

Dystopian ruins: Nostalgia for a lauded past that never existed

> **Liam Rothbaler**

Open Window, Institute for Creative Arts & Technologies, Stellenbosch, South Africa.

liam@openwindow.co.za (ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0804-1483>)

ABSTRACT

Dystopian narratives – in the broadest sense – often employ literary *topoi* centred around the so-called graceful collapse of ruins and ruination. In western cultural practices, the powerful and emotionally compelling visuals associated with ruins have been widely used since the fifteenth century to broadcast and inspire contemplative, nostalgic desires. The goal often seems to involve inspiring emotional responses to support readings that subjectively romanticise a historical age and its related socio-cultural values, or seek to glorify ideals of an imagined past. However, sensationalistic attempts to inspire similar nostalgic desires with more recently ruined structures seem unbecoming, especially when one considers that these structures have emerged from situations and circumstances unrelated to the gentle weathering of time, such as violent warfare and unsustainable urban planning. To that end, I reflect on the theme of (re-)imagined pasts and futures in the *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition. Using the triptych *Linger* (2023) by Ricardo Liut as a point of convergence, I unpack more nuanced discussions regarding the representations of ruins as motifs in European art and literature, subjective/collective memory and nostalgic desires, and notions of dystopian ruination. These discussions raise questions regarding the use of ruin motifs in the contemporary age, and how “inauthentic” ruins are prominently sensationalised by dystopian themes and concerns.

Keywords: dystopian narratives, environmental storytelling, nostalgia, nostalgic desires, Romantic gaze, ruin motif.

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Stairways and Ruins

Introduction

Taking the sub-theme of (re-)imagined pasts and futures from the *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition¹ as a point of departure, I address the varying appearances of architectural ruins represented in media and art that align with an overwhelming sense of reflective nostalgia. Specifically, I explore representations of ruins that seem overly attached to dystopian narratives and ideas rooted in western cultural practices, and how these western-centric ideals may be challenged by outliers from non-western practitioners. Thus, I argue that ruins and similarly dilapidated structures are often over-utilised as artistic motifs and metaphoric vehicles to offer critique on narratives that celebrate a glorified image of the past and, sometimes, the insipidly nostalgic musings of potential or imagined futures as well (Huyssen 2006:7).

I begin with a brief outline and history of the ruin motif, focusing on European landscape painting traditions and Romantic French literature. This section explores how ruination and its associated symbolism have evolved since the fifteenth century. Following on from this is a discussion regarding the influence and allure of nostalgic desire on one's memory and imagination, and its links to topics explored in western utopian/dystopian discourse. I then engage with the *Linger* (2023) triptych by Ricardo Liut from the *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition, wherein notions surrounding universal constancies and challenging ideologies – with regard to the lingering remnants of past experiences and memorable actions expressed in ruins and nostalgic imagery – are explored.

Ruins as a motif in European art and literature

Some of the earliest known examples of ruins becoming objects of aesthetic appreciation can be found in the tail-end of the Italian Renaissance, with studies of the Roman Forum excavations conducted by artists such as Brunelleschi and Donatello (Woodward 2001). Subsequent excavations into archaeological sites of the Domus Aurea complex, Herculaneum, and Pompeii inspired a greater obsession with the remains of historically significant sites, typically of ancient Roman or Greek design, due to the conscientious effort of reviving and purifying Renaissance architecture *en masse* in the manner or style of antiquity (Italian: *all'antica*). By most traditional accounts, as collapsing or dilapidated structures, ruins had previously served a primary purpose as quarries for pre-shaped stone and sources of readily available marble that could be burnt for agricultural lime. These structures were made valuable beyond these means only insofar as the subjective, fantastical musings that their layers of rich metaphoric and allegorical meanings could inspire in one's imagination (Chiasson 2023:367).

It is this phenomenon – suggestive of a personal, tender appreciation for decay and collapse anticipated under the gentle weathering of time – that marks the ruin motif as a far more complex construct than its base appearances might initially suggest. Following Renaissance ideals, ruin-littered landscapes started to appear more frequently in Baroque paintings by artists such as Salvator Rosa (1615-1673) and those previously attributed to Monsù Desiderio, culminating in new forms of imagery that elevated ruin architecture beyond mere sites of archaeological study or circumstantial academic meaning (Zucker 1961:119-120). The presence of romanticised ruins in the backgrounds of historical paintings from the seventeenth century onwards seems to elicit a strangely comforting mixture of melancholy and delight in acknowledging the certainty of one's death (Daemmrich 1972a:452). By some precarious balancing of material decay with emotionally compelling visuals, the motif of ruins and ruination can inspire a profound contemplation of one's mortality and, in so doing, can engender a heightened awareness of one's self-diminishment before the immensity of time, and the spatial enormity of the universe.

This observation regarding the visual impact of ruination in wider artistic practices also raises pressing considerations towards the relationship between what one might distinguish as historical signification and a more private, personal signification of the ruin motif. This is a distinction that is made more prominent by the amateur documentation and grim aestheticisation of bombed or abandoned cities and collateral damage² emerging in the aftermath of World War II, and more recent conflicts across countries such as Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon, Ukraine, and Palestine (Huyssen 2006:8; Meltzer 2019:17). I address this distinction in greater detail below, but ostensibly, the creative representations of ancient, ruined structures in European art and literature published from the fifteenth century onwards tend to foster a newfound appreciation for the fragility of human life.

Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Italy and France, artistic interpretations of ruins of antiquity had become almost mythic in their capacity to seemingly transcend time and space. These structures were elevated to be inextricably bound with historical, legendary, or even fictitious events, thus serving as conceptual anchors that could bind aphorisms with an artist's/author's critical reclamation of the past. Ruins thus became 'trigger sites' for the pensive soul, founded on a dynamic network of related literary *topoi*³, symbolism, and personal meanings (Daemmrich 1972a:450; Chiasson 2023:367). Yet, there remained a poignant character in the European depictions of ruins through various styles of landscape art⁴ and sentimental descriptions of related sites in literature – pre-revolutionary French poetry, in particular – that managed to maintain a nuanced tenderness pleading for the safeguarding of human life and its fleeting, fragile character⁵ (Meltzer 2019:65).

Overall, there are four aspects of so-called 'ruin culture' that are addressed extensively in French art and literature between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Daemmrich

(1972b:40) conceptualises these according to notes he has made on French writers such as Joachim Du Bellay (1522-1560), Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704), Jacques Delille (1738-1813), and Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897), alongside the many paintings and etchings of Claude Lorrain (c.1600-1682), Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778), and Hubert Robert (1733-1808), in discussion with Denis Diderot's critique of such paintings in his *Salons* (1759-1781). These aspects are thus said to acknowledge a marked distance felt between the ruin as a literary subject and those who are fortunate enough to contemplate its destruction from a temporal distance, and include (i) the use of ruins as significant conceptual anchors for voyeurism; as (ii) symbols of ephemeral human life and death; as (iii) an aesthetic key of the ideal picturesque⁶ landscape; and as (iv) a structural device that connects the narrative present with a historical, legendary, or imagined past.

Turning the focus towards paintings, many prolific European landscape artists from the seventeenth century onwards also began working ruins into the scenic backdrops of picturesque and Romantic landscapes. In several cases, these even became the central subject of the piece. Giovanni Paolo Panini (1691-1765) and Giovanni Antonio Canal (1697-1768) are particularly notable for building on the *vedute* style to create *capricci*, which highlight fantastical scenes of Italian and French cities elevated by the appearance of imaginary (and sometimes real) overgrown ruins. Their influence spread across the continent, as seen in William Marlow's (1740-1813) *Capriccio: St. Paul's and a Venetian canal* (1795), painted after his time spent in Rome and Venice, which famously depicts the Anglican cathedral as if it were originally built within the Italian Republic of Venice.

Similar fantastical imagery began to take root in Romantic Germany and England at the turn of the nineteenth century, ever-present in the pensive works of Caspar David Friedrich⁷ (1774-1840), John Martin (1789-1854), Thomas Cole (1801-1848), John Constable (1776-1837), and JMW Turner (1775-1851), who had begun domesticating and beautifying their ruined architectural subjects by means of the picturesque and the sublime (Huyssen 2006:14; Chiasson 2023:363). A prominent theme of architecture that has slowly been reclaimed by nature is seen in many Romantic landscapes of ruins from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, building towards a utopian sense of timelessness in these scenes that contrasts with the progress-oriented historical narratives that dominated twentieth-century industrialisation (Fraser 2016:185). This fantastical imagery is now more commonly referred to as the wider Romantic tradition of "ruin-gazing".

Therefore, although most of the ruins depicted in Romantic landscapes are speculative or, at least, feature some attributes to a certain degree of speculation, their continued use as the subjects of such works grants a measure of legitimacy to the legends associated with their appearances. The ruin motif is hereby naturalised as a signifying experience that language cannot express alone. Its visual forms seem to embody shared feelings,

thoughts, and desires that anyone could come to understand (Van Eeden 2004:28). It is infused with deeper layers of meanings that Georg Simmel (1958:383) describes as being akin to nostalgia, for: '[w]hen we speak of "returning home," we mean to characterize the peace whose mood surrounds the ruin'. I would therefore argue that the representation of ruins can *speak of a past that shall (tragically) never be present again, but also of a fictionalised past that has never existed*. They linger as the remains of human greatness that neither dust nor erosion can erase, sometimes making their grandeur all the more worthy of celebration when placed in juxtaposition with a present that is described as being less favourable.

Nostalgia: Romantic desire in imagination and memory

I use the term "nostalgia" as its primary meaning suggests – a form of intense homesickness or heartbreaking desire to return to something that is inaccessible, conflated with a strangely comforting sense of familiarity that is felt – even if only momentarily – in the present regarding a place that either exists far away, or existed long ago (Huyssen 2006:7). Nostalgia is not a new cultural phenomenon, nor is it inherently harmful, despite what may be said of its incipient use as an insult towards Swiss mercenaries circa 1680. However, there is something to be said about the coercive power it commands, especially regarding its widespread exploitation through belligerent calls for a so-called return to 'national greatness' or 'the good old days', as is often popularised amidst times of great uncertainty (Ziolkowski 2018:316; Zhou 2023:44).

Acknowledging the idea that ruins can hold a multitude of meanings should also serve as a reminder of the fact that one should remain cautious of the dangers posed by aestheticising other temporalities. Although feelings of longing and critical thinking are not oppositional qualities, the emotional resonance inspired by nostalgic desires cannot be overemphasised (Boym 2001:49-50). There exists some strange human temptation in wanting to glorify the past because it offers a perceived sense of stability and belonging from a position in the present, while catastrophising the future only because it is uncertain and, therefore, frightening. This tender balance between past and future temporalities is another phenomenon channelled through the ruin motif, which can become a refuge to those seeking escape from the pressures and anxieties felt in the present day.

To look back fondly on an imagined past is arguably not much different from dreaming for a "brighter tomorrow" if one considers how differing temporalities are made to merge within a specific point of space, perpetuating the idea that anywhere (regarding an imagined time different to one's own) can be argued to be more appealing than what is happening right here, right now. However, there needs to be a discernible familiarity or,

at least, some measure of personal understanding separate from wider interpretations of another temporality for nostalgia to take root in the image of ruins and ruination. Without strong justifications to buy into a shared sense of sentimentality predicated on collective memory and common desires, the imaginary sense of time embedded within the ruin loses its allure, and disillusionment begins to challenge all measures of personal understanding or imagined connection to the notions of a glorified past.

Andreas Huyssen (2006:7-8) argues that nostalgia can be regarded as a kind of ‘utopia in reverse’, leading to a broader consideration of ruin motifs and their uses beyond those found in the remnant sites of antiquity or speculative art and literature. Indeed, utopian treatises and architectural projects from the late eighteenth century onwards were no less influenced by the Romantic’s gaze on ruins than the disciplines of painting and printmaking. Utopian ideals regarding radical social and political reforms in favour of improving what was understood to be social cohesion (sometimes through forceful means) tend to assert that one must break free from the ideological constraints of the past. Yet, these ideals are often put forward without first considering the realistic expectations of what such ventures likely entail. The belief that things can be better simply because they differ from current circumstances is not sustainable, as may be noted in the numerous failed phalanstery community experiments⁸ that were once inspired by the utopian treatises of Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), Charles Fourier (1772-1837), and Robert Owen (1771-1858).

Indeed, it seems well-nigh impossible to build and maintain a personal connection to a site through nostalgic desires alone. Similar concerns can be noted by the rising popularity of more exotic and extravagant follies in English, German, and French landscape gardening between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries (Ching 1995:27; Van Eeden 2004:24; Moylan 2021:4-5). Rather than seeking to emulate and revere the virtues of ancient civilisations – more often than not, these were (to some extent) Roman – these structures were erected as deliberate, falsified ruins to support some form of sarcastic commentary on the decay of existing western world orders. They express a yearning for a romanticised revival of glorified Classic values, such as monumentality and harmony, while over-emphasising visual properties to the point of sensationalism (Zucker 1961:124-125).

During the rise of the Third Reich in Germany, the theory of ruin value (German: *Ruinenwerttheorie*) was proposed by its chief architect Albert Speer – later recorded in his memoirs – to explain the belief that modern buildings should be constructed using certain design principles and with materials that would later decay into beautiful ruins. Again, one can note that the intention is for these structures to mimic those of the ancient Roman monuments, but now from a position evoking an imagined utopic future, rather than recalling notions of an imagined, glorified past. By means of example, Speer

specifically mentions an illustration showcasing his plans for the Nuremberg Zeppelin Field – described as columns in perpetual collapse with broken marble walls covered in ivy – claiming that Hitler himself found them to be ‘illuminating’ despite initial, heated protests from most of his political entourage against any ideas that the Reich would fall (Speer 1970:55-56).

As the story goes, Hitler soon put forward new laws ordering that all national buildings important to the Reich should be built with these principles in mind. This was an ironic decree in hindsight, perhaps, considering the tens of thousands of war-torn, “inauthentic” ruins that were later created by the repeated Allied bombings⁹ of Nuremberg, the Ruhr, Berlin, Cologne, Hamburg, Stuttgart, Essen, Bremen, Düsseldorf, and Dresden during the latter half of the Second World War (Huysen 2006:8; Meltzer 2019:2-3). What many of these Aryan utopian idealists arguably failed to understand in seeking to use nostalgic desires as a uniting force that might strengthen social bonds between compatriots, is that such buildings still require a sense of familiarity established through their repeated use by people (and eventual abandonment by those people) before the unspeakable essence of the ruin can emerge from its later disuse. Only then does a true sense of nostalgia become accessible through a maturity of spatiality, which is something that cannot be copied or declared by claim alone. Indeed, nostalgia is a quality that is *produced* slowly over time through routinised socio-cultural experiences and practices, and then made desirable by their later loss (Lefebvre 1991:15-17; Audin 2021:4).

The allure of ruination had thus become so strong during the first half of the twentieth century that existing national buildings, including some still under construction, were already being envisioned as future ruins, as if to forcibly pre-empt nostalgic desires by preparing for their anticipated collapse (Zucker 1961:127). Aside from Speer’s designs for the Zeppelin Field, other examples of ruins-to-be that are notable for their imaginative visions of the futuristic ruin motif include Joseph Gandy’s *A Bird’s-eye view of the Bank of England* (1830) and Hubert Robert’s *Imaginary view of the Grand Gallery of the Louvre in Ruins* (1796), which was first exhibited in a pairing alongside a ‘more conventional representation’ of the very same gallery space in the Salon of 1796, to the shock of most attendees (Kassabova 2014:78). However, these are only adaptations of the ruin motif superimposed onto quasi-ruined visions of the Bank of England and the Louvre, respectively – both of which have seen decades worth of significant renovation work and continue to be used in the current day.

Furthermore, Gandy’s drawing does seem to be more of a cutaway study that neatly exposes the Bank’s clean interior, and Denis Diderot (1963:227-230) famously chastises Robert in his *Salon de 1767* for tending to include too many people in his paintings of ruins (although, this is almost thirty years before his exhibition of the *Grand Gallery in*

Ruins) – a quality that Diderot feels detracts from the experience of ruin-gazing because these figures arguably become distractions that prevent one from forming a personal connection with the site as depicted (Kassabova 2014:81). Yet, despite Gandy’s sterile “excavation” and Diderot’s insistence on the lack of people in ruin settings, there may well be merit to the contrasts that these elements create, because they reinforce the notion that ruins must have a sense of pronounced *socio-historical value*, regardless of whether this value is deemed to be true or fictitious (Kassabova 2014:78).

In seeking out the ruin as a site for Romantic contemplation, one must not forget that it is only through their use by humans that all buildings, edifices, and architectural constructions are made out to be living, breathing things. Moreover, it is only by the later loss of its inhabitants and their routine use of the site that ruins can eventually become imbued with that unspeakable quality that makes them so appealing to the ruin-gazer. One learns to appreciate the ruin in lieu of the people who have left it behind by recalling the complexities and hardships of those who have lived and died in earlier periods of human history. This is a challenging point to dismiss when either (i) the site itself is still in good working condition, or (ii) the people who previously used the site are still alive after it has been abandoned and fallen into disrepair. As I explore below, that second point becomes especially relevant with the rise of so many “inauthentic” ruins emerging in the twenty-first century.

Contemporary dystopian ruins

Reviewing the use of nostalgia as a motivating force offers an intriguing link to topics central to the grand narratives¹⁰ of societal collapse and sorrow that utopian/dystopian discourse so frequently captures (Abrams & Harpham 2015:413). The term “dystopian” has become something of a buzzword in more recent years, but dystopian concerns ostensibly rose from the burgeoning critique of failing utopian ideologies sometime around the early twentieth century, often explored through fiction and literature that includes a morbid fascination with the misfortune and suffering of others (Claeys 2017:4-5). Here, an exercise in contemplating total destruction and the depths of human wickedness becomes tangible in groundbreaking works like Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1908), Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1921), and HG Wells’s *A modern utopia* (1905).

Authors of fiction such as London, Zamyatin, and Wells spoke to a prudent distrust towards the idealisation of speculative collective identities that celebrate the success of societal orders. They believed that such identities were constructs built upon the lies of their forebears and that the coercive power inherent in the idealisation of former power structures should be noted well (cf. Sargent 1992:188; Claeys 2017:271). The dystopian

commentary discussed in these narratives arguably became stronger when early, anticipative feelings of global destabilisation became bound together in speculative visuals (and the imagery of speculative ruins) that later became a kind of quasi-judicial testimony to the undeniable reality of inhumane violence, mass destruction, and turmoil felt during the years leading into and following global disasters of the Great War, circa 1911 to 1920 (Chiasson 2023:365).

Since originating as a form of anti-utopian critique during the early twentieth century, the dystopia¹¹ has developed into a genre (or artform, in the broadest sense) that often prompts critical engagements with notable social, political, and cultural trends of the times. The narratives that manifest in these dystopian societies are often used in conjunction with stark, emotionally compelling visuals to establish numerous storyworlds predicated on notions of dehumanisation, misery, and grief – notions similarly shared between the features of ruins and nostalgia as well. Yet, beyond the allure of nostalgia in terms of longing for an inaccessible and romanticised past through the ruin (or, in some cases, a similarly inaccessible and romanticised future), there is potential in its use as a catalyst for critical reflection. Thus, the ruin can become an effective motif for inspiring positive change as an aftereffect of its appearances – notably achieved by confronting one with evidence of the processes of ruination, abandonment, and despair (Meltzer 2019:88; Audin 2021:5).

To be considered dystopian, a work of art (or a text, in the broader sense) must meet two primary requirements. Firstly, it must focus on the notable, destructive changes perceived within an established human settlement¹² and, secondly, it must prompt a critical examination of the faults present in socio-cultural trends and political power structures of the society that lives there (Barton 2016:7-13; Van Gheluwe 2015:7). These features afford artists, writers, and creative designers from various disciplines a means to explore speculative futures (and pasts) of humanity in relation to a particular set of environmental conditions related to observable trends in social, cultural, and political phenomena (Laakso 2022:450). These speculative temporalities are then enacted within a designated spatial boundary – the dystopian city-state – to act as metaphoric vehicles for dystopian concerns and themes surrounding topics of homelessness and unemployment; destructive climate change projections; irreparable global ecological damage; and continuous acts of targeted violence against social groups based on religious, racial, gender, and sexual prejudices (Van Gheluwe 2015:8).

The dystopian concern with more recent forms of ruination often entails that, in glorifying imagined pasts/futures through the image of the ruin, one must first contend with the presence of a false dichotomy that obfuscates the site's original purpose(s) and values. Whether conceived by warfare, man-made and natural disasters, or the rampant destructive

machinations of capitalistic industrialisation, most ruins that have emerged in the twenty-first century seem to have been developed from anything but the ‘gentle erosion of time’ (Meltzer 2019:15). Instead, what one finds is the ruin motif forcibly carved into the various instances of mostly unfinished or abandoned industrial and residential districts of cities. These scars are present even in the current standings of former utopian-inspired settlements – such as Johannesburg, Ōkuma, and New York – where hundreds (if not thousands) of silent factories, schools, power plants, shopping centres, and even entire neighbourhoods are rarely maintained after they have fallen into disrepair (James & Jameson 1913:36; Tamari 2014:202; Audin 2021:5; Amato 2021:247-249). Similar cases may also be noted in the wake of devastation wrought by natural disasters and violent man-made catastrophes in large sections of former residential areas within New Orleans, Omarska, and, more recently, Gaza and the West Bank (Orvell 2013:647; Herscher 2014:464-465).

The few sites that are eventually revitalised are often rebuilt with predatory real-estate profit schemes in mind or at the fiscal expense of their remaining citizens through community-led efforts, such as those stemming from the practice of *machizukuri* in Japan¹³ (Orvell 2013:660; Satoh 2019:128-129). It is far more common to find that ruined buildings and amenities are left abandoned until they can later be demolished or ‘recycled’ to capitalise on available plots in the commercial and real estate markets. Systemic issues surrounding population decline, gentrification, and harmful, unsustainable business practices only exacerbate this problem further. The results often lead to more significant problems of economic migration, homelessness, unemployment, and a milieu of empty, decaying urban and post-industrial spaces as most surviving residents are slowly displaced in favour of “sound” financial investments or idealised real estate projections (Amato 2021:250-254; Audin 2021:3).

Indeed, I would argue that there now exists an almost meta-nostalgia for the romanticised perception of “authentic” ruins in the twenty-first century. A sense of fascination with ruination is undoubtedly lost when the building’s form degrades too quickly or, worse, is sterilised because it stands empty a little after its construction has finished (or after construction has been placed on indefinite hold). That once-powerful admiration and awe for a lingering spirit of the glorified past dull with the repeated appearance and use of imagery sensationalising commonplace rubble and debris. This phenomenon twists one’s reverence for the ruin motif into an indifference (and perhaps even slight annoyance) bred from emotional fatigue – stemming from a privileged space of voyeurism – and the overly-dramatic posing of ‘ruin porn’ for insubstantial news stories, fad picture books, and amateur films that have sought to capitalise on an already over-saturated market of sensationalised mass media (Huyssen 2006:8; Orvell 2013:670).

Furthermore, the question arises about how, or even if, one can equate these contemporary “ruins” to antiquity. Rubble is not infused with the same complex and powerful mixture of hopeful and tragic melancholy that can maintain Romantic sensibilities (Salgues 2021). This is primarily due to the fact that the spiritual presence of nature has not been given adequate time to dominate a site’s remains before its inevitable metamorphic transition from building to ruin to rubble is completed. Rather, rubble now seems better suited to highlighting the many looming failures and empty promises of modernity by serving as constant reminders of humanity’s hubris; failed experiments all cut short in the name of impeding inefficient progress and, of course, the destructive nature of warfare (Orvell 2013:651-652).

Ruins of the twenty-first century are thus barely touched by nature before they are scrubbed away or left abandoned to fall further into disrepair. Such sites are nothing more than worthless heaps of scrap and debris that litter cityscapes and offer no meaningful recourse for Romantically inclined wanderers trying to find their place (and the value of ruination) in a now globalised, collective human history (Speer 1970:55-56). The romanticised image of the distant “fallen Empire” has thus lost its playful charm, which I feel only leaves an immediate sense of discomfort and profound grief in acknowledging that one is witnessing societal collapse as it is happening at an unprecedented pace and frequency.

Additionally, as I mentioned previously regarding the grim aestheticisation of ruins through photography and film, amateur acts trying to make ruins out of rubble effectively dehumanise the survivors of (avoidable) collateral damage. More recent sensationalistic practices of “documenting” societal collapse entice a rather unsettling cultural practice of mourning the “living dead” in online spaces and wider discussions while the wounds of contemporary societies are still fresh and, in some cases, continue to bleed profusely (Orvell 2013:647). Indeed, although there are cultural memories, histories, and identities attached to architecture and notions of lived place, the destruction of these sites should not be equated with the destruction of their attached socio-cultural attributes (cf. Bevan 2007; Herscher 2014:466). Unlike the ruins of antiquity, the peoples and associated cultures of such sites remain, leading to a paradoxical appearance of the ruin motif that is scavenged by those seeking to elicit a feigned nostalgia for something that is not entirely gone by perpetuating a sense of slow violence (Leary 2011). To ruin-gaze in the twenty-first century is thus to bear witness to the spectacle of human history and cultural memory actively being destroyed and feeling powerless to stop it, as if one remains stuck in a position of passive voyeurism.

This is not to say, however, that all instances of ruins from the contemporary age have negative connotations. With the popular use of speculative ruins in video games – such

as those designed for FromSoftware's *Souls* series (2011-c.2018), Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* franchise (2007-), Naughty Dog's *Uncharted* series (2007-2022), and Guerrilla Games' *Horizon* series (2017-) – the ruin motif may have been further removed from the Romantic tradition, but its depiction remains adjacent to those from eighteenth-century art and literature. Speculative ruins in gaming contexts are assembled with the intention of player-led exploration, extending the level of accessibility for introspective contemplation beyond the previously required site-specific confines of ruin-gazing. One is now invited, as a player, to engage with these structures from an 'embodied ludic subject-position' (Vella 2016:2). This effectively allows one to step into the ruin, as it were, and enact centuries-old childlike flights of fancy virtually, through the similarly pleasurable/frustrating act of playing a video game (Chiasson 2023:367).

Stairways and Ruins

In broaching the themes of the *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition, I feel it pertinent to briefly address one of the exhibition's prompting quotes taken from Sol Plaatje's (1930:182) *Mhudi*, where he claims that, '[t]here is always a return to the ruins, only to the womb there is no return'. Ostensibly derived from the Setswana saying, '*maropeng go a boela; go sa boelweng ke teng*', the origins of this quote refer to a belief in the fact that one's sense of home is found with one's ancestors, and often tied to a specific place or region (Poore & Shole 2021:154). In other words, the understanding of where one seeks comfort is directly linked to the spatialised history and legacy of one's community, made visible through the motif of the ruin.

As if to acknowledge this connection between one's sense of home and ancestry in a South African context, I argue that Ricardo Liut's *Linger*¹⁴ in the exhibition *Stairways and Ruins* elicits a familiar sense of nostalgia associated with European notions of fleeting cultural memory and posterity, but distinguishes itself by means of presentation. This triptych involves the digital manipulation of scenic photographs depicting local structures in disrepair and lone figures enshrouded by human waste and pollution. The prints have been left exposed to sunlight, later torn and layered into collages on three separate sheets of cotton paper that are exhibited together in separate frames. The result is not a traditional conception of western ruins, nor is it a sensationalised depiction of rubble and debris, as is commonly explored through the medium of photography. Rather, emphasis is placed on the melancholic introspection that ruin motifs can inspire, explored through a sequence of loosely related prints emblematic of hazy, washed memories.

Considering that South Africa does not have as storied or long-standing a tradition of ruin-gazing as most European countries and cultures, it does seem strange for Liut to

position the collapsing structures at the centre of the triptych. However, the use of three prints is especially noteworthy, I argue, owing to the notions of glorified pasts, imagined futures, and the sensationalised (destructive) present discussed above in relation to trends of exploring ruination and the ruin motif in European art and literature. While the triptych's presentation may not imply a timeline from past to present to future, a sense of temporality merged with subjective/collective memory is acknowledged in how the prints' faded subjects seem to hang in suspension like haunted visages and eerie recollections of the past, serving as poignant reminders of the irreversible impacts that collective human action and development have on one's surroundings.

Therefore, the presentation of these prints' sequencing is not one of temporal ordering, but rather of a more complete range of the consequences of harmful human impacts that wax and wane over time without truly diminishing. This non-linear exploration across time also echoes scientific notions of energy constancy and its transformative nature, which Liut highlights as inspiration for the work and its title (Stairways and Ruins 2023:36). Indeed, a non-linear exploration of time and memory seems appropriate in recontextualising nostalgia as a wish for simpler times, which feels impossible amidst the tumultuous rapidity of a world governed by post-industrial, multinational capitalism.

A fast-paced lifestyle is the norm of the twenty-first century, regardless of where one finds oneself in the world, and one struggles to find adequate time to ponder (let alone mourn) violent events of the recent past before one's attention is whisked away to something new and exciting (cf. Van Eeden 2004:18). These prints are, therefore, presented as a collection of broken memories; sectioned into hazy recollections that are interconnected, but only begin to form a more coherent whole when the time is taken to step back and view them together. Thus, the visual narrative woven by *Linger* seems to call for a momentary pause on the part of the viewer – as long as one needs – to think back on memories of one's own surroundings that one is familiar with before another distraction claims one's attention and whisks it away.

Conclusion

Ruins of the twenty-first century are a visceral reminder that one should pay heed to the destructive tendencies of the present with as much mind as visions of the future, and stories of the glorified past. The once tender interplay between playful societal critique and nostalgic desires for another time has been shattered by the harsh realities of global warfare, genocide, invasive technologies, and urban decay stemming from rampant, unsustainable capitalistic practices. Or, worse yet, these qualities are entirely undermined by wider desires to sensationalise aesthetic considerations and historical

traditions in mass media. Indeed, it seems that there is no escaping the haunting visage of the ruin in the early twenty-first century. Yet rather than continuing to engage with an appreciation for the frailty of human life, what one must now contend with is the immense emotional weight that such imagery inspires on a daily basis.

In agreement with Plaatje's claim, a return to the ruins seems inevitable. However, perhaps it is now best to look at how the ruin motif is connected to people and their destructive tendencies in the present without seeking to capture or inspire a sense of nostalgia for other temporalities. The idea that visual representations of ruins alone can be used to inspire nostalgic desires is disillusioning. Rather, it is the experience of contemplating the existence of ruins as the aged remnants of collapse that inspires such desires, evident in the frustrations caused by countless abandoned residential districts and "ghost towns", to the endless feed of perverse, sensationalistic short-form videos and photographs circulating online through social media and fad news websites.

Contemplating contemporary ruination highlights a distinct lack of substantial reasoning justifying the slow perpetuation of ongoing human suffering and violence. Through sensationalism, it feels as if generations of grief are being collapsed into neatly stacked piles of attractive rubble, with the intent of selling their now worthless imagery as packages of "content" online. It is enough to leave one feeling nauseatingly numb in the face of how quickly certain aspects of human culture can be consumed and discarded with relative ease, when for centuries (at least when looking at the storied history of western traditions in Europe) the opposite has been true.

The ruin motif has thus become a near-constant reminder of rapid decay, stripped of any semblance of sentimentality or Romantic appeal for the gentle weathering of time. Yet, I cannot help but wonder what flights of fancy the ruins of the current day and age shall one day inspire for future generations. Now, more than ever, there seems to be a profound longing for authenticity and genuine human connection. Whether this longing shall, too, soon find its way in a return to the ruins has yet to be seen.

Notes

1. *Stairways and Ruins* was a large-scale collaborative project between ViNCO (the Visual Narratives and Creative Outputs research niche), the North-West University Gallery, and Iziko Museums of South Africa. The catalogue and a virtual representation of the exhibition, hosted at the North-West University Gallery between July and September of 2023, are available for exploration here: <https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/vinco/stairways-and-ruins-exhibition>.
2. This is a notion I explore later in this article, but the use of 'collateral damage' to describe (often, intentional) civilian casualties can be seen as a euphemism that potentially dehumanises innocent victims of international warfare operations, and thus reduces the culpability of military and national leadership that refuses to take accountability for their actions (Talhavi 2022:19).

3. Most notably, the *nostos*, *veduta*, *memento mori*, and *loci amoenus* and *horridus*, as I explore in this article.
4. Here, I am referring primarily to the various capricci landscapes and cityscapes in Claude Lorrain's sketches and paintings, such as the *View of Campo Vaccino* (1636), along with Piranesi's *Vedute di Roma* (c.1747-1778). These kinds of artworks often present an almost dream-like interpretation of existing structures in re-imagined settings (typically Italian or French cities), with imaginary or overgrown ruins woven into their scenery.
5. Perhaps this idea of tenderness emerging from an interplay across French art and literature is best exemplified in a section of Denis Diderot's (1963:229) commentary on the lost painting *Grande Galérie éclairée du fond* by Hubert Robert (c.1767): 'I see the marble of the tombs fall into dust and I do not want to die!' (French: '*Je vois le marbre des tombeaux tomber en poussière; et je ne veux pas mourir!*').
6. The picturesque is best characterised as a stylistic emphasis of the formal elements of line and colour, and how these can be combined in ways that construct charming and fanciful compositions. The result is often a complex staging of 'agreeable' elements, usually a mixture of landscapes and buildings, situated somewhere between the related aesthetic ideals of the beautiful and the sublime (Daemmrich 1972a:454). It is an idealised way of looking at nature through the added lens of ephemeral human efforts to build and settle, in scenes that are not quite natural in all their appearances (Van Eeden 2004:27).
7. Caspar David Friedrich is famously described by David D'Angers (as cited by Orvell 2013:655) as the progenitor of tragic Romantic landscapes that dictate a profound sense of loss and ruin in the surveyance of 'failed dreams of the Enlightenment', which is an idea that is similarly echoed in how dystopian artworks often comment on the failed dreams of utopian ideologies and rampant capitalist desires. Many of Friedrich's works were heavily criticised (for a number of reasons but mostly owing to Adolf Hitler's personal admiration of the artist) until the 1960's, when publications like Rosenblum's *The abstract sublime* (1961) helped to change earlier notions of his works, and endorsed the world-renowned reputation that Friedrich now holds as "father" of the transcendental landscape tradition in German Romanticism.
8. More often than not, it seems that most founders of so-called utopian settlements and experimental utopian socialist models seem to have had the intention of primarily trying to rectify the economic issues faced by previously failed experiments. As a result, the unique needs of the site itself or of its struggling community members were often overlooked, leading to a vicious cycle of failing experiments and abandoned communes across France and North America well into the early 2000s (Knapowski 2023:9; Baridon 2017:9-11; Woodcock 1956:82).
9. Most of these targets were industrial centres and steelworks vital to the war effort on all sides, but that did not mean that residential suburbs and housing districts were left unscathed (Huyssen 2006:8). Mark Cartwright (2024) estimates an avoidable casualty record somewhere between 600,000 and one million total civilian deaths from deliberate bombing missions across European cities alone.
10. This term is taken from the philosophical writings of Jean-François Lyotard (1984:37-39), referring to the scepticism surrounding 'celebrated' broadcast narratives that have influenced social relations, cultural memories, and widespread public interpretations of historical events and societal legitimisation from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.
11. I propose that such works cannot be categorised according to a singular set of transmedia generic conventions. Rather than only expressing critique on utopian ideals and ideology, dystopian works have developed since the early twentieth century to include far more nuanced tropes and topics concerning a profound exploration of the human condition. In this regard, I do not believe it is far-fetched to think of the dystopian as an aesthetic ideal on par with the picturesque and the sublime. It is an ideal that is primarily characterised by an innate sense of navigating feelings of intense heartbreak and suffering through the exploration of speculative spaces.
12. Referring to the *tópos* (ancient Greek: *τόπος*; "place") that is closely associated with dystopian narrative tropes and unique spatial-architectural features central to the imagined society that lives there (Doron 2000:254; Claeys 2017:4-5).

13. *Machizukuri* is best understood as a manner of gradually cultivating “community empowerment” through proactive socio-cultural activism. Most projects seek to focus on promoting more diverse city functions and anticipate for future developments in more efficient ways that can benefit and strengthen a society holistically; often including welfare projects related to improving urban spaces and living environments for the public on a micro-scale by means of allocating land for amenities such as roadways and accessible transit systems, parks, schools, sewers, and welfare centres (Sato 2019:128-129).
14. A reproduction of this artwork can be viewed on page 36 of the *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition catalogue, available here: <https://online.fliphtml5.com/cpsgh/rwpm/>

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