

Interrupting Progress: Ruins, rubble and  
catastrophe in Walter Benjamin's History

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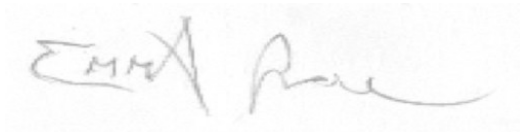
2012

## **CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Emma Rae", is centered on the page. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'E'.

## Acknowledgements

My thanks to the following people and organisations who assisted in the production of this thesis: my home institution, The University of Technology, Sydney (UTS); the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences; TFC research centre, and the department of Cultural Studies (with particular thanks to Juleigh Slater for her willingness to negotiate university bureaucracy on my behalf). I acknowledge the assistance of The *ATN-DAAD Joint Research Cooperation Scheme*, which provided funding for a research trip to Berlin in 2011 as part of the Colonial Entanglements project with Lars Eckstein, Anja Schwartz, and Dennis Mischke (University of Potsdam), and Dr. Andrew Hurley (UTS). Thanks also to Katrina Schlunke, who led the project at UTS, and who also provided many kinds of advice and support as a co-supervisor, colleague and course coordinator during my candidature. I am grateful to Bundesarchiv and Northwestern University Library for research support and images used in this thesis.

For research on ruins and locations I owe thanks to: Tim Edensor (Manchester Metropolitan University), Dylan Trigg, Simon Gregg (Gippsland Art Gallery), James Dickinson (Rider University), George Galster (Wayne State University), and Yves Marchand, who gave direction to early stages of this project, answered many questions, and provided invaluable contacts and materials. I rarely undertook fieldwork alone, or without invaluable local advice. Therefore, I owe many thanks to my “Couchsurfing” and “Flickr” contacts in Detroit and Berlin, and various others who gave me tips, allowed me to use their images, or joined me on adventures—both anonymously (sarahkucera, urbanwuff, Мя.Мøпстєr, D-Kay2009, shando, Yyellowbird, Detroit Liger, Bourbon Baby, TunnelBug, D.P. Rubino, Filip Jonker, wanus, kgreipel, Julian Turner, raindog808); and in person (Christel, Carlotta, Aaron, Ciarán, Allen, Thomas, Nathan and Bryan). Particular thanks to Matthew Beauregard, for dragging me in and out of scrapes on numerous occasions (and in two different hemispheres).

Thanks to my family and friends for their support and caring thoughts; proofreading skills, and public nagging—especially Meg and Jamon, Cliff and Daisy, Jo, Cassie and Mark, Tanija, Ross and Susan, Shaun, and Lee. Thanks also to my friends and colleagues at UTS for sharing the experience: Katie, Adam, Jessie, Emma; Malcolm and Majella; Paul, Nic, Sue and Sarah.

I’m particularly indebted to my favourite housemate and co-conspirator Clancy, for all the support in editing, reading, commiserating, travelling, cooking and general thesis survival. (Thanks also to my other housemates: Duncan, Mitch, Glen and Hayley).

I’m enormously grateful for the encouragement and patience of my supervisor Tara Forrest, who saw this thesis through from its inception in my honours year, and who has often gone well beyond her responsibilities as an academic advisor. It’s been a privilege to work with her, and to know her as a friend and colleague.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge all the people who came and went during this development of this thesis: Lachlan, Tegan (James), Lou and Moo, Grummy and Grandoug, Eliza, and Dad.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates abandoned and obsolete sites of contemporary modernity as “modern ruins” of a recent past, which present the potential to interrupt notions of assumed progress and linearity. This investigation is undertaken through the use of a Benjaminian approach to history and perception in the city, as well as fieldwork involving subjective and experiential encounters with modern ruins from 2009 to 2011.

This thesis examines modern ruins in three cities—Paris, Berlin, and Detroit—in relation to Walter Benjamin’s recurring references to ruins, rubble and catastrophe, and his use of dialectical configurations as a means to salvage and evaluate the lost and threatened aspects of a recent past.

In Paris, the shopping arcades of Benjamin’s Arcades Project and the ruins of the Paris Commune of 1871 are examined as case studies of mass-ruin and dereliction in an urban setting, with an emphasis on allegorical perception, interpenetration of past and present, and the energy to be detected in the recently outmoded. In Berlin, urban remnants from the Second World War to the present are considered in relation to Benjamin’s writings on Berlin, and the notion of catastrophe. In Detroit, modern ruins are framed as dialectical image spaces that offer an experiential dialectic and critical potential.

With particular reference to The Arcades Project and Benjamin’s short essay ‘On the Concept of History’, this thesis assesses ruins as spaces in which a different kind of history might be located—locations where the force of progress is both embodied, in terms of its destructive nature, and suspended, in terms of the persistence of the rejected and outmoded remnants of prior eras.

This thesis concludes that modern ruins, as tangible remnants of the recent past, offer the potential to transport us radically beyond the experience of the everyday city, to a unique and inhabitable space of transition between past and present. The physical presence of modern ruins, fragmenting and ultimately crumbling into rubble, can be likened to the more abstract force of progress, which obliterates much of the past in the pursuit of constant development and investment in the future, framing recent history as something to be moved beyond. However, in their persistence, modern ruins also interrupt this force, standing against progress and exemplifying Benjamin’s dialectical approach to history that can bring past and present together in a moment, allowing for the temporary rescue of the detritus of history from oblivion.

## List of Abbreviations

The following terms, acronyms and abbreviations are used throughout this thesis

- AP* (1999), *The Arcades Project*, in Tiedemann, R. (ed.) trans. H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England.  
(also titled *Passagenwerk* and *Passagen-Werk*)
- Origin* (1998) *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, (1998), trans. P. Osborne, Verso  
(also *Trauerspiel*)
- OTCH* On The Concept of History (In Selected Writings, Volume 4)  
(also titled Theses on the Philosophy of History).
- Chronicle* Berlin Chronicle (In Selected Writings, Volume 2, part 2)
- BC* Berlin Childhood Around 1900 (In Selected Writings, Volume 3)
- OWS* One-Way Street (In Selected Writings, Volume 1)
- CP* Central Park (In Selected Writings, Volume 4)
- Selected Writings*
- SW 1* (1996), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913-1926*, Bullock, M. and Jennings, M.W., (eds.), The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England.
- SW 2:1* (1999), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, Jennings, M.W., Eiland, H., and Smith, G. (eds.), trans. Jephcott, E.F.N, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England.
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