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Urban Exploration as Adventure Tourism: Journeying Beyond the Everyday

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I came to Chernobyl to visit the ruins.

For someone intent on the situated experience of decay, this site, when detached from its past, is a model for the process of the decline of the built environment.

But it would be a mistake to ignore the inevitability of Chernobyl—its ongoing, insistent presence in the landscape. The reality that it will be thousands of years before the threat of further nuclear disaster ceases to be real, and the fact that we collectively fail to do anything much to prevent such an outcome, have an impact

so immediate and solid, when standing in the sun on a peaceful spring afternoon, that they are not easily forgotten, or, more exactly, recovered from.[1]

Pripyat was a purpose-built 'atomograd', a Soviet-era city designed to house the workers of the nearby Chernobyl nuclear power plant. The city was occupied for just seven years before the entire population of fifty thousand was evacuated in 1986, following the accident at Reactor 4.

To visit Chernobyl as a tourist is not a comfortable experience. Besides the potential exposure to radiation, the three-hour trip from Kiev on deteriorating roads, or the process of passing through military checkpoints and radiation scans, I was not comfortable with visiting Chernobyl as a disaster zone, and I am not comfortable with fascination in relation to human suffering.

The discourse on Chernobyl (and by association nearby Pripyat) is often one of catastrophe, told in measures of radioactivity, body counts, clinical language of cancers and birth defects. None of these things speak in my experiences of the site:

Faded, washed out colours, nothing vibrant except the leaves on the trees. Modern buildings in a Soviet style removing them once from familiarity, removed again by broken windows with ragged curtains, and the scattered personal remnants of fifty thousand lives.

[1] The italicised sections in this chapter are excerpts from my travel notes from 2009. While most of the details about Chernobyl were gathered from tour guides when visiting Pripyat, see also Mould 2000: 143147 and Beresford and Smith 2005: 290-93.

Overgrown paths, half-obliterated mosaics. Classrooms in disarray, an empty pool with an impotent diving board suspended above. Finally, we reach the iconic amusement park, its rusting dodgem cars still waiting patiently behind the fence, a rotting wooden-seated roundabout, photographed against the backdrop of equally rotten buildings, and the red and yellow Ferris wheel, appearing from a distance as if it could still function, if only there were people here to use it.

Figure 9.1 A swing in the abandoned amusement park. Pripyat (Chernobyl). Despite featuring in iconic images of the city taken since the disaster, there are questions as to whether this park was fully operational prior to the evacuation.

Images go some way to expressing the complexity of the site. They reflect the experience itself, the tactility. They remind me of the slight breeze, the spring warmth, the very tangible presence of absences and the strange taste of radiation—like touching your tongue to a battery.

This wasn't somewhere static; this was a place where one thing happened once.

Pripyat, along with Gunkanjima in Japan, is one of the few relatively untouched landscapes of large-scale modern ruin in the world. Modern ruins are those architectural sites where long-term neglect has led to a state of visible decay, and in which the functionality of the place is compromised so that the dominant impression becomes one of uselessness and absence. Unlike historically significant sites (remnants of prior cultures and eras), these everyday ruins are the persistent detritus of the culture that generated them, existing both within and outside that culture. If space is socially and culturally produced, as Lefebvre suggests, then a contemporary ruinscape is a void of production – its status as a place is called into question by material decline that signifies the end of its life as an actively inhabited (and therefore continually produced) space. The modern ruin becomes dead space because death '…has a location, but that location lies below or above social space', which is 'a space of society, of social life' (Lefebvre 1991: 35). Another way of framing the space/place distinction is in Certeau's iteration of Merleu-Ponty's phenomenology, in which he frames space as a site of movement and action, ever ambiguous, while place 'implies an indication of stability' (Certeau 1984: 117). Certeau also notes that death 'falls outside the thinkable' (Certeau 1984: 190), which, when applied to modern ruins as dead spaces, partially explains their sudden shift from dynamic to inert sites of social production: modern ruins are the unthinkable "dead" sites of the contemporary era, existing, but unstable - not yet gone, but implicitly excluded from society because of their uninhabitable and unpredictable presence.

As a destination that is between place and space, between being and unbecoming, the contemporary ruinscape holds a shifting transience—hardly a tautology, this notion considers the inherent possibility of such a space, which at any moment might face demolition, reconstruction or renewal; a transience that must be acknowledged because it renders the space fundamentally precarious.

The problematic nature of such precariousness can be seen in some early encounters with 'modern ruins', such as the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war and the subsequent battle of the Paris Commune in 1871. The burnt out shells of sites including the Hotel de Ville and Tuileries palace stood for years in a recognisably modern (post-Haussmann) Paris, and were subject to fascination on the part of visitors, who avidly consumed postcards of the city in ruins (see Luxenberg 1998). Since then, the decay or destruction of modern cities has been repeated in world wars, natural disasters and acts of terrorism, which serve to make us no less fascinated, but decidedly uncomfortable about the ruins of the present era. Similarly, large-scale decline and abandonment has lead to landscapes of ruin, which are equally uncomfortable spectres in an urban setting.

The dominant perception of abandoned buildings classifies them as pejorative wastelands, eyesores that have no place in a modern setting. Disused and decaying buildings disrupt efforts to maintain order and aesthetic unity, and manifest as problems to be dealt with through demolition or renovation. There is little discourse within which to attribute value to such sites, with the exception of local sentiment and heritage, which tend to elevate select locations to the status of 'historical site', while other structures are denigrated. The mainstream view of modern ruins does not see any value in these

discarded remnants of the recent past—at least, not as they stand. For most, such sites remain unnoticed in the everyday landscape (for example, Hollander (2009) and Gallagher (2010) resolve to fix the problems presented by modern ruins through demolition and erasure from the landscape, or incorporation into projects of renewal).

However, a growing body of literature on contemporary ruins attempts to deal less reactively with decay and abandonment. Some emphasise the individual or personal value of the sites themselves, and many assesses modern ruins as both a product of recent history and a bellwether for a post-capitalist or even apocalyptic future. In their relation to the present they can be seen as post-industrial ruins (Edensor 2005), detritus of recent history (Hell and Schönle 2008, on the ruins of modernity), postmodern or post-Fordist ruins (High and Lewis 2007; Cowie and Heathcott 2003, on deindustrialisation), or as memorial and palimpsest (Huyssen's present pasts (2003)). As sites they can be scapes (Bergers's drosscape, 2007; Hell and Schönle's ruinscape, 2008); spaces (Edensor's interstitial spaces (2005: 60), Turner's liminal landscapes (in Turner and Bruner 1986: 33-44), and Certeau's espaces (1984: 117)); and states (terrain vague and shrinking cities (Oswalt 2005)). As place they can be defined by what they were (as in Boym's nostalgia (2001)), or what they might become (Vergara's 'American Acropolis' (1999: 15)).

Recently, there has been a growing fascination with urban and industrial decay, and ruins are increasingly acknowledged as a contemporary phenomenon. Images from Marchand and Meffre's *Ruins of Detroit* featured in a 2009 Time article on the decay of the city (see Marchand and Meffre 2009 and 2010). Paiva and Manaugh's *The Art of*

Urban Exploration (2008); O'Boyle's *Modern Ruins* (2010) and Drooker, Woodward and Brinkley's *American Ruins* (2007) join earlier publications such as Vergara's own *American Ruins* (1999); Skrdla's *Ghostly Ruins* (2006); Seidel, Sack and Klemp's *Underworld* (1997) and Hamm, Steinberg and Jungk's *Dead Tech* (2000), each concerned with relatively contemporary sites of recent ruin, as well as obsolescence. Polidori depicts the decay of Pripyat and Chernobyl in his *Zones of Exclusion* (2003).

Most of these publications are little more than coffee table books depicting confronting, yet increasingly typical, images of decay. This emphasis on the aesthetics of decay reflects the preoccupations of the emerging practice of urban exploration. Whether mainstream (as in the case of Marchand and Meffre, and Vergara) or independently published in print and online, these texts represent the core products of a growing sub-culture.

'Urban Exploration' (hereafter UE) is an umbrella term for a practice in which participants seek to enter locations that offer experiences beyond the everyday. Most commonly, urban explorers visit sites of abandonment and decay, or forbidden locations (such as drains, sewers and subway tunnels). The term can also refer to related practices in which participants gain access to active sites (rooftops, building sites, bridges and otherwise restricted areas). The practice can involve trespassing, forced entry, and exposure to dangers including structural instability, asbestos and other contaminants. There is an element of personal risk with regard to the methods of access (which can include climbing, rappelling, tunnelling and so on), as well as encounters with security or police, or others who make use of such locations (the homeless, those engaging in

illicit activities and “salvagers”, for example). Practices encompassed by UE include the Japanese practice of Haikyo (from the Japanese term for “ruin”, and a practice which is specific to ruinscapes) and Infiltration, which focuses on trespass and subversive aspects of UE.

Exploration in spaces of decay continues to be the most common form of UE. As one veteran explorer notes: ‘Among the most delightful targets you’ll find are abandoned sites, probably the most popular locales among urban explorers’ (Ninjalicious 2005: 88). Thus, this chapter is concerned with the kinds of touristic experiences one can find in contemporary ruins, as opposed to popular ruins of antiquity; disaster zones in a state of disruption; the risks of adventure tourism, or the standard urban tourism of cities like New York.

UE consciously operates by subverting conventional attitudes towards abandoned or forbidden spaces, challenging notions that such sites are useless or unimportant. The explorer attributes personal, collective and aesthetic value to these sites as worthy destinations, sites of a particular kind of experience.

The UE community operates most evidently online. The web provides an ideal platform to share both images and privileged information between explorers, while maintaining anonymity. Through online networks, a sense of a worldwide community has been fostered and it is this community, more than anything else, that allows for the possibility of contemporary ruin tourism.

Formally, there are no UE tours – though such things could be said to exist via websites including CouchSurfing, GlobalFreeloaders and individual UE sites. Exceptions might include guided tours of Pripyat in the Ukraine (soon to be expanded), Haikyo tours of Gunkanjima in Japan, New Orleans 'Katrina tours', and tours of Catacombs and other similarly 'dark' sites. Considering any sanctioned tourism as UE is problematic, however, because the core element of UE—trespass—cannot apply. Conversely, as there is no way to access Pripyat in particular without prior consent, explorers must make use of sanctioned tourism to pursue their practice there. Further, few of the contemporary ruin photographs in print are taken without prior permission, although many of them are the work of confessed urban explorers.

Therefore, the notion of UE as a touristic practice must be considered—seeking the foreign or unfamiliar, destination specific travel for the purposes of UE, and the global nature of UE communities all suggest that there is an element of tourism—particularly in Pripyat and America's rust-belt cities, which have achieved high status in the community as must-see destinations for the dedicated explorer. Further, as with many tourist sites, iconographic images emerge: the Ferris wheel in Pripyat, or Michigan Central Station in Detroit. Even the increasing proliferation of literature focusing on contemporary ruinscapes cannot do without images. The work of Trigg (2006), Edensor (2005) and Hell and Schönle (2008) exemplifies this: these highly academic publications are filled with black and white shots of miscellaneous decay, as if their words are not enough to describe the state of things.

Something about the search for this place, signalling to us from a distance, long before we get close to it, makes it seem epic and static… it is holding its breath—as are we.

We approach the front fence of Michigan Central Station, awed. Take pictures. The smashed windows are gaping, angular, dark and opaque, a random pattern within the criss-crossed window frames.

The relationship between tourism and consumption is well established, with Urry in particular providing a relation between western leisure practices, consumer culture and the escapism or exoticism of the tourist/travel experience. However, Urry suggests that tourist sites 'are fundamentally places of service and material consumption' (Urry 2004: 209), a quality which cannot easily be associated with the kinds of destinations sought by urban explorers. In fact, in the case of UE, the opposite is the case—modern ruins are sites which have fallen out of the world, they do not figure on any tourist map and are by definition absent of the kind of material consumption that generates a commodification of place.

However, Urry also suggests that 'the minimal characteristic of tourist activity is the fact that we look at, or gaze upon, particular objects, such as piers, towers, old buildings, artistic objects, food, countryside and so on.' (Urry 1995: 131). Thus the visual component of UE, souveniring images of decay from abandoned locations, becomes consumption of place in a touristic sense—the images generated by the

explorer are the productions of a visitor's gaze, and thus a 'tourist activity'. In this context, modern ruins are tourist destinations.

Contemporary ruins as tourist destinations stand somewhere between the romantic sublime, and the uncomfortable notion of disaster tourism, which 'values extreme cultural experiences' as transgressive acts (Garoian and Gaudelius 2008: 124). As with adventure and disaster tourism, UE seeks to indulge in risk taking activities, and perhaps also to imagine 'apocalyptic scenarios of the world turned upside-down' (Huggan 2010: 101) and 'to see and experience it in situ, to claim that one was physically present in the midst of it all' (Garoian and Gaudelius 2008: 124).

'Unfortunately, such transgressions are imperialistic', observe Garoian and Gaudelius (2008: 123), and Huggan argues that adventure tourism is potentially linked to 'a crisis in masculinity' and a 'quest for progress' (2010: 102). A similar reading of UE culture reveals an overt masculinity, particularly in the emphasis on exploring and conquering, physical strength, imperviousness to danger, and survival. The pursuit of real or authentic experiences, as opposed to the contrived spectacle of traditional tourism, is also a common element between the UE traveller and the adventure/disaster tourist (see Huggan 2010: 100-103, in particular).

In relation to adventure and disaster tourism, Bell and Lyalls's accelerated sublime incorporates vastness, stillness, extreme feats, 'dark' sites (here Bell includes Chernobyl) and risk for pleasure (2002: 188-200), which are also common to UE. The accelerated sublime is inverted, however (as is traditional tourism) by the covert and

subversive nature of UE. Where the accelerated sublime accounts en masse for those who want to experience sublime qualities in authentic and impressive ways, UE continues to be a preoccupation of independent groups who make their own itineraries and maps, and are their own guides.

In considering 'toxic tours' (including Chernobyl), Pezzullo wonders if the benefits of tourism in disaster affected areas, run-down neighbourhoods and polluted sites raises a 'tension between engagement and objectification' (Pezzullo 2007: 31), an exploitation of people and places in the interests of a political or educational drive to occupy, physically, a space of risk in which something must be confronted. However, Pezzullo believes in the substantive power of this form of disaster tourism to counter 'mass commercial tourism' (Pezzullo 2007: 37), and in doing so, move away from the usual binaries of self and other or home and away, and avoid the sense of alienation and privilege of traditional tourism. A thinking engagement with the unacknowledged or spoilt spaces of everyday life, as a tourist, is less problematic than a tourism spectacle that emphasises foreignness and turns the potential for education into consumption.

Because UE operates as an unsanctioned and unguided engagement with spaces that are not the commodified sites of either traditional, disaster or adventure tourism, if it is a tourist practice at all, it must be said to be a participant generated consumption of the aesthetic and experience of modern ruins, which exists in opposition to commodified, mass-tourist practices.

When arguing for the potential of alternative practice in modern ruin spaces in this chapter, I take on two theoretical approaches. The first is Walter Benjamin's 'redemptive critical practice'; the second is Certeau's notion of spatial practice.

Benjamin and Certeau identify dominant perceptions and conditions within modern and spatial paradigms of the material world. They propose an active rejection of the experiences engendered by particular ways of seeing and existing. The practice of UE similarly rejects the control of the built environment by actively seeking sites in which such control is suspended, diminished, and challenged.

One could think of Benjamin as an early urban explorer—taking to the streets of foreign cities, and in his travels seeking locations and experiences that do not usually figure in a typical tourist account. Benjamin's experiments with hashish in Marseilles, for example, and his short pieces on Moscow and Naples, were aimed at altering the usual perceptions of the city, both as experience and as representation. A pertinent reading of Benjamin's city portraits suggests that

> [t]he fragmentary style pursued by Benjamin in his writing on the city is in keeping with his understanding of the modern urban complex as the locus of the disintegration of experience and with his recognition of the need to salvage the disregarded debris of contemporary society. The city is a vast ruin demanding careful excavation and rescue. (Gilloch 1996: 23)

Benjamin's writings, concerned often with the rejected, lost, and ephemeral are described by Caygill as 'littered with the remains and traces of abandoned works', with a great deal of his legacy made up of 'ruins', 'fragments' and 'Uncompleted/uncompletable projects' (Caygill 1998: 3). One such work is the voluminous Arcades Project, which is significant because it focuses on the semi-derelict shopping arcades of 1940s Paris. In wandering the ruins of the recent past, I share with Benjamin a fascination for the outmoded and obsolete detritus of capitalism, which he discovered in the then-decaying arcades.

In using a Benjaminian approach to contemporary ruin landscapes, I admittedly avoid engaging closely with notions of space and place, urban renewal, embodiment, affect and other equally significant understandings of the built environment and its decline (as outlined above). The reason for privileging Benjamin's methodology is the extent to which it provides the necessary perspective to return potential and value to a site that is normatively beyond redemption in itself. Where other approaches place one at the centre of the ruin, or account for experience in terms of broader social and cultural contexts, Benjamin finds a use for the neglected and liminal refuse of modernity, for, as he states: 'Overcoming the concept of "progress", and overcoming the concept of "period of decline" are two sides of one and the same thing' (Benjamin 1999: 460). For Benjamin, as for myself, and for the practice of UE more generally, the forgotten and neglected aspects, the rejected elements of contemporary modernity provide an experience and understanding through which the notion of progress can be overcome; and by association the dominance of renewal, consumption, commodification, linear

histories and the attribution of value within this framework might be (at least temporarily) suspended.

As a reaction to dominant perceptions, the experience of exploring ruins takes on the quality of a collective and subversive set of acts against a perceived spatial dominance in which our actions are prescribed by a constructed order. One reading of Urry suggests that 'tourism as a form of consumption starts to become hegemonic and organize much of contemporary social and cultural experiences.' (Shaw and Williams 2004: 114). The second approach in this chapter, using Certeau's Spatial Practice, presents an argument in favour of UE as more than an alternative and thrill-seeking hobby, instead considering it to be a tactical intervention in the built environment, and rightfully termed a 'practice'.

Urban explorers make use of the process of decline and renewal that prevails in cities in particular. Of New York, Certeau says '[i]ts present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future.' (Certeau 1984: 91). Here, Certeau shares a vision in common with Benjamin, he sees in progress and accelerated modernity a tendency toward catastrophic ruin. Gazing at the city, 'The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding… a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production' (Certeau 1984: 91).

This is the readable text of the city, against which Certeau pits an everyday spatial practice that is migrational and mobile. Within this notion of the everyday, Certeau posits a challenge to the administrative power of the concept city. Vitally, the 'networks

of order' dominate this concept city, in which 'there is a rejection of everything that is not capable of being dealt with in this way and so constitutes the "waste products" of a functionalist administration (abnormality, deviance, illness, death, etc.)' (Certeau 1984: 94-95). Modern ruins are such 'waste products', excluded from order and network, and in Certeau's argument, these products (if not reintroduced and transformed via the force of progress) can manifest 'effects contrary to those at which it aims' (Certeau 1984: 94). Thus, ruins, like unpredictable articulations of walking in the city, provide a tactical alter which cannot be accounted for in the organisational principles of an idealised built environment, allowing for myriad possibilities which are often unseen within the constructed order.

Regarding travel and the possibility of exiting the ordered city, Certeau states that '[t]ravel (like walking) is a substitute for the legends that used to open up space to something different.' Here, he suggests that the practice of travelling provides an exoticism of the everyday, 'walking exile produces… the effect of displacements and condensations.' Such practices in turn 'invent spaces', that is; they provide the same potential as walking to subvert the everyday, to bring about new perspectives, new stories and new narratives about place (Certeau 1984: 106-107).

Where unpredictable movement of citizens through city space might undo the hegemonic regulation of urban life (for example, the spatial practices of walking, travelling and narrating), UE adds several dimensions of resistance within the construct of the everyday. Each step over a threshold takes the explorer away from crowds, away from newness and sameness, away from the codes that regulate public behaviours; away

from the watchful eye of police and fellow citizens, away from the safety of the ordered city. To crawl through a hole in the fence is to disarm the powers that assumed a fence could keep you out. To lower yourself into a dark basement, and light it with a torch is to rediscover a forgotten world that you would otherwise never see. To capture a moment of death with pictures of smashed windows, flooded lift-shafts and crumbling plaster is to challenge any idea of stability and constancy of the built environment.

In framing UE as practice, the act of urban exploration is legitimised as an interventionist strategy. Like the play and psychogeography of the Situationists, designed to 'take action over the city' (Sadler 1998: 15), the practice of UE reveals the potential of modern ruins to interrupt and subvert dominant conceptions of ideal, modern space, as well as the expectations and aims of traditional or 'everyday' tourism. 'In the ruin we confront an alternative aesthetic, one which rebukes the seamlessness of much urban design and opens out heterodox possibilities for appreciating beauty and form' (Edensor in Ingold and Vergunst 2008: 134).

The consciousness of this activity is revealed in shared codes and rules of the UE community. I refer here to two seminal texts on the subject, collated by early participants in both the online and real-life culture of UE that began to emerge in the mid-nineties.

The co-creators of *Jinx* 'World Wide Urban Adventure' magazine, record the adventures of their 'agents' in *Invisible Frontier* (Deyo and Leibowitz 2003). In addition to abandoned sites, the frontier of which they speak is to be found in any

restricted, uninhabited or difficult to access location in New York. This includes underground (sewers, subways, aquifers), government buildings (UN headquarters), bridges, rooftops, and the usual urban ruins.

While the *Jinx* crew is a community of secret agents adventuring in a hostile urban wasteland, Jeff Chapman (aka Ninjalicious) considers a more serious practice (or 'art') of UE. He emphasises preparedness, and advises the aspiring explorer to get fit, stop smoking and cultivate an ethical attitude to what he sometimes terms 'infiltration'. Like the writers of Jinx, Ninjalicious self-published independently (in photocopied "zine" format, and online) during the early development of the international UE community.

Both of these texts significantly influenced core tenets of UE culture, largely accounting for the unity of practice that is reflected in the following core principals of UE:

> 'Show respect for sites by not breaking anything, taking anything, defacing anything or even littering while exploring.' (Ninjalicious 2005: 20)

> 'Explorers use the motto 'take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints' (Ninjalicious 2005: 26)

> 'While no equipment is actually essential, there are three pieces of basic equipment that I regard as the explorer's best friends: the flashlight, the camera and the moist towelette' (Ninjalicious 2005: 51).

Though there are variations on this last theme (the recent adage of GPS enabled electronics, for example), the fundamentals remain the same: despite the occasionally exaggerated anarchism of UE, there are rules and codes which are followed by most, if only in the interests of personal safety and preserving the site itself.

Such rules are a curious development, and occasional criticism, for a culture that otherwise takes the stance of pioneers against pretentious aestheticism and state or hegemonic control of space. However, such rules exist in part to distinguish explorers from vandals, graffiti artists and partying teens, and in part because these locations are, realistically, often unsafe.

The stories of the Jinx crew, Ninjalicious and other explorers reflect my own experiences in modern ruins—surreptitious entry, a sensation of smells and sounds which differ totally from everyday encounters with space and place; sites littered with remnants, personal effects, animal (and human) faeces. Locations defined by what is missing – floors and roofs, doors and walls, windows, furnishings and, crucially, people. They are marginal sites, on the fringe and the outer, quietly fading from life.

> *We visited Staten Island three times while in New York. The advanced deindustrialisation and population decline of the island provided easy access to a vast playground of modern ruins. Each day we took the ferry past the Statue of Liberty, and landed with residents and a few other tourists at the terminal, seemingly worlds away from Manhattan, despite the fact that we could see the city clearly across the water.*

Urban explorers are those who visit and pay attention to such sites, not out of historical or personal interest (or not that alone), but for the sake of a particular kind of experience. Anyone who visits a site of modern ruin leaves behind an everyday world of assumed stability to step into a highly unusual universe where decay and disorder dominate. In contrast to the regulated spaces with which we are most familiar, modern ruins stand out as a challenge in two senses: they offer an alternative to the regulated and mediated spaces of daily life, and thus the possibility for opposition; and they are not easy to find or access.

> *This building, once a standard brick structure with reinforced concrete flooring, is now devoid of most doors and all windows. Possibly, the person who made the hole we climbed in through also stripped the place of anything of value. Probably, the windows fell out after a few years of a freeze-thaw cycle and no maintenance.*

> *We gain the roof (the urban explorer's Everest), and are rewarded by a sunset view of the Brooklyn Bridge—a reward made sweeter because there is no one else there to interrupt the moment, no other tourists taking happy snaps, no screaming children or ticket sellers.*

Figure 9.2 Interior of an abandoned factory on Staten Island (view towards the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge)

There is a great deal of repetition amongst the UE community regarding these sites as forgotten, forsaken, silent and so on. To a more thorough analysis, this vision fails to comprehend the complexity of urban decline and renewal—alternative uses by squatters, homeless, graffiti artists; havens for criminal or illicit activity, as well as sites of sentimental histories for local citizens. The signs of 'life' in modern ruins are often summarily ignored by the urban explorer who insists on the static, empty and isolated qualities of abandoned locations. What is significant about this wilful ignorance is the special privilege it places on the explorer as the only presence in the ruinscape. It makes sense in the context of a culture of subversion that, though potentially risky and dangerous, only takes the practitioner away from the safety of their home for the brief incursion into the forbidden. To acknowledge that others might have more right to these sites, or that they might not in fact be as marginal and excluded as the explorer

perceives them to be, would diminish the assumed authority that presents their experiences and legitimises their practice.

Fundamental to the experience of the abandoned, disordered, and rejected sites of recent history is the nature of their appeal to those who seek them. Writing about this appeal without grand statements and clichéd generalisations can be challenging because these are sites in which human culture is absent, locations where there is little discourse within which value might be attributed. Part of the appeal is also in the confronting impact of decay, which is also challenging to communicate without emotive generalisations. New language must be found – that is to say, existing terms must be applied to the experience itself. To say an abandonment is wild, beautiful, colossal, epic and confronting in its decay is to say it is sublime, in the classical sense of an ancient ruin, and speak also of a romantic ruin aesthetic. To say a ruin is lost and forgotten, full of history or holds memories is to speak of an urban palimpsest in the sense of Huyssen's politics of memory (2003), of Gordon's ghosts and haunting (2008), and also echoes Benjamin's critique of progress as a force which obliterates the past. The idea of an unacknowledged or lost past, of untold stories, also relates to Stewart's poetics and affect (1996 and 2007), and Crinson's urban amnesia (2005). The observable fascinations with peeling paint, broken and smashed windows and objects, discarded rubbish and unidentifiable substances are the stuff of Kristeva's uncanny and abject (1982) or Trigg (2006) and Edensor's (2005) aesthetics of decline.

> *On our final day, we bring a native New Yorker and a GPS and trek through the rain to a complex of active and disused hospital buildings. In what is one of our*

more successful expeditions, we find an array of unwanted objects and rotting, yet accessible interiors. The decay is pervasive, and the building seems tired out and used up, as if it is resigned to its fate of demolition by neglect. The rain outside enhances the sense of isolation and intimacy, and as we creep out into the darkening day, I'm sorry to leave.

This is how we come to know New York—through dark, smelly, slimy, rusty, holey, disappearing places. Places that few others see. Places which are never guaranteed to be there the next time you visit; which are sometimes already gone before you arrive.

In his rumination on the value of urban ruins, Leary questions the potential of abandoned buildings, and refers to urban explorers as 'ruin fetishists' (Leary 2011). It is perhaps an apt term in the sense that many ruins achieve iconic status amongst explorers, as indicated by the repetition of certain images in the online archives as well as in print, and particular reverence for sites of significance (usually based on their size, and thus the scale of decay, as well as level of accessibility). But Leary also refers to 'ruin porn', suggesting that these images gratify some desire, perhaps voyeuristic, to uncover the ruin, to lay it bare and to indulge in the pleasure of a ruin aesthetic.

In interrogating my own reactions to ruins, I must admit a certain amount of pleasure in decay. As much as I want to deny that I am a voyeur of other people's broken lives and failures, it is an unavoidable aspect of an obsession with the rejected, obsolescent wreckage of modernity. However, in considering ruin gazing as practice, it becomes a

method that might legitimise an otherwise uncomfortable inversion of tourism. The practice of UE is not necessarily one of conquering uncharted territories so much as collecting the fragments of a vanishing past, to explore the ruin is to acknowledge that '[t]he true method of making things present is to represent them in our space… We don't displace our being into theirs; they step into our life' (Benjamin 1999: 206).

Bringing the lost and forgotten back into the world is a redemptive act. As Benjamin proclaims in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 'nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history' (2003: 390) . He also asserts that 'The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption' (ibid). The diversity of these ruins, their accessibility in being neglected and outcast, allows them to be reclaimed. Not in a possessive, material sense or even in the sense of rescue and rebirth which might redeem discarded objects, but in the more abstract sense of encountering and knowing the secret index of history which Benjamin considers to be vital to salvaging lost and threatened pasts.

Salvaging such sites need not be a colonising act, glorifying their heritage, or beautifying their decay. It may be enough to be aware of their existence, to experience them in their final stages of life, to meet them and know them at that place and time. In a Benjaminian sense, modern ruins should be met at the stage of their fate (or, to use another of Benjamin's phrases, their 'future fate'). In this case, their fate is abandonment, decline, and ultimately, insignificance. As important as any detailed history is their liminal status as the ruin.

Turner's last words on liminality, though still in reference to van Gennep's rites of passage, open up the term for a broad engagement with ruins as ambiguous sites 'detached from mundane life' (Turner in Turner and Bruner 1986: 41), a space in which ordinary experience is suspended, where a 'fructile chaos, a storehouse of possibilities…a gestation process' (Turner in Turner and Bruner 1986: 42) bears the potential for both a post-liminal state (in which the ruin can become something else, razed or rejuvenated) and a unique or unusual experience which stands against tradition. This is particularly apparent in connection to what Turner terms the 'aesthetic form' and the role of disparity and resistance in the struggle for equilibrium (Turner in Turner and Bruner 1986: 37-38).

Ruins as liminal landscapes, therefore, are sites that provide the necessary 'stage… for unique structures of experience' (Turner in Turner and Bruno 1986: 41). Like Benjamin's Erlebnis (shock experience) or Certeau's spatial practice, what is significant about contemporary ruins is the way in which they can interrupt, fracture and disturb ritualistic responses, in this case, the reactions to the dead, undesirable or dangerous. By penetrating a contemporary ruinscape, a dead space, one is confronted with many things that are not of the dominant modes or perceptions, and thus, 'erupt from, or disrupt, routinized, repetitive behaviour' (Turner in Turner and Bruner 1986: 35), particularly when 'we try to put past and present together' (ibid) as we do when encountering modern ruins.

In their contemporaneousness, as modern ruins, the sites of which I speak are undoubtedly 'betwixt and between the structural past and structural future' (Turner

1986: 41), though not so much in terms of humanity's biological development, but rather in relation to presumed progress and teleological histories, both of which naturalise ends and means, and envision the future positively in terms of material progress (rather than Benjamin's rubble and wreckage). The normative view of history posits constant renewal – contemporary ruins are the absolute antithesis. In their ambiguity as not-what-they-were, but not-yet-gone, ruins not only symbolise and signify, they offer an experience to the visitor which is seldom found elsewhere.

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