

Ruin Memories: Materialities, Aesthetics and the Archaeology of the Recent Past

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Ruin Memories is an ambitious edited volume about contemporary ruins of the recent past and the challenges that the encounter with such ruins poses to critical scholarship, knowledge production, and practices of heritage management. The volume is the product of an eponymous collaborative project that took place between 2009 and 2013, with support from the Norwegian Research Council's program "Assigning Cultural Values."

In their elegant introduction, editors Þóra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen problematize the modern ruin as an object of analysis embedded in the "archaeological paradox," in which the past "understood as completed and left behind can only be accessed on the condition of its own material presence" (p. 21) in the contemporary moment. This paradox is at the center of the volume's purpose, which proposes both a critical engagement with scholarship on temporality, decay, and memory and an invitation to resist modern normative practices in studying ruination and material remains. According to the authors, such resistance occurs by embracing the non-discursiveness and otherness of things and by reconsidering the modern ruin as a productive and revelatory site of engagement.

The body of the volume comprises 23 contributions organized in five sections: "Things, Ethics and Heritage"; "Material Memory"; "Ruins, Art, Attraction"; "Abandonment"; and "Archaeologies of the Recent Past." Considered as a collective work, the volume offers no unified programmatic as to what is to be done with/to the modern ruin, or indeed as to what sorts of ethics might be deployed toward it. Indeed, for each author and contributor to the volume the ruin is in turn a metaphor, a site, an object, a rhetorical device, a process, a political alibi. This multiplicity of perspectives highlights precisely the capacity of "ruin" to generate productive discussions on such archaeologically relevant topics as the politics of heritage, the destructive consequences of capitalist modes of production, and the material expression of affective memory.

The editors and contributors share a commitment to the material world as their main interlocutor, which testifies to the substantially archaeological character of all contributions despite some not being based in excavated materials. The commitment to the material qualities of things is often doubled with a turn to affect as a key parameter of knowledge production—affect here designating the particular modes of aesthetic engagement with the material world prompted by the encounter with modern ruins.

In *Ruin Memories* this encounter is often mediated by a concern for making sense of, and in some cases managing, our affective engagement with the material remains of the recent past as heritage—in the form of disused factories, war zones, unfinished construction projects, assemblages left behind by those

departed in migration or death, etc. Many contributors deploy the tools of phenomenology, particularly Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit* ("letting-be"), to trace the contours of the anthropomorphic bias that dominates archaeological models of agency and temporal change, and to propose instead an ethics of care and healing that allows for the otherness of things to manifest in the ruin. Such an approach to heritage is of course contested and, for many contributors, the debates and disagreements produced by the modern ruin as heritage are part and parcel of its political affordances.

The political implications of modern ruins are also invoked in the often-disturbing chapters concerned with the destructive effects of violence, exploitation, and war in the contemporary landscape. Many contributors draw from the tensions between creation/production and decay/trauma that are said to exist, or more precisely to be manifest, in the ruin. Throughout the volume, the ambivalence of ruins as simultaneously sinister and enchanted or benign and harmful mirrors the political ambivalence of modernity itself.

For the reader, a question that lingers throughout the volume is whether the aesthetic experience of the ruin as incomplete and ambiguous should stand in and of itself as a valid mode of scholarship, for example as a way of "presencing" the past and bringing affective impressions into focus; or whether the aesthetic encounter should serve as an entry point into a subject matter that archaeologists should seek to fold into a broader analytical project. How might archaeologists place the enchantment of things under scrutiny without becoming cynical of their power to reveal the immediacy of human experience? The volume offers no singular answer to these questions but, rather, presents the reader with a compel-

ling series of alternative paths through which she may elect to chart a course.

The most satisfying aspect of this volume is arguably its overall resistance to abstraction, which is a timely, compelling, and substantive contribution of *Ruin Memories* to a "turn to things" in the social sciences, which tends to remain emphatically conceptual—or even disarmingly metaphysical. The authors of *Ruin Memories* invite a refreshing mindfulness in engaging the very stuff of data that, in other archaeological works, tends to recede into the background of interpretation. Overall, the shared mindful engagement with materiality does much to bridge the diverse disciplinary orientations of the authors, as does the use of visual media (chiefly on-site photography) in their deliberate practices of knowledge production. The abundant illustrations serve in part to bolster repeated claims to the evocative poetics of modern ruins, and in part to flesh out the methodological apparatus that might accompany a sustained engagement with such a seemingly evanescent topic as the process of ruination. This latter aspect is compelling in the context of the volume and of its epistemological tangle with phenomenology.

Ruin Memories should be of particular interest to those wishing to reflect critically on the archaeological processes of decay, site formation, and archiving, and more generally on the entanglements between the archaeologist as practitioner, material heritage, and memory. Further, because of its thorough engagement with the process of ruination and the affect of heritage, *Ruin Memories* will also appeal to those invested in the archaeology of the contemporary, symmetrical archaeology, and new materialisms.

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