Transformations

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Light and the Aesthetics of Abandonment: HDR Imaging and the Illumination of Ruins

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Abstract:

The online circulation of photographs of abandoned places has been considerably influential on the contemporary visual culture of ruins. At the hands of online content-editors and users, images of ruins have become the subject of listicles, click-bait posts, image aggregators, and image hosting sites (sites such as, Buzzfeed, Imgur, and Distractify). Considering the high volume and frequency in the circulation of images of ruins as components of visual lists of the top abandoned places, this paper contemplates the relationship between the ruinous and the abandoned. When Svetlana Boym asserts, "ruins give us a shock of vanishing materiality" (Boym 58), we must consider that this shock is most commonly conveyed through images. In the case of contemporary images, this sense of "shock" is often visually achieved through distorting the tonal range of photographs of decay and abandonment. Images that are tone mapped to display a high dynamic range of luminosity (commonly, "HDR photographs") appear surreal – a disturbed reality distinct from that which we encounter day-to-day. The paper considers how light, in the manipulated tonal range of the photograph, problematises the ruin's signification of meaning. (183 words)

Keywords: ruins; abandoned places; photography; HDR; light

The theory of light as luminiferous aether was disproven by the beginning of the twentieth century - however light has only increasingly asserted itself as a medium of communication since. Light is the medium through which information travels between continents within the thousands of miles of fiber optic cables beneath the surface of the earth, but it is also the medium through which visual information is transmitted from right before our very eyes into our bodies. Beyond the mere fact that whatever is visually perceived is perceived through light, the contemporary moment, seemingly being as much about images as experiences, begs the question of what significations are at play in rendering the image of light? The European obsession with ruinscapes reached a height alongside Enlightenment thinking, the reassertion of aesthetics, and the entrenching of linear perspective within visual culture – and thus represents an intensely modern phenomenon. Bearing in mind that ruins embody a particular dialectical tension between materiality and immateriality, perhaps it is not surprising that an interest in ruins has reasserted itself in our increasingly digital age (Boym 58). When Svetlana Boym asserts, "ruins give us a shock of vanishing materiality" (58), we must consider that this shock is most commonly conveyed through images. This paper argues that in the case of contemporary images of ruins, exciting "shock" is often visually achieved through distorting the tonal range of photographs of decay and abandonment. Images that are tone mapped to display a high dynamic range (HDR) of luminosity appear mythical – a disturbed reality distinct from that which we encounter day-to-day. Here, I consider how light, in the manipulation of the tonal range of the photograph, problematises the ruin's signification of meaning. The HDR image bears a dynamic range more comparable to painting than to the capability of the average

human eye or the typical photograph, however there are still profound differences in the signification of light between different media.

Tone mapping images to represent a higher dynamic range of luminosity is a common means of aesthetically enhancing photographs – one that is commonly utilised in images of abandoned places. The semiotic value of the ruin, as its image increasingly circulates online through listicles of the "most beautiful" [1] or "surreally creepy" [2] abandoned places, is significant in itself. Unlike Romantic painting of ruins, these new images circulate in unprecedented volumes and with unprecedented speed. Existing somewhere between endurance and decay, ruins are dialectical in their liminal form. Tone mapping images of ruins to emphasize the tensions between light and dark intensifies the ruin's signification as a site of incredible tension. However, this exaggerated visual tension in tone-mapped images of ruins, does not necessarily enhance the discursive nature of ruins themselves. The expanded luminosity of the ruin image is rarely paired with an intensification of context, critique, or dialectical possibility.

Though the contemporary designation of these images of ruins as "ruin porn" is often a commentary on the exploitative nature of photographs of dereliction, it is also worth considering how, from Romantic paintings of the ruin lust to the high contrast photographs of the current moment, the different ways that ruins have been "lit" might render the image explicit. Does the overt material detail emphasied in the HDR image abolish the lust and romance signified in hazy streams of light in the paintings of the centuries before? This paper explores the different ways in which light has been rendered in images of ruins. Considering the present day popularity of HDR depictions of ruins in the circulation of their images online, this paper attempts to address the possible implications of this manipulation. To this end, I question whether light is, at least in some sense, complicit in rendering images as vulgar through its garish display of intense luminosity. I argue that, in their manipulation, these tone-mapped images become anaesthetised – the discursive potentiality that is often attributed to the ruin's visual form is sacrificed in an intense luminosity that renders the ruin as mere spectacle.

Lighting the Ruin: From the Romantic to the Sterile

Though Svetlana Boym describes the present moment as one of a "strange ruinophilia" (58) – our contemporary fascination with ruins is only in some sense new. Art critic Brian Dillon argues that by the eighteenth century, European culture displayed a "recognisable 'ruin lust'" (12). While this section is not intended as a genealogy of depictions of ruins, it questions the aesthetic differences between the lust for ruins born out of the Enlightenment and the current, arguably pornographic [3], fascination with ruins of the present day. Here, I consider the way that light renders ruins differently between Romantic paintings and contemporary photography, and question how the significations of ruins are perpetuated or challenged by the symbolic value of light in these images.

Following both G.F.W Hegel and Jacques Lacan, Friedrich Kittler reiterates that architecture is the oldest form of "art and / or worship" (59). However, the lust for ruins and decaying architecture is a particularly modern phenomenon (Dillon; Hell and Schönle; Huyssen; Macaulay). Ruins, in their state of decay, embody modernity's compulsion in defining itself against the past. This "invention of a future-oriented view of the passage of time" (Presner 196) could be argued as having been intensified by new technologies, particularly the solidifying of linear perspective through devices such as the camera obscura (Kittler). The influence of the camera obscura on painting was paramount [4], and not again matched by a device until the invention of the photographic camera. From the onset of the seventeenth century through to the late nineteenth century, ruins were a common subject matter of painting, and reached a height in the late eighteenth century, when paintings of ruins were made popular through the "Romantic aesthetics of fragmentation, failure, and the picturesque decline" (Dillon 11). While painting ruins proved to be a good exercise in visualising linear perspective in their complex architectural form, they also played a particular role in defining the gaze. The practice of "ruin gazing" became a fixture of Romantic contemplation, ultimately reasserting aesthetic concepts such as the sublime and the picturesque (Dillon 12) into both ruins themselves and their depictions in paintings. Ruin gazing not only served to fix the relationship between viewer and subject, but also helped to define the modern perspective - it is beyond coincidence that "the time of the fascination for ruins coincided with the fascination for new optic devices" (Boym 84 n. 4).

Considering their popularity in the height of perspectival painting, images of ruins relied heavily on the artist's ability to depict light. While light was rendered through painting its interactions with objects, conveying an illusion of form, depth, and texture onto a flat canvas, it was also commonly depicted in itself - as a haze, penetrative rays, or through colour casts signifying the time of day. The luminosity of these paintings, the way that light interacted with, and became, subject matter itself, was just one of the ways in which ruins came to embody certain ideological mandates of modernity. Romantic paintings of ruins denoted a certain optimism rather than despair [6]. In paintings of ruins, time is depicted as continuous: the built environment decays, nature overgrows it, and the sun continues to rise – thus evoking the rhetoric of progress. Paul Zucker notes that it was not until the seventeenth century that ruins were considered to be a serious subject matter of painting. Ruins offered "opportunities for the scintillating interplay of light and shadow, of nuances of color, provided for by the interesting contrasts between the tonal values of withered stones and growing vegetation which naturally could not be found in unimpaired works of architecture" (120). These characteristics of the ruin fulfilled William Gilpin's requirements of picturesque impeccably, compelling him to pose the question "is there a greater ornament of landscape, than the ruins of a castle?" (27).

However, illustrating light was not the same for all depictions of ruins. Take, for instance, the etchings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, whose rendering of light sits in stark contrast to paintings of the same era that also portray ruinous forms. Andreas Huyssen (2010) describes Piranesi's depictions of light as being so eccentric that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was particularly perplexed by the disparate continuity between his own perception of ruins and that of Piranesi's, visible in his etchings. This difference was "especially uncanny" in that the artist's work depicts a "relationship between space and a kind of light that seems to produce darkness," where "walls seem to absorb light instead of reflecting it" (Huyssen, *Authentic Ruins* 25). Huyssen furthers this idea in citing Ulya Vogt-Göknil's observation that Piranesi's "rays of light leave their natural trajectory. They bend and curve around things, sliding from one object to another, occasionally jumping over interstitial spaces" (as cited in Huyssen, *Authentic Ruins* 25). In spite of certain commonalities in depictions of ruins, Zucker notes that we must resist generalisations and strive against forgetting certain exceptions and overlappings (119). However, even he observes that "the shimmer of a silvery moon, [and] turbulent dramatic clouds ... became almost contingent requisites" of Romantic paintings of ruins (119). This continuity of stylistic narratives was in line with classically modern thinking whereby the values of rationality and authenticity held off the more contemporary idea of artistic rupture that developed in later stages of modernity.

With the advent of the photography, and its ability to capture a scene with unprecedented accuracy, the painter was forced under a new competitive pressure "to differentiate between the artistic and the technical medium, and thus to only paint images that could not be photographed" (Kittler 137). The camera's image ensured that "objectivity was to suppress interpretation, judgment, or theory in the reporting and picturing of scientific subjects," - its initial purpose was "to produce a perfect mimetic copy rather than something anew" (Saltz 204). In this sense the camera freed painting of its obligations to linear perspective, recognisable forms, and depicting reality. However, with the introduction of the camera, the shift in imaging ruins was not a shift to depicting them through impressionist style painting. Rather, ruins became, more commonly, the subject matter of documentary photographs – images of decay, destruction, and remains were taken to be evidence of events, thus best captured with the technical instrument of the camera. Dirk De Meyer argues that this marked the end of the ruin lust of the Enlightenment, stating, "the end of representing ruin and disaster in a romantic vein arrived with the first photographic representations of man-made catastrophes" (21).

Not only did the form of images of ruins change with new optics, from painting to photographs, but so too did their content. Images of overgrown relics shifted to battlefields and destroyed cities, and perspective shifted from being solely eye-level and linear, to also include aerial and telephoto viewpoints. The fact that this new form of ruin image "rapidly developed its own modern iconographies" (De Meyer 20), almost perfectly exemplifies both Paul Virilio's and Friedrich Kittler's linking of optical advances to military technologies. Virilio's own archeological endeavor of photographing abandoned World War II Bunkers along the Atlantic sea wall embodies the documentary aesthetic that became common of depictions of ruins after the photographic turn. Almost underwhelming, the bunkers fill a reasonable amount of the frame while just enough of the surrounding landscape remains visible. Rather flat, daylight exposed, and black and white, the images are simple and considerably aseptic – nearly the opposite of Gilpin's requirements of the picturesque. Featured in the

book *Bunker Archaeology,* the photographs appear bordered by the white of the page, and are captioned with their place. Virilio's images serve as an interesting example of this period of visualising ruins, especially considering that these same bunkers are often the subject of more contemporary, more aestheticizsed photographs. Jane and Louise Wilson's photograph "Azeville", which was the main exhibition photograph for Tate Britain's 2014 "Ruin Lust" exhibition, is a black and white image of the Azeville Battery in France with only a few distinguishing characteristics from Virilio's image of the same site. Jane and Louise Wilson's photograph of the structure is taken with an upwards perspective, making it appear gargantuan. The tonal range of the image also appears to be massive, with a white sky featuring only minimal light grey traces of clouds with the inside void of the structure entirely blackened. It is only through the aggrandising perspective and intense luminosity that this image differs from Virilio's - yet it seems unlikely that Virilio's photograph of Azeville would have been considered as the leading image of this art exhibition [5].

The shift of content within the ruin photograph presupposes a shift in ruin's material form. Rose Macaulay's contemplation of ruins after World War II asserted the occurrence of new forms of ruination in which ruins "have not yet acquired the weathered patina of age," nor "true rust" (453). These "new ruins" depart, visually from the picturesque paintings ruins of the Enlightenment – they "are for a time stark and bare, vegetationless and creatureless" (453).Andreas Huyssen also notes that in the contemporary moment, "the chance for things to age and become ruins has diminished" (*Authentic Ruins* 19). It is because of this that I argue that contemporary visual representations of ruins tend to take on the vocabulary of abandonment rather than ruination. Þóra Pétursdóttir alludes to this idea in asserting, "proximity and even coalescence of this past makes it practically impossible not to also face abandonment as such" (337). To these ends, we can consider the abandoned place as a postmodern instantiation of our former, modern, ruins. This clarification is necessary when considering that the contemporary images of ruins that often come under scrutiny as "ruin porn", circulate online as images of abandoned places. Likewise, the HDR images to which I refer, are often labeled, and disseminated, as abandoned places within the online vernacular. Our shift into late modernity, further away from the classic phase in which the ruin lust began, has been accompanied with an exacerbated capitalist temporality. With this, it is important to make the distinction between the way ruination has classically been conceived – structures being reclaimed by nature over time – to the more common case today whereby becoming ruin happens through the loss of use-value, as is the case in places devastated by deindustrialisation (Cowie and Heathcott; Edensor; Mah; Strangleman). Simply put, "We have gone from ruin to rust, from trace to waste" (Picon 77) – things are discarded, sites are abandoned, long before they become intelligible within the semiotics of the classical ruin.

(Tone) Mapping the Ruin: The Digital and High Dynamic Range

It is estimated that the human eye perceives a tonal dynamic range of about 1,000,000:1 (Darmont 37). This far exceeds the tonal range capable of both film and consumer-level digital cameras [7]. While new digital technology has expanded this range in certain high-end equipment, the tonal range of a singular "unaltered" image taken with a camera still remains limited in comparison to tonal range of luminosity encountered directly by the average human eye. With analog photography, film-based images with shallow tonal range may be corrected materially – during exposure, film processing, or in printing. Here, the improved luminosity of the image may be achieved through the material manipulation of the image medium to compensate for the inadequacy of the technology in capturing the true luminosity of the scene. Techniques such as burning and dodging have an analogous digital functionality through algorithmic equivalents – but these are used most commonly to manipulate specific areas of images that would aesthetically benefit from more or less "light". Tone mapping however, addresses the overall luminosity of the photograph, using several images, underexposed and overexposed to different degrees, composited together to create a single image with an increased dynamic range. This process enhances the details within highlights and shadows creating an illusion of an optimally exposed photograph that exceeds the luminosity captured in a single image. Here, we are reminded of Gilpin's appraisal of picturesque adornment, and his assertion that it is the way that the light interacts with a given scene that makes an image worthy of being rendered. Though tone mapping as a process is often justified as a means to overcome the limitations of technology in capturing and rendering realistic images, images that

have been edited to display a tonal range that exceeds the average perceptible range of the human eye tend to elicit the picturesque effects that Gilpin describes in his work on the picturesque.

An image that bears the effect of dynamic range beyond the scope of the human eye begins to appear surreal. And while the ratio cited earlier implies that the human eye has a far superior capability for perceiving luminosity than our new optical technologies are capable of recording, this is slightly misleading. Our vision is not unlike the tone-mapped image that combines numerous scenes to display a properly exposed image – our ability to perceive a high dynamic range without scanning a given scene is rather limited. This is one reason why the HDR image rarely tends to look entirely familiar, and more often appears as uncanny. Sarah Arnold describes HDR imaging as a technique that enables the "rendering of the apocalyptic imagination" (334). The surfaces of the subject matter seem to glow, the tension between shadows and light intensifies, and colours somehow appear simultaneously more muddled and more vivid. These characteristics, Arnold describes, animate the world in the HDR image making the built environment "resemble more fictional dystopian settings than actual existing structures," and thus "enhance the atmosphere of ruination" (335). While we can make aesthetic claims about the use of HDR in general – I argue that there is something particular at play in the tendency to the use HDR techniques in images of ruins and abandoned places. There is an undeniable, and simple, practical element to this choice – HDR imaging accentuates surface texture, increases the amount of detail in shadows and highlights, and in some cases "restores" the vividness of colours. However, it is not uncommon to encounter images of ruins and abandoned places that have been tone mapped so severely that they seemingly appear to depict a scene beyond reality. Utilizsing HDR effects to enhance an image elucidates the complexities in rendering reality - enhancing a scene to appear *more real* often results in a slippage into the *more-than-real*. On one hand, HDR images may be argued to possess a dynamic range more accurate to the luminosity we encounter in gazing upon ruins in the direct encounter – thereby representing a more real image. On the other hand, an intensely tone mapped image with a high dynamic range often fails to appear in continuity with perceived reality – and thus appears more-than-real. Here we can interrogate whether the image with a dynamic range beyond that of the human eye more accurately falls within the discourse of the *hyperreal* rather than the surreal – an image, that in some sense, becomes "more real than real" (Baudrillard, *Simulation* 81) rather than beyond real.

Whether light can be rendered accurately or authentically assumes that there is such a thing as accurate or authentic light. Does an image that shares continuity with the perceptual parameters of the human eye bear a closer resemblance to natural reality? Even in the instance of the unaltered image, "photographic light is not 'realistic' or 'natural'" (Baudrillard, *Photography*). In claiming that photographic light is not realistic, Baudrillard is not suggesting that it necessarily artificial either – "rather," Baudrillard claims "this light is the very imagination of the image, its own thought" (Baudrillard, *Photography*). To this point, we cannot simply think of the HDR image as having been corrected, even when the effect has been utilised to appear closer an actually witnessed scene – it is an entirely new depiction, a new world, whereby light performs its own image.

HDR imaging does not always take place at the hands of an editor in the post-production process. Though tone mapped images are commonly created by layering several images together in photo-editing programs such as Adobe Photoshop, software such as Photomatix can automatically produce the effect by means of algorithmic enhancement. Further, this algorithmic function has been incorporated into the firmware of some high-end camera bodies, automatically capturing an image with a greater dynamic range than what the photographer could have directly witnessed. The notion of reality, and the possibility for "natural" photographic renderings, is further complicated by what Hito Steyerl refers to as *computational photography*. This creation or alteration of content by means of algorithmically determined information fabricates a result that "might be a picture of something that never even existed" (Steyerl). The indexical link through which photography's role is to "represent what is out there by means of technology" (Steyerl) becomes challenged, or at the very least, as Cathryn Vasseleu argues, becomes reinvented by these new technologies. Speaking of the photograph, Vasseleu's argues that indexicality "refers to a physically enacted connection between an object and its traces in a photographed image" - however, "computer modeling reinvents the age-old trick of seeing by mimetic illusion" (161). In the case of computer modeling an object to reflect a particular translucency, the indexicality of the image becomes an "index of refraction" rather than an index of an object (161). Following Vasseleu's argument that images' indexical traces shift in computational processing begs the question of what the tone mapped photograph becomes an index of (if an index of anything at all) by nature of manipulating the image's

luminosity. However, this is not to say that the HDR image is distinctive from the unenhanced photograph in its failure to capture reality as even the most seemingly authentic photographs must be approached with suspicion.

The HDR image is neither a more, nor less, accurate depiction of reality. It brings, as László Moholoy-Nagy argued of the photographic image in general, something entirely new into being. However, in spite of being made possible by advances in optical technologies, the beyond human HDR image operates through a visual rhetoric more similar to painting than photography. Stan Brakhage argues that absolute realism is a myth – in this sense, I argue that the HDR image is *mythical*. Whereby the realist photo represents the cohesive and collective visual vernacular of high resolution, sharpness, and optical veracity (the myth), HDR imaging asserts an idealizsed optical range shrouded in the aesthetics of Romantic painting. In their remarkably detailed work *The Art and Science of HDR Imaging*, John J. McCann and Alessandro Rizzi assert that illumination only became important in painting during the Renaissance period. Using the examples of painters such as John Constable and John Martin, who were well known for their depictions of ruins, McCann and Rizzi ask the reader to "imagine for a moment what [these images] would look like if we removed all trace of illumination. Imagine them as accurate renditions of the object's reflectances. Frightening, isn't it?" (60). Describing the HDR image as "surreal" – literally *beyond* realism – is beyond inaccurate. Rather than opposing the symbolic order of reality, it returns us to it. These images of ruins do not contest the conditions of their creation, but reassert them as picturesque. If the painting and the HDR photograph exist in the same stylistic register as one another, what is it that maintains the painting as part of a certain "ruin lust", but asserts the photograph as "ruin porn"?

Touching the Ruin: Pornographic Light

In painting, light becomes incredibly loaded with aesthetic signifiers; light is perceived, and interpreted many times over: in the sensing of the scene that inspires the image; in its translation into pigment and new medium; and in the final work being visible to the spectator. Each of these interactions requires sensation. In the translation of light into a new medium, painting maintains a level of aesthetic experience absent in photography. The *modulation of colour* implies the "juxtaposition of pure tones arranged gradually on the flat surface [that] forms a progression and a regression that culminates in close vision" (Deleuze 107). Here, sensation becomes at once haptic and optic, depending on both the touch and sight of the painter – light, which is arguably depicted when anything is visually depicted at all, becomes reproduced sensually, rather than through "direct resemblance of visual units of the coded image," (Crowther 23) as is the case in photography.

While the primacy of vision is absolutely a modern phenomenon, it has, for the most part, continued to be increasingly entrenched in contemporary visual culture [8]. This intensification of perspective and the primacy of vision is the consequence of optical technologies. While painting, regardless of content, maintains a haptic quality through the painter's touch in applying a medium to the surface, perspectival painting heavily limits "the intensity and the velocity of the hand" (Ionescu 116). Here, I think of Kittler's reference to the camera obscura that "allowed the light, and everything it illuminated to be conveyed onto a surface, which the hand of the painter only had to paint over" (63). In this moment, vision almost entirely obliterates the sense of touch – only leaving the artist to trace the perspective that has now become engrained. However, even with minimizsed haptics, the trace of touch lends the painting to certain intimacy. Light becomes softened by the body, its colour carefully mixed, its illuminative ability and translucency pulled by the hand, its edges blended – painting, in its literally sensual rendering of light, embodies touch and thus confirms materiality. In this sense, painting is indexical of the artist's touch.

The photographic image differs immensely – it is not an index of the presence of a photographer, nor is it in index of the subject. Rather, the photograph is an index of light, and the degree to which it burns the surface of film when reflected off a series of objects within a given frame. Daniel Palmer contests Roland Barthes's influential claim that "the photograph is literally an emanation of the referent" (80). Palmer asserts that rather than an emanation of the referent; the photograph is an "image of the world that bears an impression of light according to the specific optical and chemical technologies that brought that image into being" (156). There is something comforting in the idea that photographs "touch us", but it is an

argument that I am not convinced by. In photography, there is no touching between the viewer and the subject – the photograph is an assemblage of reflections where touch only occurs in light's burning of the surface of the film.

This touching is reduced yet again with the advent of digital photography where light is instead read by a sensor and interpreted into digital light displayed on a screen. This interaction is complicated when altered algorithmically. Unlike the painting, the photograph bears no haptic trace, no definitive evidence of touch. I think of painting and the HDR image on a spectrum of media. This is not to claim that the painting of ruins is more authentic than the HDR image of them, but rather that the HDR image embodies an intensification of the implosion of sensation. Here, I think of Joseph Vogl's claim that, media "have the tendency to erase themselves and their constitutive sensory function, making themselves imperceptible and 'anesthetic'" (16). It is to these ends that I argue that HDR images of ruins can be thought of as anaesthetic. I must clarify that I am not suggesting that increasingly technologically based art practices are incapable of calling on affective experience, embodiment, and the sensuous, but simply that HDR images of ruins do not typically do so. This is also not to say that picturesque paintings of ruins are substantively more significant, or capable of signifying, than their HDR contemporary – but that they exist earlier in a genealogy of technology and visual culture that has overall, but not always, been increasingly anaesthetic. Tone mapped, HDR photographs of ruins (especially those generated automatically through firmware, filters and algorithms), results in composite images – "fragmentary impressions" in which we "see too much-and register nothing" (Buck-Morss 18). These, at once sensational but non-sensuous images, speak to Susan Buck-Morss's assertion that "the simultaneity of overstimulation and numbness is characteristic of the new synaesthetic organization as anaesthetics" (18).

Svetlana Boym asserts "a critical ruin gaze does not aestheticize history" (79). Here we realise that Boym's *ruinophilia* is in reference to a minority of visual depictions of ruins that "harks back not to nature but to the unfinished project of critical modernity" (80). Rather, the images that tend to be referred to as "ruin porn" embody what Arnold observes as an enduring "overinvestment in them as spectacles of our epoch" (334). While Boym's *ruinophilia* is distinct from the HDR images that circulate with little context in the online visual vernacular, her assertion that "we frame ruins, they frame us" (83) is potently relevant. In framing the abundance of the photographs of ruins as pornographic, their meaning to us becomes defined. While Boym's account of a critical ruin gaze opposes a "postmodern fascination for multiplicity and simulation" (80) the online circulation of images of decrepit and abandoned places demands it. The semiotic value of light, like linear perspective, has become so inscribed in visual culture that, in vulgar practice, it is simply a trope. The HDR image of ruin and the typical pornographic image share a certain continuity in their visual rhetoric: the subject is presented with little context, arguably objectified; lighting is strategically used to simultaneously render the subject glamorously and explicitly; the image is typically designed to be circulated. But, in arguing that HDR photos of ruins share certain aesthetic tropes with pornography, I am not necessarily asserting that these images are pornographic. Rather, I argue that, not unlike the majority of circulating images in the contemporary moment, HDR images of ruins are, in numerous ways stripped of an affective quality, though not entirely stripped of their affective character - here, I question whether the historically dialectical connotation of the ruin can possibly endure within these images. The labeling of certain images as "ruin porn" continues to be contested and debated within certain discourses concerning the material reality of ruins [9]. Images labeled as such, are typically done so because of their "superficial and one-eyed portrayal of urban decay that turns social and material misery into something seductive and aesthetically pleasing" (Pétursd—ttir and Olsen 7). However, this critique of these images - that they render the miserable into the pleasing - is one that can be leveled against mediation, more generally. I argue that the mediation of ruins needs to be considered as a phenomenon in its own right. Although absolutely connected with the material reality of ruins, it operates beyond the implications of the ruin itself. Here we are faced with the central tension of material and visual culture; while the two are co-constituting, they are not one in the same.

The HDR image, in its *hyperreal* rendering of light through numerous algorithmic interventions, collapses the sensual possibilities of visualisation into *simulacrum* – following Baudrillard's terms:, "this is what implosion signifies" (*Simulation and Simulacrum* 82). The ruin's material form, somewhere in between a state of endurance and decay, cannot be rendered or simply implied through high dynamic range. Stretching the poles between light and dark leads to "the absorption of one pole into another, the short circuiting of poles between every differential system of meaning ... the impossibility of any mediation"

(Baudrillard, *Simulation* 83). In an attempt to further emphasize the "shock of vanishing materiality" (Boym 58) that is excitable through ruins, expanding the dynamic range of the image only further anaesthetises it. The dynamic range rendered in the typical "surreal" image of abandoned places emulates a level of luminosity that the average human eye would not encounter when fixed on a scene. However, beyond the application of garishly aestheticising photos to the point of anaesthetisation, rendering dynamic ranges beyond human perception is thought to be useful in industrial machine vision applications (Darmont 7). So while I argue that the HDR image is already considerably anaesthetised in its removal from bodily sensation, HDR imagining for the purpose of machine vision furthers us into the realm of absolute "*automation of perception*" (Virilio *The Vision Machine*). In spite of light's seemingly enduring symbolic significance in visual culture, perhaps it is time that we reconsider the implications of its image. Paul Virilio asserts that there can be no politics at the speed of light – light, in this sense, connotes haste, mediation, and separation. In the case of HDR images of ruins, tone mapping becomes yet another layer of visualisation through which experience is manipulated, mediated, and distanced. Light is the means through which we can experience phenomena at great distances from our bodies – the intensely tone mapped HDR image of ruins, does not function as a "site of contemplation" as that ruin once had. The facets of the material ruin that were extended into its visual significations in painting – for instance the dialectical tension between the past and present, immateriality and materiality, etc. – cannot be assumed to operate in the same way that they once had. The highly aestheticised images that circulate online are rather emblematic of the great distances between us, and the distance between the material reality of the ruin and its image in the contemporary moment.

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Endnotes

1. See, for example, Buzzfeed's "The 33 Most Beautiful Abandoned Places In The World" (2013). www.buzzfeed.com/awesomer/the-33-most-beautiful-abandoned-places-in-the-world#.rf5XWPD4bd

2. See, for example, Buzzfeed's "17 Surreally Creepy Abandoned Places Around The World" (2014). www.buzzfeed.com/adamdavis/surreally-creepy-abandoned-places-around-the-world#.frjjxGbdZ

3. See Arnold (2015), hoogland (2014), Leary (2011), Mullins (2012), and Pétursd—ttir and Olsen (2014), amongst others, for a more substantive discussion on the term "ruin porn" in reference to images of urban blight.

4. See, for example, *Optical Media* (Kittler, 2010), section two, "Technologies of the Fine Arts", and *Techniques of the Observer* (Crary, 1998).

5. An obvious exception being paintings of ruins showing destruction in progress, for example John Marten's "The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum" (1822). However, even in these depictions of past catastrophic events, the rhetoric of progress can still be considered evident in the contemporary visual culture of these paintings – in the fact that humanity endured.

6. Brian Dillion, the curator of the show, was absolutely aware of the similarities between Virilio's image and the Wilsons' image considering that he refers to Virilio's *Bunker Archaeology* in the work *Ruins* (2011).

7. See, for example, Darmont (2012), who cites slide film as having a range of 8-stops (250:1 contrast); negative film with 11 f-stops (2,000:1 contrast); and "normal digital cameras" as ranging from

"below 8 f-stops to above 11 f-stops" (6).

8. This statement is not meant to undermine the push of art movements, aesthetic theory and visual culture studies to be more inclusive of other experiences (i.e. feminist aesthetics, more-than-human discourses, affect theory, etc.), but rather, asserts that popular culture is still predominantly occupied with linear (visual) perspectival mediations.

9. See, for example, the first issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*, featuring Þóra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen's "Imaging Modern Decay: The Aesthetics of Ruin Photography" (2014) and the subsequent responses.

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