

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

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## **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.

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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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- SW 3* (2002), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 3, 1935-1938*, Eiland, H., and Jennings, M.W., (eds.), trans. Eiland, H., and Jephcott, E.F.N., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England.
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