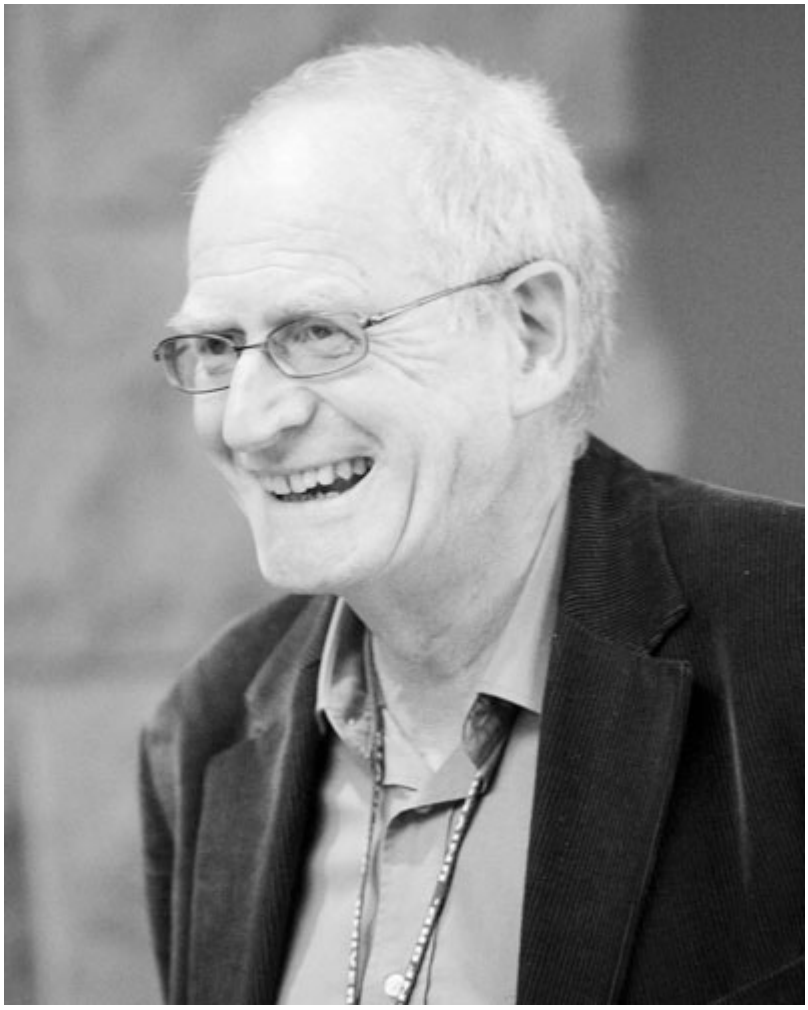
ELEMENTS OF A THEORY OF RUIN





A wonderful talk this evening from Alain Schnapp in our Archaeology Center.

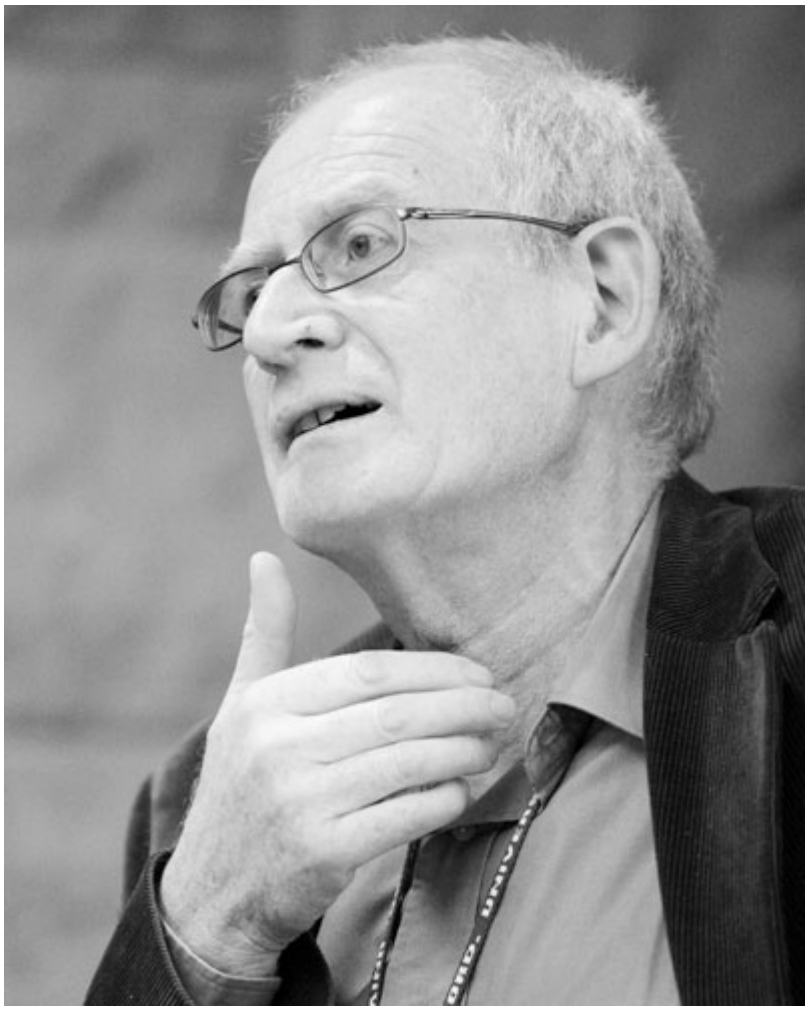
It was about “ruin” as an intellectual artifact.

Through a kaleidoscope of quotes and vignettes about ruin from antiquity to modernity, Alain reflected upon broad human experiences at the heart of our sense of history, memory practices, collection, temporality.



Goethe among the ruins of humanity’s childhood

I was tempted to synthesize, from this mélange, some elements of a theory of ruin.



Vectors

Articulation Between past and present; flows and continuities, also interruptions. Actuality, as the conjunction of past/present. Temporal topology, the non-linear folding of pasts and presents. Presences, and absences, voids.

Materialization Artifacts and architectures as the metonymic and metaphoric materialization of past in the present.

Inscription Epigraphy, engraving, iconography as a particular presence of the past. Token or icon? Textual sources as ruins. The contrast between inscription and mute relics.

Categorization Catalogs of things. Attributions to date, place, to the makers in systems of order that make sense of entropic ruins and fragments.

Quantification Just how much remains? Can there be too much memory? Ruin and letting go of the past.

Collection Gatherings of ruins and fragments. The collection as microcosm.

Authentication Is the relic genuine, or a fake? What is such authenticity?

Historicity The power to preserve, to commit to memory, to narrative; active processes of recovery, conservation and destruction or elimination. Historicity as our sense of place in historical narrative. The role of hindsight. Agency – the ability to articulate past and present, to (re)construct, to repair the ruin.

Reflection Self consciousness of time and entropy. The ruin as memento mori.



Theatre/archaeology – the re-articulation of fragments of the past as real-time event – from Brith Gof Theatre – *Tri Bywyd* (Three Lives) 1995 – [Link]

[Link] – The Bibliotheca Universalis Antiquaria – my project with Alain and colleagues.