



Ruining Ruin Porn

A future for Hashima

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Ruins embody a set of temporal and historical paradoxes.

Brian Dillon (2011: 11)

The disaster ruins everything ...

Maurice Blanchot (1995: 1)

On account of the fundamental transience of their object of study – the fact that performance always consumes itself in its unfolding – theatre and performance scholars have had a long-standing investment in relics and remnants. Whether the inflexion has been historiographical or archaeological, the fragments and detritus of performance have generally been used to challenge linear notions of temporality, and to show that something of the original event – its pastness – still haunts the present. By contrast, this essay, while equally interested in untimeliness, proposes an alternative way of thinking about performance and ruination that does not look back to the past, but rather focuses on the future. But what do I mean when I speak of the future?

Within the context of contemporary ruin studies, futurity is generally discussed in two ways. Either, it is associated with what the geographer Caitlin DeSilvey calls ‘anticipatory history’, a mode of palliative curation that looks to the inevitable destruction of buildings and materials (2012: 31). Or, on the other hand, it is imagined as a vehicle for the ‘Ozymandias complex’, a melancholic temporality that, in keeping with Percy Bysshe’s Shelley’s 1818 poem of the same name, reminds us of the transience of all things as well as the essential *vanitas* of human endeavour (Viney 2014: 161).

The futurity that interests me, however, is a little different, since it is found in thinking about performance as an analogue to the ruin, an event that discloses the future in the very process of erasing the now, in producing the past. In the same way that the ruin places the present in crisis by allowing disjunctive temporalities to coalesce and overlap, so, I argue, performance erases the present for the sake of paradoxical remainders that are both ‘no more’ and ‘not yet’ (Agamben 2009: 48).¹

It is perhaps not so strange to see performance defined today as a kind of ruin. The recent interest in archives and re-enactments by theatre and performance scholars and practitioners in the past decade or so has complicated previous debates (perhaps even obsessions) about the authentic status of ‘live’ versus ‘recorded’ performance (see Phelan 1993 and Auslander 1999). As Amelia Jones (1997, 2012), Adrian Heathfield (2012), Diana Taylor (2003), and Rebecca Schneider (2001, 2011) have argued so plausibly, performance never comes to an end; its present is always haunted by both its past and future. However, in this dominant attempt to think of performance as ruin, to posit it as a ‘dialectical image’ (Benjamin 2002: 475) or spectre that refuses to exit the scene (Derrida 1994), the onus has been largely placed on the first haunting – the haunting from history. What tends to be forgotten here is the other side of this anachronistic coin: namely, the extent to which performance is engaged in an act of *teleiopoiesis*, a telephone call or message transmitted to distant others – ghosts from the

¹ Although not the focus of this essay, there is much debate as to what actually constitutes a ruin and whether or not the ruin has been created through natural forces or by human-made factors, such as warfare, forced evacuation and myths of economic progress. See Hell and Schönle (2010: 1–14) and Trigg (2006).

future. As Derrida explains in his *The Politics of Friendship*, *teleiopoiesis* does not consume the present in the name of a Hegelian *telos*, the result of which is already predetermined; rather, it burns itself up for the sake of a future whose meaning is here but whose outcome can neither be predicted nor foretold, and that, on account of that, may offer new, unexpected ways of being (Derrida 2005: 32). At a time when we are faced with the unpredictable transformations that climate change will surely bring to the planet as well as the increasingly unsustainable practices of neo-liberal capitalism, it seems important that performance practice and scholarship renounce their fascination with ‘futures past’, and instead look to ‘futures present’ – to those processes and possibilities that are both underway and yet always still to come (Adam and Groves 2007: 196).²

Reflecting the shift in the ‘object of performance’ from mode of production to site of reception (Sayre 1989; Goldberg 2007), this essay attempts to engage with these issues by exploring the relationship between ruins and still and moving images. In an age of transmediality, installation art and expanded cinema, it makes little sense to reduce performance to an ontology of liveness (Phelan 1993); on the contrary (as many of the essays in the recent *Performance Research* editions *On Duration* (2012) and *On Time* (2014) have proposed), it may be more useful to approach performance in terms of a durational component that inheres in any artwork, regardless of its medium. In line with this thinking, some images, both moving and still, have the potential to be performative on account of the ‘boundlessness of their sensory effect’ (Crone 2012: 12) – in their ability, that is, to affect the spectator in the here and now, in their moment of reception. The essay proceeds in three stages. In the first

part, I provide a historical and theoretical overview of the type of performance inherent in the relatively new genre of photography known as ‘ruin porn’; in the second, I critique two images from Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre’s *Gunkanjima* (2013), a photo album that attempted to document the ruins of Hashima, an island situated 15 kilometres from Nagasaki City in the East China Sea;³ and, in the third, I turn to Lee Hassall’s film *Return to Battleship Island* (2013), which purposefully set out to contest the tendency of ruin porn to blind us to the possibility of a future, and, by doing so, to challenge the ‘exhaustive logic of capitalist modernity’ (Brennan 2000: 3).

A word of caution: Hassall’s film was made as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded project ‘Future of Ruins: Reclaiming Abandonment and Toxicity on Hashima Island’, on which I was the principal investigator. The aim of the project was to create a multi-modal mapping of the island, and to investigate how the dynamic temporality of ruins may afford new ways of conceiving the future. As the research unfolded, it became increasingly apparent that Hashima’s future was threatened by, on the one hand, discourses of heritage that wanted to fix the island as a monument to Japan’s once-great industrial past, and, on the other, by a flood of digital images that, in an age of the Internet and instantaneous communication, fetishized it as a sublime fossil, deprived of history and motion.⁴ The more we discussed the images of Hashima on the project, the more it became obvious that the site could only be accorded a future through an alternative mode of representation that problematized the tendency of images to deny the destructive power of time. In this respect, Hassall’s film is best seen as an experiment in decomposition, a practice-based investigation into how an aesthetic of

² These two modalities of the future are not, of course, mutually exclusive. It is simply that the ‘past futures’ have traditionally been the preferred subject matter for scholars, rather than the more speculative ‘futures present’.

³ Enlarged images from the book were also part of an exhibition entitled *Gunkanjima* at the Polka Gallery in Paris in 2013.

⁴ There has been a long-standing campaign to see Hashima designated as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) world heritage site on account of its world historical interest. The bid was successful, and, on 4 May 2015, as I was editing this essay, the island, along with other industrial ruins of the Meiji-era in Kyushu and Yamaguchi, was granted UNESCO status.





ruination may function to liberate time and so give its viewers a palpable sense of the future. Although I was not involved in making the film, the work is imbued with many of the research questions driving the project, in particular the participants' discussions about the efficacy and meaning of ruin photography. In that respect, my 'reading' of the film as well as my critique of 'ruin porn' is self-interested, and undoubtedly biased; as such, it is advisable to approach it as a perspective or intervention, not something that purports to give the definitive account or have the last word. There are always other readings, different registers of experience. Realizing that many readers will not have seen the film, and so be compelled to accept my argument at face value, Lee Hassall and I, in an attempt to convey *Return to Battleship Island's* commitment to movement, have placed a series of stills from the film on the right-hand margin of the page. To do that, we invite the reader to move between text and image, and to scan the page vertically and horizontally.

RUIN PORN

'Ruin porn' is a neologism supposedly invented by Detroit blogger James Giffioen in the late 2000s in reaction to the process whereby the city of Detroit, as a result of economic decline and 'white flight', was transformed into a post-industrial ruin, which, in turn, was exploited as aesthetic backdrop by film-makers and urban explorers (Polter 2013). In keeping with related phrases such as 'disaster porn', 'climate porn' and 'eco porn', the epithet is essentially critical, designating, as it does, 'a superficial and one-eyed portrayal of urban decay that turns social and material misery into something seductive and aesthetically pleasing' (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014: 7). As Anca Pusca (2010) and Paul Mullins (2012) have argued, ruin porn is, more often than not, practised by professional and amateur outsiders who have little interest in or knowledge of the complex and specific socio-historical factors that have decimated

communities, destroyed lives and contaminated landscapes. Consequently, and this is close to Bertolt Brecht's critique of photography as 'a reproduction that masks the content' (2000: 144), ruin porn tends to overlook the human cost involved in processes of economic transformation.⁵ As a consequence, like the commodity fetish, as described by Marx in the first volume of his 1867 text *Capital*, it deprives the world of history and politics, transforming reality into a useless, aestheticized product. Referring to abandoned steel works and mines in Central and Eastern Europe, Pusca remarks how

[w]ith workers often lying outside of the picture – literally speaking, the photographs depicting industrial ruins – it is easy to decouple the scenery from a particular historical context and admire it for its physical/geometrical lines alone. The human traces serve only as temporary reminders of a population that must have been there sometime. The worker disappears physically, as a material fragment, and the image of the world no longer contains him/her: as such, the worker disappears as an ideational category. (Pusca 2010: 244)

John Patrick Leary makes a similar point in his critique of photographers such as Andrew Moore (2010) and Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre (2010) whose glossy, coffee table books have transformed contemporary Detroit – 'the Mecca of urban ruins' – into a hauntingly beautiful no-man's land:

So much ruin photography and ruin film aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins, dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit and transform them, and romanticizes isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation, and not just stubborn survival, of the city. (Leary 2011)

Given that 'photography' is, for Kelly Dennis, 'the medium of pornography' (Dennis 2009: 7, emphasis in original), it is somewhat strange that the only academic article on ruin porn to have subjected its central premise to any real scrutiny has come from contemporary archaeology. In a lengthy discussion article with

⁵ Given the obsession that ruin photography has with abandoned factories and machinery, it is telling that Brecht's critique of photography was directed at images of the Krupp Work Factory. See Anderson (2014) for a more detailed discussion of this point.

a number of archaeologists and geographers, including those with long-standing interests in theatre and performance, Póra Pétursdóttir and Björnar Olsen propose that the critics of ruin porn are engaged in their own act of blindness.⁶ This is due, they claim, to a prevailing ‘iconophobia’ (2014: 12), which prevents scholars from seeing the performative function of ruin photography, the way in which its aestheticization of the object allows for a cross-temporal encounter with the materiality of things: ‘Understood as the product of an interactive engagement with things, the photograph also ceases to be experienced as merely the *representation* of that encountered to be seen [instead] as a recollection, or duration, of the engagement itself’ (16).

In order to account for the photograph’s capacity to perform duration, to leap beyond its spatio-temporal frame, Pétursdóttir and Olsen have recourse to Roland Barthes’s famous notion of the *punctum*, that ‘thing’ in the image that ‘pricks’ or ‘wounds’ the viewer, without the latter being able to account for it:

[T]he punctum is rather the aesthetic effect of the photograph itself; aesthetic not least because it is not merely experienced as something visual but also as something that ‘takes root in the gaze and the guts’ ... , and thus in the fully aesthetic or bodily experience of perception. (20)

For Pétursdóttir and Olsen, the photograph performs by ‘touching’ the spectator in such a way that the image is no longer only a visual picture – something that we merely observe and consume – rather, it exists as a kind of actant, a non-human entity or thing that has the potential to disturb temporal boundaries and collapse distances. In this instance, the ‘skin’ of the image, to adapt a phrase from the film scholar Laura Marks (2000), registers an imprint of the original object that then

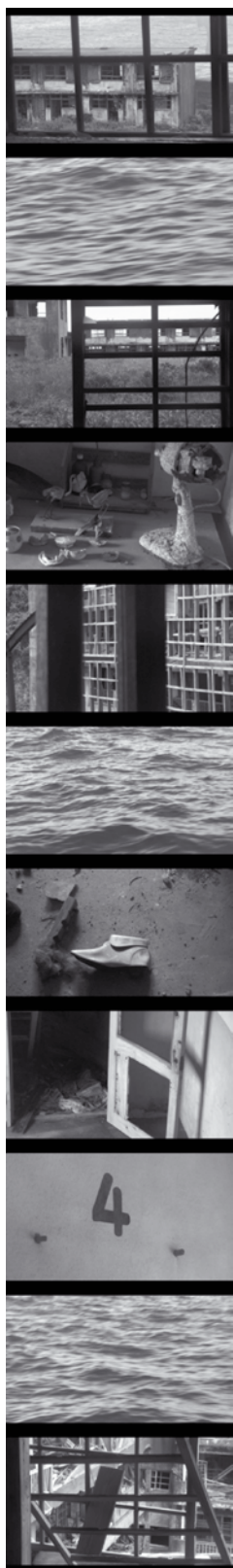
reverberates in and through the observer’s body via a haptic act of looking. There is much to be said for Pétursdóttir and Olsen’s attempt to draw attention to the performativity of images, not least because it shows how photographs can produce an untimely encounter that decentres the subject in the act of reception itself. However, within the context of ruin porn, their argument, for all its passion, is problematic and ultimately non-convincing.

The first problem – and this is caused by a slight misreading of Roland Barthes’s theory of photography in *Camera Lucida* (see Barthes 1993) – is their assumption of an inherent performativity to all photographic images, regardless of their qualities of mediation.⁷ In a passage on the *punctum*, for instance, they claim that ‘the ignition of this aesthetic affordance is always already present in the things depicted – and brought forward not necessarily because the photographer intended to do so but because of the photograph’s indiscriminating attentiveness to the surface of things’ (20). In making this statement, which ostensibly endows photography with some essentialized and magical capacity for capturing and transmitting the immediacy of the real, Pétursdóttir and Olsen downplay the crucial role played by what Barthes calls the ‘studium’, that is to say, the way in which images are aesthetically composed and mediated by photographers. It is simply not enough to suggest, as Pétursdóttir and Olsen do, that all images possess the power to perform on us; on the contrary, as Jacques Rancière has pointed out in *The Future of the Image* (2007), in a world where everything is always already aestheticized, the aesthetic power of the image resides in the artist’s ability to produce a redistribution in ‘how ideas and intentions [normally] organize the data of sense

⁶ These are Michael Shanks and Angela Piccini.

⁷ At times in *Camera Lucida* Barthes appears to suggest that photography works magically to reproduce a past reality in the here and now. In a discussion of Richard Avedon’s portrait of the former slave William Casby, Barthes says, ‘[T]here was a *certainty* that such a thing had existed: not a question of exactitude, but of reality ... slavery was given without mediation, the fact was established without method’ (1993: 80, emphasis in original). But then, almost immediately, Barthes counters this claim by reminding us that photography does not capture real things as such, but rather their ‘emanation’ as light particles that ‘touch me like the delayed rays of a star’ (80–1). In our dealings with photography, then, we are always in the domain of the dead: relic hunters in a landscape of fossils. The performance of the photograph is not so much about immediacy, as Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2014) maintain; rather, it is grounded in mediation and delay, a negotiation with the presence of an absence.





experience' (2007:23). Pétursdóttir and Olsen's mistake here is to confuse the *aesthetic* with *aesthetics* – or, put differently, to imagine that all artworks have the potential to transform our engagement with the world. And with respect to this point, it is telling that for all their supposed concern with aesthetics, Pétursdóttir and Olsen never analyse how a specific photograph or, for that matter, photographer, produces the affective performance that they are so concerned to defend.

The second flaw in Pétursdóttir and Olsen's argument is caused by their odd reluctance to engage with semantics. This oversight, as Angela Piccini equally acknowledges (2014), means that they ignore the specific 'labour' of pornography – or what we may see as its mode of performance.⁸ Like theatre, as defined by Sigmund Freud in his 1905/6 essay 'Psychopathic characters on the stage', pornography functions according to the logic of the fetish, in which reality is not repressed but disavowed, a psychic operation that allows the split subject to hold two contradictory ideas in place at the same time. To get a better understanding of the essentially fetishistic quality of ruin porn, it is crucial to consider etymological matters. The etymology of the modern word pornography derives from the Greek *pornographia*, a noun formed by adding the prefix *pornē* (prostitute or slave) to the suffix *graphein* (writing). Translated literally, pornography is an instance of prostitute's writing, a form of textuality that disseminates sexualized images as content. However, there is an additional meaning inherent in 'prostitute's writing' – one, moreover, that posits the prostitute as an active agent, the person doing the representing, in other words. The ambivalence or 'doubleness' inherent in the etymology of *pornographia* is especially important in the context of ruin porn: for it suggests that pornography is not simply about

the production of erotica. More generally, and in keeping with current thinking in 'porn studies', as well as drawing, more specifically, on the ideas of Alain Badiou (2013) and Jean Baudrillard (1983), it refers to a specific style or form of representing that poses political and ontological questions about the form and function of the image itself – what we may call its *mise en scène* or tendency towards spectacle.

Basing her reading on Jacques Lacan's understanding of fetishism, and Frances Ferguson's claim that 'something can be pornographic without being sexually explicit' (2014:48), Kelly Dennis argues in *Art/Porn: A history of seeing and touching* (2009) that pornography transcends sex. Indeed, for her, it is best understood as a fantastical mode of representation that allows split subjects to retain an illusory sense of completeness:

It seems reasonable to conclude that ... in pornography fascination does not consist in the sight of beauty, breasts, or 'beavers' but in something else altogether The fantasy is not sex so much as it is the possibility of fantasy itself. (Dennis 2009: 111)

Dennis's analysis of pornography as 'ontological critique' (117) adds a new dimension to ruin porn. It suggests that what is veiled in ruin porn is not simply a complex socio-political reality, as most of its critics, following a largely Marxist reading of the fetish, have tended to stress, but rather a metaphysical or onto-theological dread about lack and loss itself, which, as I will presently argue, centres on a paradoxical disavowal of time. By providing pictures of decay, most ruin photographers prevent from us actually seeing – and thus experiencing – the reality of transience. In other words, they keep temporality at bay by purporting to show it. As such, the performance of these images does not, as Pétursdóttir and Olsen claim, work to destabilize the spectator by bringing us closer to things, in a spatial

⁸ According to Piccini's insightful critique, what Pétursdóttir and Olsen neglect to say is that ruin porn tends to produce distanced looking. As such, their argument for a more affective visual practice based on the appreciation of beauty is only half right. Their concern with aesthetic beauty overlooks what is really at stake in the pornographic image: namely, its capacity to trouble the boundaries between looking and touching, which, as Piccini argues, is the very thing that the erotically charged male gaze seeks to disavow. This leads her to conclude that 'the problem with ruin photography is perhaps not that is pornographic, but that is *not* [pornographic enough]' (2014: 32).

and temporal sense; on the contrary, we are provided with a decidedly theatrical pleasure, a kind of fetishistic *jouissance* that does little to disturb or rearrange our normative, sequential ways of being in time. To borrow the language used by Georges Didi-Huberman, in an essay on the writer and art historian Carl Einstein, conventional mimetic images tend to ‘fossilize’ the world (2007: 5). In the face of such fossilization what then can be done? Are we condemned yet again to the same old ‘anti-theatrical prejudice’ in which representation is denounced as essentially perverse and illusory (Barish 1985)? Or might there be alternative ways of constructing images that perform differently?

In an attempt to explore these questions in greater detail, I want to investigate for the remainder of this essay how two different types of image-making have tried to capture and express the temporality inherent in the post-industrial ruins of Hashima Island in Japan, one of the most iconic and photographed ruin sites on the planet, on account of its strange, surrealist setting in the East China Sea.

PERFORMING GUNKANJIMA

At a time when Japan, as a result of chronic stagflation, high unemployment and abandoned construction projects, is obsessed with *haikyo* or ruin tourism, the island of Hashima, known colloquially as Gunkanjima or Battleship Island, due to its resemblance to a warship, has been a magnet for national and international ruin enthusiasts. Once an uninhabited rocky outcrop, situated close to its larger sister island Takashima, Hashima’s future was transformed when a seam of coal was discovered beneath the island in the 1860s. In 1890, as part of the Meiji drive to modernize Japan, the Mitsubishi Company started operations to extract coal, with the discarded slag being used, like an industrialized ‘ant hill’, to create industrial buildings and a surrounding sea wall in 1907 (Marchand and Meffre 2013: 9). Due to increased demand for coal as a result of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–5) and the Russo-Japanese

War (1904–5), the population of the island increased dramatically in the early decades of the twentieth century, with miners and their families being stationed on site. This increase in demographics resulted in the construction of a series of apartment blocks or dormitories, including the famous Building 16 on the south of the island, which, as the historian Brian Burke-Gaffney points out, ‘was [in 1916] Japan’s first concrete building of any size’ (2013: 13).

Hashima played a key role in Japanese imperialism in the 1930s, and by 1941 ‘annual production at Gunkanjima reached 410,000 tons’ (ibid.). In 1939, thousands of Korean workers were forcibly stationed on the island, often working in dangerous and unsanitary conditions. According to Burke-Gaffney,

about 1,300 labourers ... died, some in underground accidents, others of illnesses related to exhaustion and malnutrition. Still others had chosen a quicker, less gruesome death by jumping over the seawall and trying in vain to swim to the mainland. (Burke-Gaffney 2013: 13)

Hashima underwent yet another surge in growth in the 1950s, as Japan attempted to rebuild a country that had been decimated by war. Since coal was an integral energy source for steel and metal works, more miners were needed to work on the island, and this resulted in the construction of new residential tower blocks, a state-of-the-art high school, restaurants, shops and a hospital. In the black-and-white photographs taken by the miner Chiyuki Ito in the 1950s, the island is depicted as a worker’s paradise, a fully functioning Le Corbusean housing project, albeit in the middle of the sea. Incredibly by 1959, the island, which measures only ‘408 metres from south to north and 160 metres from east to west, with a circumference of 1.2 km’ (Kobayashi 2004: 137) housed more than 5,259 people – the ‘highest population density ever recorded in the world’, with ‘1,391 people living within a single hectare’ (Burke-Gaffney 2013: 13).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the island’s fortunes took a dramatic downturn with Japan’s shift from coal to a mixed nuclear- and petroleum-based economy. In January 1974,





Mitsubishi gave the order to stop operations, and only three months later, on 20 April, the workers abandoned their homes, leaving behind them a panoply of consumer goods: television sets, children's toys, posters, fridges and beer bottles. Battered by the wind and waves, and corroded by the salt in the air, the island quickly fell into a state of disrepair and rot. The resemblance to Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary (prison), situated off the coast of San Francisco, California, is uncanny, and one that visitors often make.

Hashima's extraordinary appearance, lying like some broken, concrete cathedral amidst the waves of the East China Sea, has appealed to many artists and filmmakers. In the 1940s, when still a working mine, the island was the location for the Japanese melodrama *Midori Naki Shima (The Greenless Island)* (1949). In its time of ruin, its usage has only increased, with pop bands, documentary film-makers, avant-garde artists, computer game designers and commercial cinema crews seeking to use it as a spectacular backdrop – aesthetic shorthand for content. Perhaps the most famous, and certainly most exploitative, engagement with the island has been its computer-generated appearance in the James Bond blockbuster *Skyfall* (2012), as the site where the villain, Raoul Silva, hatches his plans to destroy the world.

However, of all the artists drawn to the melancholic wreckage and sad desolation of its ruins, undoubtedly the most populous have been photographers. Over and beyond the overwhelming number of images of the island posted on websites and blogs by 'dark tourists' and urban explorers, a number of expensively assembled books have been published over the last decade or so, including Saiga Yûji's *Gunkanjima, Nemuri no naka no kakusei* (2003), Sinichiro Kobayashi's *No Man's Land: Gunkanjima* (2004) and Yves Marchand's and Romain Meffre's *Gunkanjima* (2013). Seduced by a desolate, photogenic landscape of perspectives, shapes and objects whose use-value has long since vanished, Hashima appears in these works as a photograph in waiting, a perfect embodiment of what Theodor

Adorno sees as the determining factor in any aesthetic artefact: namely, its status as a super commodity, something that serves no real purpose (Adorno 2004: 297). Despite differences in resolution, colour and exposure time, it is nevertheless striking to note how the photographs taken by the artists mentioned above resemble one another in terms of composition, mood and leitmotif. It is as if the island is having its own private joke: bewitching the photographers with the promise of some authentically immediate shot only to prove that such an image is a theatrical cliché, a visual trope that is repeated again and again by every camera that shoots it.

As a result of this similarity, I have decided to limit my analysis of the 'ruin porn' of Hashima to one publication, the most extensive, Marchand and Meffre's *Gunkanjima*. In their foreword to the book Marchand and Meffre explain how their aesthetic is based on the attempt to photograph 'remarkable buildings that embody the psychology of an era or system in their architecture, and to explore their metamorphoses' (2013: 3). This has led them to focus on both Detroit and Gunkanjima, as sites whose 'unique architecture' offers two condensed examples of the extent to which urban life in the twentieth century mirrored the production values of capitalist modernity itself. Their approach is not gratuitous, however, for, as they claim, their objective is to critique the unsustainable nature of such a global economic system:

Detroit allowed us to observe an aspect of the modern Western world through the filter of ruins. Likewise Gunkanjima offered the vision of a pioneer and prototypical city entirely dedicated to an industry whose principle of modernity drove it to ruin. (Marchand and Meffre 2013: 13)

The critical thrust of Marchand and Meffre's visual practice is underlined by the comments made by both Brian Burke-Gaffney and Alissa Descotes-Toyosaki in the introduction and afterword of their book. Reprising his position in an earlier article on the island published in *Cabinet Magazine* (2002), Burke-Gaffney suggests that Hashima – and by extension the

images in Marchand and Meffre's book – can be used for the purposes of negative critique. They warn of an ecological catastrophe to come:

But the eerie beauty and symbolism of Gunkankima undoubtedly lie in its decay The ghost island of Gunkanjima, we suspect, is what the world will be like when humankind finishes developing it and exploiting its resources: a ghost planet spinning through space – silent, naked and useless. (Burke-Gaffney in Marchand and Meffre 2013: 15)

Descotes-Toyosaki's conclusion is equally sombre and premonitory. For her, the futural double of Gunkanjima is Fukushima, the town whose nuclear processing plant was damaged by a tsunami in March 2011, and that is now an uninhabited, toxic zone:

In a poignant documentary film entitled *Nuclear Nation*, the inhabitants of Fukushima tell how pleasant life was in Futaba before March 11, 2011. At this hour, they have yet to be compensated for their land. The shutting down of Gunkanjima coincided with the expansion of the Japanese nuclear capacity initiated in the early 70s. In a way, Gunkankima might have been a precursor of the ruins that the forbidden zone around the plant has become: a *furusato* [a native land] where no one will ever be able to live anymore. (Descotes-Toyosaki in Marchand and Meffre 2013: 107)

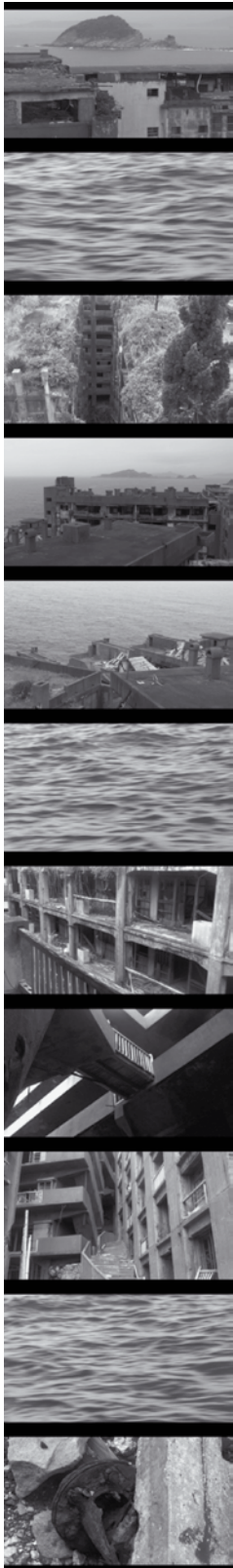
Contextualized within the pages of Marchand and Meffre's *Gunkanjima*, these statements are ironic, perhaps even self-defeating. For while Burke-Gaffney and Descotes-Toyosaki are concerned to posit the ruins of Hashima as troubling objects that would activate both past and future in a single critical moment, Marchand and Meffre's images have the opposite effect. In them, the viewer doesn't experience the unsustainable nature of twentieth-century history as a palpable, temporal force, telescoping us, remorselessly, from utopia to dystopia; rather, in keeping with the critique of ruin porn above, they appear to be totally devoid of temporality. In the photograph entitled *Beauty Salon and Barbershop, Building 65*, for instance, the scene is depicted as a classic still life or *nature morte*.

⁹ See, for instance, *Leap into the Void* (1960), the celebrated photograph of Yves Klein suspended in mid-air; or Josef Koudelka's extraordinary image Czechoslovakia, August 1968 (1968).

On the left-hand side of the image, the viewer's eye is attracted to a green, rusting, industrial water boiler that is positioned alongside a decaying white sink in the middle distance, the rim of which is full of dark, rust particles. A discarded shaving brush is balanced at the very edge of the sink. In the background, there are two blue plastic containers, and a dirty, flecked portrait of what appears to be a young Japanese woman in a cheap picture frame. These are set against a wall whose lower half is composed of a series of stained and cracked white tiles, while the upper part consists of crumbling green paint and exposed plaster work at varying stages of decomposition. The image itself, which appears to be filmed on a tripod and captured by a long exposure, is pre-naturally still and quiet. Unlike the uncanny sense of 'agitation' that certain still images can produce (Lomax 2006: 55), nothing seems to move here.⁹ Rather, the whole scene – and this is perhaps most evident in the calcinated, white pipes of contorted metal protruding at right angles from the belly of the boiler – is fossilized and bone-like. Paradoxically, in this image – that purports to capture transience in motion and to translate the vibrant materiality of things – one has the distinct impression of stasis: it seems that nothing will change. What we are left with is a sense of eternity, a suspended world deprived of motion and metamorphosis. So Marchand and Meffre's work does not perform affect, in the way that Pétursdóttir and Olsen might claim. On the contrary, it appears to invest in the pornographic logic of the fetish, allowing the spectator to enjoy the ruin as a fantasy that consoles rather than deranges.

The same fetishistic operation is arguably at work in Marchand and Meffre's landscape shots of Hashima's decaying and ruined buildings. In these high-resolution photographs, which often fill the whole page with a spectacular, two-dimensional image of devastation and abandonment, the viewer's eye is stunned with massification, washed out by the monotony of different shades of grey. In *Jikogudan, 'Stairway*





to Hell', the image is densely packed with a number of dilapidated window frames from three brutalist tower blocks that converge on a crumbling set of concrete steps, which rises steeply into a shadowy stairwell. The shot (surely taken with a wide lens) invites the viewer to consume the whole scene in a single take. In keeping with the disciplinary law of perspective, the eye is focused on the vanishing point in the picture. Such a technique encourages the spectator to ascend the stairs and 'walk through' a geometry of rectilinear lines and shapes. Although this may appear to afford an imaginary phenomenological encounter with the depth or inside of the concrete structures, the effect is somewhat different. For what actually transpires in this image is a purely retinal – and thus distanced – response to the flat surfaces of the concrete buildings that flank the stairwell. This is not, then, an image that allows the viewer time to feel and so reflect on Hashima's past and future; rather, it is a glamorous image that, to me, celebrates its own sublime construction. The effect is decidedly sensationalist, an image that conceals the real in its very desire to stage it as spectacle.

A final point of critique. As one flicks through high-resolution image after high-resolution image in Marchand and Meffre's *Gunkanjima* (there are approximately 70 images printed on A6 gloss-finished paper), one sees the same perspectives and motifs reappear: long corridors acting as vanishing points, endless doorways and windows used as framing devices, an obsession with Euclidean lines and shapes that seem somehow to have withstood the devastation and a nostalgic concern with abandoned children's toys and recreational equipment. By the time that one gets halfway through the book, Hashima has been transformed into one massive homogeneous totality – a site in which, as I read it, solidity triumphs over fragility and stasis over transience. If such exhaustion was the point to their work, one could applaud Marchand and Meffre for their self-reflexive critique, their perverse, Baudrillardian desire to trouble

the supposed capacity of ruin photography to represent the world. Such an 'anorexic commitment' (Baudrillard 1989), however, is not the case. Marchand and Meffre's stated intent in their Introduction to *Gunkanjima* is to challenge the exhaustion of modernity, with the camera positioned to witness and register capitalism's logic of 'creative destruction' (Harvey 2010: 184).

In my experience, this act of political looking does not succeed in raising consciousness; rather, like Bernd and Hilla Becher's images of industrial ruins in the Ruhr Valley in the 1960s, Marchand and Meffre's aesthetic runs the risk of replaying the serialized temporality of the production line. By placing image after image in a repetitive sequence, and then inviting viewers to absorb themselves in them, it could be said that Marchand and Meffre exploit the ruins of Hashima one more time. This is ecologically dubious, for it transposes the logic of modernity from the factory floor to the aesthetic realm itself. The dangers inherent in such transposition are evident by recalling the late Teresa Brennan's caution in her extraordinarily prescient text *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a new economy* (2000): '[M]odernity is producing a more complete and final form of death. Its victorious economy, capitalism, is turning biodegradable life into a form in which it can generate nothing' (2000:2). Although there is undoubtedly a great sense of craftsmanship and atmosphere in Marchand and Meffre's pictures of Hashima, there is little temporality or life to be intuited in them; rather, like most ruin photography, I felt that I was stuck in an endless and repetitive present that told me little about the past and asked nothing of future. As I looked at image after image, I was distanced, anesthetized to time.

RETURN TO BATTLESHIP ISLAND

Made as part of the AHRC-funded pilot project, 'Future of Ruins: Reclaiming abandonment and toxicity on Hashima Island' (2013), Lee Hassall's *Return to Battleship Island* is a 30-minute silent film, shot on a high-definition (HD) semi-

professional camera (a Panasonic HMC41), using a standard Leica lens.¹⁰ Responding to the academic work carried out by the other researchers on the project (Carl Lavery, Deborah Dixon, Carina Fearnley and Mark Pendleton), all of whom were engaged in different forms of spatio-temporal mapping, Hassall's intention for the film was, as he put it, 'to ruin the ruin'. Hassall's understanding of ruination here is quite different from the one advanced by the geographer Caitlin DeSilvey. Whereas DeSilvey refers to the 'ruination of the ruin' (2014:87) in her critique of the National Trust's management of the Orford Ness site in Suffolk, Hassall's focus is on representation, perhaps even art itself. Like Hollis Frampton's film *Nostalgia* (1971) in which a series of still images are burnt on a hotplate as the film strip and voice-over (describing the images) relentlessly roll on, so Hassall's film set out to undermine, consciously, the pornographic gaze of ruin photography that has done so much to petrify Hashima.

In his research for the project, which included a close analysis of Marchand and Meffre's images of Detroit and Gunkanjima, Hassall was aware that most of the existing images of the island's ruins generally use tripods and long exposures to evoke a sense of artfully composed stillness, Hassall's rejected this aesthetic by deliberately insisting on filming with a hand-held movie camera. In the opening moments of the film, for instance, the island is viewed (if we can say that) from a fishing boat at sea. The turbulence of the boat means that the images convulse, spasm and lose focus. At one moment, they appear to collapse completely. It is as if the camera were sea-sick. Hassall's insistence on removing all sound from the film compounds the nausea. By focusing all attention on the visual movement of the camera, the film seeks to musicalize the spectator's eye, to attune it to the film-maker's physical shifts and stumblings, to set it in motion.

To use the title from a well-known essay in theatre and performance studies, the observer's eye, in *Return to Battleship Island*, 'finds no

fixed point on which to rest' (Pontbriand 1982). In its febrile restlessness, the camera does not just appeal to vision; on the contrary, it both activates and participates in a corporeal economy of pulsions, rhythms, part objects. In his commitment to movement, Hassall – or so it appears to me – *détourns* the retinal logic of spectacular vision and returns us to the body. As he made the film, Hassall talked about fashioning images that the viewer would breathe with rather than look at. His aim, he claimed, was to produce a vector or force-field in which objects would lose their discreteness. And watching the film, as I have done on numerous occasions, both alone and with others, there is little doubt that the images target the stomach and intestines. The constant movement on the surface of the wave image is too much for the eye alone; you have to give yourself up to its rhythm, to attune yourself to its pace.

Hassall is able to create this visceral effect through a compositional logic based on repetition and difference. As the camera moves through the island, documenting the trajectory of the scholars involved in the project – the images of the ruins are intentionally banal and conventional – each stage in the journey is broken up with a repetitive shot of a wave, which lasts for approximately 12 seconds. The rhythmic return of the image creates a sense of what Dylan Trigg in *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, nostalgia and the absence of reason* calls 'dynamic stasis' (Trigg 2006:21). Whereas the wave sequence always repeats the same image, the island sequence moves forward in time and creates a linear narrative, full of stock tropes and typical images of ruination. These two regimes of movement overlap and intercut each other constantly. In the impossible interval or in-between time that Hassall's film has produced, there are two contradictory and destabilizing desires at stake: first, a desire to remain with the wave, and, second, a desire to remain stable on solid ground in the hope of seeing the island. Somewhat agonistically, however, the initial or extant desire is always

¹⁰ For more on the project, see www.futureofruins.org.uk





undercut by its opposite impulse. The more one seeks consolation in the rhythmic play of the wave image, the more one wants to return to dry land, and vice versa. The film offers no alternative to this discomfiting disjunction between two temporal rhythms. Rather one is caught between anticipation and retention, 'suspended between two mental intrigues' (Lyotard 1991: 186).

Similar to the films of Michael Snow and Douglas Gordon, *Return to Battleship Island* works according to a logic of accumulation in which the film does not so much seek to create images of time as to produce a temporal experience itself. As image after image in the work simultaneously disappears and repeats, time, in line with Hassall's desire to produce movement rather than stillness, strangely starts to disclose itself as a temporal force. This is not the Bergsonian time of recollection and continuity (1950), and neither is it the thick, multidirectional time that Michel Serres speaks of in his conversation with Bruno Latour (Serres 1995: 56); rather, by severing the spectator from past and future and focusing attention on the presentness of the present, Hassall succeeds in evoking what I can only call a kind of ungraspable, almost abstract, notion of time that I was unable to coincide with or exist in. In this empty flow of time that consumes itself as it passes, *Return to Battleship Island* ironically shows that there is no possibility of coinciding with or retaining these images that we experience all too palpably. We appear to be trapped in a dilated timescape that is simultaneously haunted by a past and impatient for a future, too early and too late for the present, the always erased now.

By making this gap or symptomology appear, Hassall manages to unveil, I would suggest, the very thing that the pornographic gaze is concerned to disavow: the absence or abyss that is constitutive of being itself. For this reason, we may say that Hassall's 'ruination of the ruin' is perhaps best defined as the ruination of fantasy; he collapses the stage set, discloses the blind spot at the very heart of vision. In touching on this *aporia*, *Return to Battleship Island* draws

unconsciously close to what Jacques Derrida in *Memoirs of the Blind: The self-portrait and other ruins* – his reflection on drawing – calls the 'Augenblick' (1993: 48), a kind of blinking or eclipse that produces an imperceptible delay between the artist's hand and eye. By reflecting on the gesture of blinking, in which something inescapably 'drops out of sight' (*ibid.*), Derrida radically recasts our understanding of ruination. In a discussion of the uncanny self-portraiture of Henri Fantin-Latour, Derrida says:

It is like a ruin that does not come *after* the work but remained produced, *already from the origin*, by the advent and structure of the work. In the beginning, at the origin, there was ruin. At the origin comes ruin; ruin comes to the origin, it is what comes first and happens to the origin; in the beginning. With no hope of restoration. (Derrida 1993: 65)

Regardless of the differences between painting and film-making, Derrida's words shed dark light on Lee Hassall's film, and allow us to understand, perhaps, the type of experience that *Return to Battleship Island* was seeking to create. For in its commitment to movement, in what Derrida might call its 'ecliptic rhythm' (55), the film manages, I think, to achieve its ambition: namely, to prevent the viewer from consuming at a distance the very dilapidation it shows. Indeed, with Derrida firmly mind, Hassall's portrait of Hashima may be best seen as a lure, a trap. You think that you are watching a film about ruins, but what the film actually shows is that perception itself, as Derrida claims, is always already ruined. Hence the great irony in Hassall's title; for if the work is supposedly predicated upon some 'mythical' return, the composition of the piece shows that such a return is impossible. For, as Derrida's comments highlight, how can one ever hope to restore a place that never existed, reproduce an experience that was wrecked at its very origin? Helped by Derrida, a ghost from the past whose insights were already there, awaiting us in the future, it now becomes possible to grasp the logic behind Hassall's provocative drive to ruin the ruin. In a world glutted with ruin porn, there is little to be gained by representing

ruins, innocently and beautifully, as Marchand and Meffre do; rather, the more important task is to ruin representation itself, to provoke an experience of untimeliness through the artwork's willingness to blink and erase itself.

FUTURE OF RUINS

But to return to the central premise of this essay: how does such a performance of ruination allow for the possibility of a different future to emerge, one that may break with capitalism's exhausted *and* exhausting economy of desire? A possible response to this question may perhaps be found by comparing the sense of time produced in *Return to Battleship Island* with what Maurice Blanchot terms 'the time of disaster', an uncanny temporality characterized by 'dis' or 'non' appointment, in which 'the future is always already past' (Blanchot 1995: 1). Crucially, the 'pastness' of the future, in Blanchot's formulation, does not mean that time stops flowing; rather what is being rejected by Blanchot is a certain engrained idea or concept of the future. As Barbara Adam and Chris Groves point out, this type of future has been historically imagined in the West as a time that, on the one hand, succeeds the present, and, on the other, as something that can be managed and traded in (2007: 39–76). In contrast to this, and in order to keep the future 'unknown' – and thus potentially liberating – Blanchot allies it with the 'disaster', a mode of temporality that is simultaneously here and elsewhere:

When the disaster comes upon us, it does not come ... but since the future, as we conceive of it in the order of lived time, belongs to the disaster it has always already withdrawn or dissuaded it. (Blanchot 1995: 1–2)

Blanchot's somewhat difficult notion of a future that withdraws in the very act of arriving can be explained by distinguishing, as the French language does, between the words *futur* and *avenir*. Whereas *le futur* is something that we can anticipate, *l'avenir* escapes all

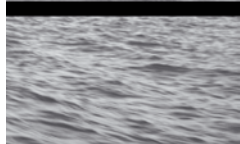
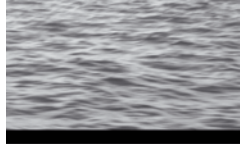
prediction; for, as its name suggests, it is precisely always *a-venir*, a time to come. This is why the future, like the disaster and ruin, is both a source of anguish and possibility. By always outrunning us, it reveals the originary and irreparable loss that the subject seeks to veil: 'We are not contemporaries of the disaster: that is its difference The disaster would be in addition, in excess, an excess which is marked only as pure loss' (6).

Blanchot's notion of disaster as temporal excess not only highlights *Return to Battleship Island's* commitment to the future, it discloses its political and ecological importance. By allowing a space for the unknowable to disclose itself, Hassall wagers on abandoning the deadly repetitions of capital for the possibility of something new, the creation of a different earth, perhaps. Tellingly, however, Hassall has little interest in building the new upon some pre-existing and thus contradictory image of the past, and nor is he interested in using the images of Hashima as a tired caution for some environmental apocalypse to come;¹¹ rather, he simply prefers to render time palpable, that is, to say material, by discomfiting the present and wrecking the compensatory lure of the image. Through its deliberate ruination of ruin porn, the film allows the spectator to experience the impossible presence of a renegade temporality that refuses to be measured and will not sit still. Crucially, as I hope to have shown, the observer is displaced and decentred in this operation, unable to master the flow of images that oscillate, endlessly, backwards and forwards. In severing the present from itself, the film seeks to communicate, teleiopoetically, with those faceless ghosts of the future who are always still to come. Whether or not these phantoms will ever arrive is a question that the trembling force field of *Return to Battleship Island* leaves open and unresolved in an image of wave that erases and deforms all that came before it.

I would like to thank Joel Anderson, Tim Edensor, Richard Gough, Clare Finburgh, Joe Kelleher, Nicolas Whybrow and David Williams for their help with this.

¹¹ The image is contradictory because it projects the present into the future, and, as such, is always already an image of the past.





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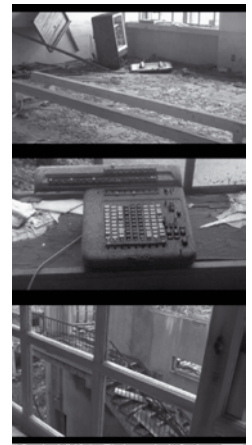
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