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The Entrancement of Ruins

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### RUINS AS TROPES OF MODERNITY

*Dragoş GHEORGHIU*

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# RUINS AS TROPES OF MODERNITY

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“... Nature does not render anything naught,  
But she instead reduces everything that has wrought  
Back to its elemental particles again. For say  
That any thing, in all parts, were subject to decay –  
Then snatched of sudden from our sight  
each thing would pass away.  
For there would be no need of force to make a chink  
Between component parts and to unfasten link from link”.

Lucretius, (2007). *The Nature of Things*. Stallings, A., E., (transl.). London, U.K.: Penguin Classics, pp. 13-14.

## **Professor Dragoş GHEORGHIU**

BA Arch. BA/MA Dsg. PhD Anthro.  
IOSUD, Doctoral School, National University of Arts, Bucharest  
Instituto Terra e Memória - Mação, Centro de Geociências  
da Universidade de Coimbra

## **ABSTRACT**

Ruins were a fascinating subject for the last half-millennium culture in Europe. Their rhetoric structure, determined by the work of Nature-Time upon materials, stimulated the arts and architecture between the Middle Ages and Post-Modernism. The paper discussed the analogy between the human body and architecture, together with the material tropes identified in iconography and illustrated with two iconic sites, Petra and Jerash. An example presented to show the use of the tropes of ruins in creating Modern Art is Constantin Brancusi's monumental work for the World War's I soldiers.

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Key words:

Ruins, Rhetoric, Tropes, Nature, Time, Anthropomorphism, Brancusi

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ruins have fascinated me ever since a childhood spent among Neolithic mounds, those earth ruins superimposed and pressed by the weather, and among the Greek cities of the west coast of the Pontus Euxinus. Maybe they shaped my destiny, because I have worked both as an architect and as an archaeologist, and some of my works of art are rhetorical tropes, that is, fragments of a whole. So the invitation to write an article for the first issue of the ACD Journal, aside from being a pleasure and an honour, triggered a moment of introspection. It seems unusual for an art and design magazine to mark its beginnings with this subject, which would seem to be more closely related to history, or even to mythology, because all mythologies have geneses and destructions. And yet the word is linked to art and design and thus to culture, especially the European culture of the second half of the last millennium. In my opinion, the entrancement of ruins represented the cyclical ferment of European Modernity, an idea that I will try to present in this text.

## 2. RUINS TODAY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

An analysis of the current bibliography on ruins reveals a great diversity of meanings, demonstrating their ubiquitous presence in various fields of knowledge, be they philosophical, anthropological or artistic, and confirming that there is even an *imaginary* of ruins (Bégin and Habib, 2007). The ruins exist in relation to Time, being forms created by Time (Augé, 2003)[ so they highlight its *passage* (Fabricius Hansen, 2016); from here one can draw an analogy with Nature's work of disaggregation, erosion, collapse, and vegetative invasion (Simmel, 1919), which she shares with Time.

Viewed as a product of human creation, the ruins are the result of an inverse process to that of construction, located in a *liminal* area between creation and destruction (Kaderka, 2011). Another analogy is that between ruins and the decayed human body (Hancock and Garner, 2014), the human being being subjected in time to ruination

(Murchadha, 2002). The experience of ruins is the experience of a *loss* (Lacroix, 2008), but also of a kind of *adventure* (Castañeda, 2017), because the ruins are a show in itself (Augé, 2007) whose experiencing produces emotion (Light and Watson, 2016). An experience that also produces *nostalgia* (Huyssen, 2006), due to the presence of Time (Hetzler, 1988) or, in other words, of destructive Nature, but also an *aesthetic pleasure* (Trigg, 2006; Ginsberg, 2004; Hetzler, 1982; Macaulay, 1966). This aesthetic pleasure is found in the poetics of Antiquity (Schnapp, 2016), in Renaissance literature (Hui, 2017), in the visual arts, from Classical art (Fabricius Hansen, 2016; DeSilvey and Edensor, 2012; Borys, 2005) to the contemporary (Dillon, 2012).

## 3. A HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE (DESIGN, ART AND CULTURE)

The European Middle Ages used the ancient ruins as their source of spoliation (Fabricius Hansen, 2015); see also Panofsky (1946), recycling Italian architectural elements, carrying out a process of combining the creations of the present with the metonyms of the past. Perhaps due to this type of design, which shows the fascination of the descendants of the barbarians of the North with the greatness of the Mediterranean world, even in fragmentary form, the Middle Ages had periods of appreciation of the *humanitas* of ancient art, those small *renascences* (Panofsky, 1960) that preceded the Renaissance. The phenomenon of the appearance of the ruins of Antiquity in European culture has been explained as being subsequent to the discovery of the texts of the ancient humanists (Lowenthal, 1985) who prepared the Renaissance.

A famous example is Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, discovered by Poggio Bracciolini<sup>1</sup> in 1417 (Greenblatt, 2011), a book that acted as a cultural trigger of the humanist tendency towards the Antiquity present in Italy. For the Renaissance spirit, the ruins of Antiquity became sources of pleasure, as can be read in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (2005): „Admiring these beautiful fragments with much delight and pleasure, I was still eager to search out new finds”

<sup>1</sup> Bracciolini is also the author of *Historiae de varietate fortunae Urbis Romae et de ruina eiusdem descriptio* (1443-1449).

(Colonna, 2005: 260). Another source for understanding the place of ancient ruins in the European consciousness could be the cultural pilgrimages to Constantinople in the early 15th century to study architectural relics (Harris, 2017), followed by the influence of numerous refugee scholars after the fall of the Byzantine Empire. Viewed from a long-term perspective, the process of cultural diffusion of ruins from Italy and Greece shows us that in following centuries they would gradually appear in the art of the cultures of northwestern Europe. „Pilgrims“, „travelers“ and „tourists“ (Starkey and Starkey, 2020) are the human categories that starting with the Middle Ages will discover, describe, draw or photograph the ruins of Europe and then the Middle East. After the antiquities and ruins of Rome („*the marble wilderness*“, Byron, 1812) and Italy (Pompeii was discovered in 1738 and Herculaneum in 1748) follow those of Greece, whose promotion is mainly due to French culture (Stoneman, 2010: 107-9), to cite only two monumental works: *Recueil d'Antiquités* in seven volumes (1752-67) written by Comte de Caylus and *L'Antiquité explorée et représentée en figures* (1720) by Bernard de Montfaucon.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were those of the travels of Englishmen (Stoneman, 2010; Starkey and Starkey, 2020) to Greece or the Near East, whose picturesque landscapes and ruins fascinated them, so intensely that the nineteenth century will see this iconography transposed from painting and prints even to Worcester, Minton or Copeland plates.

The industrial age will witness contrary attitudes towards ruins in England and France, Morris and Ruskin (1849/ 1961) wanting to keep the ruined monument to immerse us in the spirit of the times and not spoil its authenticity, as opposed to Viollet-le-Duc's interventionism in France (Choay, 1992).

## **4. AN APPROACH TO RUINS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF DESIGN, ART AND CULTURE.**

### **4.1. ANTHROPOMORPHIC SYMBOL**

The Vitruvian (1960) theory of construction

with anthropomorphic symbolism shows that in classical times the human body was a model for building design, seeking links between the human body and Euclidean geometry (Wittkover, 1971). But this analogy was much stronger: the human body of the Atlanteans and Caryatids was both a symbol of the static forces of buildings (Gheorghiu, 2000; 2003) and apotropaic images, positioned for the purpose of magical protection. In eighteenth-century painting, many representations of architectural ruins have anthropomorphic statues near them, whose presence is certainly metaphorical, their meaning referring to the analogy between the human body and the building (see also Roth et al., 1997). Ruins are likened to both the body and human life (Chateaubriand 1966; but see also Murchadha 2002) because they are subject to the same effects of Time or Nature.

The question of the Sphinx (a female monster which is according to Nietzsche (2008) a "*Sphinx-Nature*") to Oedipus, a question that referred to the bipedal position of the human body (self-standing in its youth), being replaced (in old age) with that of the tripod (a geometric figure of greater stability such as the base of the pyramids [see Serres, 1989: 285 ff.]), is a metaphor for both human and architectural physical decomposition. It can be seen that an architectural ruin, from the moment it was reduced to a pile of rubble, will last much longer than in previous stages of deterioration. The erosion of forms sometimes partially exposes the supporting skeleton of a building, which still fulfills its role of draining forces, just as some bones still retain parts of cartilage. The loss of balance is the first sign of ruin. As a result, the forces kept in check by geometry are unleashed, and the dissolution of geometry finally produces chaotic shapes. This type of dissolving means, for example, the loss of symmetry (a common feature of buildings and the human body) or the rhythm of the facades. The loss of geometric shapes will lead to the loss of the linear Renaissance perspective (Edgerton, 1975), which was a symbolic form in itself (Panofsky, 1924-25); in this case Euclidean geometry will be replaced by a chaotic, fractal one, in which the continuous dissolution produced by Nature, as Lucretius observed two millennia ago, reduces everything to the elementary particles



from which that whole was formed. Sand is the last avatar of a ruin. Ruin is the symbol of the Earth's attraction to the shapes raised in space, an attraction that unbalances and decomposes bodies. This attraction of Nature, which is devouring symmetry and Euclidean geometry, is also due to the climate and the action of the living. Both plants and animals infest the body of the dead man, or the ruined house or temple. The imbalance of the buildings leads to their ruin and complete dissolution reaching all the way to the foundations, i.e. those parts hidden in the Earth that support the weight and strength of the entire architectural object. The foundations are the only architectural features that still maintain the shape of the original building; they are hidden in the ground just like the roots of trees, which reproduce the shape of the aerial crown. Once exposed to the eye, they no longer fulfill their role of maintaining the vertical state of the building.

#### 4.2. THE TROPES OF RUIN OR THE RHETORICAL FIGURES OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE WHOLE

A careful analysis of the real ruins, or of the images with ruins, from the iconography of the last four centuries, reveals to us that the ruins are a product of rhetoric. They are a presence of a rhetorical diminution, respectively the presence of the whole of a composition that is continuously divided, as suggested by Rond d'Alembert's definition in the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Lettres* (1750-72, Paris, v.4, p. 658): *ruines, décombres, débris* (see also Schnapp 2018: 157). I am not referring here only to the property of the fragment to be metonymic, but to an entire rhetoric in which the tropes of the dissolution of the built forms have different meanings analogous to the deterioration of the human body. I will try with the help of a set of images of the classic ruins of Petra and Jerash to present this rhetoric of reduction, as an "experience of loss" (Lacroix, 2015) of the forms until their final disappearance. I chose Petra because it is a clear example of Western entrancement with ruins and because at this site one can observe the ravages of Time also as melted forms, like

the stone that flows under the action of Nature [Figure 1].



Figure 1: Nabataean temple façade, Petra, Jordan.

Photo: D. Gheorghiu

**Decapitation** or the loss of the building covering is the transformation of the intimate interior space into an open passageway, similar to a street. It is the trope of the annulment of the mystery. [Figure 2]



Figure 2: Roman ruins, Jerash, Jordan. Photo: D.

Gheorghiu

**Fleshlessness** or the dissolution of the non-structural material is the trope of revealing the hidden resistance structures, of the skeleton of the construction, of the elements related to the draining of forces. In the iconography of the XVII-XVIII centuries, the columns of the ruined temples stand, as well as some arches, proving that forces still flow through them. [Figure 3]. The struggle between the processed material and the forces of Nature positions the ruin in a liminal area in which it "gives the impression it is a work of Nature" (Simmel, 1919: 125).





Figure 3: Roman ruins, Petra, Jordan. Photo: D. Gheorghiu

**Piles** or the chaotic clutter of collapsed fragments is perhaps the most common trope of the ruins in which the human agency has acted, in cases of demolitions or wars.

**Foundations** or bases are the tropes of hidden elements, but also the final stages of the coherence of the ruined built form [Figure 4].



Figure 4: Building foundation, Petra, Jordan. Photo: D. Gheorghiu

**Fragment** is the metonymic trope from which the shape of the whole can be deduced. It is the trope of the imagination, offering the chance for a mental reconstruction of a coherent form. It also allows a fractal fragmentation, as long as it can restore the shape of the whole [Figure 5].



Figure 5: Column fragments, Jerash, Jordan. Photo: D. Gheorghiu

**Spoliation** or the recycled fragment is the transfer from a dismantled building to a new one. It allows the realization of a composition with elements from different times. [Figure 6]



Figure 6: Spolia, Petra, Jordan. Photo: D. Gheorghiu

**Patina** is a qualitative trope of materiality. It is an augmentative trope of the antiquity of the ruin or of its fragments. [Figure 7].



Figure 7: Patina on a marble capital, Jerash, Jordan. Photo: D. Gheorghiu

**Dust** is the smallest part of a decaying material, in which the original shape has been completely lost. It is a trope of grinding and the last visible level of matter predicted by Lucretius. In Chateaubriand's (1972) vision, it is also the sandy matter that leads to forgetting the objects immersed in it. And under the action of wind and water, dust becomes a destructive agent that bites the stone. [Figure 8]

<sup>2</sup> <https://europeansculpture.tumblr.com/post/141249560355/fermand-l%C3%A9ger-dans-latelier-de-constantin> (accessed on December 12, 2020).





Figure 8: Dust, sand, and eroded material, Petra, Jordan. Photo: D. Gheorghiu

In this enumeration there is a trope related to each mentioned category, namely that of the **material**. Up until the industrial age, the solid construction materials were wood, brick and stone. Stone was the main material of the monuments of Antiquity and the ruins that lasted the longest were those of buildings built of stone on stone foundations. [Figure 9] European culture of the last half millennium has functioned under the fascination of the tropes of the ruins. From the Renaissance to the present, the history of European art is a cyclical rediscovery of the ruins, of the Past, and subsequently of Classical art.



Figure 9: Stone columns on stone foundation, Jerash, Jordan. Photo: D. Gheorghiu

If we seek to correlate the rhetorical tropes identified with different historical epochs, we can see statistically that for example the Middle Ages is the age of spolia, and the period between the Renaissance and the nineteenth century is that of symbolic spolia, of the insertion in the present of the fragments of art and architecture of the classical Antiquity.

The art of the XVII – XIXth centuries was interested at the beginning by the tropes of beheading, piles and patina, while towards the end, due to the archeology, its interest shifted to the foundations. The "aesthetics of the fracture" of the eighteenth century will be the ferment of the late nineteenth-century art (Nochlin, 1994) and the genesis of the twentieth-century modern art, which begins with the fetishization of the fragment (a rhetorical trope that will have a brilliant career in the visual arts due to Cubism) and that will emerge at the end of the century, in Post-Modernity, and which will insistently persist in the architecture of the XXIst century. At the same time an interest in fragmentation and materials recommences, now from the philosophical perspective of "materiality" (see Ingold, 2007).

At the beginning of the XXth century, two brilliant artists, Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) and Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) were fascinated by the ancient fragments that influenced their sculptural work in which they displayed the fragmented human body. Brancusi apparently overcame this archaeological influence in his work, but, throughout his life, continued to create works that represented fragments of a "whole", which could have been for example the Temple of Indore in India or the Memorial for the World War I Romanian soldiers. All these fragments in the form of architectural elements, sculpture pedestals, or even sculptures, formed a composition resembling an ancient ruin in his studio. Brancusi's studio full of huge crumbling blocks of stone and vertical or obliquely supported columns on the walls looks like a XVIIth century painting or engraving in which various characters move among crumbling cylindrical fragments of columns or cubic stones from the walls. And maybe with this picturesque and romantic image in mind, Fernand Léger was photographed in this studio, surrounded by stone cylinders and unprocessed boulders<sup>2</sup>.

But the symbol of ruin, as a result of the decay of the bodies, appears most obviously in Brancusi's monumental work, the Memorial for the World War I soldiers from Târgu Jiu in Romania. Between 1937 and 1938, the sculptor created a work of modern art intertwined with Nature, involving both an urban and a wild area near the Jiu River, composed of a column, a monumental gate in the

form of a triumphal arch, and a cylindrical table (Gheorghiu, 1995a). The funerary ensemble (Gheorghiu, 1995b) in which the experience of Death was related to Nature can be imagined as representing a great cathedral beheaded and disembodied by

Time, without roof and without walls, of which only two structural elements have been preserved, alongside a cult piece, to celebrate the local cult of ancestors (Gheorghiu, 1996).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

If the eighteenth century experienced a cult of ancient ruins (Schnapp, 2018), with the first part of the twentieth century it changes into a cult of all the monuments of the past (see Riegl, 1928). It can be inferred that all the rhetoric of the decomposition of constructions and its analogy with that of the human body have generated an experience of Death in which Nature had a role in relation to Time and consequently a funerary role, and that the cult of ruins mentioned was also a cult of ancestors. This description fits perfectly with the purpose and final form of the monument of Brancusi from Târgu-Jiu, which, although deeply modern in form, can be considered in spirit as a last great work of Classical workmanship.

Industrial modernity has not tolerated ruins due to its philosophy that of refusing age, wear, tear (Loewenthal, 1985) and degradation (Peregalli, 2010). She dismantled the metaphor of Nature-Sphinx-Time, and even launched the idea of "the death of Nature" (Merchant, 1980; see also Hadot, 2004). Although it lost that quality of *wabi-sabi* with which it was loaded in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the ruins continued in the second half of the twentieth century to inspire architects (see Maxwell, 2013 for comparing the ruins of Beirut with the facade of Central Savings Bank Vienna), and visual artists, for whom archaeological remains have become real sources of inspiration (see Renfrew, 2006). Reducing the Past only to its materiality, nullifying the nostalgia and the entrancement with which it was perceived, hiding the anthropomorphic symbolism of the surrounding world, and finally denying the existence of Death, the reception of ruins in the contemporary world is reduced to a phenomenological consumerist experience, impoverished of any spirituality.

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### **DRAGOȘ GHEORGHIU**

Professor Dragoș Gheorghiu is a cultural anthropologist and an experimental archaeologist. He has conducted advanced theoretical and practical research in the study of prehistoric technologies, and acted as editor and co-editor of volumes on imagination, prehistoric design, fire in archaeology, ancient ceramics, figurines, stamps, architecture and place. He is Paul Mellon Fellow at the Center of Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

[gheorghiu\\_dragos@yahoo.com](mailto:gheorghiu_dragos@yahoo.com)