

## Abstract

Every city has its modern ruins, whether post-industrial remains rusting away; derelict houses falling into the street; or rows of empty and neglected shopfronts reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's Parisian arcades. This chapter explores the associations with Benjamin's work that can be brought forth through the contrast of the active and inhabited city, and ruinous architectural remnants – real and imagined – revealing the end of the city as the other face of modernity and history, made present in the critical formation of the modern ruin.

Urban endings are characterised through the register of the imagined, and the politics of imagination, as much as material encounter. Modern ruins sustain alternative imaginaries of the city (as a concept) through the contrasting visions of the city as a site of ruin, and the city as a seamlessly planned environment. The power of such imagination to impact everyday experience evokes a distinctly Benjaminian reversal of progress, which he identified in the semi-abandoned Arcades, and which extends to modern ruins that evoke the end of the city, when architecture and technological forms are rendered useless and obsolete.

Considering modern ruins (real and imagined), this chapter considers the relation between the materiality of contemporary architectural decay, and imagined urban endings. Through Walter Benjamin's rubble-infused and urban-focused writings, modern ruins and urban endings reveal the transience of the city, its material decay and disappearance, reflecting the inherent flux and movement of the city. The chapter enacts Benjamin's archaeological excavation of history in the present, where lived encounters and the act of reading flash up together with a multi-temporal recognition of the moment through the ruinous allegorical mode that takes modern ruin and urban endings as the site of critique.

## The City's Other Face: Modern Ruins and Urban Endings

In the imaginary of the city, there are certain recurring images, and common urban characters. The thronging American metropolis, New York, Chicago; the modern industrial city, the “Cottonopolis” of Manchester, the “steel” cities of Pittsburgh, Sheffield (UK), and Newcastle (Australia). The old European city, with winding cobbled streets and historic architecture – Amsterdam’s canals and art galleries; London’s boroughs, bridges, and high streets. The high-rise urbanism of Hong-Kong and Dubai. Increasingly, these imaginaries are also hyper-technological – a “cybernetic urbanism” (Krivý 2018) of global smart cities founded on algorithms and populated with automated machines (Foth, Mitchell, and Estrada-Grajales 2018); digitally securitised city centres designed for control and surveillance (Krivý 2018) transformed by mega projects visioned through digital and 3D renderings of future development (Melhuish, Degen, and Rose 2014).

In reality, many cities are hybrids, new and old together – gridded streets forced onto the landscape to re-order the vernacular, like Haussmann’s new Paris, built on the ruins of the 1871 Commune and erasing many ancient parts of the city; or Robert Moses’ Cross-Bronx expressway, blamed by Marshall Berman for leaving the South Bronx as a “modern ruin” in the 1950s and beyond (Berman 1982). So often, we call on a conception of the ideal city – clean, safe, new – as if this conception *is* the city, but it is also a place of endings and chaos and disorder; a place where things are torn apart, and scattered, and forgotten and left behind because of relentless forces that push (things and people) ever onward. Many cities have experienced mass-decay, the destruction of war, and population decline leading to abject ruin – and destructive renewal. In the same year as the Paris Commune, the Great Chicago Fire razed a third of the city, and a hundred years later inner city neighbourhoods were overwhelmed with abandoned buildings as populations shrank and urban blight set in; Manchester’s industrial growth gave way to post-war ruin, and later post-industrial decay; Melbourne’s now re-vamped docklands were derelict for decades. Many cities – like Detroit, Pittsburgh, or Leipzig – have yet to fully recover from a long period of

decline characterised by the decay and ruin of vast industrial complexes. This chapter considers these kinds of modern ruins – ruined architecture, derelict wastelands, and mass destruction – as an unavoidable part of urban life, arguing that the city is a place of ruins as much as a place of advancement and development.

The persistence of sites of modern ruin is at odds with how we see the city and ourselves. Urban ruins in particular are so often perceived to be within, but not of, the city, aberrations that don't belong there – the furnishing of gothic underworlds, or markers of deprivation and failure, rather than an inherent character of the city. Modern ruins are sites that mark out truncated futures – blunt urban endings figured in broken windows and rubble, which at their most extreme present a counter to mantras of perpetual growth and seamless order. The ordered city is the aim of urban planners, city councils and governments, but also the dream of those who wish to address the traditionally negative impact of rapid urbanism. Historically, the “new” city is forged on the unfortunate ruin of the old; for Le Corbusier, the old city was Paris, with its medieval backstreets (Kasinitz 1995, 101). For Jane Jacobs, it was the more organic form of the city prior to active planning (Jacobs 1972, 50). Jacobs identified urban policy in American cities as the source of cycles of “slumming and unslumming” (Jacobs 1972, 284), generating decay and destructive redevelopment, the life and death of urban neighbourhoods. According to Robert Fishman, Frank Lloyd Wright foresaw the “death” of the modern city in urban sprawl, making what was a new city to those like Le Corbusier a rapidly declining “old” city, “the centralised industrial metropolis” (Fishman in Kasinitz 1995, 395), which fell to ruin as populations moved out to commutable suburbs, and heavy industry declined – the (Western) industrial city has become old, even endangered (Fishman in Kasinitz 1995, 407).

Often-romantic visions of the modern city as a planned behemoth of efficiency and order frequently obscure a counter-vision, a contrasting imaginary, whether gothic, noir, steampunk or dystopian – the materiality of urban decay and destruction, and the fictions of imagined apocalyptic ruin. A counter city that is run-down, dusty and forgotten, disordered, eerie and strange, and which reveals a vision of the modern city that is ruinous and crumbling, a place of endings and disintegration. This fragmented and ruined concept city corresponds to the shattering experience of modern life as one of wreckage and dislocation, and stretches from the slums and

boulevards of early modernity (Benjamin, 1999a; Benjamin, 1983), to the liquid and quartz forms of late modernity (Bauman, 2000; Davis, 1990), and Berman's reworking of Marx's expression of modern transience, "all that is solid melts into air" (Berman, 1988), or Schumpeter's "creative destruction" (Hetherington and Cronin, 2008). The modern imaginary of ruins derives from colonial and imperial ruin gazing (Hell 2008, Stoler 2013), and the eighteenth century obsession with the fall of civilisation, "this earlier imaginary of ruins haunts our discourse about the ruins of modernity [and yet] the twentieth century has produced a very different imaginary of ruins", one which moves away from the return to nature of the romantic sublime, and dwells on the inherently destructive nature of progress, working at a frenzied speed to unravel and reconstruct in perpetuity (Huysen 2008, 18).

Marshall Berman used the term "modern ruin" to describe both the urban decay of the Bronx, and the underbelly of urban modernity as a churning destructive force, exemplified in urban decay:

"Among the many images and symbols that New York has contributed to modern culture, one of the most striking in recent years has been an image of modern ruin and devastation. The Bronx, where I grew up, has even become an international code word for our epoch's accumulated urban nightmares: drugs, gangs, arson, murder, terror, thousands of buildings abandoned, neighborhoods transformed into garbage and brick-strewn wilderness" (Berman 1982, 290).

Berman's vision of the Bronx as a modern ruin shows the "other face" of the modern city that is the central concern of this chapter. The emergence of urban modernity – and the concept of the modern city – is associated with ruins; that is, with material, metaphorical or allegorical ruination. The interpenetration of ruins, the city, and modernity is established across multiple registers of fragmentation and decay. Theories of the urban have been intertwined with such visions of ruin (symbolic and actual) by a number of writers including urban sociologists like Georg Simmel, who wrote *The Ruin* in 1911; and by Jane Jacobs, who focused on urban blight and regeneration in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. In Berman's work, the end of the city is an inevitable and haunting possibility of modernity, even in the present; made visible through modern ruination, urban decay, and destruction.

Perhaps the most detailed philosophy of modern ruins is put forward by Frankfurt School theorist Walter Benjamin, described by Andreas Schönle as a “founding father of ruinology” (Schönle 2006, 651). Benjamin famously critiqued the construct of linear historical time with references to Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*, in which Benjamin perceived that Angel of History held aloft, looking upon the wreckage of the past, unable to make it whole, as the winds of progress blew the Angel towards an unknown – but implicitly destructive – future time (Benjamin 2003, 392). But Benjamin also repeatedly cited the Janus face of capitalism as a contrast between progress looking forward, and ruin strewn behind – the latter is the “other face” of perpetual progress that the Angel can only look upon in frozen horror – and this other face persisted, for Benjamin, in out-dated fashions, relics that seemed out of time, the outmoded and forgotten remnants of an era – most notably, the then-decaying Paris shopping arcades.

Despite the unfinished nature of the voluminous and fragmented *Arcades Project* (Benjamin 1999a) – and, indeed, Benjamin’s collected writings generally – Benjamin’s writing consistently and movingly evokes a kind of shadow-world of urban life, haunted by the advent of modernity, but also by its own present and future ruin. As Susan Buck-Morss states in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, the *Arcades Project* “broke radically with the philosophical canon by searching for truth in the “garbage heap” of modern history, the “rags, the trash”, the ruins of commodity production that were thoroughly tainted with the philosophically debased qualities of empirical specificity, shifting meanings, and above all, transiency” (Buck-Morss 1989, 218). To understand the city – and by association, past and future historical constellations, as well as material encounters and the visual regimes of modernity – Benjamin had to tear the city apart, to see the city not as a composite whole but as a profoundly fragmented place. In doing so, Benjamin produced a vision of modern ruin: what Max Pensky calls a “disruptive-constructive strategy” (Pensky 2001, 154), that is allegorical “insofar as it consists of the wilful wresting of fragmentary images and textual elements from their place in the history of literary reception and the construction of montages or constellations from these fragments, montages that are intended to illuminate the object truth of contemporary social reality.” (Pensky 2001, 154-5).

The strategy was not restricted to works of art, texts, or media, however. Benjamin also sought this illumination of reality in real material decay, in the modern urban ruins of his era. In *Ruin and Rubble in the Arcades* Tyrus Miller suggests that destruction and progress go hand in hand, observing that Benjamin's method stemmed from the contemporary historical tendency towards obsolescence and swift decline, a method focused on "the ruined hopes of the past" in the arcades; those "things, impulses, objects and matter" in a state of decay and fragmentation (Miller in Hanssen 2006, 93). As Miller states, "Benjamin follows the surrealist procedure to the letter, montaging a pile-up of disparate industrially produced fragments" using "the same uncanny jumble of outmodedness that attracted the surrealists" (*ibid*), and which is also found in urban ruins and relics – the other face of the modern city.

#### A (Short) History of Modern Urban Ruins

If we date the phenomena of urban ruination from the advent of modernity, up to the present day, urban endings in cities take many forms beyond post-industrial decay. These include slum clearance and revitalisation, disappearing entire communities and ways of life under the rubble of demolition; or the devastating aerial bombardment and firestorms of modern warfare in Dresden during World War II, or in Aleppo since 2013; or even further back to the ruins of the American Civil War, or the War of 1812, in which American government buildings were reduced to smouldering wrecks. Modern ruins include the wreckage of depopulated disaster zones like Pripyat, near Chernobyl, or New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. Even small transitions – a few derelict shops or a burnt out building – can be understood to be ruinous in nature, not aberrations in the fabric of the modern city, but constituent parts of urban life.

Ruins are a fundamental aspect of the city, as it is lived, as it is dreamed – abandonment, dereliction, devastation and demolition characterise different phases in a city's development. This vision is nothing new – it's as old as cities themselves (Woodward 2002). The ruin imaginary – though possessing a particular contemporary form – reaches back to antiquity, to the fall of Rome, and Carthage, and forward to the speculative ruination of contemporary cities. Ruin gazing also produces a certain kind of imperial imaginary, from Shelley to Speer, that sees ruins as part of the rise and fall narrative of the West, in which history ends in the destruction or

disintegration of great monuments (Hell and Schönle 2008, 2) – this is one key way in which the city is imagined, through urban endings in ruins. At the same time, although the imaginary has a long historical trajectory whose clichéd forms can be traced to a distant past, it is also something embedded in post-war modernism, in the form of speculative realism, science fiction, and apocalyptic urbanisms (Vidler 2010). Simultaneously, the modern urban ruin is embedded in is what Sharon Zukin would call a post industrial, post-Fordist, even post-modern imaginary of place as a fragmented pastiche of disintegrating forms (1991).

In the case of London, the ruinous alter-ego appears, for example, in Gustav Dorés 1872 etching of Macaulay's *New Zealander* gazing out at the future ruins of St Paul's, or Joseph Gandy's *A Bird's-eye view of the Bank of England* in ruins from 1830 – but also in the post-war ruins and bombsites of Rose Macaulay's *The World, My Wilderness* (1950), with former landmarks transformed into rubble-strewn wastes. Paris's ruins also haunt the city through the Surrealist and Situationist pre-occupation with the torn-up cobbles of revolution and forgotten and neglected passages and side-streets – one of the key influences of the *Arcades Project* was Louis Aragon's account of the *Passage de l'Opéra* on the verge of demolition (Aragon 1994, 14). Paris's counter-city also features in Hubert Robert's reimagining of Parisian monuments as ruins of antiquity – but also in photographs and artworks displaying the destruction of the city following the Franco-Prussian war and uprising of the Paris Commune – including the Tuileries Palace, which stood as a ruin for more than a decade. For contemporary city governments, underlying planning and branding are fears about the “haunting spectres of crime, corruption, and decay” (Andreas Huyssen, 2008, p. 5) that are associated with urban ruination and decline.

A ruinous, alternative image of the city thus goes far beyond the imagination – the reality of the down-and-out city in ruins was lived contemporarily in Benjamin's times, and in many ways his vision was driven by his own despair over the destruction of Berlin, his home city much diminished following the economic crises of the 1930s, threatened by war, and to which he was unable to return from his exile in Paris. Benjamin's perception of the modern as inextricably linked to destructive change in experience culminated for him in the destructive energies of the First World War, revealing a profoundly altered world over a short period:

A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body. (Benjamin 1999b, 732).

These destructive elements encompass both the literally destructive forces of modern warfare, but also the nature of change, accelerated in Benjamin's lifetime by progress and development, in such a way that experiences of a recent past appeared impossibly dislocated from the present. But even immediately prior to this destructive period of history, central Paris – where Benjamin lived at the end of his life, and where he tried desperately to complete *The Arcades Project* – had been in a state of ruin for much of the 1920s, caught up in cycles of decay and reconstruction as the economy fluctuated, and the last of Haussmann's plans came to fruition. Paris was one of the first cities in which mass urban ruin was photographically documented, with postcards of the burnt out Hôtel de Ville and other ruined Paris landmarks widely distributed in the years following the uprising in 1871 (Luxenburg 1998, Przyblyski 1995). Similarly, the American Civil war and Crimean war generated what Susan Sontag considered some of the earliest ruin photography, “anonymous” and “epic [...] depictions of an aftermath” (Sontag 2002, 86), showing landmark buildings of Atlanta and Charleston reduced to rubble, or the streets of Sebastopol hemmed in by ruins (see also Ginsberg 2004, 488).

In this context, modern, urban ruins are those architectural structures that persist in every city – no matter how well developed or densely populated – which are visibly affected by material decline and neglect, or destruction. Not ancient ruins, but those of a recent and recognisable past – those of living memory – as well as the imagined ruination of the contemporary moment, envisaged through decay and a return to nature. Materially, such a ruin may be rotting away and empty, wide open for anyone to wander into (like the arcades of Benjamin's time). A modern ruin may be in a secured area, off-limits to the general population – like the vast field of ruins that sat between East and West Berlin for decade. It is important to note (as Benjamin did in relation to the arcades as obsolete ruins that revealed the forgotten parts of the city) that such urban endings present vital sites of contrast to the vision of the city as new, planned, and seamless – and increasingly, as technological, shining, and smart.

## The Politics of Modern Urban Ruins

Walter Benjamin was drawn to the Parisian arcades as they fell out of fashion, were neglected, and became ruinous havens for forgotten and outmoded fashions and objects. These arcades were, for Benjamin, conceptually attached to the vagaries of commodity fetishism, but also the very nature of modernity, and the modern city. For Benjamin, abjection and abandonment went hand in hand with the churning production of “up to date” objects and styles – clothing and consumer goods, but also interiors, architectural forms, and technology. The gas light that illuminated the earliest arcades in their heyday become models for a kind of critical illumination of history itself, and their afterlife, lingering uselessly on the interior walls of barely trafficked passages. The arcades at the end-point of their popularity also exemplified the increasing destructiveness of progress-driven history, pointing to a politics of (particularly urban) ruins. The arcades, in this sense, were quintessentially modern ruins in the making – covered passages intended for an emerging class of consumers; swiftly outmoded by the energies that produced them, abandoned by the crowds, and left to fall to pieces by the ever churning drive towards newness – a drive that continues to characterise (and ruin) modern cities.

Louis Aragon, in his Surrealist semi-fictional work *Paris Peasant*, suggests that such ruinous sites, the unusual, “the unthought of” (1994, 11) parts of the city can be mediations on the mythologies of an era. Aragon gives credence to the personal experience of spaces of decline as destinations that reveal something about the present – in his case Paris of the 1920s – but also something about the past, and something about the city itself. Benjamin was drawn to Aragon because of his aptitude for imbuing various spaces of Paris with an otherworldly sense of being stranded between life and death:

Although the life that originally quickened them has drained away, they deserve, nevertheless, to be regarded as the secret repositories of several modern myths: it is only today, when the pickaxe menaces them, that they have at last become the true sanctuaries of a cult of the ephemeral, the ghostly landscape of damnable pleasures and professions. Places that were incomprehensible yesterday, and that tomorrow will never know. (Aragon 1994, 14, also quoted in the *Arcades Project* (Benjamin 1999a, 87))

In transience, the myth of the modern is revealed – the city is not whole and shining, it is fundamentally ruinous, constantly out of fashion, and routinely torn apart. For Benjamin, the idea of being outmoded or old fashioned is exemplified in the arcades' life and death. As Benjamin states in *The Arcades Project*: “Not long ago, a piece of old Paris disappeared – the *Passage de l'Opéra*, which once led from the boulevards to the old opera theatre. Construction of the Boulevard Haussmann swallowed it up. And so we turn our attention to the [...] often empty and dust-covered arcades of more obscure neighbourhoods.” (Benjamin 1999a, 923). Not only do the arcades physically manifest the past in the present, they also contain a configuration of past-present relations. They hold outmoded objects and dreams from a recent past, appearing “old-fashioned in comparison to the new” (Benjamin 1999a, 2014). Furthermore, the architecture of the arcade itself, as a construction in iron and glass, evidenced a sense of the archaic or obsolete.

A similar analysis of modern urban ruins might now include other popular spaces of consumption: strip malls or suburban shopping complexes that are swiftly going out of fashion as online shopping expands; the useless machinery of twentieth century manufacturing, stranded in inner city brown-fields; the foreclosed homes of the sub-prime mortgage crisis, boarded up and left to rot; smashed up shopfronts that once displayed videos, and later, DVDs and games, for hire. To use Benjamin's critical formulations: the process of decay and obsolescence embodied in rejected objects and places stands for the more abstract ruin of the collective past, driven by a destructive present and future. Modern ruins bring into being a revolutionary mode of comprehending the space of the modern city, through things and places that are in the process of “being no more” (Benjamin 1999a, 833), politicised by the material transience that comes to bear in abandoned, disused, derelict, and obsolete urban space that are left to their inevitable ruinous end.

In *The Ruin*, written in 1911 (notably, before World War I), Georg Simmel makes a particular point of referring to “urban ruins” left alone by people to fall apart, as a “more meaningful, more significant” phenomena than the ruins of antiquity, or even war (Simmel 1959, 261). For Simmel “[t]he inhabited ruin loses for us that sensuous-suprasensuous balance of the conflicting tendencies of existence which we see in the abandoned one. This balance, indeed, gives it its problematical, unsettling, often unbearable character. Such places, sinking from life, still strike us as settings for

life” (*ibid*). As in Benjamin’s arcades, Simmel suggested that urban ruins have a particular capacity to unsettle us, to generate contemplation of modern life through abandoned architectures. At the same time, however, Simmel warns of the nostalgia of ruins, and particularly abandoned architectures, in which the contrast between human ingenuity and the persistence of nature appears as “a cosmic tragedy which [...] makes every ruin an object infused with our nostalgia; for now the decay appears as nature’s revenge...” (Simmel 1959, 259).

Nostalgia brought on by modern urban ruins isn’t necessarily a problem, however. As Dianne Chisolm suggests in relation to Benjamin’s constellating method and allegorical destruction, nostalgia can be a way of imagining, through the assemblage of historically loaded fragments, alternative histories and futures (2001). As an example, Svetlana Boym’s retrospective nostalgia is directly linked to the political capacity of “ruinophilia” (Boym 2017, 43), which, rather than presenting catastrophe and ruination as inevitable violence, instead links ruin (including the end of the city) to freedom and possibility. “A tour of ruins leads you into a labyrinth of ambivalent temporal[ities...] that play tricks with causality. Ruins make us think of the past that could have been and the future that never took place [...]. (*ibid*) Rather than a return to nature, or an imperial or colonial nostalgia, a *critical* nostalgia through ruins “condenses alternative senses of history. Ruination is a corrosive process that weighs on the future and shapes the present” (Stoler 2008, 194), it understands modern ruins to be political.

This need not be a hopeless vision of pending catastrophe (the sort of “post-modern” apocalypticism that Henri Lefebvre, and others have rejected (see for example Henri Lefebvre’s *Writings on Cities* (1996, 31)). Instead, it is more like what Svetlana Boym terms the off-modern, in which “the ruins of twentieth-century modernity [...] undercut and stimulate the utopian imagination, constantly shifting and deterritorializing our dreamscape” (2017, 44). The nostalgic vision triggered by a conceptualisation of the city-as-ruin is more of a “prospective vision” that is “connected with an orientation towards the future” (Boym, 2017, 39), than a hopeless and clichéd nostalgia for the past. The city-as-ruin links across “sites of different modernities – industrial, post-industrial, digital, post-digital” (Boym 2017, 40), through multiple citations of fragmentation and destruction, the mutuality of modernity and ruin, and the imagination of something beyond the present moment.

Moreover, “[r]eal ruins of different kinds function as screens on which modernity projects its asynchronous temporalities and its fear of and obsession with the passing of time. Benjamin says that allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things...” (Huysen 2008, 19). This reference to allegories and ruins is often, in Benjamin’s work, directly related to a representation of a lived history and language from his *Trauerspiel* study (Benjamin 1998), but – as in the example of the arcades and Aragon’s work, above – there is always a significant blurring between what Benjamin saw and experienced, and how he conceptually imagined the world through fragmentation and ruin.

Tara Forrest uses Benjamin’s work to describe the capacity of the imagination to open up a faculty or perception within cognition, a politics of possibility that generates understanding beyond the literal representation of what is seen (2007). For example, Benjamin’s ruin and rubble can be situated in symbolic and speculative registers, as well as in the material, through film’s capacity to explode our perceptions of urban life, revealing the world as a rubble field (Forrest 2007, 74). Not only is the figuring of the city as a ruin capable of counter-producing possibilities for the world at large, but an imagination of rubble and fragments derives from a tendency to reconstruct and oppose aesthetic regimes through the fantastical (Jameson 2005). As Joseph Tanke asserts, the notion of the imagination “breaks the habitual sensory frameworks that prevent the full flourishing of human capacities, ushering them into new space-time configurations.” (Tanke 2011, 157). The power of such imagination to impact the everyday experience of the viewer – by distancing, transfiguring – may also be transferred to material encounters and experiences in the city, but especially in modern ruins.

Benjamin’s ruinous method is a reworking of the imagination of the cities of modernity; of the life of the commodity; and of the future of the present as a counterfactual history, where the city is imagined more in the form of the trash heap of history (Pensky 2001, 211) than as a beacon of unproblematic future progress. Here, lived encounter and the moment of reading flash up together with a multi-temporal recognition of the present moment through the ruinous allegorical mode. This is the true essence of experience, for Benjamin. “Modernity’s constant assertion of the ever-new cannot prevent its collapse into the ever-same. It too will decay, its

monuments will fall into ruin, even when the monuments of modernity least expect it” (Frisby 1985, 235).

The cyclical loss embedded in the modern must be opposed by redemption, and the fragmented allegorical mode is potentially redemptive, even in ruin, as Graeme Gilloch suggests:

The allegorical gaze, like the magical gaze of the child-as-collector, is the salvation of the thing. Ruination and redemption – these are the Janus-faces of allegory. The allegorical vision as the overcoming of myth and the moment of historical redemption contains within it the qualities of the dialectical image, and hence becomes the fundamental basis of Benjamin’s critical historiography (Gilloch 1996, 138).

While Benjamin resisted the baroque conceptualisation of melancholy and eternal transience uncovered in his study of German tragic drama (Benjamin 2008), and considered the destructive aspect of modernity in terms of catastrophe, he did not necessarily frame decay and decline as solely negative: the ruination caused by the push for progress and desire for increasingly fetishised commodities could, in fact, be opposed in ruin. That is, the myth, the illusion constructed by the increasingly detached material products of an era can, in their decay, reveal the dreams of the era as just that – improperly invested imaginings. It was ultimately Benjamin’s reimagining of the concept of the city, through modern urban ruins and urban endings, that generated his critical and philosophical politics of history and progress – a profound understanding of the cities of modernity as cities of ruin.

### Conclusion

In ‘Convolute N’ of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin describes “The pathos of this work: there are no periods of decline. Attempt to see the nineteenth century just as positively as I tried to see the seventeenth, in the work on *Trauerspiel*. No belief in periods of decline.” (1999a, 458). Later, Benjamin’s writes that “[o]vercoming the concept of “progress”, and overcoming the concept of “period of decline” are two sides of one and the same thing” (1999a, 460). As Susan Buck-Morss clearly articulates, Benjamin argued that no city, no moment, is more important or significant than the last – he was concerned with overcoming progress and its polarity, decline; and they are related tasks, for:

The debris of industrial culture teaches us not the necessity of submitting to historical catastrophe, but the fragility of the social order that tells us this catastrophe is necessary. The crumbling of the monuments that were built to signify the immortality of civilization becomes proof, rather, of its transiency. And the fleetingness of temporal power does not cause sadness; it informs political practice. (1989, 170).

To value modern, urban ruins as political objects is not to invest in nostalgia, but to unlock an imagination that resists the supremacy of perpetual growth – the project that Benjamin was working on for most of the last decade of his life. Not just resisting the corrosive power of eternal novelty, but, through urban endings, in ruins, understanding the fundamentally illusory nature of the modern city as a site of reification and commodification. The link between ruins and the myth of progress is particularly evident in the creative destruction of urban regeneration: “As a classic example of reification, urban “renewal” projects attempted to create social utopia by changing the arrangement of buildings and streets—objects in space—while leaving the social relationships intact.” (Buck-Morss 1989, 89). What Benjamin sought was not the “illusion of social equality” that such aesthetic and spatial renovation provides, but rather the alternative vision of modernity as one of decline and ruin.

This vision is evident in the emphasis that Benjamin placed on a fragmented and figurative perception of modernity as both a process of ruination and disintegration of experience, which seeks to redeem the past via a re-evaluation of the ways in which we recall, preserve and inhabit a space of “what has been”, particularly through urban encounters with the traces of the recent past (Benjamin 2003, 183-184). Seeking these traces in actual ruins may seem to be an excessively literal, even blunt reading of Benjamin’s work, however Benjamin certainly centred his investigations in the material remains of the nineteenth century that persisted in Paris’s decaying passages, where he encountered forgotten and neglected objects that he saw as the refuse of a churning, destructive modernity. Modern urban ruins are such rejected, ephemeral refuse, less a reflection of Benjamin’s repetition of the ruin motif, than a reference to the relationship between ruins and a culture of consumption or history-as-progress – whether cities ruined by war and revolution or the abandoned remnants of obsolete industries or outdated fads. As Benjamin’s eclectic collections in the *Arcades Project* demonstrate, almost any category of remnant – books or toys, second-hand

clothing, aging technology – might have similarly political import. However, by emphasising ruined architecture, the other face of the increasingly seamless cities emerges in ever-present urban endings that can be directly related to everyday life in the city, and, moreover, to the conceptualisation of the city itself as a place of modern ruin.

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