

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>**Special section: Thinking through ruination: theoretical and empirical approaches to the ruins of the Anthropocene****Thinking through ruination: an introduction**

Anna Clot-Garrell

Universitat de Barcelona

Date of submission: January 2024

Accepted in: January 2024

Published in: March 2024

Recommended citation:

CLOT-GARRELL, Anna (2022). "Thinking through ruination: an introduction". In: Anna Clot Garrell (ed.). «Special section: Thinking through ruination: theoretical and empirical approaches to the ruins of the Anthropocene» [online]. *Digithum*, no. 30. <https://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i30.428115>. [Accessed: dd-mm-aaaa].



The texts published in this journal are – unless otherwise indicated – covered by the Creative Commons Spain Attribution 4.0 International licence. The full text of the licence can be consulted here: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Abstract

This introduction aims to present the main contributions of the two parts of the special section – titled “Thinking through ruination: theoretical and empirical approaches to the ruins of the Anthropocene”. The focus of this special section is to explore the anthropogenic ruins of our recent past within the current context of environmental challenges and threats. The compiled articles exemplify the significance of examining these ruins, highlighting their richness and cross-disciplinary nature. Additionally, the introduction underscores the fertile intersections between the articles and discusses their common motifs in addressing the ecological crisis through the lens of ruins and ruination processes.

Keywords

ruins; debris; waste; infrastructure; concrete; coal, plastic; landscape; extinction; socio-ecological transformations; modernization; Anthropocene

Pensar a través de la ruina: una introducción**Resumen**

Esta introducción presenta las principales aportaciones de las dos partes de la sección especial titulada «Pensar a través de la ruina: aproximaciones teóricas y empíricas a las ruinas del Antropoceno». El objetivo de esta sección especial es sumergirse desde una perspectiva interdisciplinaria en la exploración y estudio de las ruinas antropogénicas de nuestro pasado reciente en un contexto de retos y amenazas ambientales. Los artículos compilados ilustran la importancia de examinar estas ruinas, destacando su riqueza así como su naturaleza compleja, fragmentaria y paradójica. Así mismo, esta introducción subraya las intersecciones fértiles entre los artículos y resigue los diferentes elementos que confluyen en el abordaje de la crisis ecológica a través de la perspectiva de las ruinas y los procesos de ruina.

Palabras clave

ruina; escombros; residuo; infraestructura; paisaje; hormigón; carbón; plástico; extinción; transformaciones socioecológicas; modernización; Antropoceno

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

Thinking through ruination: an introduction

"But the closer I came to these ruins, the more any notion of a mysterious isle of the dead receded, and the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe."

(W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*)

In 2012, Caitlin DeSilvey and Tim Edensor published a seminal article discussing the growing academic interest in the contemporary life of ruins. This interest has persisted, and nearly a decade later, the present-day *Ruinenlust* not only echoes earlier obsessions with decay and destruction but also reflects our current concerns and anxieties regarding the socio-ecological crisis we face. The ruin gaze has continued expanding and proliferating beyond romanticized and melancholic views of a distant past to encompass attention to the anthropogenic ruins of a recent past as heuristic tools and critical devices to examine the transformations and contradictions of our present. The articles compiled in this special section are an example of the vitality of this ruin's attention as well as of its richness and cross-disciplinary nature.

Contributions from a variety of disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history, environmental humanities and fiction enrich the two parts of the special section (No. 30 and 31). These diverse academic lenses converge to explore ruins as an object and concept within the context of environmental challenges and threats, offering multifaceted perspectives and diverse thematic insights. Through the lens of waste, Olli Pyyhtinen, Stylianos Zavos, Alma Onali, Ulla-Maija Sutinen and Niina Uusitalo open the first part of the special section (No 30) by examining the Anthropocene-ruination nexus. The authors examine new realities of waste and trashscapes, examining plastic, which has become an iconic noxious material of our times. Ferran Pons-Raga and Ismael Vaccaro address the relationship between ruins and landscape transformations, focusing on material traces of extractive resource infrastructures in rural environments. Moving from land to sea, Oriol Batalla reflects on ruination and extinction processes by looking at the anthropogenic destructive impacts on the ocean. Ariadna Peralta's sociological fiction on sharecropping illustrates the power of literature in providing a sharp critical gaze to explore ruins and ruination processes without aestheticizing disaster. Gloria Guirao's review of Anselm Jappe's book culminates this first part of the special section, dealing with the ruins provoked by another emblematic material of the Anthropocene: concrete. Drawing on Jappe's book, Guirao looks into the reverse side of one of the central material foundations of progress fantasies in the construction of modern industrial-capitalist societies.

Extending the discussion, the second part of the special section (No. 31) begins with Lluís Montull's philosophical essay on Walter Benjamin's philosophy of ruins. Montull delves into Benjamin's concept of ruins to reassess Bruno Latour's reinterpretation of the iconic "Angel of history" allegory from Walter Benjamin. In this exploration, Montull leads us through the intricacies of Benjamin's work to show how this concept, across its variegated forms, opens up epistemological and political possibilities not only to confront a damaged past but also to respond to a closing future. Following this thread on revisiting Benjamin's ideas, Jaume Franquesa invokes

critical insights on the temporality of capitalist modernity in Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* to address the profound transformations witnessed in the Catalan rural landscape over the past fifty years. By examining the "traces of dislocation" left behind by modernization processes in two rural areas, Franquesa illuminates the lived experiences and life modes encapsulated within ruins. In a complementary exploration, albeit from a distinct temporal and geographical perspective, Qieyi Liu conducts a historical analysis of Gejiu, a mining city in southwestern China during the first half of the twentieth century, problematizing linear narratives of splendour and decay surrounding modernization processes. The special section concludes with a review of two books that engage in dialogue with the central ideas presented in the aforementioned contributions. These books explore the links between global and local ruination processes and reflect on the social life that fades away among the ruins, while also highlighting the more-than-human forms of life that can eventually arise among them, as evidenced by the posthuman landscapes described by Cal Flynn.

Throughout the journey of reading the different papers featured in the two parts of this special section, several common motifs and fertile intersections emerge in thinking about/through ruination our ecological crisis. One key motif is the authors' shared adoption of a relational and processual perspective when examining ruins. Rather than viewing ruins as static and inert, they recognize them as dynamic and contingent entities. The papers depart from the ruins in their current state by considering the textures of their materiality, but all locate these diverse material remains within a web of relations and valuation practices that produce these things, landscapes and places as ruins over time. The analyses of situated processes of discard, decay, extinction and abandonment that the different papers unveil resonate with Ann Laura Stoler's emphasis (2013) on considering ruination as a political process that affects particular people and places, as exemplified by the pieces of Pons-Raga and Vaccaro, Guirao, Franquesa and Liu. Similarly, Anna Tsing's stress (2015) on attending to these living-space entanglements from a more-than-human perspective is exemplified by the works of Pyyhtinen *et al.*, Batalla and Peralta. Overall, all the authors contextualize ruins, showing that they are not the result of sudden changes or apocalyptic events but rather are endemic to specific logics of industrial-capitalist modernity that can be traced through this persistent materiality. Therefore, ruins do not simply exist but instead become as such.

Different scales of analysis and spatial and temporal spectrums are also at play in this relational and processual perspective that the different papers in this special section embrace. On the one hand, they all show how the focus on the tangible character of ruins enables us to grasp large-scale phenomena such as the ecological crisis as well as ground such an abstract narrative like that of the Anthropocene. As Marc Armiero indicates (2017), placing socio-ecological relations at the centre is crucial when revisiting the blind spots and reification risks of the Anthropocene narrative. In this regard, Pyyhtinen *et al.*, for instance, zoom into "the ordinary Anthropocene" by focusing on the *naturecultural* entanglements with our quotidian through which waste items and materials – as remains, relics or ruins of our society and wasteful human actions – are sensed and lived. On the other hand, the ethnographic articles of Pons-Raga

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

Thinking through ruination: an introduction

and Vaccaro and Franquesa, as well as Montull's philosophical essay and Peralta's sociological fiction illustrate how spatial and temporal dimensions interrelate in this materiality of ruins. From different perspectives, these contributions look at the historicity of ruins that link and, at the same time, condense the overlapping and changing spatial and temporal relationalities. As highlighted by Franquesa, ruins can be approached as "traces of dislocation". Rather than being seen as "self-contained relics in a specific time and space", as noted by Pons-Raga and Vaccaro, ruins can be envisaged as material elements that enable the tracing of social links between the past, present and future of the same place, thereby facilitating an understanding of the constitution of these landscapes in an intertwined and processual manner – a point also discussed by Montull theoretically through Benjamin's concept of ruins and illustrated by Peralta's narration of the changing materiality of sharecropping and its socionatural environment.

The relational, processual and multi-layered approach to ruins that the different papers adopt in this special section also enables us to observe how ruins interestingly disrupt binary conceptions between presence and absence, what is visible and invisible, what rests and vanishes, what emerges and disappears, what has value and what has not. From distinctive thematic angles, the authors suggest how ruins invite us to embrace gradation and ambiguity, as well as tensions and contradictions in our analyses, challenging and expanding our gaze. For instance, in his philosophical essay, Montull emphasizes that "the possibility of constituting a philosophical experience is to make ours the fragmentarity and provisionality of these ruins that define the modern age and modernity, despite their opposite claims, which means also rethinking a scientific praxis that cannot ignore its co-participation with the evil". Assuming this complexity from the outset applies not only to our perspectives and contents but also extends to how we communicate and disseminate research. Some authors address this challenge by experimenting with language to capture the intricate nuances of ruins and the process of ruination. For example, Pyyhtinen *et al.* expand the effort of thinking through ruination to the mode of writing. They disrupt conventional forms and narrative structures of academic writing to tell stories of the Wastocene and its ruins. Through what they call "textual ruins" or "ruination writing", they insert vignettes in the text as open-ended assemblages to capture the specific but fragmentary and paradoxical nature of ruins under examination in more inclusive writing. Similarly, Peralta's sociological fiction experiments with literary language in her piece on the material memory of our world. By beautifully echoing the steps of W.G. Sebald in *The Rings of Saturn* and Judith Schalansky in *An Inventory of Losses*, Peralta's work exemplifies the possibilities of utilizing fictional narratives to tackle the ecological crisis in a manner that is both experiential and thought-provoking. Additionally, Batalla's paper delves into the analysis of ocean ruins by incorporating artistic language and focusing on the visual work of Chris Jordan, Jeff Orlowski and XL Catlin Seaview Survey. Like other works in the field, such as the edited book *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Tsing *et al.*, 2017), Batalla's article illustrates the hermeneutic potential of artistic representation, such as visual media, to re-link distant and broad environmental phenomena with minor scales of social meaning that enable more subjective, situated

and normative understandings of environmental problems (Jasanoff, 2010). Beyond this experimentation with literary and artistic languages, the special section also incorporates diversity in its multilingual character. It features contributions in English and Catalan that aim to enlarge and make our academic writing horizons more plural.

In this expansive endeavour of thinking through ruination our ecological crisis that this special section displays, one final crucial point worth highlighting is the common critical perspective shared among all the papers. They all recognize the potential for transformative and creative outcomes that can result from scrutinizing ruins and the processes of ruination. Pyyhtinen *et al.*, for instance, invite us to reflect upon "the disruptive potential of ruination", arguing how waste disrupts our human senses and becomes a tragic reminder of the deterioration and persistence of the stuff we have built and accumulated. However, amidst this negativity of ruination, also stressed by Gastón Gordillo's term *rubble* (2014), Pyyhtinen *et al.* emphasize how ruination can become a powerful metaphor and conceptual tool to critically confront the overly optimistic and equally technocratic circular economy ideal. Drawing on the concept of *response-ability* by Donna Haraway (2016) and Jacques Rancière's perspective on politics (1999), the authors conclude by pointing out how the haunting presence of waste calls for an affective apprehension of this human and more-than-human ruination as a situated prerequisite for the possibility of an emancipatory political response. Likewise, Pons-Raga and Vaccaro explore in their work the critical possibilities of ruins as they relate to landscape transformations. Their approach, which they refer to as "territorial education," underlines the importance of recognizing the notion of territory over the proliferation of contemplative views of landscapes as a form of pristine nature. The authors propose teaching local communities to recognize ruins to counteract the tendency of these landmarks to be ignored or commodified within a capitalist market economy. By fostering an "inwards" rather than "outwards" appreciation of these ruins, they hope to inspire a deeper understanding of the connections between past, present and future landscapes. Ultimately, this approach can stimulate greater knowledge of the complex and often conflicting processes that shape landscapes. Overall, the contributions in this special section suggest that the accumulation of defeats, mistakes and failed attempts, as they persist and reflect in ruins and trashcapes, can become invisible threads that can help us weave our present. In doing so, they can challenge the dominant narratives of progress that seem to repeat today in a green tone.

References

- ARMIERO, M. (2021). *Wastocene: Stories from the Global Dump*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DESILVEY, C.; EDENSOR, T. (2013). "Reckoning with Ruins". *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 465-485. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512462271>
- GORDILLO, G. R. (2014). *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction*. Durham: Duke University Press.

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

Thinking through ruination: an introduction

- JASANOFF, S. (2010). "A New Climate for Society". *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 27, no. 2-3, pp. 233-253. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409361497>
- SCHALANSKY, J. (2021). *An Inventory of Losses*. East Anglia: New Directions.
- SEBALD, W. G. (1995 [2016]). *The Rings of Saturn*. East Anglia: New Direction.
- STOLER, A. L. (ed.). (2013). *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- TSING, A. L. (2021). *Thee mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- TSING, A. L.; BUBANDT, N.; GAN, E.; SWANSON, H. E. (2017). *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

Thinking through ruination: an introduction

Anna Clot-GarrellUniversity of Barcelona
annaclotgarrell@ub.edu

She is a Juan de la Cierva Incorporación postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for the Study of Culture, Politics and Society (CECUPS), Department of Sociology, University of Barcelona. Her current research revolves around the study of meaning-making processes around climate change and socio-ecological transformations, integrating theoretical and empirical work in grounded qualitative methodologies. She holds a PhD in Sociology with an international mention from the Autonomous University of Barcelona awarded with the Manuel Sales & Ferré Sociology Prize from the Institute of Catalan Studies (2018).

