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CITIES OF WRECKED DESIRE: POST-APOCALYPTIC CINEMA AND RUIN PORNOGRAPHY

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Resumo

A pornografia da ruína - a estética fotográfica da decadência arquitetônica - tem uma longa história no cinema e na televisão e está ligada aos espetáculos do apocalipse e suas conseqüências. Mais recentemente, esses tropos representacionais tornaram-se um gênero fotográfico por direito próprio, destacando e, talvez, celebrando a decadência urbana e industrial. Ainda não necessariamente emergindo dos mesmos eventos apocalípticos como suas contrapartes ficcionais, o fato de que os tipos de características representacionais são formais são repetidos entre ficção e não ficção significa que são imagens documentais de não-ficção são interpretadas da mesma maneira que como de Depois da Terra (M. Night Shyamalan, 2013) e Planeta dos Macacos Amanhecer (Matt Reeves, 2014) (entre muitos outros), como Oblivion (Joseph Kosinski, 2013). Consequentemente, foi alegado que:

... arruinar a fotografia e arruinar o filme aestheticizes a pobreza sem questionar suas origens, dramatiza espaços, mas nunca busca as pessoas que os habitam e transformam, romantiza atos isolados de resistência sem reconhecer as enormes forças políticas e sociais alinhadas contra a transformação real e não apenas Sobrevivência teimosa, da cidade (Leary, 2013).

Este artigo explorará a estética da pornografia de ruína e do cinema e da televisão pós-apocalíptico, a fim de avaliar a maneira com que essa forma de reportagem documental pode ou não conseguir chamar a atenção para as causas e condições da decadência urbana, colapso econômico, E a possibilidade de reconstrução e resultados positivos urbanos e civis.

Abstract

Ruin pornography – the photographic aestheticization of architectural decay – has a long history in cinema and television and is linked to spectacles of apocalypse and its aftermath. More recently, these representational tropes have become a photographic genre in their own right, highlighting and, perhaps, celebrating urban and industrial decay. While not necessarily emerging from the same apocalyptic events as their fictional counterparts, the fact that similar kinds of formal representational characteristics are repeated between fiction and non-fiction means that those non-fiction, documentary images are interpreted in the same ways as those of the cities of films such as Oblivion (Joseph Kosinski, 2013), After Earth (M. Night Shyamalan, 2013) and Dawn of the Planet of the Apes (Matt Reeves, 2014) (amongst many others). As a consequence, it has been claimed that:

... ruin photography and ruin film aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins, dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit and transform them, and romanticizes isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation, and not just stubborn survival, of the city (Leary, 2013).

This paper will explore the aesthetics of both ruin pornography and post-apocalyptic cinema and television in order to assess the manner with which this form of documentary reportage might or might not succeed in drawing attention to the causes and conditions of urban decay, economic collapse, and the possibility for positive urban and civil reconstruction and outcomes.

PALAVRAS CHAVES
Ruínas, Pós-apocalipse, Cinema, Decadência, Fotografia.

KEY WORDS
Ruins, Post-Apocalypse, Cinema, Decay, Photography.

Introduction

> Both structure and ruin, the city is the manifestation of collective social production, and yet is loaded with personal memories, desires and traces of the past. (L. Webb, 2014, p. 280)

> Is there a greater ornament of landscape, than the ruins of a castle? (W. Gilpin, 1791, p. 27)

One of the most evocative tropes of post-apocalyptic cinema would have to be the city in ruins, all towering edifices and crumbled concrete, deserted, feral and empty. The ruined city in cinema is a site within, upon and through which action occurs – the staple of this genre – but the ruined city is also a narrative in its own right, the form of destruction hinting at the kinds of madness that brought the protagonists to this point.

The ruined city is, and contemporary ruins are, attractive for reasons that are historical and cultural: emerging into frames of interpretation as a result of the developments of notions of the picturesque. The ruin functions as a reminder and a warning, perhaps, but it also allows a way to play out fantasies and desires that stray closer to the articulations of a social death drive insofar as we call for continued representations of the ways we might bring the intricate structures of culture crashing monumentally down. Apocalypse cinema is only one of the latest methods by which these eschatological narratives have been uttered; literature is full of last men, last cities, last civilisations and, further back, the foundational narratives of our species are littered with the muscular actions of vengeful gods and other metaphysical forces. But the ruined city of fiction and the ruined city of fact are not the same territory, even if the aesthetics of the first provide a means to misrecognize the status of the second.

Methodology

This paper seeks to thematically analyse contemporary thinking about ruins and their representation in fiction and non-fiction, examining key texts and contemporary research to identify common concerns.

Aims of the Research

This paper identifies key ways in which the representation of the ruin in genre cinema might coincide with and influence the manner with which contemporary ruins are thought of, affectively responded to and managed by populations and civic bodies.

1: The Porn in Ruin Porn

As Pétursdóttir and Olsen note in their introduction to (2003), never before in the history of our species

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have so many things been made, so many structures constructed and so many abandoned, such that as the cycles of mass-production and "material replacement have accelerated […], increasingly larger amounts of things are increasingly rapidly victimized and made redundant". The result, they claim, is a "… ghostly world of decaying modern debris [… that is …] too recent, too grim and too repulsive to be embraced as heritage" (p.3). At the same time, recent trends in media production and circulation have seen the rise of increasingly convincing representations of a world in ruins, or a world of ruins, through which protagonists struggle and narratives are told. Where once the post-apocalyptic tale was a minor subset of science fiction literature, now it is a major multimedia genre of its own, with identifiable sub-genres and a representational typography firmly embedded in popular consciousness. As a further point of consideration, the proliferation of the contemporary ruin has led to the development of a particular kind of documentary practice, collectively referred to as 'ruin pornography'. This mode of representation celebrates the decayed and abandoned structure, reproducing in fine detail sites that are as spectacular as they are melancholy and, in the process generating conflicting affective responses in those who encounter these images. What then might the relationship be between the rise and popularity of ruin photography – or ruin pornography – and the aesthetic sensibilities of increasingly realistic and convincing spectacles of ruin in contemporary post-apocalyptic cinema?

Part of the difficulty faced by the aestheticisation of the ruin lies with the nomenclature with which it circulates: the suffix 'porn' indicates both pleasure and, specifically, scopophillic pleasure but, also, the pleasure of the illicit, the thrill of looking at what shouldn't be seen. Much like the sexual pornography to which it refers, ruin porn produces a fantasy that supplants the actuality of the site and stands both in for, and in between, the subject and the experience. This is not to necessarily criticize pornography for the manner with which it mobilizes and circulates historically and culturally contingent discourses of desire – only to acknowledge that it does so. Given this, it stands to reason that the formal aestheticisation of a site, the attention to detail, framing, lighting and composition that typify the images referred to as ruin pornography will draw on similar structures of mediated encounter.

Usefully, Dora Apel writes:

> Even if we take the term 'ruin porn' at face value and see the objective of ruin imagery as the production of pleasure or arousal, to condemn the massive proliferation of ruin images on this basis leads to no new insight or knowledge. The more productive questions are how ruin images please, move, or arouse and what purpose this serves. (2015: p. 24)

Does the representation of the ruin, as metonymic reference to absent events and participants, both stand in for the missing, complete building but also act as both screen and barrier; screen upon which the fantasy of destruction can be realized and enjoyed and, consequently, barrier to the retreat from the ruin back to the completed building which, because it is not fantasmatic is therefore less satisfying? For Jacques Lacan "Art is a form of metonymy, as it always is a part pointing to a whole, an object allowing for larger interpretation.

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And metonymy, as it implies absence, is desire […]" (Claridge, 1998, p. 132) Consequently, we can utilize the presence of both pleasure and satisfaction generated by the art of cinema and documentary photography as a way to explain the presence of metonymy as governing system in the construction of representations and this might, in turn, lead us to an understanding of why the representations of ruins, in cinema and documentary photography, is so troubling and affecting.

2: How Are Ruins Meaningful?

The ruin has long been a central figure within the development of representational languages. It was William Gilpin who, in the late 18th century, helped codify the first uses of those tropes collectively referred to as the picturesque, seeing these ideas as a way of mediating between the beautiful and the sublime as categories of experience and understanding. For Gilpin, the picturesque was, simply, "that kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture" (1768, p. 2) – later refining this tautology further to indicate that

> The picturesque may be thought of as halfway between the beautiful, with its emphasis on smoothness, regularity, and order; and the sublime, which is all about vastness, magnitude, and intimations of power; the picturesque must combine aspects of both of those. (Voller, 2016)

Regardless of the fact that Gilpin is little remembered or read, his points demonstrate that as ideas around the picturesque developed currency and become part of a standard representational schema in the 18th and 19th century, the ruin is often included as a feature in a particular way of interpreting the landscape that fits within specific ideological frameworks – for Gilpin and his contemporaries, this would be the idea that an appreciation of the landscape would be enhanced with a specific kind of education, especially including an appreciation of the classical arts and notions of ideal proportions. Gilpin's guides and notebooks often refer to ruins as significant sights, nascent tourist stops and destinations, places where the presence of a ruined structure functions as frame and counterpoint to the natural environment. The notion that a ruin might best be considered a compositional element in an apperceptive process when considering a landscape might seem naïve, but it is exactly this kind of representation that governs the use of the ruin in contemporary fiction and, particularly, in post-apocalyptic cinema.

3: Chains of Signification

Cinema is, of course and like all communicative media, founded on the development and circulation of chains of signs, arranged in complex, historically and culturally contingent arrangements and sent out into the world in order to convince, persuade and, at times, bludgeon. Consequently, the interpretation of cinema is a complicated hermeneutic act disguised as commonplace entertainment. Audiences are adept at maneuvering signifying relationships, reading content as both literal and figurative, understanding when the figure they see on the screen stands for the individual and when that figure represents more than itself. In the same way,

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cinematic tropes and formal devices develop the same representational complexity and both encourage and reward the same interpretive facility; camera angles offer discourses of power and intimacy, lighting suggests psychological interiority, and so on.

Outside the darkness and safety of the cinematic experience, the pro-filmic world mobilizes signs in the same way – chains of signification wherein the literal objects we encounter and utilize, the articulations of power and intimacy, the multitudes of minor and forgettable interactions we endure over the course of a day all stand in for other things beyond their immediate presence. Again, there is nothing new or remarkable about this. A building is both a literal structure emerging as a consequence of a long and complicated set of arrangements and interactions and, at the same time, an articulation of power, mastery, even hubris. Le Corbusier's 'machines for living', Haussmann's renovation of Paris, or Lancelot Brown's delicately crafted 'gardenless' landscapes are all disparate examples of the ways in which designed interventions into lived experience carry both literal meaning and, at the same time, a host of other interpretive possibilities that exist concurrently.

Consequently the building, the suburb, the city, are all both in the world and also stand in for complex chains of signification that are simultaneously multiple and widely circulated. Spatial relationships, methods of transit and possibilities of access are all woven into urban architecture and are learned by each location's inhabitants who take these messages and integrate them into lived experience.

The point to this digression is to note that the construction and interpretation of chains of signs that work as both literal statements and, simultaneously as expressions of both metaphor and metonymy is not limited to the various media we consume. Instead, the world we encounter is made for and by us in the same way – literal artifacts and processes that are themselves and are also more than that, understood as multiple iterations and interpreted effortlessly, once the interpretive mechanisms are understood. Thus, I argue that these productive mechanisms work the other way as well; the methods for interpreting the chains of signification that occur on the screen and, increasingly, across multiple screens, will impact on the ways in which we approach the interpretation of our lived experience as well.

Bill Schaeffer (2001), in discussing the cinematic spectacularity of the 9/11 Twin Towers attacks, notes that it is entirely likely that the choice of the target was inspired by the kinds of large-scale destruction globally circulated by such films as *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996) and *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) wherein landmarks and their ruination function as metonymic actions standing in for wider, less easily represented, unrest and upset. Similarly, Susan Sontag, in her 2003 article 'Looking at War' considers statements she had made about photography and conflict some twenty-six years earlier. Then she had claimed that

> … while an event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs, after repeated exposure it also becomes less

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real. As much as they create sympathy, […] photographs shrivel sympathy.

However, when revising these sentiments for the more recent publication, she noted:

> I'm not so sure now. What is the evidence that photographs have a diminishing impact, that our culture of spectacle neutralizes the moral force of photographs of atrocities? [….] An image is drained of its force by the way it is used, where and how often it is seen. (2003)

So the ruin appears in the place of the event that gave rise to it and the majority of those films that incorporate the post-apocalyptic ruinscape utilize the ruin as a sign in the place of the events that caused it, with specific events and apocalypses indicated by different kinds of ruins. This means that cinema and photography construct and circulate a typology of disaster and ruin representation that is powerful enough to implicate and direct real-world actions, both in terms of those events that give rise to ruins and those processes that allow us to understand the significance of the ruin.

It would seem that the pleasure of looking at ruins takes two dominant forms; that of a scopophilic pleasure which might be located at the superficial recognition of disaster and destruction, as Susan Sontag has argued elsewhere, but also as a kind of mournful nostalgia, what Kate Brown has elsewhere defined as 'rustalgia'. (2015) If these two responses function as poles upon a continuum, then between the pleasure that the destruction that has happened to produce the ruin, and a mourning of the loss evidenced by what remains lies an entire spectrum of responses that might equally partake of both positions as of somewhere between them. Necessarily, however, the representation of the ruin impacts on the assessment of the actual ruin. The represented actual ruin becomes a salutatory lesson as well as a place for mourning, a compressed nostalgia. Andreas Huyssen explores this in detail when he comments that "… in the body of the ruin the past is both present in its residues and yet no longer accessible, making the ruin an especially powerful trigger for nostalgia". (Huyssen, 2006: 7)

4: Post-Apocalyptic Cinema: Some Observations

Throughout this discussion I have claimed that the representation of the ruin on the screen establishes an interpretive schema that stands in the way of alternate ways of considering the ruin in actuality. Necessarily, as cinema and later media have evolved, the narrative function of the ruin has similarly changed. But I would venture to suggest that whilst the narratives that drive post-apocalyptic media, like the apocalypses themselves, have altered to serve the various concerns of the contexts that require them, the ruins, as the platform upon which and against which the narrative occurs, and within which the protagonists and events are defined, remain constant as a form of momento mori (or, perhaps, tableaux mort), a compressed set of signifiers that lead out to a remarkably consistent group of meanings. A cinematic apocalypse allows us to grasp and participate in, as Sontag makes clear, "the fantasy of living through one's own death and more, the death of cities, the

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destruction of humanity itself". (1965, p.44) But where an apocalypse occurs in order to reveal what otherwise could not be shown, for the post-apocalyptic text the revelation has occurred. What then has been revealed?

A cursory glance at the presence of the ruin in contemporary post-apocalyptic cinema reveals the same kinds of frozen appreciation present in ruin photography. Necessarily, the genre demands action, identifiable protagonists and movement through spectacular locations, but the ruins themselves, increasingly accurately rendered, are passively considered. Once of the points of direct connection between the genres of post-apocalyptic cinema and documentary photography is the use of actual locations for fantasy settings. All of the District 12 sequences for *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012) were filmed in the abandoned Henry River Mill Village, once a planned community and now an abandoned ghost town. *Oblivion* (Joseph Kosinski, 2013) was largely filmed in Iceland and Hawaii, the better to exploit the otherworldly landscapes into which computer generated ruins could be inserted for greater effect. Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) was filmed in disused hydroelectric power plants and deserted chemical factories in Estonia while *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (Matt Reeves, 2014) made extensive use of a CGI-enhanced ruined San Francisco to supplement its location shooting in British Columbia.

The rise of digital animation and computer enhancement has certainly allowed the post-apocalyptic ruin to develop in complexity. Where earlier films made use of deserted cities – shot at specific moments in the morning when traffic was lightest – to indicate the post-apocalypse, the more recent post-apocalyptic settings can be represented with far more detail and precision, the better to indicate the type of apocalypse that has occurred and, hence the manner with which we are to understand the narrative. The better, also, to luxuriate in the details of the specific destruction, the aesthetics of the collapsed building and significant details of humanity's collapse.

The mediated ruin stands in for a small number of possible causes – indeed, Charles Mitchell's *A Guide to Apocalyptic Cinema* (2001) notes just seven types of these films. (ix) But the ruin – represented or hinted (depending on the budget of the film) – always leads us back to nostalgia and mourning in an oddly passive way. Consequently, we can see the traces of a pastoral utopianism coded into the desires of the films' narratives to reach a resolution that might offer either explanation or hopefulness. So the gaze of this cinema and, by extension, documentary photography, looks past the present moment; the present is, for these films, to be endured for the better time to come or, if the film is of a melancholic bent, endured until the final moments of both the film and our species. But the present cannot be altered. Indeed, the present of the post-apocalypse is to be avoided much like our contemporary ruins themselves. The point is that the proliferation of a small set of representational languages within this genre means that certain kinds of discourses, especially oriented towards the development, portrayal and circulation of fantasy, will govern and direct the ways with which audiences intersect with metaphor and metonymy in relation to desire. These methods of directing desire towards satisfaction occur in all representations, not just those that feature the ruin as part of their dominant representational schema. Cinema – all media – train us both to construct desire and to receive satisfaction

and pleasure in very specific ways. My argument, then, is that the mobilization of metaphor and metonymy in media will affect the ways these structures are utilized in the real world and that – for our encounters with the ruin – the screens of fantasy are trained to view the ruin in a way that prevents it from being understood outside of those schema.

5: Conclusion: Detroitism and Beyond

John Patrick Leary, writing about the aestheticisation of post-economic collapse Detroit, comments that:

> So much ruin photography and ruin film aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins, dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit and transform them, and romanticizes isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation, and not just stubborn survival, of the city.

Crucially, he continues:

> And to see oneself portrayed in this way, as a curiosity to be lamented or studied, is jarring for any Detroiter, who is of course also an American, with all the sense of self-confidence and native-born privilege that we're taught to associate with the United States. (2011)

The problem, it would seem, lies beyond the fact that the aestheticisation of the ruin prevents a complex and meaningful engagement with future-focused opportunity and civic redevelopment; instead, for Leary at least, the metynomic ruin locks those who are associated with the ruin into a discourse that runs counter to other ideological systems. Certainly the idea that ruins might happen elsewhere and to other people is an important one.

Perhaps, though, the appreciation of the ruin stands in opposition to the role of the violence that gave birth to it. If, as Richard Slotkin argues in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-century America* (1992), the myth of the American frontier is a guiding ideological presence throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and a central and crucial part of this myth is regeneration through violence (p. 12) then the ruin points out the failure of this myth and signals the death of the frontier. Violence will produce the ruin but no regeneration is possible. The ruin, we are encouraged to believe, occurs elsewhere and else-when – and for the ruin to occur here, Leary suggests, is to acknowledge the failure of fantasy that denies its possibility. The celebration of destruction, the offense taken at being included in the discourse of the ruin, or the mournful nostalgia at what is lost – all of these are frozen moments that are obstacles to possibility. Our approaches to the ruin are structured in advance by the media we consume and by the proliferation of those discourses in our daily interactions, yet the conclusions we draw from the ruin are constrained by the narratives within which the metynomic and metaphoric possibilities of it are articulated

Svetlana Boym comments that "ruins make us think of the past that could have been and the future that never took place, tantalizing us with utopian dreams of escaping the irreversibility of time". (2016) The contemporary ruin is a problem for us in the way that our encounters with historical ruins are not; historical ruins can be looked back as teleological markers, indicators of necessary activity on the way to our glorious now: contemporary ruins instead suggest that the long now of the modern and post-modern period might not be so stable as we might like, and this ambivalence is borne out with the rise and rise of a spectacular cinema of destruction, that, too, is oriented towards the ruin in a similar teleological fashion. Post-apocalyptic cinema provides an aesthetic template to allow for the historicisation of the contemporary period and what we are seeing with the establishment of ruin pornography, as a documentary practice, is a movement towards the recognition of the contemporary ruin as being both part of history, and an indicator of our own place in history; not somehow immune to history but subject to its forces continuously in ways that trouble and unsettle us, render rough the smooth, and which might just force us, like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, to consider the detritus or our actions gathering at our feet.

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