary rubble presents the eclipse of romantic aesthetics by the true appearance of historical acts. This is precisely the immanence of historical and aesthetic truth in a single (dialectical) image that Benjamin would have recognised.

### **Walter Benjamin: symbol, allegory, and the ruin**

In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin elucidates a theory of Baroque allegory in which the ruin, as the physical corollary and counterpart of allegory, takes a central role; 'Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things', he writes.<sup>11</sup> Benjamin describes allegory as a form that has been progressively marginalised by the hegemony of beauty within aesthetics, an ascendancy exemplified in the aesthetic symbol.<sup>12</sup> Benjamin draws a sharp distinction between symbol and allegory, and suggests that romantic symbolism, itself a corruption of 'real' mystical and sacred symbolism, had usurped the legitimate position of allegory within the Baroque period. His goal was to revitalise allegory, to 'redeem' it, and thus redress criticisms that it was too mechanical, a mere 'technique', based on convention, suitable for illustrating 'concepts' but not 'ideas'.<sup>13</sup> Allegory was also condemned as ultimately meaningless because of its 'failure to stabilise meaning', its sheer proliferation of readings in which any object was eventually capable of signifying any meaning.<sup>14</sup> But Benjamin's resurrection of allegory, and his insistence that it exceeds symbolism by exceeding aesthetics, unlocks its potential as a critical or 'destructive' strategy. Allegory is a sensibility as well as a method; 'Benjamin's phrasing repeatedly stresses that allegory is a focal point from which to look on things: he refers to "the allegorical way of seeing" or of "looking at things": "the allegorical attitude"; "the allegorical intention" as well as allegorical intuition'.<sup>15</sup> In this conception, allegory is able to defeat beauty by going 'beyond' it, and breaking out into the phenomenal, historical world.<sup>16</sup>

Benjamin's condemnation of the romanticist symbol is enacted around the issue of beauty as a totality, he distrusts the aesthetic symbol's presentation of a falsely affirmative, mythifying image of a classical ideal. The symbol aspires to aesthetic autonomy, completion, and transcendental unity, and it has been wrapped in a harmonious trinity with truth, beauty, and moral good since the time of Aristotle; 'as it invokes totality and closure, classical symbolism seeks to transcend

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<sup>10</sup> The irony of the situation is that Speer's elaborate preparations provided no guarantee, and in reality the majority of his works were destroyed violently by enemy bombs or by demolition after the war, creating an aesthetic effect quite different to that which he planned.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, New York and London: Verso, 1977, pp. 177-78.

<sup>12</sup> See McCole, who writes that 'the possibility of aesthetically transcending the flawed world of experience tends to devalue the experience of its brokenness. Such false aesthetic transcendence was just what Baroque Trauerspiel denied. In order to gain access to its allegorical form, therefore, Benjamin would have to demolish the affirmative biases built up around the romantic concept of the aesthetic symbol.' John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1993, p. 127.

<sup>13</sup> This is Schopenhauer's distinction, which Benjamin employed to illustrate the historical marginalisation of allegory. As McCole relates it, 'the clincher in this argument was to equate allegory with script, for script was seen as "a conventional relationship between a signifying image and its meaning, ... a mere mode of designation", or "a playful illustrative technique at best" [which designated] The "art of the symbol" versus the mere "technique of allegory"'. McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 123.

<sup>14</sup> McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 135. Later re-interpretations of allegory have valued precisely this richness, indeterminacy and ambiguity of meaning, the disengagement of a direct connection between signifier and signified.

<sup>15</sup> Bainard Cowan, 'Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory', *New German Critique* 22, Winter 1981, p.112

<sup>16</sup> 'In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty.' Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 178.

time and history, thereby displacing the anguish of life with images of stabilised harmony and eternal perfection'.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, Benjamin sees the allegorical sensibility as a means to defeat the totalising aims of symbolism; with its emphasis on transience, specificity, and the contingent world of lived experience, allegory provides a means to represent the frailty and finitude of human life. The tragic fate of the individual adrift in history finds allegorical expression in the emblem of the death's head, through which Baroque allegorists expressed the ultimate vanity and futility of human aspirations, forever grounded by the knowledge of the inevitability of death.

In allegory the *facies hippocratica* of history lies before the eyes of the observer as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history which, from the beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful expresses itself in a countenance - no, in a death's head ... in this, the figure of man's most extreme subjection to nature, is pronounced the enigmatic question not only of the nature of human existence as such but of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the core of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular account of history as the passion of the world, a world that is meaningful only in the stations of its decay. The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical being and significance.<sup>18</sup>

The individual, in the 'primordial landscape' of the ruin, is faced with an image of his or her own death, that 'most extreme subjection to nature'. The futility of the individual human life is compounded into the 'enigmatic question' of the meaning and value of all human endeavour in all of history. The baroque view of life, as a play performed within the ever-present shadow of the death's head, takes its significance precisely from this transience. Opposing the false transcendence of the romantic symbol, in baroque allegory 'it is fallen nature which bears the imprint of the progression of history'.<sup>19</sup>

If the death's head represents the eventual fate of all living things, the ruin provides an equivalent in the inorganic realm; a reminder that not only architecture, but all cultural and social aspirations must eventually succumb. The ruin represents brokenness and transience, bearing as it does the physical traces of time on its surface as a kind of historical palimpsest or script; 'The word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience... In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting.'<sup>20</sup> The ruin frequently provided a background for Baroque tragic drama and allegorical painting, compounding its message by presenting the death's head - the ruins of the corporeal human individual - within the ruins of its cultural and architectural 'achievements'. If even the most enduring of human creations, built in stone, were destined for inevitable decay, then the frailty of human flesh was thus revealed to be doubly condemned.

The distinction between the false affirmation of symbolism and the destructive power of allegory is perhaps most clearly marked in the 'decisive category of time'. In John McCole's paraphrase, 'the symbol embodies "momentary totality", "self-contained, concentrated, steadfastly remaining itself", whereas allegory has the discontinuous structure of a series of moments, of transitory, failed attempts to capture meaning.'<sup>21</sup> While the symbol manifests the fleeting representation of eternity, allegory's emphasis on specificity and fragmentation in the objective world is extended to the temporal, where time is shattered into eternally passing instants of historical insight through 'shock'.

### **Temporality, tradition, and shock**

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<sup>17</sup> Lutz Koepnick, 'Allegory and Power: Walter Benjamin and the Politics of Representation', *Soundings* 79, no. 1 / 2, Spring/Summer 1996, p. 68

<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 166.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 180.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 177-178.

<sup>21</sup> John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 133.

The notion of the isolated image 'blasted out of the continuum of history' reoccurs throughout Benjamin's philosophy of history, reflecting a central tenet of historical materialism, that the past is constructed by the present, and must therefore be read in and through that present.<sup>22</sup> Different interpretations of history would thus result from changing modes of perception brought about by the effects of new technology. Speer's Law of Ruins is predicated on exactly the opposite premise - since his ruins are designed to 'inspire' subjects a thousand years in the future with the same aesthetic affect he admires in the present, they are predicated on the belief that the citizens of the future will be no different from those of his own time. Tradition, for him, is based on conservation, on the perpetuation of an unchanging ideal. Benjamin's understanding of historical subjectivity departs radically from Speer's positivist, teleological view of history as continuous progress: the 'allegorical mode' allows him to express 'the experience of a world in fragments in which the passing of time means not progress but disintegration.'<sup>23</sup> For the historical materialist, the sudden, shocking presence of the present provides a vital anchor point in the fluidity and indeterminacy of historical interpretation, and it is achieved through the act of plucking an image or object out of history's stream and examining it 'at a standstill', as a dialectical image.<sup>24</sup> Dialectical images are themselves allegorical, a 'modern form of emblematics', in which the past and the present exist simultaneously, their juxtaposition providing a critical tension.<sup>25</sup>

Speer's Theory of Ruin Value is designed to avoid such affirmations of a specific time, place, or individual in favour of a generalised and nostalgic temporality. These are precisely the 'traces of the present' Benjamin refers to in his characterisation of the 'Destructive Character', for whom 'destroying rejuvenates in clearing away the traces of our own age; it cheers because everything cleared away means to the destroyer a complete reduction, indeed eradication, of his own condition.'<sup>26</sup> Given Benjamin's ambivalent attitude towards destruction, there is some room for interpretation as to whether he regards the 'destructive character' as the positive instrument of divine violence, or some darker force. Is Speer the destructive character, or is the allegorist - read Benjamin - himself? The answer lies in the fact that for Benjamin destruction is never an end in itself, it is only ever a process required to free history from accretions of tradition and mythology. It is the fragmentary rubble left in the aftermath of destruction that manifests the present and provides a field of possibilities to the allegorist. The destructive character, conversely, 'obliterates even the traces of destruction'.<sup>27</sup> The rubble of the demolished streetcar depot here provides a basis for a distinction, since Speer's negative reaction is based on the appearance of these 'traces of destruction'. For Benjamin, however, it is only through an examination of these melancholy traces, the rubble left after the 'catastrophes' of history, that the allegorist can critically approach 'his own condition'.

## Historical materialism and melancholy

The lasting interest of Benjamin's theory of allegory lies not only in his analysis of the melancholy sensibility of the Baroque period, but his later development of the relevance of allegory to Baudelaire's Paris of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and Weimar Germany in his own time. While he defines Baroque allegory as a highly specific form, its position at the centre of both the method and philosophy of historical materialism, along with its adaptation into his unique theory of historical subjectivity and experience, remains relevant to the present day. Benjamin's understanding of allegory as a critical strategy, a means of undermining or corrupting established traditions from within, lends it a crucial significance both to his philosophy of history and his critique of the aestheticisation of politics. Both can, in turn, be analysed in opposition to Speer's theory of ruin value, which manifests precisely the mythologised, nostalgic view of

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<sup>22</sup> 'A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the "eternal" image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.' Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, ed Hannah Arendt, New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968, p. 264

<sup>23</sup> Buck-Morrs, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> 'The presentation of the historical object within a charged force field of past and present, which produces political electricity in a "lightning flash" of truth, is the "dialectical image"...it is "dialectics at a standstill.' Buck-Morrs, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 219.

<sup>25</sup> Buck-Morrs, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 170.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, 'The Destructive Character', *Reflections*, 301.

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin, 'The Destructive Character', *Reflections*, 302.

history and propagandist application of aesthetics that Benjamin derided. If Benjamin's understanding of the ruin as an emblem of transience is allegorical, Speer's use of the ruin is 'symbolic' in that it aspires to the idealised, atemporal totality characteristic of Nazi Neo-Classical architecture. Allegory, for Benjamin, is not only counteraesthetic, but a counter to aesthetics,<sup>28</sup> and therein lies its particular strength in opposition to the 'aestheticisation of politics' he identified as a key characteristic of fascism.

In the epilogue to 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin identifies an apotheosis of the aestheticisation of politics in Marinetti's ecstatic vision of the beauty of war.<sup>29</sup> Such an 'aestheticisation' was equally present in every aspect of civic life under the Nazi regime, and can be seen as an important device by which the populace was subdued into a homogenous and compliant 'mass'. Lutz Koepnick writes that, in Benjamin's formulation, 'fascism displaced politics with aesthetics, not only to dedifferentiate the institutional complexity of modern societies, but also to transform the political into a vessel of religious revelation and community building.'<sup>30</sup> Koepnick goes on to list three distinct methods by which, according to Benjamin, fascism employed aesthetics for political gain, and juxtaposes them against Benjamin's 'answer' to the tendency, which lay in politically engaged art - specifically montage, and its use in Russian avant garde film.<sup>31</sup>

While it would be an oversimplification to say that Benjamin identified symbolism as the medium of mythologised political representation, and allegory as its counter impulse, this is the general theoretical trajectory of both the 'Work of Art' essay and the political aspects of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. In fact, the opposition is elucidated through a reverse relationship with myth; if 'allegory and myth were "antithetical" [i]ndeed, allegory was an "antidote" to myth...'<sup>32</sup> this was countered by symbolism, which 'ultimately becomes complicit with myth because it hides the methods of signification upon which it is based.'<sup>33</sup> Allegory is thus equally as 'political' as symbolism, but its energy is of a de-mythifying, anti-aesthetic type. The point of interest here is that Benjamin and Speer each manage to read the ruin in terms of his own political program, which is to say they read diametrically opposed concepts into the same motif. Where Benjamin sees transience and decay, Speer sees permanence and continuation.

### The historical subject

In the context of Benjamin's melancholic conception of the ruin, it is understandable that many of Speer's contemporaries in the Nazi party saw his Law of Ruins as an entirely inappropriate image for the party to project. Speer of course saw no such intimation of transience and futility, precisely because his understanding of the ruin is *confined* to the aesthetic realm. The ruin *appears* to have lost its totality and descended into fragmentation, but this is a deceptive appearance, since its political program remains intact, and as totalitarian as ever. It is not a process of disintegration or reduction, but of accretion; Speer's ruin becomes ever more 'whole' as it gathers the aesthetic layering of dilapidation. Far from relinquishing control of his buildings to allow their return to nature, Speer proposes to use the ruin to manipulate time and decay for

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<sup>28</sup> Koepnick, 'Allegory and Power', p. 70.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, London: Fontana, 1973 (1955), p. 235. The celebration of war was not confined to Italian Fascist circles, Germany had its own proponent in Ernst Junger, of whom Benjamin wrote a scathing critique as early as 1930. See Benjamin, 'Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*, edited by Ernst Junger', *New German Critique* 17, 1979, pp. 120-128, which is accompanied by a commentary by Ansgar Hillach, 'The Aesthetics of Politics: Walter Benjamin's "Theories of German Fascism"', pp. 99-119

<sup>30</sup> Lutz Koepnick, 'Allegory and Power', p.59.

<sup>31</sup> 'First, he maintained that political spectacles divert critical judgements about the configurations of modern life; they deflect any comprehension of the political as a nonmetaphysical space in which we may negotiate the cultural ideas, institutions, and values that ought to organise political exchange. Second, Benjamin read fascism as an attempt to superimpose on political practices romantic notions of genius expressivity, and hence, to ground processes of legitimation in aesthetic myths of self-referential creativity and symbolic totality. Third, Benjamin believed that the aestheticisation of politics results in a deluding regime of visual modes of political representation, one that mesmerises the masses and transfixes them as uncritical spectators and voiceless tokens in the allegedly aesthetic form of the *Volksgemeinschaft*.' Koepnick, 'Allegory and Power' p. 59

<sup>32</sup> Buck-Morrs, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 164

<sup>33</sup> Koepnick, 'Allegory and Power' p. 68.

aesthetic affect. Just as Nazi state architecture relied on domination to subordinate the will of its subjects, Speer's ideal ruins project a sense, not of the individual's significance through transience, but the absolute irrelevance of a single human life in the context of the timeless and monolithic state apparatus.

The ultimately affirmative message of Speer's 'Theory of Ruin Value' is that even though the individual must die and be forgotten, this is of no consequence since the body politic will 'live on' eternally. This further encourages identification with the 'Fatherland' since it provides a means of achieving immortality. Thus the practice common to SS officers, of wearing a death's head emblem sewn into the uniform, emerges as a symbol, not only of willingness to die in the name of the Reich, but of this willingness actually re-constituting the individual as *already* dead.<sup>34</sup> The constant presence of the death's head is equally a means for the individual soldier to become accustomed to living with (or rather *in*) death, for signifying to the enemy that he has nothing to lose, and for binding him to his comrades in the collective. Such an everyday familiarity with death stands in marked contrast to Benjamin's understanding of the death's head as an emblem of *vanitas*, directed to the individual, and designed to be happened upon unexpectedly, providing a sudden jolting reminder of personal vanity in the face of human mortality. The soldier, as a pure instrument of the state, voluntarily renounces subjectivity, and transfers individual mortality itself into the perpetuation of the regime as a whole.

### Monumentality and totality

The version of temporality projected by Speer's idealised ruin bears significant commonalities with that of Alois Riegl's description in 'The Modern Cult of Monuments' of the 'intentional monument'.<sup>35</sup> This has historically been the most common form of monument, distinguished by Riegl from the 'unintentional' or historical monument, and art or architectural objects with the aesthetic quality of 'age-value'. In Riegl's description, the ruin would usually be classified as an unintentional monument, since it is commonly brought about by an uncontrolled or 'unintentional' process, and stands generally for historical development, with its cycles of human construction eventually overtaken by nature. This is also the frame within which Benjamin sees the ruin, as an object that stands generally, but not necessarily intentionally, for death, and the transience and futility of human life. For Speer, on the other hand, the ruin is an intentional monument in disguise.

For Speer the ruin represents, not the end of the signifying aspect of architecture, but its continuation in a different vessel. 'Hitler liked to say that the purpose of his building was to transmit his time and its spirit to posterity. Ultimately all that remained to remind men of the great epochs of history was their monumental architecture, ... Our architectural works should also speak to the conscience of a future Germany centuries from now.'<sup>36</sup> Nostalgia and a nationalistic preservation of tradition were central to the aims of Nazi propaganda. Much of the party's authority was built upon a mythological genealogy stretching back to Imperial Rome, and its architectural aspirations centred around perpetuating this 'tradition' well into the future. Speer's ruin was thus conceived as the point of origin for the regeneration of a monumentality in which the thread of continuity supposedly reaching from classical antiquity to the Third Reich would be preserved. The Thousand-Year Reich, in this conception, could extend indefinitely. And here again the politics of the aesthetic arise - an intentional monument is a deliberate or artificial prompt for memory, but the ruin, as a reminder of the inevitability of decay, is rarely considered an appropriate vehicle for perpetuating memory. The commemorative function of a ruin is thus usually incidental, or accidental, and subjective. This is matched by the sources of its aesthetic pleurability - the 'organic' asymmetry, rough edges, and irregularity produced by

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<sup>34</sup> The use of the skull and cross bones flag by pirates in the Baroque period carried a similar connotation - having chosen to live as renegades, pirates were condemned to die if they should ever be captured, and thus lived (literally) under the sign of their renounced mortality. Thanks to John Macarthur for this observation.

<sup>35</sup> Alois Riegl, 'The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and its Origin', translated Kurt Forster and Dianne Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 25, Fall 1982, pp. 21-49.

<sup>36</sup> Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, pp. 96-97

the arbitrary effects of nature are enjoyable *because* 'the original intention of the builder has been more or less lost.'<sup>37</sup>

By employing the ruin as a historical monument, to carry specific messages into the future, Speer attempts to disguise his political motives under the 'disinterested' sign of nature. Even though he intends for the ruins of his buildings to inspire the 'heroic inspirations' needed to resurrect the Fourth Reich, this is nowhere made explicit in the ruins themselves. Their propagandist aspect is hidden under the apparently accidental, and thus 'truthful' sign of the historical monument, through the aesthetic and the authenticity produced by age value. It is not surprising that he is dismayed by the 'dreariness' of the demolished streetcar depot, which is clearly devoid of age value. The interesting aspect of Benjamin's conception, in this context, is that he gives no precedence to 'age value' as an aesthetic, but only as a bearer of traces of the past. For him the romanticism of the ruin is not a prompt for historical truth, but rather a means of obscuring it.

Speer's attempts to create 'natural' ruins bear superficial similarities to Benjamin's conception of the ruin as 'history... physically merged with the setting'.<sup>38</sup> But when Benjamin writes of history becoming nature, he intends this as a reflection of the baroque view of nature, not seen 'in bud and bloom, but in the overripeness and decay of her creations.'<sup>39</sup> Speer's romantic illustration, on the other hand, is a picturesque vision of architecture merged ambiguously with nature, overgrown with ivy, its edges blurred and softened by the effects of 'natural' weathering and decay. For Speer the blurring of boundaries between architecture, nature, and history is read as an affirmation of nature as an adjunct of fate, as though the Nazi party had come 'naturally' to power and would just as 'naturally' return to it in the future. The ruin in this vision is an expression, not only of National Socialism as a 'force of nature', but of the inevitable renewal of that force, where the ruin operates as a symbol of lasting tradition and eternal return. Conversely, for Benjamin, as for the allegorists of Baroque tragic drama, 'the word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience...in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of eternal decay.'<sup>40</sup>

### **Conclusions: the ruin as process and trace of 'poverty'**

If Speer's attitude towards tradition is one of preservation and continuity, hence the idea that people in a thousand years will be the same as those in the present, Benjamin's position is more ambivalent. For him any evocation of tradition is equally a traduction, an act of violence against that tradition, brought about by the inevitability of speaking it falsely. This notion is illuminated by Benjamin's distinction between '*Erfahrung*' and '*Erlebnis*', both rendered in English as 'experience'. If *Erfahrung* can be described as experience in the past tense, the weight of received ideas, habit and custom that is built up over years, then it is this accretion of tradition that Benjamin sees as being incompatible, or at least in tension with *Erlebnis*, the present tense or 'now' of lived experience. *Erfahrung*, when read as a stultifying force, must be shrugged off before modern society can 'wake' into the true experience of the present. As Detlef Mertins states it, 'the erasure of "experience" (*Erfahrung*) as something passed on had become necessary for the possibility of "experience" (*Erlebnis*) as something lived - the elimination of history for the openness of historicity.'<sup>41</sup> Benjamin understood the value of past experience as a means to inform the present, but saw the danger in tradition when it was misappropriated by fascist groups and reworked into mythology. Benjamin's project of 'positive barbarism' was engaged in demolishing these mythological aspects of tradition in order to release history from its bondage, and he describes the state of living under such 'erasure' as one of 'poverty'.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Zucker, 'Ruins - An Aesthetic Hybrid', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 20, no. 2, Winter 1961, p. 119.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 177-178.

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 179.

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 177-178.

<sup>41</sup> Detlef Mertins, 'The Threatening and Enticing Face of Prehistory: Walter Benjamin and the Utopia of Glass', *Assemblage* 29, April 1996, p. 18

<sup>42</sup> see Walter Benjamin, 'Poverty and Experience', quoted by Jacques Derrida, 'A Letter to Peter Eisenman', *Assemblage* 12, p. 10.

The concept of poverty works as a description of the liberated condition of the subject following the action of positive violence, which is also the emancipatory potential of the ruin. For Benjamin, violence and destruction are able to 'shatter the continuum of history', leaving in their wake a fresh and de-mythified field of fragments and detritus. The act of destruction places everything in new juxtapositions, shatters old relationships, and opens history up for examination, making it 'accessible'. For Benjamin, it is through the suddenness and shock of destruction that the subject emerges from the 'dream' of tradition and into modern life in the present. The stripping away of the 'traces' of tradition, the removal of 'aura', the sudden shock of awakening, all aspire, in Benjamin's conception, to the emancipated state of the 'new poverty', where illusions are abandoned and the subject is presented to itself in the present. Ruin, both as verb and noun, process and object, thus exemplifies a mode of working and a field of possibilities for historical materialism.

The process of ruination can be applied equally to the conceptual and to the objective world. This is the true meaning of Benjamin's statement that '[a]llegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things'.<sup>43</sup> criticism in the name of allegory is a process of conceptually 'ruining' the structures of affirmative argument and then of working through the rubble. Criticism as 'an activity of stripping its objects bare, mortifying them, dragging the truth content of what is depicted in the image out before it',<sup>44</sup> is analogous to the physical forces of decay and destruction. The 'attraction' of ephemeral beauty is worn away, revealing the essential structure, whether of object or idea, and leaving it as a ruin.<sup>45</sup> Whereas for Speer the process of ruination is entirely aesthetic, and represents not a reduction but an accretion of myth, Benjamin's conception of the ruin is as a means of laying bare a truth buried beneath layers of false romantic aesthetics. It provides the basis for further examination of the interrelations between aesthetics and politics, allegory and symbol, monument and ruin, criticism and myth. This is the lasting value and relevance of Benjamin's idea of ruin and ruination.

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<sup>43</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 177-78.

<sup>44</sup> Criticism itself is thus a 'violent' act: 'Regardless of medium, [Benjamin] considered criticism an activity of stripping its objects bare, mortifying them, dragging the truth content of what is depicted in the image out before it, not as 'an unveiling that destroys the mystery but a revelation that does it justice. Thus the negativity and destructiveness of criticism opens up a moment of revelation, which in turn opens the future potentiality of the object'. Mertins, 'Walter Benjamin's Glimpses of the Unconscious...', p. 119

<sup>45</sup> 'The object of philosophical criticism is to show that the function of artistic form is as follows: to make historical content, such as provides the basis of every important work of art, into a philosophical truth. The transformation of material content into truth content makes the decrease in effectiveness, whereby the attraction of earlier charms diminishes decade by decade, into the basis for a rebirth, in which all ephemeral beauty is stripped off, and the work stands as a ruin.' Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 182.