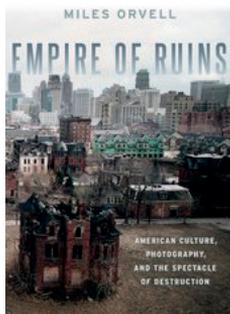




EMPIRE OF RUINS: AMERICAN CULTURE, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND THE SPECTACLE OF DESTRUCTION

by Miles Orvell
(A Book Review)



In his stellar *Empire of Ruins: American Culture, Photography, and the Spectacle of Destruction* (2021), Miles Orvell invites his readers on a striking exploratory journey, deep through “ruin time” and squarely into “ruin space,” in visual and literary representations. His aim is to understand nothing less than what ruins are and what cultural history thinks of them.

Found in urban environments, apocalyptic landscapes, and scenes of war and nuclear waste, they symbolize both the passage of time and “how we look at ruins” (ix). As “spectacles of destruction” (1), according to Orvell, their meaning is determined by the cultural beliefs and ideologies prevalent at a specific moment in time. Written against the backdrop of the contemporary fascination with aesthetic ruination, in everyday life as well as cultural studies (as it is captured in the handle “ruin porn”), Orvell presents his readers with an equally careful and compelling study of ruination as a condition of modern life. Thereby, he never shies away from questioning the ethics and moral responses that must accompany any study of ruins whose photogeneity frequently belies their disastrous causes and debilitating effects. Orvell puts it rather succinctly when he writes, “in ruins begin responsibilities” (x). This is especially

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true when it comes to the “destructive sublime,” which he discovers in modern ruin photography and “in which the spectacle of ruin and waste is foremost and is often the consequence of technology” (14).

Fittingly, Orvell’s study is constructed in the form of a triptych, mirroring Thomas Cole’s epic five-part series of paintings about the rise and fall of great empires Orvell derives the title of his study from: *The Course of Empire*. Cole’s third installment of the Capitol modeled on the symbolism of classical Roman architecture—*The Consummation of Empire*, that is “an Empire at the crest of its fortunes” (209)—is preceded by two paintings that depict the rise of civilization and succeeded by two that take ruins in decline as their subject. Orvell’s tripartite structure reveals his desire for formal coherence, as well as the possibilities for juxtaposition that this form offers, both in terms of times and media. Not incidentally, Orvell’s photographic examples are often composites that tell a story either within one or multiple frames, such as in Camilo José Vergara’s time-lapse chronophotographs of industrial ruins that Orvell reads as “a way to see the larger forces of global economies that are altering urban ecology and space [...] depicting the history of the late twentieth century as a process of abandonment without new growth, death without transfiguration” (87).

Tracing the various conceptualizations of ruins more or less chronologically, Orvell begins his journey in “Part I: The Romance of Ruins” from the nineteenth century on, which considered ruins as visible remnants of a glorious past (modeled on ancient Athens and Rome in particular), and hinted at an equally promising future. “Part II: Modern Times” then moves deftly through the twentieth century, marked by ruins indicting the present; whereas in “Part III: The World in Ruins,” Orvell lets the twentieth century slide into the twenty-first, where ruins are read as a symptom of a future that is difficult to both take in and visualize. His succinct preface puts this trajectory in a nutshell: “My purpose is to explain a pattern that has been largely concealed in previous discussions of ruins—the progression from a nineteenth-century quest for ancient ruins as a sign of cultural prestige to the twentieth century’s acceptance of contemporary ruins as a necessary concomitant

of progress, to the twenty-first-century realization that we have created a world of ruin that is all but inescapable" (x).

Ruins, according to Orvell, are not only buildings and cities that have fallen into disrepair through the force of time, often ending up overgrown and thus repossessed by nature, but also the polluted landscapes of toxic waste that humans are responsible for. Yet Orvell's work distinguishes itself by not stopping at charting "the course of empire" (216) in a cohesive but never too neat chronicle of various forms of ruination. Creatively looking backward and forward in history, considering time as "ruin time" itself, he rather offers retrospections as well as projections to trace larger conceptual lines while at the same time complicating them throughout. Hereby, his most important medium is photography, which, like ruins, mirrored the past in the nineteenth century and moves towards depicting the present in the twenty-first, in the way it captures immediacy. At the same time, Orvell keeps juxtaposing the analysis of photographic images with readings of architecture, material culture, fiction, installation art, and film, letting all those media illuminate each other and proving himself, like in his past books (including *The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community* from 2014, or his now classic *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* from 1989), a superb reader of the exchanges and counterpoints in the rich cultural history of intermedial interrelations.

Over the course of his eight chapters, Orvell pieces together more and less familiar narratives of cultural history (such as the ruination in the wake of 9/11 vs. the mound ruins of the "Mound Builders," a prehistoric civilization in North America), often within the same chapter: juxtaposing, for instance, mushroom cloud photographs with lesser-known images of bomb craters left in the Southwestern desert by underground testing. The evidence he draws on to advance his clear-cut argumentation is wide-ranging and compelling without fail. "Part I: The Romance of Ruins" develops a theory of ruins as part of a past that demonstrates the futility of human construction, "inflected with a nostalgia for the utopian possibility that the veiled past represents" (17). Accordingly, Chapter 1, "In Search of History," transports the reader

to the nineteenth-century quest for ruins in Europe and the Americas, drawing upon both the Mayan and Aztec cultures in Mexico as well as the American Mound Cultures, whose perceived authenticity was utilized to “confer authority on American culture” (17). Driven by the idea of a “romance of ruins” (40), Orvell argues, the discovery of the Mayan and Mound remains demonstrates “how deep the need for ruins has been for two hundred years” (42). Chapter 2, “Pueblo Utopias,” builds on the romantic—and romanticized—longing for ruins in America by turning to the stone remains of pueblo civilizations in the Southwest. In photographs of the Cliff Dwellers’ ruins by the likes of William Henry Jackson and Laura Gilpin, complemented by the literature of Southwestern modernist writers such as Willa Cather, the Southwest serves as “strong ground for a declaration of cultural independence from Europe based on the unique legacy of North America’s Native Americans”—willfully providing, as Orvell points out, “a sanitized romantic past that was free from the recent history of Indian wars” (49).

“Part II: Modern Times” theorizes the ruins of modernity, in the wake of World War I and II, as human-made and immediate symbols of the twentieth century. Given the “colossal production of waste” (74) and the state of collapse always present in the face of nuclear threat, modern ruins inhere “the accepted condition of contemporary civilization” (73). Chapter 3, “Things Fall Apart,” examines documentary photography of urban disintegration set in Detroit, Philadelphia, and elsewhere in a heavily industrialized America to that end. Photographs by Vincent D. Feldman, Andrew Moore, and Camilo José Vergara show buildings and scenes whose decay and vacancy is already priced into their construction, up to a point where they “memorializ[e] the process of mass production itself, with its outmoded factories and models of efficiency, now obsolete” (80) and come to stand as symbols not of a failed but rather an overly successful capitalism. Chapter 4, “Creative Destruction and Urban Space,” takes into view demolition photography, wherein the intentional tearing down of iconic buildings such as Penn Station in New York City and the implosion of an urban neighborhood like the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis is televised for a live audience and thereby become “domesticated

for popular consumption and naturalized as an essential element of progress" (103). Consequently, an artist like Gordon Matta-Clark cuts holes in existing buildings to create new vistas. The ruins left by the 2001 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, captured through 9/11 narrative photography by individual photographers and amateur collectives alike, lies at the heart of Chapter 5, "Destroying Modernity: The World Trade Center." Photographs by James Nachtwey and Joel Meyerowitz, Orvell concedes here, simultaneously bear witness and invite voyeurism in the long-standing conundrum between aesthetics and ethics that necessarily creates distance between the viewers and what they are looking at, making "a demand on us to resist that spectacle" (144).

In "Part III: The World in Ruins," Orvell develops his third theory of ruins out of Walter Benjamin's "angel of history," who has his face turned towards the past while being propelled into the future. Now, in the latter half of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, ruins "represent the conditions of humanity more generally and are part of the future as well as our past and present" (18). Considering ruins as representative of one endless catastrophe, Chapter 6, "Atomic War and the Destructive Sublime," analyzes atomic bomb photography and nuclear landscapes as well as their aftermaths in the popular imagination (Hollywood films like *On the Beach* and *Planet of the Apes*), which are in fact those media that have familiarized us with the kind of apocalyptic scenes that defy understanding in the first place. Chapter 7, "Framing the Post-modern Wasteland," focuses on industrial landscape and toxic waste photography by David T. Hanson and Edward Burtynsky to show the "terrifying sublime" (183) that is the land's beauty, dread, and vulnerability in a globalized context. Consequently, Chapter 8, "Picturing Climate Change: 'It's the Apocalypse,'" moves to climate change photography and popular films that document the ongoing destruction of the ecosphere and try to envision post-apocalyptic life in a landscape of future ruins. In the Conclusion, "Looking Back on Tomorrow: The Course of Empire," Orvell lets Benjamin's angel spin both forward and backward, finally collapsing the historical timeline of ruination by thinking about present ruins in the wake of weather extremes as they stand at the base of cli-fi disaster movies, looking simultaneously to the past and into the future,

especially in moments of revolutionary change. Inserting our contemporary moment within a historical sequence of such revolutionary changes, Orvell writes: “Our own moment, as we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, compels us to assess our time as a moment of revolutionary change, when the sustainability of our cities, the viability of our landscapes, and the future of the planet itself are all at stake, as we contemplate the effects of the long twentieth-century romance with technology and global capitalism” (20)—ultimately providing us with both his rationale for writing *Empire of Ruins* and the ethical stakes in which his inquiry is grounded.

Overall, I have rarely come across a scholarly monograph that is as lucidly written and generous to its reader as Orvell’s work. In its elegant prose, it is a sheer pleasure to follow along the arguments he advances, while never receding from complex answers. What also makes the volume such a joy to peruse is his openness to engage in a conversation that reaches far beyond the book, by asking himself questions that he then explicitly asks his reader to ponder. Always intriguing, they are surely open-ended enough to become material for further studies on, more specifically, the representation of ruins, and, more generally, the documentary vs. the aesthetic modes and the mediation of disaster. Orvell’s book speaks to the veritable interest in ruins, wastelands, and apocalyptic scenarios that has evolved in our age of global wars and turmoil, and continues to increase with the progression of global warming and climate change. The book should speak to all scholars interested in such equally prescient and pressing matter, to scholars of cultural history, eco-criticism, and photography—really anyone interested in the medium and practice of photography, this “chronicler of the dream of America [that] produces the visual record of its reality” (216) and “chief means by which Americans saw the force of time and change in the material culture that surrounded their lives—and that remains so to the present day” (ix), as well as its interrelated media. For “images of Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, of wildfires sweeping over vast areas of the West, of irreversibly melting glaciers, of landscapes devastated by toxic waste, have registered not only as pictures of the present but as images of the future, and they don’t bode well for America—or for planet

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Earth” (216), as Orvell so insightfully concludes in one of his signature planetary moves.

Orvell would not be Orvell though if he did not provide a cautiously optimistic outlook, wondering whether ruins might not also, like in the past, provide an incentive for restoration: “The question is whether we can still retrieve the materials, along with the necessary wisdom, to start again” (216). I, for one, am confident that scholars—and the general interested public, for the book is admirable in its public appeal as well—will feel stimulated to take up Orvell’s materials and arguments in order to continue to begin anew, despite and especially in the face of the impending disasters that might yet lie ahead. While his style is smooth, Orvell is well aware that his is not—and should not be—the final word on all matters relating to ruin, spectacle, and disaster. Rather, it is his welcoming invitation to scholarly discussion that proposes to take his arguments further into an as of yet unknown future, build on them, and revise them according to changing meanings of catastrophic events, the progressive stages of ruination of our planet, and the persistent conundrum of ruins as a “space between beauty and—given the subject matter—the unsettling dread of destruction” (13). Because, for Orvell, both creative and political potential can be found in the kind of aesthetic detachment that is often employed when we observe scenes of destruction.

Bio: Julia Faisst is Professor and Acting Chair of American Studies at the University of Regensburg. She received her PhD from Harvard University and her *venia legendi* from the Catholic University of Eichstaett-Ingolstadt. She has held the positions of Max Kade Distinguished Visiting Professor at Notre Dame University, Postdoctoral Researcher at the International Center for the Study of Culture at Giessen University, and Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Wake Forest University. She is author of *Cultures of Emancipation: Photography, Race, and Modern American Literature* (Winter, 2012) and the habilitation/book-length manuscript *Precarious Belongings: The Unmaking of the American Home, 1980s-Now*, as well as co-editor of *Picturing America: Photography and the Sense of Place* (with Kerstin Schmidt, Brill/Rodopi, 2019) and David P. Boder’s *I Did Not Interview the Dead* (with Alan Rosen and Werner Sollors, Winter, 2012).

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*Sacred Spaces
In North America*

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