

Ruminations on Ruination – Philosophers’ Magazine (penultimate draft)
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I spend a considerable amount of my time thinking about (and when I’m lucky, visiting) architectural ruins and I’m not alone. Consider the most visited historical sites in the world. They consist mostly of ruins. Sites such as Machu Picchu, the Pyramids at Giza, and the Angkor Archaeological Complex receive tens of millions of visitors a year; the Great Wall of China alone receives 9-10 million visitors annually, and Hadrian’s Wall can boast over one million visitors a year. Why do people go on pilgrimages to these sites? Why are they so attractive to so many of us?

I believe these sites are more than mere historical curiosities. Those of us who are fortunate enough to travel spend a great deal of time and money to stand on the earth and look upon the vestiges of architectural structures. We could much more easily look at professional photos of these cultural landmarks on the Internet. We could read about their histories from any one of dozens of various historical accounts. Yet this somehow isn’t enough. There is something special about *being there*. In the context of architectural ruins, it just isn’t comparable to experience them through another’s eyes or words. We feel a pull to bear personal witness.

One of the most engaging interactions I’ve had with a ruin was with Ta Prohm in the Angkor Archaeological Complex in Cambodia. Of all the structures housed at the Angkor Archaeological Complex, Ta Prohm is the most photographed. It is also a structure that has had fewer conservation interventions; while the walls of the temple have been buttressed with wooden planks and some metal scaffolding, no major reconstruction work has been done. Some readers might recognize this ruin as the “Tomb Raider” temple, featured in the movie (and video game) of the same name. The structure is not the most complete structure in the archaeological complex, nor is it the most historically significant. Rather, it is the structure that has been most uprooted by the banyan trees. In Ta Prohm we see nature overtaking the work of (ancient) mankind. The walls of the ruin are in the process of turning into rubble. Unlike many other structures at this archaeological site, this ruin has been allowed to ruin. Ruins are ephemerality writ large, and I think that the most impactful engagement with ruins are those that remind us that the ruin has a life-cycle.

Ta Prohm helps us see what I call the tripartite nature of ruins. We can see ruins as objects that have a foot in three different times: the past, the present, and the future. This is the nature of the ruin: they help us imagine the past, affords us interesting aesthetic opportunities in the present, and asks us to project ourselves (and it) into the future. We think about those who once lived, our own current experience, and what will be. In the present, the ruin asks us to walk around it, through it, and sometimes climb upon it. We can smell the air as we reimagine what it was like, but we also stumble around its boulders, recognizing that the structure is no longer fit for its original purpose.

There are two kinds of aesthetic experiences of ruins that are often conflated: that of recording the ruin be it in poetry, prose, or picture and that of engaging with a ruin *qua* ruin (the experience of the ruin *in situ*). Much artwork has been made with ruins as its subject precisely

because ruins elicit complex emotional and cognitive responses. Talented artists, such as Turner, can capture some of the beauty of ruins. However, painting and photographs are two-dimensional art forms, both intentionally created for an audience. Such works provoke questions about artistic intent, framing, color choice, etc. that we don't have when appreciating a ruin *qua* ruin. In this sense, ruin appreciation is more akin to nature appreciation. As we do with nature, we walk through ruins, smell the damp moss, touch the weathered stone. Proprioception is absent in two-dimensional artworks but is highly relevant to engaging with ruins. While there is, I believe, an important difference between ruin appreciation and the appreciation of art whose topic is ruins, no one will deny that the one can inform the other. In *The Decay of Lying* Oscar Wilde states that while there may have been fogs in London for centuries, no one noticed them until Art invented them. We must allow that our knowledge of iconic art informs our appreciation of its subjects. The distinction between ruin appreciation and appreciation of art with ruins as their subject is a topic which I will return to shortly.

I'm hardly the first to ponder the power of ruins. One of the most beautiful books written about the aesthetic appreciation of ruins is *Pleasure of Ruins* by Dame Rose Macaulay. Macaulay explores the kinds of pleasure elicited by looking at the spectacle of a ruined building during various epochs, and details the various reactions to this *ruinlust* (a term, I believe, she coined). According to Macaulay, our myriad reactions include: admiration of the ruin in its architectural prime; the aesthetic pleasure in its present appearance; the historical or literary association the ruin may elicit; the mere pleasure of decay; the mystical pleasure in "the destruction of all things mortal and the eternity of God;" the egoistic satisfaction of realizing you are alive while so many others have fallen; the joy of seeing your foe's empire destroyed; and, the melancholic ruminations of the river of time, alongside the more intellectual pleasure of archaeology and antiquarianism.

Macaulay distinguishes major and minor pleasures of ruins. Minor pleasures include looting, graffiti (which she claims "all good tourists have done in all times"), self-projection into the past, and "being portrayed against a ruinous background," the ruin "selfie" in contemporary terms.

Major ruin pleasures were skillfully explored by contemporary ruin-philosopher, Robert Ginsberg, whose ode to ruins, *The Aesthetics of Ruins*, is as much a love poem to architectural ruins as Macaulay's tome. Ginsberg categorizes philosophical accounts of ruin appreciation into classical and romantic. According to the classical conception, aesthetic appreciation of ruins requires imagining the existing ruin as a previously existing whole. The classical conception is similar to the "archaeological model" of ruin appreciation as both view the ruin as data to be used to learn something historical without regard to present aesthetic experience with the site. Using the ruin as a prop in a game of imagination is relevant to *ruinlust* and ruin tourism, one of Macaulay's "minor pleasures" – to imagine oneself living in the past. Similarly, there is an emerging trend in Western philosophical aesthetics to talk about the aesthetic enjoyment of sites, buildings, and places that no longer exist, which can be found in work by Jeanette Bicknell and Jennifer Judkins. This appreciation involves "imaginative reconstruction" and evokes the classical conception of ruin appreciation insofar as the aesthetic goal is to re-imagine the original structure's appearance.

In contrast, the romantic account of ruin appreciation centers on the thoughts and emotions of a person absorbed in the experience of a ruin. In this model, the focus is on engagement with the forces of nature, acknowledging the eternal interplay of nature and time. This conception is emotive, drawing less on the scientific knowledge to be gained from the artefact and more on one's emotional experience. For example, the ways plants and animals encroach on the artefactual structure of Ta Prohm have special importance in this romantic account.

Besides the experience of ruin *qua* ruin, we see the romantic conception of ruins in the paintings of G.B. Piranesi, the poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the written word of Grand Tour diarists. Ginsberg's prose beautifully summarizes, "The ruin in the Romantic attitude is a temple of reverie. Here we sit apart from the world, while in the presence of its underlying flux. The ruin takes shape from the flow of our associations and sentiments. It breaks open the gates of the soul."

The romantic conception may spur a more emotional response, one that might remind us of death. Ruins are *memento mori* on a grand scale. This is best evidenced by what has been called the "Ozymandias effect" named after the Shelley sonnet:

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!

We see the remains of powerful men, taken over by nature, and we despair. The great scholar of art and cultural property law, John Henry Merryman states, "We cherish cultural objects as intimations of immortality, of the defeat of time. . . by their continued existence, they encourage the further human effort to create something that will endure, to hold back the night of oblivion." While Ozymandias might remind us to despair, to see that even the mightiest work of man will succumb to nature, Merryman urges us to stake our claim to this world. Recognizing the inconsequentiality of man while understanding that we, too, stand upon this earth, evokes another familiar concept: the sublime.

Feeling tiny in comparison to time and nature allows us to feel terror when looking at the ruinous remains of a human construction. According to Immanuel Kant, the experience of the *dynamical sublime* is an experience of the enormity of nature and our role within it. We feel puny against the forces of nature, but also realize our reason gives us standing. Although Kant believes only nature can evoke the sublime, it seems conceivable that we could apply his theory to human structures. The experience of ruins, like the experience of nature, can make one feel small in relation to the universe, encompassing all of space and time as it does. When looking at an ancient ruin, one can imagine her own civilization also falling prey to time, leaving behind only remnants of its former glory. This feeling soon leads to another – one of wonder that although time waits for no one and no civilization has bested mother nature – we, as humans, can leave something lasting. We can leave a mark that stands the test of time, proving we are not so insignificant as it once seemed.

It is probably no surprise to my fellow ruin tourists that the notion of the picturesque is connected to this romantic conception of ruins. The term "picturesque" traces back to a 1768 essay by

Reverend William Gilpin, “An Essay on Prints.” He defined “picturesque” as “a term expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture.” Similarly, Christopher Hussey, in *The Picturesque: Studies in A Point of View* (1927), called the picturesque, a “practical aesthetic for gardeners, tourists and sketchers.” At its core, the notion of the picturesque is the prospect of converting beautiful vistas into two-dimensional pictures. While the 18th century was the heyday of the picturesque, we appear to live with a picturesque hangover in the 21st. Amateur photographers, especially Instagrammers, have changed the travel landscape, angling to take pictures of ruins without people in the frame. A quick search on the internet yields various tutorials on how to remove people from your travel photos. Millions of people flock to Angkor Archaeological Park every year, yet when people post pictures of their trip, all we see are the beautiful structures seemingly divorced from the commerce of cultural heritage tourism. There appears to be little desire to capture the authenticity of the moment, recording for posterity an accurate account of the experience. Rather, modern ruin tourism is bent on producing picturesque photos, posted on social media for all to see. Instead of climbing around the structures, people angle and wait to take the perfect photo on their iPhone.

This modern-day trend emphasizing the picturesque smacks of Macaulay’s minor pleasure – graffiti. In my opinion, Instagramming is a form of digital graffiti. This digital graffiti has been exacerbated by the trendy aphorism “pics or it didn’t happen,” which (in the travel context) means if you fail to capture an experience with a beautifully framed shot on Instagram, it’s as if the experience didn’t happen. Unlike the travel slide shows some of us were subjected to in the living rooms of friends and family, Instagram pictures (like graffiti) are public, and public for a reason. They merely announce, “Yes, I was here!” They also speak to the opulence of a lifestyle, our modern-day, watered-down Grand Tour. Instagram graffiti does not ask of its author any self-reflection; it asks only for others momentary attention.

In sum, the classical conception helps us imagine the ruin in the past, the picturesque is one of many modes of interacting with the ruin in the present, while the sublime invites us to consider the future. To fully address the tripartite nature of ruins we may need to employ multiple modes of appreciation. The classical conception alone does not fully capture this tripartite nature as it looks backward. The romantic conception more aptly addresses the tripartite nature of ruins, but too often can lead one into the future, while ignoring the present. *Memento mori*, one facet of romantic ruin gazing, is an implied reference to the future as it translates to, “Remember that you die.” Also, since the romantic conception focuses on the trains of thoughts the ruin evokes in the observer, it relies almost exclusively on visual perception, to the detriment of other kinds of aesthetic engagements. The same criticism could be made of the sublime. The picturesque ruin-gazer exclusively focuses on the ruin as subject of two-dimensional art; and while picturesque ruin-gazing can afford us with some aesthetic experience of the ruin in the present, it collapses ruin appreciation into the appreciation of pictures where ruins serve as the subject matter. Returning to the beginning of this rumination on ruins – why visit a ruin if all one cares about is how the ruin looks on a piece of paper or screen?

It is significant that Ta Prohm is the most photographed ruin in the Angkor Archaeological complex. It speaks to its power as an object of the picturesque. It is also relevant how it is photographed. You see two main types of ruin photographs at this site: the ruin selfie and the picture of the structure devoid of people. Both can be types of Instagram graffiti, this modern-day

ruin tourism. While the photograph might elicit some of the same responses, it lacks many of the powerful elements we gain when engaging with these sites *in situ*.

My vacation photos of Ta Prohm are quite different. They are pictures of people taking selfies at the ruin; pictures of people taking pictures of the ruin; pictures of the scaffolding; pictures of the signage. I like watching and documenting how people engage with the site.

Besides the differences in my vacation photos to that which you might find on Instagram, I think my experience of the ruin is different from many modern ruin tourists. I think it is important to put the camera away and experience all the unexpected beauty the ruin has to offer. Walking through the ruin, climbing on the ruin, smelling the soil beneath your feet and touching the stones are all parts of ruin appreciation lost when we engage solely in picturesque ruin-gazing. These non-visual ways of aesthetically appreciating ruins adds our sense of really *being there*.

Next time you're literally reflecting in your cell phone screen – capturing that perfect vacation selfie, take a moment to reflect on the sublime power of architectural ruins. Remember that there is more to experiencing ruin than the minor pleasures of the digital graffiti of Instagram culture. Immerse yourself in the timeless and multisensory pleasure of *ruinlust*.

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