

RUINS — JOSEF KOUDELKA



Thoughts on the universality and valency of ruination. With a comment about the toppling of statues of erstwhile heroes.

A couple of months ago Alain Schnapp was talking with me about his new book, a universal history of ruins, an exploration of an archaeological sensibility that takes us back to antiquity [Link]. I have just received the Aperture edition of Josef Koudelka's *Ruins* – a series of photos of ruins of antiquity around the Mediterranean taken by this celebrated Magnum photographer [Link]. With H  lo  se Con  sa and Bernard Latarjet, Alain has written a wonderful introductory essay and supplied extended captions in the way of quotations to accompany Koudelka's photos.



TUNISIA. Dougga theatre. 2011. On 9 August, I arrived at Thugga (Dougga), three leagues distant from Musti. The town of Thugga was situated on the slope of a small hill where we found the ruins of several buildings, among others the portico of a temple still in good condition; it was supported by six thick columns with four on the facade and the other two on the sides. Each column was four feet in diameter and around forty feet high. On top of the portico there was a crouching eagle with spread wings and the top of the temple door, which was not large, with a niche. [...] The remains of the aqueducts that once carried water into the town could be seen.

Jean-Andr   Peyssonnel (1694-1759) from Voyage dans les r  gences de Tunis et d'Alger, 1725.

These are not pictures of classical antiquity. But we may well recognize what we are looking at.



These are not documents in the sense that we take them to witness dispassionately what they depict. But they do document Koudelka's travels over the last 20 or so years, visiting and revisiting ancient Greek and Roman ruins.

These photos do not offer illustrative value, backing up some archaeological or historical observation of a particular site. As a series or portfolio the photos have clear features in common – the same panoramic format in monochrome, cropping that excludes context, foreground-background contrasts, and more. These features bring to us the eye of the photographer rather than the sites themselves. In this way the photos are abstract, disconnected from specific site and locale. Koudelka doesn't seem to have provided any text to these photos. They were indexed by Valerie Tosti and captioned by Alain.

These are not landscapes with ruins in the tradition of the (theatre of the) picturesque, As in a painting by Claude or Turner.



One of Turner's studies of Norham, on the Tweed. Scottish Borders. 1798.

Though the photos offer rich textures of decay, they do not resonate with a contemporary aesthetic of "shabby chic", the celebration of patina and wear and tear.

We may recognize that there is a distinctive eye behind these photographs, one that seeks out certain formal properties of an ancient ruin. But they do not belong with those photographs that come through the eye of a voyeur, one who loves to look from a certain distance at urban decay and the left overs of abandonment.



Abandoned School Number 3, Pripyat, Chernobyl



Koudelka traveled and took photos. The collection is the document, the aftermath of a personal itinerary. A primary orientation is dislocation; it is only at the end of his decades of wandering that the images received captions that reconnect them with where they were captured. The photos are much more connected to each other than they are to ruined sites of antiquity.

What the collection conveys to me is a dialogue with monochrome photography in exploring tonal balances (extraordinary dark and moody skies even in the Mediterranean, for example), chiaroscuro and more, in the textures of stones and plants.

The panoramic format is most significant because it emphasizes framing, selection, focal points, and especially the striking dynamics of horizontal (fallen) and vertical (standing). Some of the panoramas are vertical but they are printed horizontally in the book. This further emphasizes the dynamic.





Horizontal and vertical are not only formal properties of the images. Buildings fall; many of these ruins have come into the care of those who have cleared the ruins of vegetation that would conceal and accelerate ruin to the point where ruin becomes indistinguishable from the environment, where the architecture and statue (the figure) return to ground. Columns have often, in the ruins of antiquity, been re-erected by agencies intent on conservation, a gesture against the leveling forces of time. The contrast between horizontal and vertical, modulated also in diagonals and curves, is about the *process dynamics* of horizontal (fallen) and vertical (still standing and enduring, or rebuilt). This side steps the old trope of ruin as a return to nature and introduces human agency as a kind of negative entropy, a reinvestment of energy that things might endure longer.

Here, notably, Alain reminds us of Volney's 1791 revolutionary thesis on ruination as a *positive* process, that ruins point to the emancipation of humankind.

Pull down the statues and temples of the oppressors!

Cycles of destruction and (re)construction, even redemption. This makes me think of Walter Benjamin's famous equivalence, paraphrased – that allegories are in the realm of thinking what ruins are in the world of things. [Link]



Alain draws out such subtle valencies of ruination. Transcending simple contrasts between past and present, for example (and especially in this photographic medium), ruins invoke voluntary memory – recollection. And involuntary memory – the ruins hail us, interrupt our wandering, speak to us. As we pass by, the ruin poses a question to us – “have you forgotten, might you remember?” In the tension between remembering and slipping into unrecognizable oblivion, the statue crumbles, its face dissolves [Link].

Figuration. Do you see the face still? Who was this? Do you recognize them? Ruins require recognition, distinguishing the statue and the architecture from the background, the sands of time from which all arises and into which all eventually subsides.



Read more – Allegory [\[Link\]](#)

Project: et in Arcadia ego – [\[Link\]](#)

Project: *So werd ich Todten-Kopff ein Englisch Antlitz seyn* – [\[Link\]](#)