

Salvatore Puglia



Ruins in the Island



The call of the ruin

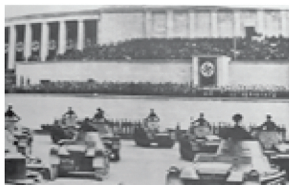
In this context I should perhaps dedicate a few words to the so-called Theory of Ruin Value, which is not Hitler's. It is my own theory!

I had occasion to see how the rubble from renewing the tramway system in Nuremberg, made of iron and cement, were spread all around it. What an unpleasant impression that pile of trash produced! Seeing it, I told myself that we should not construct our most important edifices with reinforced concrete but, on the contrary, draw on the construction techniques of the Ancients, so as to render such structures agreeable to sight, even if in ruins. Following that, I tried to go deeper into my ideas concerning this, and I realized a large drawing, unfortunately lost, of the Nuremberg Zeppelinfeld.

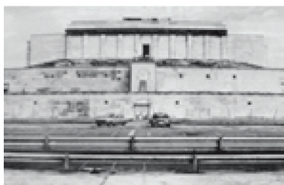
(Albert Speer, *Technik und Macht*, Esslingen 1979)

As a commentary to Speer's remarks, it is perhaps interesting to remember that the Zeppelinfeld stadium "the world's largest tribune," which welcomed 100,000 members of his Party is – although it has been divested of the most evident marks of its original function such as the colonnades and giant eagle – today a recreational park where both car racing and open-air rock concerts take place.

Indeed comparison, what interests me in Speer's discourse is the relationship between ruin and monument. The monument always has a finger pointing somewhere; it always indicates a



The Zeppelinfeld in 1938...



...and in 1979



direction in time, even if it is there for remembering (*Denkmal* in German) or for admonishing (*Mahnmal*). As Leopardi already noted, in the middle of the Romantic period (in his *Zibaldone di pensieri*), one builds a monument to counter the idea of finitude.

I find it interesting to reflect on how a regime at the height of its power can already be interested in the forms of its own demise. For my part, I am attracted to “unconscious” ruins. The images used for the work *Antiquarium* were mainly taken in two places: 1) in Rome, in the Antiquarium comunale of Celio, a veritable open cemetery for archaeological relics that – too fragmentary, dispersed or anonymous – didn’t even find a home in some museum warehouse; 2) in Bagnoli, near



Naples, in the disaffected or soon to be demolished industrial buildings of the Italsider.

These piles of rubble are supposedly the antithesis of what Hitler and Speer intended by “ruin value.” At the same time, I am not sure that what made me scale the fences surrounding these sites in order to photograph them was not a version, perhaps more conscious or more “de-constructed,” of a similar attraction for the ruin in and of itself. Of course, this was not the pathetic nostalgia for a Mediterranean world that took pride in an ancient history and a monumental past, a form of nostalgia that incited many European aristocrats to construct artificial ruins of painted wood and plaster in the parks of their castles.



But this fascination for romantic ruins, quite obvious in Speer's text, and which comes directly from the 18th century, is typical for rational beings who gamble their own persistence in future time. In short, Speer's concept seems to me a perfect syncretism of Enlightenment and Romanticism.

As I was born in Rome, I was familiar with the remains of Antiquity disseminated in the most usual places, public gardens and courtyards in the Renaissance buildings of the city center.



The *K nstliche Ruine* in Potsdam

Then I went to Germany in my quest of artificial ruins, the *K nstliche Ruine*: I went to Potsdam, in the parks where the Kings of Prussia built their own form of identification with classical antiquity. When I photographed the Norman tower site in the Sanssouci park, with its “Roman” arcades and “Greek” temple (this was in 2003), I found it quite amusing that it was in the process of being restored to its “original fakeness.”

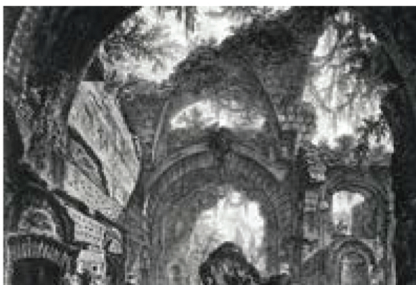




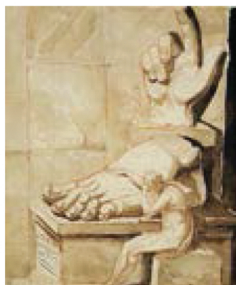
A



B



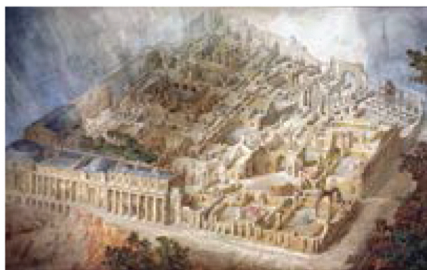
C



D



E



F

As an aside, I'd like to show you several images illustrating the aesthetics of the ruin. It seems to me that all of them, in their diversity, constitute a linear vision of time: these are "pre-Benjaminian" images. The fall is not yet the catastrophe, and there will be no caesura in time (I am thinking of Walter Benjamin's famous text on a watercolour by Paul Klee entitled *Angelus Novus*. The angel of history is inexorably pushed into the future, while looking towards the past, where "the pile of debris before him grows to the sky" (to quote his ninth *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, written in early 1940).

- A. Frontispiece of Book V of the *Architettura*, by Sebastiano Serlio, dated 1544. The Latin text on the front page reads: "its own ruin demonstrates how great Rome was".

From the Renaissance a direct line leads us to Baroque and Enlightenment age:

- B. *Caprice of Ruins*, Giovambattista Piranesi, 1756. Please note the size of the characters in relation to that of the piled-up vestiges.
- C. *Rovine di una galleria di statue nella Villa Adriana*) *Ruins in a Statue Gallery in Hadrian's Villa*, Piranesi, finished in 1770.
- D. *The Artist's Despair before the Grandeur of Ancient Ruins*, Johann Heinrich Füssli, 1780.
- E. *View of the Grand Gallery of the Louvre in Ruins*, Hubert Robert. This enlightened and learned artist, projects himself

into the future while actively participating in the acquisitions and construction of the new Louvre Museum around 1795.

- F. *A Bird's-eye View of the Bank of England*, Joseph Michael Gandy, 1830. This watercolour represents an imaginary stage of the building designed by Sir Albert Soane and not yet finished; on the same time, it allows a vision of its interior as “both seemingly in ruins and under construction”.

I don't know why islands and ruins often appear together in Romantic imaginary. Here are a few images of Pfaueninsel, the “Peacock Island” located in the outskirts of Berlin, which can be considered a complete “artificial ruin”.

Pfaueninsel was acquired by Frederick William II of Prussia in 1793 and was initially used as a hunting reserve. Before the end of the 18th century, Brendel, the court carpenter, had already erected two buildings in the form of ruins: the castle, whose south-facing façade welcomed the visitors from Potsdam and Sanssouci residence; and a Gothic-style farm on the other side of the island.



Pfaueninsel map



The Doric Temple

Let's stroll through the well-rutted lanes, without smoking or trampling on the lawns, as the billboards say: "We ask you to stay on the paths and observe the smoking ban". Let's rather admire the geometric configuration of the buildings half-hidden by the leaves, veiled in the distance by the mists, but still visible from each vantage point: the Doric temple, the Alexandrian ruin, the Scottish castle and Schinkel Kavalierhaus, whose medieval tower was built from the remains of a Gothic house in Gdansk.



The fake ruins on Pfaueninsel



2019