

Rutgers University Press

Chapter Title: Introduction: Modernity in Ruins

Book Title: Beautiful Terrible Ruins

Book Subtitle: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline

Book Author(s): DORA APEL

Published by: Rutgers University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt15sk7vm.5>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Rutgers University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Beautiful Terrible Ruins*

JSTOR

Introduction



Modernity in Ruins

The disaster unfolds before our eyes: dense fiery clouds mushroom outward; the shocking downward crash; the skewed fragments standing in an otherworldly landscape like a modern-day Dante's *Inferno*. When the World Trade Center was attacked in 2001, the nation was inundated with images of fire and smoke, ashes and rubble. The country as a whole felt violated and vulnerable, a feeling that only deepened in the following weeks and months as the planes repeatedly flew into the towers that fell again and again. The visual trauma of bodies falling from the towers was largely suppressed in favor of focusing on the architectural collapse, which was traumatic enough. The smoldering remains and terrifying steel lattice ruins that stood in place of the towers signaled a metaphorical blow to American imperialist pretensions. This humbling of imperial power surely drove the rush to rebuild, to fill the void of loss in the Manhattan skyline. It also drove the launching of two grueling, costly, and destructive wars, the limitless War on Terror and the vastly expanded security state by President George W. Bush and his administration. They were eager to replace those videos and photographs of catastrophe and defeat with images of triumph and the victory of "freedom." But the "shock and awe" campaign failed, and the recently opened National September 11 Memorial & Museum instantiates the experience of highly intensified security and surveillance, producing what one critic calls "a celebration of liberty tightly policed."¹ The memorialized footprints of the towers, however, have become a kind of ur-ruin that casts its shadow forward over the new millennium. In the current era, ruins and scenes of ruination rank among its most iconic images.



FIG. 1 Steve McCurry, *New York City, 2001. Wrecked Remains of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers.* © Steve McCurry/Magnum Photos.

The aesthetic appeal of the postapocalyptic ruins in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks is unmistakable, prompting another observer to ask, “Is it unseemly now or ever to talk about the beauty of the World Trade Center’s ruins?”² The pictured ruins, such as those taken by Steve McCurry on the day of the attack, or those of the clean-up by Joel Meyerowitz have an eerie splendor even as they convey a sense of ghostliness and suspended time (figure 1). Still haunted by the loss of almost three thousand lives, the pictures make it possible to “empathize and even identify with the ruins.”³ We must recognize that the implicit warning against imperial hubris and the burden of grief imparted by the images are in conflict with the impulse to find beauty in the ruins. Yet these contradictory narratives coexist—the beautiful and the terrible—indeed, one mediates the other, beauty making the terrible bearable. The looming trauma of the ruins may be mastered through the safe remove of representation. This is the ameliorating function and inherent contradiction of ruin imagery.

Natural disasters wreak another kind of ruinous havoc. When Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, thousands of poor and black people were trapped for days before any action was even taken to try to rescue them. The nation looked on in horror while the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) claimed ignorance about conditions in the Louisiana Superdome that everyone else in the country was watching on television. Here the power of imagery was evident in a whole new way, exposing FEMA’s shocking mismanagement

and lack of preparation for the disaster in which more than eighteen hundred people died. All too aware of the effects of images, FEMA urged that no reporters accompany rescue boats and that no photographs of the dead be published.⁴ Media controversy flared nonetheless when a photo of a young black man wading chest deep through floodwater while carrying a case of soda and pulling a floating plastic bag was described as “looting,” while in a similar photo, a white couple holding bags of food were described as “finding bread and soda from a local grocery store.”⁵ Along with the exaggerated and false media reports of black violence and criminal activity in the storm’s aftermath, these captioned images expressed the racist attitudes that demonized blacks as looters and rapists, justifying the callous and discriminatory treatment of displaced black citizens in the majority black city.⁶ Such images—the displacement of eight hundred thousand people in New Orleans and the catastrophic strike at the center of global capital in New York—reverberate with a challenge to the ability of the state to protect its citizens and to the idea of progress and rationality in the capitalist order.

The imagery of abandonment and decay produced by deindustrialization and urban decline also resounds with such challenges, and no city is more repeatedly pictured in the national media for its stark deterioration than Detroit. The travails of the city are featured in dozens of stories in the *New York Times*, for example, including many with front page headlines and two-page inside spreads with enormous photographs. The *New York Times* even initiated a “Ruin and Renewal” series that specifically tracks efforts to revive an area defined as Detroit’s North End, and produced a magazine cover story profiling Detroit-based entrepreneurs considering investment in the city, “Detroit, Through Rose-Colored Glasses.”⁷ Although deindustrial decline is widespread across the country and abroad, most notably in the former leading manufacturing centers, Detroit has become the preeminent example of urban decay, the global metaphor for the current state of neoliberal capitalist culture and the epicenter of the photographic genre of deindustrial ruin imagery.

What the city has become best known for, through the pervasive reproduction and circulation of ruin imagery, are the abandoned factories and skyscrapers; derelict hotels, libraries, schools, churches, and businesses; the acres of vacant residential lots dotted here and there with lone houses; and the derelict homes that run into the tens of thousands. After the attacks of 9/11, hurricanes intensified by global warming such as Katrina and Sandy, the global economic crisis of 2008 that caused millions of people to lose their jobs and their homes, and the nuclear meltdown in Japan in 2011, the imagery of ruin-ation has only grown and speaks to the overarching fears and anxieties of our era: increasing poverty, declining wages and social services, inadequate health care, unemployment, homelessness, ecological disaster and degradation, and fear of the other. These issues play an important role in positioning the ruins

of Detroit at the center of a vast network of ruin images, making the former Motor City the poster child of ruination in the advanced capitalist countries today. Although images are never the same as the real, the global network of ruin imagery visually constructs the nature of modern decline and shapes collective ways of seeing.

Repeatedly construed in the national media as a postapocalyptic landscape, Detroit is often compared to war zones, hurricane wreckage, conditions of the poorest developing nations, the aftermath of nuclear explosion or destruction by alien invaders. To the annoyance of Detroit's residents, the city's deterioration tends to overwhelm any sense of its vitality, or, more acutely, its living population of nearly seven hundred thousand people. But the effects of ruination are stark: 40 percent of the streetlights do not work, the school system is abysmal, and the fire department functions without adequate equipment. The unemployment rate, at 23 percent in the 2010 census, is the highest among the nation's fifty largest cities and well above the national average, while the higher education rate is well below it. Though city services are slow and inadequate, property taxes are high, continually threatening poor residents with home foreclosures and threatening the city with yet more blighted, abandoned houses. Nearly 40 percent of the city's population lives below the poverty line. About a fifth of the city's residents cannot afford a car, and Detroit has one of the worst public transit systems of any major city in the nation, which, moreover, is not integrated with a regional public transit system so that people can get to work in the suburbs. Indeed, there is no regional integration of most resources, so that what is now the poorest city in the nation, which is overwhelmingly black, is also bordered on the north by some of the wealthiest suburbs in the nation, which are overwhelmingly white.

Is the nation's former leading manufacturing center a metonym for global urban decline or a racially unique city? Does it matter what happens to Detroit, or is it obsolete and expendable? What are the cultural and political implications of Detroit's ruin imagery? The ruination of cities is always more complicated than it may seem at first, and their representation is significant for the ways in which images reveal or conceal relations of power.

We might think of Detroit as embodying two cities—the real one with all its complexities and histories, and the one fashioned through ruin images. In his 1993 study of Detroit, Jerry Herron observed, "Detroit is the most representative city in America. Detroit used to stand for success, and now it stands for failure. In that sense, the city is not just a physical location; it is also a project, a projection of imaginary fears and desires. This is the place where bad times get sent to make them belong to somebody else."⁸ As a repository for the cultural fears and anxieties of the nation, Detroit as constructed through images may be appalling or amazing, but photographs, by their nature, tend

to explain very little about the complex causes of decline or the ramifications of ruination for the city's future, or the nation's. Instead the city produced through images takes on different meanings in different contexts; even the same images may be used to serve different political agendas. Detroit is seen as both representative of urban decline *and* as a uniquely mismanaged city. As the former leading manufacturing center in the world and now a failing black city, Detroit is construed as both exemplifying inevitable economic trends for which no one is to blame and as a highly racialized city that has caused its own decline through incompetent or corrupt leadership. Detroit is thus regarded as “demonstrating” either the historical inescapability of decline or its own history of “irresponsibility.”

In this way, the rest of the country may be lulled into believing that Detroit's downward spiral is either deserved or unavoidable, or a combination of the two. These constructions of the city allow the real agents of decline—the corporations and the state—to evade responsibility and justify the state takeover of Detroit, its forced bankruptcy, the attack on workers' pensions, privatization of city services, and other threatened austerities, which ultimately serve as disciplinary warnings to declining cities and towns from Maine to California. By establishing crucial precedents that place the burden of debt on poor, black, and working people in the face of a shrinking economy, and under cover of blaming no one or blaming the city itself, Detroit and its representations assume a pivotal role in helping to shape the future of city life in America. As the central locus for the anxiety of decline, Detroit's ruins loom over the nation and beyond.

The anxiety of decline may be understood as the dark side of modernity, which is founded on a set of universalist values stemming from the Enlightenment that supported ideals of progress and rationality through science and technology. Yet modernity has also fostered the growth of disaster capitalism—the unparalleled power of the security and surveillance state, the stateless subject, the capacity for mass death on an enormous scale, the ability to destroy the earth's ecology, and new ways of immiserating masses of people, all in the service of producing extraordinary wealth and power for a tiny privileged elite.⁹ Faith in progress and rationality erodes as economic and ecological crises, poverty and urban deterioration grow. As national economic imperatives clash with the demands of globalized capital, the continuing decline and ruination of cities feeds a pervasive cultural pessimism that foresees violent disintegration and collapse—whether through viral pandemics, global warming, ecological destruction, warfare, or deindustrialization and the explosive growth of social inequality and discriminatory practices. Thus we have the paradoxical appeal of ruin imagery: the beauty of ruins helps us to cope with the terror of apocalyptic decline. Put another way, the hold of apocalyptic fear

on the cultural imagination is produced by the widespread anxiety of decline and the search for ways to mitigate its effects.

As faith erodes in a future that promises to exclude the many and privilege the few, the global network of ruin imagery expands and grows denser with a variety of contact or nodal points that connect to social issues. I want to suggest that the crucial nodal point of this network is the imagery of the postapocalyptic deindustrialized city for which Detroit serves, in the cultural imagination, as the paradigmatic example. The abandoned factories and blighted schools, churches, shops, and homes of the modern ruined city constitute the iconic ruin forms in the era of industrial disinvestment and globalization. When German news media crowned the debt-ridden city of Oberhausen “Germany’s Detroit,” it clearly invoked the universal signifier of urban decline. In the cultural imagination, the *idea* of Detroit as the repository of widespread industrial decay, shorn of its actual complexities, histories, and contradictions, serves as the quintessential urban nightmare in a world where the majority of people live in cities.

The reasons for Detroit’s pivotal position are rooted in the relationship of modernity to Detroit’s own history. The period from 1870 to 1914 has been called the “first globalization” of finance and trade, which saw the invention of the electric light, film, radio, and the ocean liner as well as international investment and the automobile.¹⁰ As the birthplace of the automobile and Fordism—the industrialized and standardized form of mass production that became the basis of modern industry—Detroit was seen as the industrial powerhouse of the nation and the motor force of modernity in the twentieth century (figure 2). The city greatly expanded in the 1920s when the downtown skyscrapers were built. But manufacturing disinvestment began in the immediate post–World War II period and developed into a cascade of closing auto factories in the latter half of the twentieth century up to the present. The resulting deindustrialization and continuing ruination of the city have come to signify modernity itself in ruins. In Detroit and hundreds of other cities, the hopes and dreams for continuous prosperity and progress in a meritocratic democracy have been steadily undermined as the unemployed and underemployed come to feel increasingly marginalized.

The effects of industrial disinvestment last for decades, especially in those cities where one industry has dominated, destabilizing communities through the loss of jobs, homes, health care; reductions in the tax base in turn lead to cuts in public services; crime increases, as does suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, and depression; landscapes decay and cultural resources decline, as does faith in government. Deunionized workers who find new jobs often do so at far lower wage rates, contributing to an almost inescapable cycle of continuing decline. John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon, authors of a study on deindustrialization, explain this downward spiral in deunionized wages:

The pay and benefits negotiated by unions rippled through the national economy, raising the standard of living for all workers in what economists call wage pull. But deindustrialization and associated deunionization have had the reverse effect. As unionized industries close, wages and benefits have fallen across the board, for all workers. At the same time, benefits are declining as workers are being asked to pay for all or part of their health insurance. To put this differently, one of the social costs of deindustrialization is the declining economic security of the entire American middle and working class. Even workers who were never displaced by plant closings or industry decline have been affected.¹¹

Thus deindustrialization not only harms the communities and the workers whose jobs have been eliminated but also undermines the quality of the jobs that remain. Conservative observers and economists often argue that these are “natural” economic trends, and claim that the manufacturing economy has given way to a service economy. But this shift has contributed to the nation’s growing inequality because manufacturing jobs have been replaced by low-wage jobs. Even when displaced workers find new jobs, they tend to earn only about 40 percent of their previous income.¹² This is true not just in America but is reflected in the global economy. Even in China, seen as the

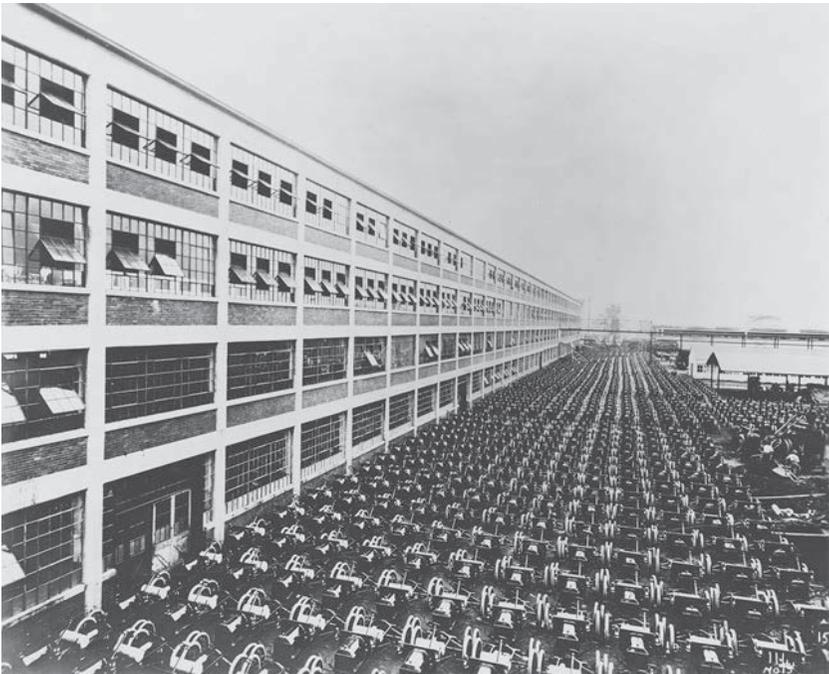


FIG. 2 One thousand Ford Model T chassis, one shift’s output, outside the Highland Park Plant, 1913. The collections of The Henry Ford (P.O. 716/ THF109225).

leader in industrial jobs, workers have been displaced, first by privatization and more recently by companies moving factories to Indonesia and other countries where labor is even cheaper and environmental regulations fewer.¹³

Sometimes former manufacturing centers with new office buildings, river-front parks, and gentrified neighborhoods appear to have made recoveries, often depending on tourism or entertainment. Despite such new development, poverty rates remain high because the jobs associated with these industries represent a dramatic decline in job quality. In 2014 Buffalo, for example, was named one of New York's "10 most exciting places" while other press headlines announced a "feeling of resurgence" in Cleveland, which has revitalized its lakefront area with new museums and gentrified old working-class neighborhoods with ethnic restaurants and loft housing. Yet Cleveland today has the highest poverty rate in the nation after Detroit; its joking mantra is, "At least we're not Detroit." Buffalo has the fourth-highest poverty rate in the country, after Rochester, New York. As a mill and steel town on the southern shores of Lake Erie, with the added advantage of Niagara Falls as a source of energy, Buffalo was once known as the City of Light. But like every city on the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River that depended on water for shipping, Buffalo declined when rail became more efficient and industries left for areas with cheaper labor costs. The city has yet to recover. Pittsburgh has shown the most economic growth since the collapse of the steel industry in the 1970s and 1980s and ranks as one of the country's "most livable cities" with its diversified economy, low cost of living, and concentration of cultural and educational institutions. Yet many people struggle in low-wage jobs. A two-year conflict between low-wage workers at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, the city's largest employer, erupted in downtown protests by hundreds of demonstrators against the UPMC in 2014. Like Detroit, all three cities have lost more than half their populations since midcentury.¹⁴

Across the country, inequality grows as the gap between the wealthy elite and the poor has widened exponentially and continues to widen. For the first time in decades, the current generation has a lower standard of living than that of its parents.¹⁵ Although corporate profits have soared, incomes have declined, with one-third of all working families making below the poverty threshold.¹⁶ While nonwhites have an astounding 90 percent risk of economic insecurity, more than 76 percent of whites today are also subject to periods of joblessness and the need for welfare.¹⁷ They too are at risk of becoming marginalized. The American dream—the idea of individual upward mobility based on merit instead of class, available to all if only they work hard enough—has become an empty phrase that ignores the downward pressure on the middle and working classes. It ignores the need for adequate food, housing, education, and health care, not to mention social institutions, social services, and functioning communities that support the efforts and provide the opportunities that make

the success of individuals possible. For most people who work very hard all their life, upward mobility will never arrive. One of the effects of capitalism is this ideological privileging of the individual at the expense of the collective, despite the realities.

Ruination, then, as Ann Laura Stoler suggests, must be understood as both a noun and a verb—“an *act* perpetrated, a *condition* to which one is subject, and a *cause* of loss.”¹⁸ Ruins are not just objects to be historicized but “unfinished histories” with different possible futures; how we understand the causes of ruination affects ongoing urban policy. But ruins also convey a sense of downward progress for a majority of Americans, which has an impact on every aspect of life. Even safely historicized ruins meant to celebrate significant American landmarks often lead to thoughts of inevitable collapse. In *American Ruins*, for example, a coffee-table photography book by Arthur Drooker that focuses on preserved and protected picturesque sites—Chaco Canyon in New Mexico or Harper’s Ferry in West Virginia—historian Douglas Brinkley muses aloud in the foreword, “Given global warming and chemical weapons and nuclear reactors, you wonder whether everyplace might someday become a candidate for Drooker’s ruins portfolio.”¹⁹

In addition to picture books and websites, the explosion of ruin imagery in the last fifteen or twenty years has been gathered in exhibitions such as *Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed* at the Research Library of the Getty Research Institute (1997); *Visions of Ruin* at the Sir John Soane’s Museum (1999), which looked at the “cult of ruins” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; *The Ruins of Detroit* at the Wilmette Gallery at Lichfield Studios in London (2012); *American Ruins: Challenging Ideas of Progress*, produced online by the Snite Museum of Art at the University of Notre Dame (2013); *Living in the Ruins of the Twentieth Century* at the UTS Museum in Sydney (2013); and *The Evolution of Neglect: Scenes of Ruin and Ruins from the Menil Collection* in Houston (2014). The Tate Britain mounted the exhibition *Ruin Lust*, curated by Brian Dillon and focused on the work of British artists, which included ruins in art from the seventeenth century to the present day (2014). Detroit ruin images in particular have proliferated at dizzying speed, including in the news media, reiterating and reinforcing the city’s pivotal position in the network of ruin images. From the Broadway play *Detroit* to Chrysler’s “Imported from Detroit” advertising campaign to proposals for colonizing hundreds of acres in the city for a zombie theme park, the borders between art, media, advertising, and popular culture have become increasingly permeable as visual imagery easily ranges across these formats and as people produce their own imagery on websites and social media.

My premise is a simple one: the anxiety of decline feeds an enormous appetite for ruin imagery. But it matters whether we understand ruination as historically inevitable, the fault of its own victims, or as the result of industrial

disinvestment and capitalist globalization. In this book, I want to explore the politics of ruination in order to better understand the pleasure, horror, and continuing fascination that ruin imagery exerts across cultural spheres and visual formats. As fears of decline grow, the threshold for compensatory aesthetic pleasure also grows higher, requiring more expressions of ruin and disaster to be mentally mastered in order to achieve a sense of safety. The appetite for ruin imagery grows larger, in other words, as the fears of ruination, which drive the need to contain and control those fears, grow more intense, imbuing ruin imagery with ever greater cultural power. Thus the fascination with Detroit's abandoned downtown skyscrapers, empty urban spaces, decaying factories, and derelict neighborhoods intensifies as the city negotiates the crisis of bankruptcy. Despite the narrative that seeks to marginalize and isolate the city as responsible for its own decline, Detroit has become emblematic of failing cities everywhere as the paradigmatic city of ruins.

Yet Detroit is also the mecca of urban explorers, architects, urban planners, and geographers as well as photographers, artists, musicians, writers, and the curious who are drawn to a city that seems to embody not only disaster but also open-ended possibility. As a result, some loyalists insist on hopeful or upbeat images of the city. But it is not my aim to prescribe the kinds of images photographers "should" or "shouldn't" produce in order to serve particular social or political agendas. Instead, my approach is to understand how we see Detroit through the imagery that already exists and continues to be produced, to understand how this imagery engages the anxiety of decline and to consider what cultural and political work it does.

Images work affectively, as sensory-emotional experiences, and ideologically, in ways that are quite separate from overt or "activist" intention by their makers. Aesthetic perception is conditioned by and works within a social field; it is subject to its pressures and anxieties. In other words, how we make images and how we interpret them is always transformed by our engagement with everyday life. This approach to imagery is what Jill Bennett calls "practical aesthetics," which links visual perception to actual events or problems and the social effects of images.²⁰ As Bennett notes, the connection of visual imagery to the practices of everyday life "occurs on an aesthetic continuum (rather than in a rarified realm)" and this understanding therefore "resists the idea that useful art must conform to a single ideal of 'activist' art measured in in-aesthetic terms" and instead asks "what art and imagery *does*—what it *becomes*—in its very particular relationship to events."²¹ Similarly, I examine the politics of ruin imagery to understand the symbolic work that it does.

Different trends within ruin imagery emerge, offering a variety of perspectives on ruination. Images may lament the decline of the city as a de-industrialized wasteland or, conversely, engage in romanticized reveries on the struggle between nature and culture; they may represent ruins as sites of

exotic discovery and transgressive pleasure or, conversely, as places of danger and threat; they may construct ruins as a backdrop to a resilient and determined city heading toward a brilliant comeback or, conversely, envision a future that regresses to an idealized preindustrial past; or they may visualize postapocalyptic landscapes that implicitly critique the status quo and offer grounds for a new beginning. These approaches imply different political perspectives, but all of them grapple with a pervasive and growing cultural pessimism, loss of faith in progress, and deepening fear that we are living in the end times. Yet just as ruin imagery challenges the idea of the capitalist state as effective protector of its citizens and source of progress and rationality, it also challenges us to consider how our declining cities may be reclaimed and reimagined as part of an egalitarian society where cities meet the needs of their collective populations, provide the basis for individual fulfillment, and help sustain the earth's environment.