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THE SIGNIFIER AS RUINS

(LAST STATION BEFORE “NOTHING”)

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ABSTRACT

Even though the seduction of ruins seems to be coming from a nostalgia for the past which, possibly, refers to the lived experience (Dasein) of youth, of glory and as a result to the vanity of the human creation, to the vanity of life itself, even if we consider ruins as a resistance and victory against time and of this against this very vanity, however, this perception for ruins is nothing but a concealment from the glance of the relation “thing”-signifier and of the way that the “thing” dictates the signifier. Ruins as a regression of the existence towards non-existence, of creativity towards fall, demonstrate the signifier as flowing from the “thing”, the Logos from ineffable, the image from unimagined, of “something” from “nothing”, art itself as a reaction of avoidance of chaos.

Essentially, ruins demonstrate meaning as a reaction to “nothing”, for which “nothing” the meaning as ruins regresses when the reason of resistance disappears.

Ruins on the way to “nothing”, a step before their absolute disappearance and their return to the protogenic materials of nature from which, besides, they come, that is the fall and crash of the meaning, allow a quick look over the origin of the meaning without the glance being in danger from the emergence of the absolute “nothing” as an origin of the meaning.

Ruins attract us because they disclose while at the same time appeal to us because they conceal the void of the “thing” as a descent of the rational world.

Keywords:

“thing” (Das Ding), void, “nothing”, signifier, meaning, lacanian “real” (réel), regression, something

1. INTRODUCTION

A stroll in the “Old Town” whether this is in Plaka, Athens or a Hutong in Beijing is always tempting because it, first of all, wakens our latent infancy. In the alleys, in the unexpected dead ends one meets as a metaphor and metonymy the child meanders, the anguished searches for solutions to the problems of the infant soul and, at the same time, the certainty for the next day. And, if the buildings are restored -Puerto Rico is an exquisite example- then the tour becomes therapeutic: since the roads, the old buildings have endured their own therapy then, generally, therapy is possible. As therapy to be thought the removal of memory, like the place never had history or its history to be starting from the moment that someone walks there. That's why Black Africa, though the human's womb, gives unfairly the impression of a constant young Continent because exactly it lacks -but a few- monuments and archaeological sites, ruins that would attest for its history, as if there was a linear time without signage from the Lesotho cave paintings to the Johannesburg skyscrapers.

Additionally, if it is about a city without cars or with child “cars”, which are meant for tourist tours, such as in Pingyao, China, then the regression is complete. The lack of necessity for money can contribute to that, as happens inside archaeological sites or Mount Athos: the visitor has the impression that an ever-present, inside the ruined sites but invisible -with a few exceptions- Mother Holy Mary cares for everyone in her garden, without her children having to do anything, just to desire the uninterrupted and incessant connection with her, not to be castrated, not to grow up.

Sometimes, the restoration gives the nightmarish impression that the buildings or the roads never lived, that nothing happened here. A hybrid without history and without past as if it got away from a laboratory or like the face of some people that having erased the past, inexpressive from plastic surgeries, cries out that these people never existed. But, does this “nothing”, this lack of trace from the past

imply that initially there was a void?

Ruins as an emergence of the relation “thing”-signifier

The love for ruins, known as *Ruinophilia*, although it seems to be coming from a nostalgia of an era, the infancy, of the human or of the mankind that ended and that imaginarily was perfect, does not originate from that or from a remain of the past that can be recreated just like from a fragment of a vessel the whole vessel can be reconstructed or from a remembrance (“Titanic”, Astor) the whole lived experience or when “In Search of lost time”[1] with a Madeleine the whole past can be reconstructed.

Ruins are definitely the demonstration of the “thing” (*Das Ding*) which openly speaks of “nothing”, that “nothing” existed and now, behold, we see it, “nothing” exists. Visiting ruins is the indiscreet glance at the void of the “thing” which now does not hide, as was the moment that it authorised the appearance of the signifier. Ruins are the bare truth of the void of the “thing” which doesn't run to hide in the pillars of the symbolic. It is the void in the centre of Tokyo, Barthes would say, which gave, however, the potential to the city to exist[2].

The walls that we see when a house is demolished for another one to be erected in its place, the appeal to our glance from the faint colour that has remained on a dilapidated wall or the ruins of an ancient temple, have a double meaning: at last I saw the “thing”, its traces, at least, its pass. I saw “nothing” - of life, of meaning, of time, of money, of civilization - “*perasmenes mou agapes, tou kairou chalamata*”[3], while at the same time, armed through meaning, in the place of which I see, I avert my glance from “nothing”.

But, is averting a way to see it? To bear to see it? To see “nothing” as harmless, as a possibility of “being”? At last, I face what art has always tried to conceal, the lack of meaning, “nothing” of the world in all its majesty, at a safe distance, that of the past which allows me not to be terrorised but to admire it. There is an exceedance of the art order: “If you want to see something, see this”, an exceedance of

¹ Proust, M., (2011). *Anazitontas ton hameno hrono apo ti meria tou Souan [À la recherche du temps perdu, I: Du côté de chez Swann]*. Zannas, P., (trans.), Athina: Estia.

² Barthes, R., (2001). *I epikrateia ton simeion, [L'empire des signes]*. Papaïakovou (trans.), Athina: Ekdoseis Rappa, p 43-46³ “My foregone love affairs, ruins of time”, Greek song, Manolis Chiotis, Eftychia Papagianopoulou, Mary Linda, (Athina: Lyrics, 1960).

³ Chiotis, M., (1960). “My foregone love affairs, ruins of time”, Greek song, [Recorded by Manolis Chiotis, Eftychia Papagianopoulou, Mary Linda]. Athina: Lyrics.

“see this”, the work of art, so that we see hereafter. At the same time the glance enchanted by the imaginary reconstruction stays nailed to the order: “If you want to see something, see this. Don't guess what's behind, the continuation, the soil, the water, the air.”

In that concept, ruins are a resistance to “nothing”. A heroic bastion of meaning, though vain. Let's think, proportionately, the case of an animal in the asphalt. If it is dead, it doesn't terrify us. However, if it is dismembered, then it terrifies us. It shows of the being's “nothing” of which its innards cannot protect us from seeing “nothing”. After many cars have run over it, this sometime in-life and motion animal, will have become “nothing”. It will have become one with the asphalt and the car tyres, it will be like it had never existed. “Nothing” will exist in its place, as “nothing” of millions of people that have died and we ignore that they existed. Where is the millions of people's “nothing” who have existed before us? Don't say in cemeteries because, we know, the number of buried there is extremely limited. Where are, for instance, the Middle Ages millions of people? Doesn't it bring to mind Baudrillard's reasoning for the separation living/dead, non-existent dead?

2. RUINS AS A DEMONSTRATION OF THE DOMINANCE OF THE “THING”

At this point, we could ask ourselves: are ruins found in the order of “the beautiful” or in the order of “the sublime”? In the order of “therapeutic” or in the order of “nightmarish”?

However, indeed, in the order of the crack which allows us to see the world, like from the chink of Bachelard's and Thoreau's hut, to see where the world is based on, where the “being” goes when it has lost its alliance with time.

Don't the worn walls, the fallen pillars, possibly, remind us of Heidegger's “being” which even though it selected the place of its life, poetically its residence and, perhaps, the way of its life, however, is found in a place where only the intention of the traveller's glance gives it value?

The pillar, architecture's glory, the one which supported the roof of the humble house and the dome of the universe, here

it is now in our feet to remind us Arnheim's words: “the human admires the pillar because it reminds him of his own fall”.

And the little faded colour left on the walls, the one that passing by, we stand for a moment to look at, isn't it, possibly, a reminder of “nothing will be left” after the instant admiration that it “lasted”?

No, ruins are not an account of vanity, religious or philosophical. Ruins are not “Still Life”. They are not a memento mori. Nor an elegy for a Vanitas. They are the emergence of the hegelian “thing” (Das Ding), the lacanian “real” (Réel), the flare of the glory of “nothing”, of the truth, as a state that is not forgotten but repressed until there is a comeback of the repressed in the form of a symptom: the ruin as a compromise of the “being” on the way to “nothing” and of the once desire of the human for something, or simply, of the desire for desire.

I remind, respectively, that in the lacanian theory of the signifier, art, religion and philosophy are ways of management of the void of the “thing”. Religion is founded on the effort of avoidance of the void of the “thing”. Philosophy on its management as possession of the absolute truth. And art is founded on the void of the “thing”. The “real” which is not related to reality but to the “thing”, along with the symbolic and the imaginary (R.I.S.), structurally compose the mental organon.

“Nothing” that emerges through the remains of the symbolic web, of the structure, reminds us the possibility of the world to be drawn from not-being in the way that Wittgenstein expresses it in his correspondence with Engelmann: “this book is written of two parts, the one you just read and the one that I haven't written. And the most important part is the one that I haven't written”.

In the way that Heidegger reminds us that the language in Japanese, koto-ba, means flower petals that come out of silence.

Doesn't architecture itself come from an unbuilt state, Isozaki wonders, isn't it a Zen meditation, Ando said?

A materialization, we would say, of the invisible into nature and of nature into a built state through the architectural syntax and the grammar of the materials. That is, an emergence of “nothing” into Logos. And, exactly, ruins, regressing, show us anew “nothing” as a submersion of the Logos.

3. RUINS IN RELATION TO THE TIME AND THE GLANCE

In front of ruins we feel sorrow of what existed sometime, we feel admiration for the human work and one's struggle against time. But, most of all, we feel seduction and awe: we saw the void on which the structural web bloomed, the return to “nothing”, “nothing” as a pre-requisite of every structure. As Metaxas brilliantly points out, the view of the ruin, even if it causes melancholy, gives the impression that at some point the one day intact would result to this. And that the moment of its final decomposition, it will merge with nature transforming slowly and imperceptibly the artful today parts and shapes of which it is composed to the once again anonymous materials absorbed now from the surroundings. Simmel, besides -drawing from Schlegel who several decades earlier supported that in the human works we can see, concurrently, creation and destruction- considered ruins as a cooperation between human creation and nature, but with the perspective of the works of art transformation into materials by nature for nature's expression. Accordingly, Benjamin, later, supported that the human history is merged with the natural landscape.

Similarly, Derrida[4], in modern times, as far as ruins are concerned, detects on the one hand the affirmation of life over the face of death but with the definite notice that the narcissic trauma as thought in the freudian theory of mourning[5], is not soothed by the process of mourning. We would say, the remembrance of “nothing” is not repressed, the ἀλήθεια (a-letheia) of the “thing” ostracizes λήθη (lethe). Proportionately, Hadjistergiou[6] in his essay for ruins points out that the “past is involved in life, it gives it meaning and strengthens it”.

Foucault, in front of ruins, wouldn't be able to enunciate his renowned phrase that art has been the system's servant. Ruins – rei-p: demolish – ridicule every system, every convention, every rule, every ethic. Their ironic, tragic laughter, laughter for regularity, normality, for the right, eternity and its synonyms, immor-

ality, God – ripa, derivative of rei-p, as a river bank, doesn't it, possibly, undermine every narcissism for stability? it reminds us Rabelais' ironic, medieval laughter as analysed by Bakhtin. It, potentially, cancels the platonic world of ideas since the idea of the Parthenon as immortal and unchanged couldn't see its materialized self as a ruin. That's why ruins frighten us, because in an experiential way – it is enough for someone to stand by them – they debunk every idea over metaphysics: if Aristotle's “Immoved Mover”, Leibniz's “Monad” or Thomas Aquinas' “Ens” don't undergo a course of decline then they just don't exist. Isn't that what made Nietzsche be sarcastic of every discussion over essence? Would it be enough to take a look at the aristotelian “accidents” in the light of ruins so as to seize every discussion over the hypostasis?

No, ruins are not a glorious necrology for life's vanity, for the all-subduing, as is used to be said, time. Or are all of these up to the point to entice us to see what is not seen, the unimagined, the ineffable, if not the monstrous, the one that if the human sees he is in danger of truth, of “nothing”. Isn't that the way that the loss results in Oedipus, in Orfeas, in Lot's wife? Because, they saw.

Isn't that what, probably, made Rilke say that beautiful is the beginning of terrible, every angel is abominable and Lacan say that beautiful is the protection from monstrous? Or Eco and Kastoriadis say that beautiful is made at the edge of the abyss?

4. RUINS, THE ABSOLUTE AND ROMANTICISM

In that way, we can understand Romanticism's love for ruins, not because they power the nostalgia for an era (F. R. de Chateaubriand: “Le voyage en Grèce”, 1806) nor for the futile splendour and of glory (L. van Beethoven: “The ruins of Athens”, greek children's dialogue, 1812) – Religion's obsession for vanity is enough – but because Romanticism, hunter of the absolute, tracer of hereafter, saw in ruins the entrance into the absolute, the point beyond which the threat of “nothing” glimmers, the ultimate travel, the one without return, alterity as a struc-

⁴ Derrida, J., (2009). *Athènes à l'ombre de l'Acropole photographies de Jean-François*. Paris: Éditions Galilée.

⁵ Freud, S., (1980). *Penthos kai melagholia. [Trauer und melancholie]*, Paradelis, Th. (trans.). Athina: Ekdoseis Kastanioti.

⁶ Giorgos Hatzistergiou, *O politismos ton fantasmaton*, (Athina: Ekdoseis Alexandria, 2020).

tural element of identity, “nothing” as a prerequisite of “something”. Typical to that is the case of the king of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm II, who assigned to the architect Johann Gottlieb Brendel the construction of the absolute erotic retreat: a palace whose higher floors are by-construction destroyed so that they give the impression of ruins (Berlin, Lake Wannsee, Peacock Island, 1793).

(A small parenthesis on nostalgia: Kant[7] said that the nostalgic is always disappointed because he wants to find youth itself, as opposed to the hunter of ruins who finds, always finds, what he is looking for. As de Botton[8] points out the beauty for Christianity's lost Paradise is nothing but nostalgia for the lost happiness. Nostalgia is the return to a primary place, Cassin says: “we always return just like Odysseus who does not seize to return”. And, Claire points out that the Renaissance was the spirit of nostalgia for Antiquity. Psychoanalytically speaking, we would say that nostalgia is the perpetual effort to return to the primary relation with the mother's body whose, however, price of success will be madness. That's why the human's desires for happiness are symbolically a substitute of the grand desire for return. That's why desires never stop: because they cannot materialize nostalgia into a lived experience (Dasein) of return – always during the materialization of a desire something stays outside, like a start for the next desire. So, nostalgia is the total imaginary reconstruction of a past that ostracises ruins, although it starts by them, so that their position is occupied by the imaginary representation as happens in the recreation of a vessel, as we pointed out in the introduction of our study.

The human does not stand vacancy, that's why the best museums offer a whole virtual representation where the vacancy that derives from the ruins disappears. And the human does not stand vacancy because it doesn't offer him the ideal mirror in which he could see the ideal image of himself as one. Ruins, thus, could be an existential lesson that completeness is the acceptance of vacancy and not the obsessive and vain search

for the illusion of “me missing nothing, to have it all”. But even if that happens, isn't it when the human dies, because he has nothing to desire anymore?

Opposed to the feeling of nostalgia we find the occupation of the human's internal space by the void of the “thing”, by the essential dimension of “nothing”.)

5. RUINS AS A WORK OF ART

Ruins, thus, become one of the rare cases for the human's glance to look at the source of all meanings: “nothing” as a prerequisite of “something”, irrational as a prerequisite of normal, meaningless as a prerequisite of meaning, chaos as a prerequisite of order, speech as a prerequisite of ineffable, image as a prerequisite of unimagined, God as a result of Logos. Ruins as a middle state between the whole and nothing, a step before “nothing”, charm and terrorise as a potential for what does not fall into the glance so as to be seen, or sometimes, as we pointed out, if seen, it blinds. Paradigmatically, I remind Leader's brilliant comment about the people's queues to see the void of the wall where Mona Lisa was hung, after it had been stolen. In the same way, we could consider “Black square” as the point beyond which there is nothing: the “Black square” just like ruins presents us “nothing” beyond which there is nothing while at the same time like ruins it protects us from “nothing” presenting it as an image, in other words, in the order of the signifier. In that concept, ruins are part of the signifier proportionate with “Sonata 4'33'” or Debord's “black screen”, an excellent contribution to the formulation of the Suprematism Manifesto. Besides, didn't Kandinsky say that “the object harms art gravely”? The less object there is, the better. Meeting Mies van der Rohe's axiom “Less is more”. In that sense, ruins are a station towards the eclipse of the object that existed at some point as a structure. That's why, besides, when people find themselves in ruined ancient times, from Antiquity till today, they are gripped over by the blind impulse to write their names

⁷ Kant, I., (2011). *Anthropologia apo pragmatologiki apopsi*, [*Antropogie in pragmatischer hinsicht*]. Tasakos, H., (trans.). Athina: PRINTA.

⁸ De Botton, A., (2013). *I arxitektoniki tis eftyhchias*, [*The architecture of happiness*]. Kalokyris, A., (trans.). Athina: Patakis.⁹ Émile de Kératry, *Les Ruines de Pompei* (Paris: Hachette, 1867).

⁹ De Kératry, É., (1867). *Les Ruines de Pompei*. Paris: Hachette.

on the ruins or leave a graffiti: by writing their name, on one hand, they think that they will be travelling eternally along with the ancient ruins, they will have gained a vehicle to immortality – through his name it is that the human lives, even as a dead, especially then – on the other hand through writing, “nothing” is harnessed, it passes to the dimension of Logos, it is symbolised as script it is delimited in the dimensions of Kant's “extender substance”, possibly annulling Baudrillard's syllogism “dying has no meaning”.

6. RUINS AND THEIR RELATION WITH THE, ACCORDING TO BARTHES, PHOTOGRAPHY: MEMORY, MADNESS, LOGOS

Ruins, talking us for death, imitate photography's cunning the way Barthes points it out: firstly, a relation with death is foreseen, photography as a defense or as a subordination to death. But photography's relation with death is nothing but a screen so that the real nature of photography which is madness, is not revealed. “The nature of photography is madness; photography is a mad image immersed in reality” Barthes admits at the end of his essay. The same applies to ruins, while they first seem to be discoursing with deterioration and death, they, however, bring out the materialization of “nothing” as the being's nature.

Ruins, also, as a condensed form of memory – ruins as a continuous presence of

memory, an abolition of regression – resemble photography and as for that manifest, for a start, that just like photography, as Barthes says, “this existed”. But, in the same way that photography deadens, immobilises time, movement, life so as to immortalise life, in the same way Pompey[9] or Efessos ruins keep in life what is no more in life. They mummify time and consequently themselves, they deaden time so as to preserve it.

Just like the written word shrinks the spoken word, it deducts sharpness, liveliness, Plato tells us, it deadens it, but in order to preserve it, Derrida would say, in the same way ruins are in-immobility-bearing organisms of the movement of life that existed sometime. The immobility of ruins allows, thus, the classification of architecture, by Hegel, to the last rank of arts on the way to the self-realisation of the spirit: ruins manifest the stable relation of architecture with the land and its perpetual effort to exceed its land nature, “nothing”, so as to become a spirit, to find its place as art. Indeed, couldn't we, possibly, consider ruins as an inverted equivalent of that time, when the construction was still a “site” before its final form as art? Do ruins meet, that way, the land form of the construction before it becomes architecture? Could we, possibly, consider the bearing organism of the construction as well as the ruins as revelations of essence which, alas, doesn't exist? Benjamin already found in ruins an allegory of the spirit for the spirit itself, the cogitation of an ambivalence.

Ruins, thus, become a comment over the signifier, a “déjà vu” which, however, needs reconstruction and interpretation, like a dream that confronts reality.

EPILOGUE

Ruins are the condensed form of what once existed, where the visitor or the random passer-by organises lost reality to his measures, the absolute place of imagination, a minor delirium of substitution of reality in the way that desire or fear dictate what could have been, what can be. At the same time, the reassurance that the “thing” is not dangerous: the visitor controls it through imagination, he sees in that what he wants to see, a mirror of himself that invites it to give him back the image that he desires for him.

But, most of all, ruins are a metaphor of the human ruin. Not because they manifest a common fate, the one of disease or old age, nor the reminder of a possible vanity. It is not about the illustration of a Vanitas. But, because they show the human condition as a perpetual resistance to the human nature itself, the alterity that inhabits him, the “strange” as a prerequisite of “familiar”, the void of the “thing” that ruins while at the same time produces “meaning”. An effort to answer Leibniz's exhausting question “why is there something and not nothing?”.

That's why, beware, the view of ruins is not always anodyne.

You saw what happened to -whom? Freud, when he sighted the Acropolis..

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