

# Performing Ruins

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The mention of the word ‘ruin’ usually conjures an image, often invoking the archaic grandeur that many come to find synonymous with ancient Greek and Roman ruins that stand proud and tall, as monumental markers of great civilisations that have come to pass. While this image is not altogether inaccurate, that, however, is not the book that Simon Murray has written in

*Performing Ruins* which is part of the *Performing Landscape* series, edited by Deidre Heddon and Sally Mackey.

The eclectic curation of ruins Murray explores in this book range from the repurposed industrial buildings of Ruhr in the form of Landschaftspark and Zollverein as art centres, to the bullet-ridden façade of the Stara Biblioteka

(Old Library) in Mostar that remains as a site for contemporary performance responding to the shadow of the war that continues to plague the city. Upon initial reading, the sheer variety of case studies and the requisite contextual information in order to understand the particularities of each location can be quite overwhelming to process especially when they are all in the space of a single chapter. In the same painstaking way that Murray encountered these places over the course of time, through his own personal relationship with the space, conversations with others who inhabit and work in the space; the reader will benefit from taking their time going over the various details of each case studies before the thematic links and resonances begin to emerge. In and amongst the variety of these spaces and ecological contexts, what remains in common is the liminal quality that these contemporary ruins seem to have been imbued with by the human activity that have coloured, shaped and affected these places. Through this, a beautiful dialogue between the human and non-human emerges from this complex web of circumstances that is best illustrated in Murray's account of how the

dramaturgy of Pearson's work (with Birth Gof in Wales) was deeply influenced by his spatial relationship to the ruined sites. He argues that a ruin is never a stable or fixed entity, but one that is constantly mutable and porous, offering a 'visceral palimpsest' through the performative interventions made by the humans who choose to inhabit it (Murray 2020, p.204). To illustrate this, he describes two performances in particular – *Tri Bywyd (Three Lives)* (1995) and *Prydain: The Impossibility of Britishness* (1996); the first staged in a derelict farmhouse in West Wales and the latter in an abandoned industrial warehouse in Cardiff. He goes through great pains to explicate the dialogic relationship between the ruins themselves and the consequent performative interventions which is something he does with great meticulousness throughout each encounter in the book.

It should be noted that Murray's book is focussed equally on the material and metaphorical aspects of as 'modern ruination' of contemporary ruins within the author's self-professed Euro-centric worldview. It is perhaps his

ethnographic approach in his encounters with these ruins that sets up the Euro-centric dynamic for the rest of his book. This is evident from his writing as he draws upon his personal anecdotes and experiences of others in framing the subject matter. At the beginning of the introduction in particular, he cites a childhood experience exploring a derelict and abandoned farmhouse while on a family holiday in rural Sussex. His recount of the sense of uncanniness he felt being in such a place as a child was as he later ruminates, a common occurrence of people encountering and interacting a ruined space. It is this intimate interaction, not dissimilar to the one in his childhood, with ruined spaces that he brings to each encounter that is included in this book.

Murray spends the first two chapters contextualising his research in the intersection between the existing field of ruin studies with the agency and ecology of performance in his curated selection of contemporary ruins scattered all through Europe. His understanding of ruin as both a concrete noun and verb together with its consequent derivative, ruination, as an

abstract noun serves as a starting point in contemplating material ruination: this serves as a gateway to consider the more complex relationships between the macro and micro perspectives, thus offering up a productive way to examine and engage with the material and social world. According to Murray, it seems that ruins are a place within a socio-cultural and economic space that has been previously designed and inhabited by humans but due to the ‘force fields of ecology and environmental catastrophe’, has fallen into a state of dereliction and disrepair (p.22). However, he is careful to draw the distinction between this and the oft romanticised photographic gaze of ruin porn which ‘induces a charge of pity sympathy, yearning, and even a kind of erotic excitement’ (p.25). He argues that such a perspective in looking at a ruin removes it from critical thinking and negates the human agency that has contributed to the dereliction and the degradation of these sites.

The subsequent chapters in the book comprise of a series of encounters in and among ruined locations through Europe, acting in concert with their human actors in both theatrical and non-

theatrical contexts. However, this is not a book driven by theory or a unifying approach towards the study of ruins, rather Murray often adopts a personable and ethnographic approach to his writing, taking great pains to outline the historical, socio-cultural and economic contexts that locate these ruined spaces and the consequent artistic/performative practice that have been developed as a response to it. As such, the chapters are organised thematically according to the overlapping ideas and concepts that emerge from his observations, interviews and reflections that he has gleaned from his extensive travels to these sites. There is a clear cohesive modern thinking that governs the chapters as they examine the ruin/ruination of a space through the lens of natural disasters, the legacies of war (both hot and cold), deindustrialisation of cities, and financial crises. The third chapter in this book however stands in contrast to the later chapters. Although he spends most of the book on what he comes to term as contemporary ruins, he devotes this chapter to discuss the classical Greek ruins of Epidaurus and Delphi and how they bear witness to the shifting

interaction within the ever-changing cultural landscape of Greece. With that being said, his his account of these two ancient sites of theatre purposefully neglects to discuss how these ‘ruins of antiquity’ lend themselves to the construction of the cultural imagination of Greece as a nation (p.42). While this is in keeping with the concept of ‘contemporary ruination’ that he outlines in the first two chapters and explores in the rest of the book, the cultural imaginary of Greek culture that these ruins that since have become monuments in themselves left me wondering if more could be excavated from them to demonstrate how they could serve the cultural imagination of Greece.

The readable style of Murray’s writing makes this an easy book to pick up even though it is a fairly lengthy read. This book makes a timely contribution to the increasingly interdisciplinary field of ruin studies by offering a wide array of lenses to encountering the performance of ruins. Ranging from the ‘intuitive to the analytical; the rational and the romantic; the affective and the cognitive and the associative and the deductive’ (p.292), these approaches

ground academic ideas of new materialism and memory studies in a variety of landscapes (urban and otherwise). Its greatest strength lies in the author's close relationships with his interviewees, that shape his writing and allow for a certain sense of familiarity despite reading about a space and place that is decidedly foreign. For the general reader, I believe that this book provides a thoughtful reflection on the complex intersectional nature of contemporary ruination albeit through a Euro-centric lens.