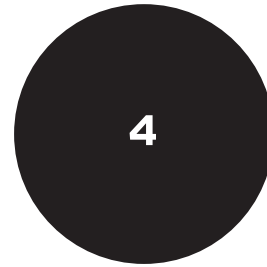




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View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.

title:

Ruins and Fragments: Air War's Mnemonic Architectures

author:

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source:

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 4 (2013)

URL:

<http://widok.ibl.waw.pl/index.php/one/article/view/124/245/>

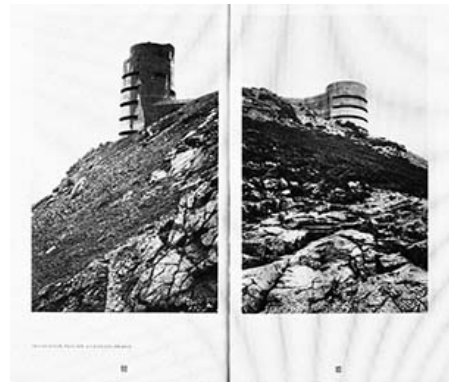
publisher:

Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences
Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw

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Ruins and Fragments: Air War's Mnemonic Architectures

In his photo essay *Bunkererfahrung / Bunker Experience* (2013), Arne Schmitt explores the relationship between two architectures: the defensive architecture of the air campaign and the modernist architecture of the postwar period. His underlying thesis is one of repressions and returns, as he makes a visual argument for the return of the bunker in the concrete structures of high modernist buildings that quickly arose over the rubble in West Germany from the 1950s onwards. The theoretical reference and artistic forerunner for such a mutual exploration of air war and postwar architecture is Paul Virilio's 1975 *Bunker Archaeology*. In this essay, Virilio makes a case for the bunker as an utterly modernist structure, a precursor to the Brutalist architecture that was popular across Europe between roughly 1953 and 1967. Having first become aware of the bunkers along the so-called Atlantic Wall during the summer of 1958, Virilio spent a good part of the 1960s and early 1970s traveling to these sites and photographing them. He describes his initial impetus for the project as archaeological: a wish to uncover the bunkers' secret messages. These secret messages have as much to do with the present and the future as with the past, because the bunker is both a remnant and an anticipation. Its concrete structure and defensive function materialize the past, but they also confirm the present. Or, to paraphrase Virilio: after looking at the bunkers of the Atlantic Wall, you cannot no longer be surprised by Le Corbusier's modernist designs. Because these grey heavy blocks reveal the architectural and urban *redundancies* of the postwar period better than any manifesto could. Their form suggests that the destroyed cities were rebuilt in the image of war: of a war past *and* of a war yet to come. Or to put it bluntly: the new cities were built with the bunker in mind.



Paul Virillio, *Bunker Archeology* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994, photo: KP)

It is fitting that Virilio evokes the ruin when speaking about the bunker, because bunker and ruin share a schizophrenic being in time. According to Brian Dillon,

ruins embody a set of temporal and historical paradoxes. The ruined building is a remnant of, and portal into, the past; its decay is a concrete reminder of the passage of time. And yet by definition it survives, after a fashion. ... Perhaps the most enigmatic aspect of the time of ruination is the manner in which it points towards the future rather than the past, or rather uses the ruined resources of the past to imagine, or reimagine, the future.¹

The ruin is suspended in time and yet it *is* time. It literally embodies a past whose remnants live on in the present and impact the future. In this sense, the ruin and especially the ruin of war materialized in the bunker stands for a conception of time that is not historic, but traumatic.

A number of artists have explored similar connections and concerns since the late 1990s, thus revealing art's ongoing fascination and preoccupation with air war in general and the site of the bunker in particular. Several of them pick up where Virilio left off. Magdalena Jetelová's *Atlantic Wall* (1995), for example, shows the bunker as utterly decayed, washed out by the tides of the sea, half sunken into sand, half collapsed above ground. The concrete structures look stranded, materializing the notion of *Shipwreck with Spectator* often evoked in connection with the air war. Onto these ruinous heaps of concrete, Jetelová has projected paraphrases from Virilio's *Bunker Archaeology*. In her photographs, the concrete place of the bunker and the virtual space of thinking *with* and *about* the bunker are thus momentarily fused and become one.

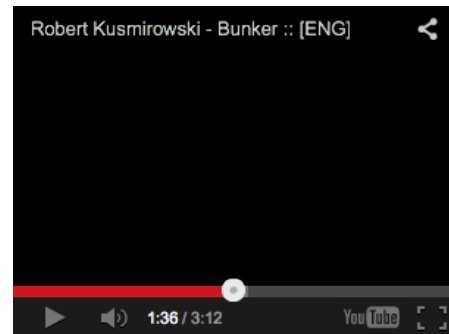


Magdalena Jetelová, "the essential is no longer visible," from the cycle *Atlantic Wall*, 1975, courtesy of the artist

Equally reminiscent of Virilio's work on the Atlantic Wall is Jane and Louise Wilson's installation, *Sealander* (2006). Their large-scale black and white photographs show the derelict bunkers hovering on the edge between land and sea, looking as if they have just been washed up on shore. Along with these pictures, they project footage of the deep-sea vampire squid, a fish possessing "the largest eye proportional to its body of any known creature. Its body is also studded with small light-producing organs ... which are turned on and off to ensure either invisibility or defensive flashes."² These features correspond directly to air war's strategic imperative to see

as much as possible while remaining undetected oneself.

While Jetelová and the Wilsons pay homage to Virilio by returning to the site of the Atlantic Wall, Robert Kusmirowski is more interested in the relationship between the bunker and Brutalism. For *Bunker* (2009), he recreated the environment of a World War II air raid shelter inside London's Barbican Center (opened in 1982). Located in a part of the city that was heavily destroyed during World War II, the Barbican is evidence of one of Virilio's central concerns: the repetition of the bunker in Brutalist architecture. By reenacting the bunker as an immersive environment *inside* the Barbican Center, Kusmirowski materializes this thesis. His installation proposes the bunker as the underlying kernel of Brutalism, thereby inadvertently suggesting the idea that also drives Arne Schmitt's project; namely, that Brutalism or postwar Modernism more generally has stored some of the mnemonic energies of the bunker experience and can therefore be treated as a displaced portal to access the trauma of the air war.³



Still, in contradistinction to these projects, Arne Schmitt does not address the bunker directly. There are only four photos in *Wenn Gesinnung Form wird* (2012) whose subject is a concrete bunker, and it is not a bunker built by the Nazis, but an old gallery underneath a vineyard in Kassel converted into an air raid shelter during World War II. As a consequence, the bunker itself is nowhere to be seen in these photos; it is only when you read the caption "Kassel Weinberg Bunker," or know of the site's



Arne Schmitt, *Kassel. Weinberg Bunker*, 2012

history, that you can make such a connection. Yet, the bunker and the memory of the air war are ever present in Arne Schmitt's photographs. They are present in the form of postwar architecture, and the way it is literally built on top of the war's rubble with the intention of warding off the past and looking ahead into the future. For his bunker series, Arne Schmitt is thus not focusing on the space of the bunker itself, but on its afterimage. He approaches the trauma of the air war through that which has taken its place, thereby examining the experience of war through the lens of the postwar.

The air campaign of World War II lends itself well to such an approach, because its destructions and subsequent reconstructions necessarily tie the war and the postwar period together. Jörg Echternkamp, one of the leading German historians working on the topic, has therefore spoken of the air war as one of the central intersections between the war and the postwar period, stating: “[t]he bombardment’s destructive consequences emphasize the war’s ongoing presence after its end.”⁴ W.G. Sebald, whose 1999 lectures on *The Natural History of Destruction* have made the air war a topic of central concern, also stresses this connection – albeit in a slightly different way. According to him, the air war’s total destruction was not fully realized in its gruesome dimension, but was instead perceived as a first step to successfully rebuild West Germany. That this observation is historically quite accurate and applies not only to West Germany, but to other parts of Europe as well, has been proven time and again. In their recent exhibition *A strangely fortunate moment (Ein seltsam glücklicher Augenblick, 2013)*, for example, urban historians Jörn Düwel and Niels Gutschow have shown that the massive destruction of Hamburg in the firestorm of 1943 was not just seen as a deadly disaster, but also as a long-overdue opportunity to modernize the city and completely revamp its infrastructure and street-map.⁵ The same holds true for Rotterdam, London and other cities across Europe. Their city planners saw the bombs as an almost welcome destruction that would make a *tabula rasa* and allow them to rebuild the city anew.

Sebald’s thoughts on the matter, however, have little to do with embracing the air war as an opportunity for (re-)construction. Instead, he sees postwar reconstruction as evidence of the repression paradigm, or to be more precise: as evidence of his well-known thesis that the traumatic experience of the air war has left no discernable trace in German literature and culture. Sebald writes:

I do not doubt that there were and are memories of those nights of destruction; I simply do not trust the form – including the literary form – in which they are expressed, and I do not believe they were a significant factor in the public consciousness of the new Federal Republic in any sense except as encouraging the will to reconstruction.⁶

Read against the grain, this phrasing suggests that if there was one place in postwar German culture where the air war played a significant role, it would have

been in architecture and city planning; in short, in reconstruction. Of course, this is not how Sebald sees it. For him, reconstruction was not about remembering, but about forgetting. It was Germany's attempt to close off the traumatic past and look ahead into a better future.

Still, if we accept the notion that the modernist complexes of the postwar period were literally built on top of the rubble of World War II, and that their function was to cover up the memory of the bombings, this also implies that we can access the trauma through that which has taken its place. And this is precisely what Arne Schmitt does when photographing places like the *Selterstor* in Gießen or the *Bredero High-rise* in Hanover.

His approach to trauma is not organized around a gap, but around a displaced presence. It is the presence of the bunker that returns in high modernism's praise of concrete; its massive and fortress-like quality, its dark underground passages, its angulation and rigidity. Through his framing of these places, Arne Schmitt teases out traces of the bunker in modernism. In that, he is in line with Virilio, but Virilio went at it from the other side, tracing modernism within the bunker. By insisting on this connection, both show that the air war's mnemonic architectures are twofold: they are both the bunker *and* postwar modernism. The connection between the two is not always self-evident. Nevertheless, it is latently there. It is this latency that has to be brought out, traced and interpreted – an archaeological task undertaken by Arne Schmitt's photographs. In them – and in West German culture at large – high modernism does not function as a metaphor for the trauma of the air war, but as metonymy. It is a correlation working through shifts and displacements that is only visible because it was initially covered up.

Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction* was an important reference point for Arne Schmitt when developing his thoughts on postwar architecture and conceptualizing his photo essays around this theme. Therefore, it is not surprising that an abbreviated and slightly altered Sebald quote serves as the caption for the prologue of his bunker series: *The Impaired Ability of Everyday Language / Das Versagen der Normalsprache*:



Arne Schmitt, from *Bunkererfahrung / Bunker Experience*, 2013



Arne Schmitt, from *Bunkererfahrung / Bunker Experience*, 2013

The apparently unimpaired ability – revealed in most of the eyewitness reports – of everyday language to go on functioning as usual raises doubts of the authenticity of the experience recorded.⁷

This quote regarding the insufficiency of language is indeed important, as it points to Sebald's central concern: finding an appropriate aesthetics for writing about the air war, and the formal challenges this poses. Contrary to popular reception, Sebald never claimed that texts treating the subject were nonexistent. Instead, he was distrustful of the way German literature had dealt with the trauma of the air raids, and he disapproved of the texts' language and formal choices.⁸ The only exemptions he makes are texts by Heinrich Böll, Hans Erich Nossack, Hubert Fichte, and Alexander Kluge.⁹ Sebald appreciates them for their documentary and realist approach. According to him, they are not "abstract and imaginary in character, but concrete and documentary."¹⁰ He claims that

it is with this documentary approach ... that German postwar literature really comes into its own and begins the serious study of material incommensurable with traditional aesthetics.¹¹

It is precisely because the air war – as with most traumata – is not accessible to "traditional aesthetics" that realism has to take over, including sober description, an attentiveness for the mundane, and an unearthing of archival documents.

One of the best-known literary examples for approaching the air war through its archives is the work by Alexander Kluge. It is exemplary for its mixing of text and image, its montage of different voices, and its convergence of opposing perspectives. Kluge describes the air war as having a deep impact that personally affected him. As a 13-year old, he experienced the air raid on his hometown of Halberstadt during the last days of the war. Still, as much as he comes upon the trauma of the air war from a personal perspective, his writing addresses its impact on history at large. For Kluge, the air war is both a significant moment in German history *and* a cipher for historicity as such. This becomes evident not only in his often-quoted text-essay, *The Air Raid on Halberstadt on April 8, 1945* (1977), but even more so in the three-volume *History and Obstinance* (*Geschichte und*



Arne Schmitt, *Prologue: The Impaired Ability of Everyday Language*, 2013, 2013

Eigensinn, 1981) that Kluge co-authored with Oskar Negt. Here, Negt and Kluge formulate the thesis that 1945 functions as a central mnemonic point in German history that enables one to look forward *and* to look back.¹² In that sense, 1945 is a central and unique moment for understanding and conceptualizing German history.

In *History and Obstnacy*, Negt and Kluge implement this thesis by making the air war a central structural element and a recurring theme of their argument. It is there throughout the book. However, its appearance is often surprising. Seemingly out of context, the experience of the air war is cited as an example for something else. More often than not, these citations are extremely brief. They shoot through the text. Still, they are not fleeting at all, but they insist and exude a piercing presence. In that, they are evidence of Kluge's self-observation that

"something that touches me very much leads to a short text; it is turned into a splinter."¹³ Or, one could just as well say: it is turned into a fragment. As Andreas Huyssen has argued, the fragment is the ruin of literature. In referring to Walter Benjamin's famous statement that "allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things," Huyssen detects "a production principle of modern art, literature, and architecture which is ... directed towards the ruinous." Therefore, "the architectural ruin seems to hover in the background of an aesthetic imagination that privileges fragment and allegory, collage and montage, freedom from ornament and reduction of the material."¹⁴ In the case of Negt's and Kluge's *History and Obstnacy*, this reciprocity of fragment and ruin is actualized as the ruin functions as the fragment of the text.

Not too surprisingly, one of these fragments is Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920). It is reproduced alongside Benjamin's 9th *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, which makes reference to the Klee drawing. Negt and Kluge have extracted the following well-known passage from it:

The angel of history's ... face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would



Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge,
Geschichte und Eigensinn, vol. 1
(Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993)

like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.¹⁵

No doubt, this dual evocation of Klee and Benjamin is a given when writing about the air war. If there is one allegory for the air war in German cultural and intellectual history, it would have to be the Angel of History. Citing it, I thus feel like I am rehashing an old cliché. Still, there are good reasons to do so: its omnipresence can be read as an insistence to follow its lead. What it leads us to is first the time of ruination, this “double exposure to the past and the present”¹⁶ that Huysen has spoken of. In the case of Negt and Kluge, this double exposure manifests itself in their treatment of the air war and its ruins as the transitional and multidirectional space that binds the war and the postwar together. And, secondly, the angel faces the past, but he also faces us. He looks at us, asking us to return his gaze.

This reciprocity of looking is driven home by another artwork taking recourse in the Klee/Benjamin allusion: Victor Burgin’s *Angelus Novus* (1995). Burgin’s *Angelus* is a photographic triptych that frames the portrait of a woman with two identical, yet mirrored aerial perspectives of bombs being dropped over a city. The aerial photos remind us that during World War II, bomb and camera worked together, as each time a bomb was released, a photo was taken automatically. The photo in the middle, however, questions this automatism. It asks how to look back in a situation where the reciprocity of looking is interrupted by an asymmetrical distribution of power. It is a face looking at us without eyes. Or rather: the eyes are overshadowed, maybe by what they have seen, and still, they are asking us to meet them and return their gaze. In its combination of bombing and portraiture, Burgin’s *Angelus* visualizes the ruin in a Derridean sense, because it was Jacques Derrida who suggested that we “read the pictures of ruins as the figures of a portrait, indeed, of a self-portrait.”¹⁷



Victor Burgin, *Angelus Novus*, 1995.

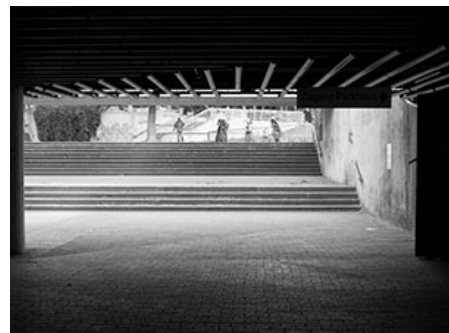
Copyright: Victor Burgin, courtesy

Galerie Thomas Zander, Cologne

It is this idea of the ruin as a self-portrait with which I would like to end my essay, by asking one more time what it is that we are searching for when looking at the architectural afterimages of war. By afterimages of war, I am of course referring not only to the bunker and the rubble, but also to the postwar architecture of high modernism. It is the latter that is the subject of Arne Schmitt's photographs. I first encountered them about a year ago in Hanover – a city that serves as a classic example of West German reconstruction, and as such is portrayed in many of Arne's works. Incidentally, it is also my hometown. Therefore, I recognized a familiar landscape in these photos, and by that I do not mean distinct places in Hanover. Rather, I realized how much this postwar architecture is part of my upbringing and thereby a part of me. It is the cityscape I grew up in and took as a given, thus not noticing it at all. As such, it complemented my horrid fascination with a model showing the bombed out city of Hanover in 1945 that is on display in the town hall. I remember repeatedly going back to it as a child; most likely because I was not able to make a meaningful connection between this kind of destruction and the city I was living in. And this lack of connectivity troubled me.

The discourse that has developed since Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction* has done much in terms of providing a missing link.¹⁸ It was helped along by the more or less simultaneously emerging discussions about the aging of modernism, resulting in documenta 12's question: *Is Modernity our Antiquity?* In the journal leading up to the show, Mark Lewis published a much-discussed essay about his ongoing fascination with a slowly decaying modernist building in Vancouver. As he

wrote, "the question remains as to what it is that continues to draw me to this modernist form, and why I continue to feel that I can make a work from it or about it."¹⁹ And shortly afterwards he suggested: "[a]larmingly, it occurs to me that this disintegration and decay might be the real reason why I am drawn to this building, and why I continue to think that it may have something to reveal."²⁰ What it reveals is different depending on your viewpoint, background, and interests. Still, in the most general sense, modernism's decay shows us that modernism was never timeless, but rather a sign of its time that is slowly but surely becoming historical. And what is more, through its deterioration, modern architecture is not just turned



Arne Schmitt, *Hanover. Lister Tor*, 2012

into a ruin, but it is also given over to the time of the ruin.¹

With regard to the traumatic experience of the air war, this shift of the modern towards the ruinous allows for a shift in perspective. It makes me wonder whether it is only now that modernist architecture is slowly becoming ruinous that we are able to see the ruin in it, even though it was always already there? Or to put it differently: is it only from a deferred perspective (*Nachträglichkeit*) that



we can think the air war and the postwar together and understand their respective mnemonic architectures? And if that is so, what is it that we are searching for?

What kind of portrait or even self-portrait do we see in the images of destroyed cities and their built-over constructions? Arne Schmitt's photographs tackle these questions from the side of modernism. They search for the bunker in West German architecture, and they find it in its reapplication of concrete, its rigidness, its fortress-like quality. By doing so, they not only visualize how trauma and memory are embedded in spaces and places, they also emphasize that repression does not necessarily generate silence, but also discourse. It is the discourse of a postwar cityscape still dominating life in West Germany today. Arne Schmitt's photographs allow us to see these everyday places as part of history. They energize the ruin's potential and project it onto modernism, thereby creating images of a multiple and multidirectional timely exposure.

Footnotes

1 Brian Dillon: "Introduction/ A Short History of Decay", *Ruins. Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Brian Dillon (London, Cambridge Mass: Whitechapel Gallery, MIT Press, 2011), 12-18.

2 <http://www.culture24.org.uk/art/photography-and-film/art52708>

3 An often-quoted example where these two memories of the bunker and Brutalism exist side by side, thereby turning Kusmirowski's artificial construction inside out, is Berlin's infamous housing complex *Pallasseum*, better known as *Sozialpalast / Social Palace*. One of its wings is wrapped around a four-story

bunker, integrating the shelter into the building's outer appearance, which in turn adds to its overall massive effect.

4 Jörg Echternkamp, „Von der Gewalterfahrung zur Kriegserinnerung – über den Bombenkrieg als Thema einer Geschichte der deutschen Kriegsgesellschaft“, *Deutschland im Luftkrieg. Geschichte und Erinnerung*, ed. Dietmar Süß (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2007), 20 (author's translation).

5 See Jörn Düwel, Niels Gutschow, "*Ein seltsam glücklicher Augenblick*", *Zerstörung und Städtebau in Hamburg*. (Berlin: DOM publishers 2013).

6 W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell, (Vintage Canada, 2011), 80.

7 Ibid., 25.

8 Andreas Huyssen has made the very interesting claim that Sebald's lectures were less an actual analysis of the literature dealing with the air war and more a necessary preparation for the author's attempt to potentially deliver his own contribution to the field. "For unmistakably, Sebald's essay is not just an analysis of those earlier writer's work, but a hidden rewriting of both Nossack and Kluge's texts themselves." (Andreas Huyssen, "On Rewritings and New Beginnings. W.G. Sebald and the "Literature About the Luftkrieg", in *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*. (LiLi). Volume 31, No. 124 (December 2001): 83.

9 The only texts he approves of are Heinrich Böll, *Der Engel schwieg* (published posthumously in 1992); Hans Erich Nossack, *Der Untergang* (1948); Hubert Fichte, *Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"* (1971); Alexander Kluge, *Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945* (1977).

10 Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, 58.

11 Ibid., 58.

12 The German passage reads as follows: "Die Jahre unmittelbar nach 1945 sind einer der wichtigsten Einschnittspunkte in der deutschen Geschichte, *nicht wegen der dort enthaltenen Handlungsmotive, sondern wegen des darin enthaltenen Erkenntnismotivs*. Diese Jahre sind ein abarischer Punkt, d.h. ein Moment, in dem sich widersprüchliche Gewalten gegeneinander aufheben, gerade weil nicht

gesellschaftlich gehandelt werden konnte. In dieser Hinsicht ergibt sich von diesem Punkt ein Blick vorwärts und rückwärts auf deutsche Geschichtsverhältnisse, wie ihn kein anderer Gesichtspunkt in der deutschen Geschichte vermittelt.

Eigenartigerweise gilt das bis heute für unser ganzes Land." Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge, *Geschichte und Eigensinn*. Volume 3. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), 1126.

13 "Etwas, das mich sehr berührt, führt bei mir zu einem kurzen Text, es wird zum Splitter." Alexander Kluge, "Lakonie als Antwort", in: Volker Hage, *Zeugen der Zerstörung. Die Literaten und der Luftkrieg. Essays und Gespräche*. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003), 205 (author's translation).

14 Andreas Huyssen, "Authentic Ruins: Products of Modernity", in *Ruins of Modernity*, eds. Julia Hell, Andreas Schönle. (Durham, London: Duke UP, 2010). Kindle (no pagination).

15 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257-8.

16 Huyssen, "Authentic Ruins".

17 Jacques Derrida, "Memoirs of the Blind", in *Ruins. Documents of Contemporary Art*, 43. "Ruins is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze. Ruin is the self-portrait, this face looked at in the face as the memory of itself, what *remains* or *returns* as a spectre from the moment one first looks at oneself and a figuration is eclipsed."

18 Even though some of his central arguments are much older, and can already be found in Negt's and Kluge's *History and Obstinacy*.

19 Mark Lewis, "Is Modernity our Antiquity?" in *Documenta Magazine No. 1: Modernity*. (Cologne: Taschen, 2007), 29.

20 Ibid., 32.

21 Huyssen has stressed this connection between modernism and the ruin when asking that we "look at the ruin aesthetically and politically as an architectonic cipher for the temporal and spatial doubts that modernity always harboured about itself. In the ruin, history appears spatialized, and built space temporalized. My

thesis is that an imaginary of ruins is central for any theory of modernity that wants to be more than the triumphalism of progress and democratization, or the longing for past greatness." Huyssen, "Authentic Ruins."