



Thea Stevens

MEMORY RUBBLE

Fragments of memory. The bleep of a text message, a bleary early-morning glance at words that make no sense. 'I'm really sorry, I've just heard about L'Aquila.' A sudden bolt-upright, a grab to the laptop, the internet connection too slow. A feeling of the earth fracturing. Which it had done a few hours before, over one thousand miles away.

Early in the morning of April 6th 2009, a massive earthquake ripped through the fabric of L'Aquila, the regional capital of Abruzzo, and the smaller settlements around it. Later, after frantic, short calls, news started to filter through. Many residents had already been sleeping in their cars, made anxious by smaller seismic ripples in the days before. But many remained in their homes. In L'Aquila and its satellites, over three hundred people died. In the space of a few moments, buildings both historic and modern ripped, fragmented and fell.

'He said that rubble came up to *here*.' Five years later, Agnese is describing her husband's movements as he and other members of the first relief squads picked their way through streets still smarting from the aftershocks. What is more difficult for her to express, still, was the territory of her imagination as she waited for news. They had felt it hard in their home town of Rieti, forty miles away, but for Agnese, the journey was internal – as a student, she had spent ten years in L'Aquila, and one version of home had gone. Like so many others who had moved geographically and chronologically, she

struggled to configure a new reality as her husband and his colleagues returned, unable to fully articulate what they had seen.

The story atomises into the jigsaw vision that we see as we move towards the limits of the *zona rossa*. While the crystal blue skies expose the ragged edges of their silhouettes, many buildings of the old historic centre stand proud to the naked eye; only a closer examination reveals the massive metal staples holding the walls into some semblance of a structure. The now-rusted padlocks and chains on doors speak of the forced wariness that the inhabitants of L'Aquila still need to exert towards the fabric of their former lives. After all, many of the funds promised by Berlusconi's government, unsurprisingly, have slipped through the cracks. The paving stones of the piazza are rendered a smaller mosaic by the intricate scarification of the seismic ripples. Monumental cathedrals of scaffolding, in themselves starkly beautiful, prop walls apart in the narrow streets. The only firm solids, it seems, now lie in the voids.

We associate the ruin with the sublimation of disaster, of human existence disordered by external forces. As such, it exerts a powerful hold on the imagination; to a great extent, it is this that has been focalised within studies, and rightly so. In my own rhetoric of research and teaching, I've explored this seductive strand of the de-materialised, goggle-eyed at the sublime, empty beauty that it releases. But now I require myself to face it head-on; for like Agnese, I had spent a formative period in L'Aquila, and like her, it was the first time I had brought myself to view its remains.

For her, the trip is emotional, characterised by the loss of friends, of familiar mindscapes, of certainty.



For me, separated from L'Aquila by years of change, it is a curiously abstract exercise. In the months after the quake, in a strangely objective *dérive*, I had walked its empty streets in my dreams. Would the experience of these well-remembered arteries now allow me to test my own reaction to the potent aesthetic of ruin?

We stroll, we talk. 'Did you hear that Fabio threw his kids out of the window? The house simply folded.' 'Cristiano said that the only thing left of the shop was a scarf perched on a pile of rubble.' 'He went to one of the encampments, 'cept there were no tents left. He said two bushes and some propped newspaper sort of did the trick, but it was sodding freezing.' Laughter. But then the experience subtly shifts. We find ourselves drawn down Agnese's old street, swept more or less clear, and just as we think we probably can't, shouldn't, go any further, we find the access fences stashed to one side. And another absence enables something truly unexpected: someone's removed the iron gate, and the staircase up to the flat – overgrown, sure, but open – lies before us. 'We cannot un-see', I comment, to thin air. Agnese's already



marching up the steps.

Outside, the house, tiny, is corsetted by its steel girdles; inside, it is anatomised. Crockery lies smashed, the furniture are burdened with dust and now, as we stand gazing, they are layered with experiences we thought forgotten. Later, Maurice Halbwach's prescient words haunt me: 'The nation may be prone to the most violent upheavals...But all these troubles take place in a familiar setting that appears totally unaffected' (Halbwachs, 1950). But what is unsettling here is how memory fluctuates. Was the house *really* like that? It feels configured slightly differently in my remembrance, much more real in its present abandon. As I raise the camera, the curious hollowness of my reaction makes of my eye a viewfinder.

We cannot un-see. But we can choose not to record. We leave the house and, with few words, we trace our way onwards. As we reach an area that was always quiet and now silent, we squeeze our way through a fence which is half-open, not fully forbidden but a warning. The camera is placed back into the open bag. Walls gape,



mattresses slump through half-missing floors, fridge doors hang open. It is not the enticement of entropy, but an open wound, with the detritus of everyday lives coalescing with the rubble.

As we return to Rieti that evening, and as I look at the photographs, the implications of what I have on my camera take me beyond whatever test I had set myself. I am glad, to the core, that the images stop at the limits of what I can comprehend in terms of human empathy. But while L'Aquila had always been beautiful, it seems even more so now in the shattered state framed inexorably by the photographic lens. And while for Agnese it was the purity of loss that brought out that beauty, for me the images fall into a trap set by my own prior aesthetic responses to ruin imagery. 'Abjection is something that disgusts you,' commented Julia Kristeva (1982). But it is not the scarred streets of L'Aquila that elicit this reaction: it is my own compromised gaze.

The experience does not seem to enter into the measured aesthetic of the photographic image. Yet photographs, and film, are the means of materialising the detritus of the territory of memory,



and their power cannot and should not be discounted. After all, there are few other means of bringing the rubble of disaster into some kind of afterlife; in a kind of inversion of Walter Benjamin's aura, they confer meaning, and impact, to that which in its previous state may have been ordinary, or at least familiar.

As I return to Glasgow, I start to assemble my thoughts on images against which I might position these anxious fragments of inquiry. In fact, I had started beforehand; a few days prior to my visit to L'Aquila, I visited the Tate Britain exhibition that took its title and core themes from the *ruinenlust* recoined by Rose Macaulay in 1953 – a time, of course, ineffably informed by the immense visual impact created by the devastation of war and its aftermath. What this raises is the cultural and contextual specificity of how ruins are regarded. As Leo Mellor observes in relation to the bombsites of Britain, dealing with such sites of memory 'is thus to be aware of the shifting paradigms of what history – and literary history and culture – chooses to unearth or forget about the materiality of cities' (Mellor, 2011). In the case of L'Aquila, is this 'aesthetic value of the ruin', put so eloquently by

Georg Simmel (1911), mine, or anyone's, to 'unearth'?

As I explain this present piece of writing to Agnese, she is quite perplexed as to why the rhetoric of the ruin can be one of such fascination to me and those in my context – '*da voi*', as she puts it, thus distancing herself in some amusement. When I frame ruin lust to her in terms of the notion of the sublime, not least within the context of travellers' reactions to Italy, the Grand Tour, Pompeii, and so on, it feels rather as if I am making excuses. And in fact we immediately reminisce further about our trip – 'do you remember seeing the tour group?' – and I find myself explaining the concept of dark tourism, the pull of the abjected gaze. 'Well,' she comments, wisely, pulling us back to the patchwork of fragments and minimal restoration that is L'Aquila today, 'let's face it, they need all the income they can get.'

Maybe it is this idea of focalising a *useful* gaze that elevates the photography of ruins and of ruined things to something more than the sum of its parts. The fascination of entropy can take us beyond 'the threshold of discomfort and aversion...to other ways of knowing' (DeSilvey 2006). But in the majority of cases, let us be clear, it is the *image* we are looking at, not the ruin itself. Even more interesting is how the seductive quality of these scraps of the dematerialised can be checked against the wild proliferation of such photographs on the internet; over five million google hits for 'abandoned places', and for the vast majority of viewers, how else can we consume these sites of memory if not by means of the exquisite visual qualities of the downloadable jpeg? It is perhaps not surprising that the definition 'ruin porn' has been applied, not least in relation to the astonishingly beautiful yet deeply problematic images epitomised by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's *Ruins of Detroit* (2010), which in themselves have generated legions of imitators.

But maybe it is unfair to phrase a deep human fascination in these reductive terms. Carl Lavery and Lee Hassall (2015) recently examined the concept of 'ruin porn' in relation to images of Hashima Island in Japan, reacting, for instance, to the work Póra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen (2014). In a careful counterargument, they propose that ruin photographs do not serve to bring 'us closer to things' (an 'active' quality which they argue to be inherent to the definition of 'pornography') or produce an 'affective performance', but instead offer their spectator 'a decidedly theatrical pleasure, a kind of fetishistic *jouissance* that does little to disturb or rearrange our normative, sequential ways of being in time'. For Lavery at least, ruin photographs rendered him 'stuck in an endless and repetitive present that told me little about the past and asked nothing of the future' (Lavery and Hassell, 2015).

Maybe this is where my particular 'ruin photographs' fall through the gaps within this discourse. They might evoke the compositional 'norms' of the ruin image "industry", but they are a materialisation of specific memory fragments, fully meaningful only to the person who produced them. In fact it is revealing that at the time of our visit to L'Aquila, Agnese and I agree initially that the images go no further; they are purely for our internal consumption. But then, afterwards, this shifts. Because I am able to treat them as abstractions of experience, they 'fit' into my own internal academic canon – and Agnese is intrigued enough to let me do what I will with them. They function differently for each of us, oscillating between a desire to intellectually understand and a desire to empathetically comprehend, and then to move on. We cannot un-see, but these visual renderings open up a territory of the imagination.

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