Nostalgia for Ruins

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The dictionary defines nostalgia as “homesickness” or a “longing for something far away or long ago.”¹ The word is made up of the Greek nostos = home and algos = pain. Nostalgia’s primary meaning has to do with the irreversibility of time: something in the past is no longer accessible. Since the European seventeenth century, with the emergence of a new sense of temporality increasingly characterized by the radical asymmetries of past, present, and future, nostalgia as a longing for a lost past has developed into the modern disease per se.² This predominantly negative coding of nostalgia within modernity is easily explained: nostalgia counteracts, even undermines linear notions of progress, whether they are framed dialectically as philosophy of history or sociologically and economically as modernization. But nostalgic longing for a past is always also a longing for another place. Nostalgia can be a utopia in reverse. Temporality and spatiality are necessarily linked in nostalgic desire. The architectural ruin is an example of the indissoluble combination of spatial and temporal desires that trigger nostalgia. In the body of the ruin the past is both present in its residues and yet no longer accessible, making the ruin an especially powerful trigger for nostalgia.

The cult of ruins has accompanied Western modernity in waves since the eighteenth century. But over the past decade and a half, a strange obsession with ruins has developed in the countries of the northern transatlantic as part of a much broader discourse about memory and trauma, genocide and war. This contemporary obsession with ruins hides a nostalgia for an earlier age that had not yet lost its power to imagine other futures. At stake is a nostalgia for modernity that dare not speak its name after acknowledging the catastrophes of the twentieth century and the lingering injuries of inner and outer colonization. Yet this nostalgia persists, straining for something lost with the ending of an earlier form of modernity. The cipher for this nostalgia is the ruin.

The Ruin Craze

At a time when the promises of the modern age lie shattered like so many ruins, when we speak with increasing frequency both literally and metaphorically of the ruins of modernity, a key question arises for cultural history: What shapes our
imaginary of ruins in the early twenty-first century, and how has it developed historically? How can we speak of a nostalgia for ruins as we remember the bombed out cities of World War II (Rotterdam and Coventry, Hamburg and Dresden, Warsaw, Stalingrad, and Leningrad). Bombings, after all, are not about producing ruins. They produce rubble. But then the market has recently been saturated with stunning picture books and films (documentary and fictional; e.g., The Downfall, 2004) of the ruins of World War II. In them, rubble is indeed transformed, even aestheticized, into ruin.

Nostalgia is at stake in the northern transatlantic when one looks at the decaying residues of the industrial age and its shrinking cities in the industrial heartlands in Europe, the former Soviet Union, the United States, and elsewhere: abandoned auto factories in Detroit; the monstrous blast furnaces of former steelworks in the Ruhr, now incorporated into public parks; the gigantic coal-steel conglomerates in Eastern Europe surrounded by ghost towns, ciphers of the end of socialism; and so on. Such ruins and their representation in picture books, films, and exhibits are a sign of the nostalgia for the monuments of an industrial architecture of a past age that was tied to a public culture of industrial labor and its political organization. We are nostalgic for the ruins of modernity because they still seem to hold a promise that has vanished from our own age: the promise of an alternative future. Such nostalgia for the ruins of the modern can be called reflective in Svetlana Boym’s sense and refutes historian Charles Maier’s pithy pronouncement that nostalgia is to memory like kitsch is to art. “Reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space. . . . [It] reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection.”

The present fascination with industrial ruins raises other questions. To what extent is the contemporary love affair with ruins in the countries of the northern transatlantic still energized by an earlier imagination that had fastened on to the ruins of classical antiquity? And what is the relation of this imaginary of ruins to the obsession with urban preservation, remakes, and retrofashions, all of which seem to express a fear or denial of the ruination by time? Our imaginary of ruins can be read as a palimpsest of multiple historical events and representations, and the intense concern with ruins is a subset of the current privileging of memory and trauma both inside and outside the academy.

Given this overdetermination in the way we imagine and conceptualize ruins, can something like an “authentic” ruin of modernity be the subject of reflective nostalgia? An answer can be found in the imaginary of ruins that developed in the
eighteenth century’s *querelle des anciens et des modernes* and was carried forth in romanticism and privileged in the nineteenth-century search for national origins, only to end up in the ruin tourism of the present. The work of Giovanni Battista Piranesi stands as one of the most radical articulations of the ruin problematic *within* modernity rather than *after* it. My interest in Piranesi and his ruins may well be itself nostalgic—nostalgic, that is, for a secular modernity that had a deep understanding of the ravages of time and the potential of the future, the destructiveness of domination and the tragic shortcomings of the present; an understanding of modernity that—from Piranesi and the romantics to Baudelaire, the historical avant-garde, and beyond—resulted in emphatic forms of critique, commitment, and compelling artistic expression. Here, as in any form of nostalgia, it is difficult to walk the line between sentimental lament over a loss and the critical reclaiming of a past for the purposes of constructing alternative futures. But Piranesi may have lessons for us as we reflect upon the loss of an earlier modernity and its visions of alternative futures.

My interest in coupling the abstract concept of authenticity with the concreteness of ruins and their imaginary is based on the idea that both the ruin in its emphatic sense and the notion of the authentic are central topoi of modernity itself rather than simply concerns of the late twentieth century. Modernity as ruin was a topos well before the twentieth century and most certainly before postmodernism. The authentic ruin is not to be understood as some ontological essence of ruins but as a significant conceptual and architectural constellation that points to moments of decay, falling apart, and ruination already present in the beginnings of modernity in the eighteenth century. Just as the imaginary of ruins was created in early modernity rather than being modernity’s end product, the notion of authenticity is a thoroughly historical concept produced, like nostalgia itself, by modernity rather than referring to an atemporal transcendent essence or to some premodern state of grace. Tied in literature and art to eighteenth-century notions of authorship, genius, originality, selfhood, uniqueness, and subjectivity, the idea of authenticity accumulated desires and intensities the more it was threatened by alienation, inauthenticity, and reproducibility during the course of modernization. As a term in that broader semantic field, *authenticity* had its heyday in the second half of the twentieth century together with the boom in nostalgias of all kinds, and it has its currency today in retro-authenticity, authentic remakes, and the Web’s “authenticity consulting,” all phenomena which implicitly deny what they claim to be. At the same time, authenticity has fallen on hard times in intellectual discourse. From Adorno to Derrida authenticity has been disparaged as ideology or metaphysics, tied to
Nevertheless, I am not ready to abandon the concept altogether, and I take comfort in the fact that even Adorno, one of the most radical critics of a specific post-1945 form of Eigentlichkeit, still spoke of the authenticity of modernist art as radical negation. His is a notion of the authentic aware of its own historicity. Similarly, I will locate the “authentic ruin” of modernity in the eighteenth century, and I will suggest that this earlier imaginary of ruins still haunts our discourse about the ruins of modernity in general. At the same time, I acknowledge that the twentieth century has produced a very different imaginary of ruins that has made that earlier authentic ruin obsolete. Even genuine (“echt” rather than authentic) ruins have metamorphosed. The element of decay, erosion, and a return to nature so central to eighteenth-century ruins and their nostalgic lure is eliminated when Roman ruins are sanitized and used as mise en scène for open-air opera performances (Terme di Caracalla in Rome); when medieval castle ruins or dilapidated estates from later centuries are restored to yield conference sites, hotels, or vacation rentals (the Paradores of Spain, the Landmark Trust in the United Kingdom); when industrial ruins are made over into cultural centers; or when a museum like the Tate Modern installs itself in a decommissioned power plant on the south bank of the Thames. Authenticity seems to have become part of museal preservation and restoration, a fact that can only increase nostalgia.

“Authentic ruins,” as they still existed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, seem no longer to have a place in late capitalism’s commodity and memory culture. As commodities, things in general don’t age well. They become obsolete, are thrown out or recycled. Buildings are torn down or restored. The chance for things to age and to become ruin has diminished in the age of turbo capitalism, ironically in step with the continuing rise in the average age of the populace. The ruin of the twenty-first century is either detritus or restored age. In the latter case, real age has been eliminated by a reverse face-lifting. The new is made to look old rather than the old made to look young. Repro- and retrofashions make it increasingly hard to recognize that which is genuinely old in this culture of preservation and restoration. The German writer and filmmaker Alexander Kluge once spoke tellingly of “the attack of the present on the rest of time.”

**Authenticity and Nostalgia**

If in the late twentieth century, as Lyotard has claimed, architecture and philosophy lay in ruins, leaving us with only the option of a “writing of the ruins” as a kind of micrology, then the question arises whether the whole tradition of modernist thought
all the way into postmodernism isn’t overshadowed by a catastrophic imagination and an imaginary of ruins that has accompanied the trajectory of modernity since the eighteenth century. Architecture in decay or a state of destruction seems to be an indispensable topos for this tradition. Real ruins of different kinds function as projective screens for modernity’s articulation of asynchronous temporalities and for its fear of and obsession with the passing of time. If, as Benjamin said, allegory in the realm of thought corresponds to the ruin in the realm of things, then this implies a production principle of modern art, literature, and architecture that is a priori directed toward the ruinous. For Adorno, in analogous fashion, the most authentic works of modernity are those that are objectively and formally determined by the ruinous state of the present. The architectural ruin seems to hover in the background of an aesthetic imagination that privileges fragment and aphorism, collage and montage, freedom from ornament and reduction of the material. Perhaps this is the secret classicism of modernism that, however different from eighteenth-century classicism in its coding of temporality and space, is still predicated on an imaginary of ruins. Classicism in Winckelmann and Goethe’s times constituted itself through the ruins of antiquity, but it aimed at the totality of style rather than privileging montage, dispersion, and fragmentariness as modernism would later do. One doesn’t have to accept a metaphysics of history in order to see the field of classical modernism as a fascinating and oscillating landscape of ruins left from a failed attempt to create an alternative kind of totality that in architecture went under the name of the International Style.

As a product of modernity rather than a phenomenon from a deep premodern past, authenticity is analogous to Benjamin’s aura. Originality and uniqueness, which characterize the auratic work of art in Benjamin, were made into privileged categories in the romantic age that was already flooded by reproductions, translations, and copies of all kinds. Analogously, the ideological value of authenticity rose in proportion to print culture’s inherent tendency to reproduction and repetition. Even in the transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist mode of production, we can detect the attempt to return the semblance of authenticity and uniqueness to commodities by way of customization. Aura and authenticity are analogous to each other. Both have to be framed historically rather than ontologically. Modernist decisionism declared both of them dead and gone, but both have proven to be quite resistant to all manner of ideology critique. The desire for the auratic and the authentic has always reflected the fear of inauthenticity, the lack of existential meaning, and the absence of individual originality. The more we learn to understand all images, words, and sounds as always already mediated, the more, it seems, we
desire the authentic and the immediate. The mode of that desire is nostalgia. A gap opens up between intellectual insight into the obsolescence of the concept and the lifeworld’s desire for the authentic. The longing for authenticity is the media and commodity culture’s romantic longing for its other. Reality TV is its pathetic expression. Authentic cuisine, authentic clothing, authentic identities of any and all kinds follow suit. The positing of stable origins and of a historical telos is never far when the authenticity tune is being played. The same is true for the discourse of ruins that has played such a central role in legitimizing the claims to power by modern nation states.

Indeed, romantic ruins guaranteed origins and promised authenticity, immediacy, and authority. However, there is a paradox. In the case of ruins that which is allegedly present and transparent whenever authenticity is claimed is present only as an absence; it is the imagined present of a past that can now only be grasped in its decay. This makes the ruin subject to nostalgia. Even if the modern ruin is not exhausted by the semantics of pastness, its temporality, which points to past glory and greatness, is different from the claims to plenitude and presentness invariably at stake in the discourse of authenticity. Authenticity claims, however, are often contaminated by doubts that then have to be compensated by further mythmaking. Thus some would claim that authentic authenticity was possible only in past ages when the world was allegedly still more transparent and not under the shadow of mass-media representation and distortion. We know what kind of ideological phantasms such projections of authenticity have caused in anthropology and other cultural sciences—the authenticity of the archaic and primitive, the privileging of authentic community, the anomie and artificiality of modern societies. Especially in the post-Enlightenment invention of origins and national identities, the present of modernity appeared (more often than not) as a ruin of authenticity and of a better and simpler past. Against this idea of a deep authenticity embodied in the ruins of a glorified past, I posit the idea of the authentic ruin as product of modernity itself rather than as royal road toward some uncontaminated origin.

Nostalgia is never far when we talk about authenticity or about romantic ruins. The political critique of the nostalgia for ruins simply as regression corresponds to the philosophical critique of authenticity as a phantasm grounding stable identities. But such a critique misses the fundamental ambiguity of the ruin, of nostalgia, and of the authentic. However justified it may be to criticize the nostalgia markets and their ideological instrumentalization of authenticity claims, it will not do to simply identify the desire for authenticity with nostalgia and to dismiss it as a cultural disease, as Susan Stewart argues in her book On Longing.9 Neither will it...
do to understand the modern imagination of ruins and its link with the sublime as expressing nothing but fantasies of power and domination, though that is indeed the case for Albert Speer’s theory of ruin value. The dimension present in any imaginary of ruins but missed by such reductive critiques is the hardly nostalgic consciousness of the transitoriness of all greatness and power, the warning of imperial hubris, and the remembrance of nature in all culture.

At stake with the “authentic ruin of modernity” is not simply the genuineness (Echtheit) of specific ruins; nor is it some suprahistorical memento mori. Genuine ness as naturalness in opposition to artificiality and the fake—a topos central to eighteenth-century aesthetics and middle class culture—is an empirically verifiable criterion of the ruin, and the memento mori dimension is not limited to modernity. We can speak of the modern authenticity of ruins only if we look at the ruin aesthetically and politically as an architectonic chiffre for the temporal and spatial doubts that modernity has always harbored about itself. In the ruin, history appears spatialized and built space temporalized. An imaginary of ruins is central for any theory of modernity that wants to be more than the triumphalism of progress and democratization or longing for a past power of greatness. As against the optimism of Enlightenment thought, the modern imaginary of ruins remains conscious of the dark side of modernity, that which Diderot described as the inevitable “devastations of time” visible in ruins. It articulates the nightmare of the Enlightenment that all history might ultimately be overwhelmed by nature, a fear succinctly represented in Goya’s famous etching El sueño de la razón produce monstruos.

**Giovanni Battista Piranesi**

The ambiguity of Goya’s title is well-known. “El sueño de la razón” means both the dream and the sleep of reason, thus pointing to what later came to be known as the dialectic of the Enlightenment. A third reading is possible, however. Imagine that the figure, dreaming or having fallen asleep at his table upon which we see the utensils of his writing, is the artist imagining the other of reason, imagining that which will become the etching—its swarm of owl-like, nefarious monsters crowding his imagination. Assume Goya’s figure is Piranesi at the moment of dreaming the shape of ruins as they will come alive
in his etchings. Putting the emphasis on sueño as fantasy and representation rather than simply sleep or utopian anticipation permits a reading of Piranesi as the creator of an authentic imaginary of ruins that reveals something central to modernity and its representations.

Piranesi’s etchings from the middle of the age of Enlightenment point toward a critical and alternative understanding of modernity that always stood against the naive belief in progress and the moral improvement of mankind. Although Piranesi’s nightmarish image world had a strong influence on romantic literature, romantic images of ruins in the nineteenth century mostly tended toward domesticating and beautifying ruins by way of the picturesque. It is no coincidence that Piranesi’s work was emphatically rediscovered in the twentieth century, often in the context of reductively realistic claims that his Carceri anticipated the univers concentrationnaire of fascism or Communism’s gulag or that his etchings articulated the existential exposure and cast-out state of the modern individual in the face of overwhelming systems as described in Kafka’s novels. Ignored by such readings was the inner connection between Piranesi’s fantasies of incarceration and the major part of his work: his archival documentation of the architectural ruins of the Roman Empire. Art historians tended to read the Carceri as the bizarre work of the artist as a young man, while focusing on Piranesi’s role in the eighteenth-century quarrel over whether the architecture of Athens or that of Rome should have pride of place. This question was surely central to Piranesi’s archival work in and around Rome, but exclusive focus on this debate does not pay tribute to the fact that the various reworkings of the Carceri spanned most of Piranesi’s working life. It also fails to make much of the fact that the later versions of the Carceri are visually close to the etchings of Roman ruins. With the help of an alternative body of Piranesi scholarship, especially the work of Ulya Vogt-Göknül, Piranesi’s imaginary of ruins can be adequately understood only if his archive-driven etchings of Roman ruins are read together with the fantasy-driven spaces of his architecture of incarceration. Only then can one speak of an authentic imaginary of ruins in a precise historical sense. Piranesi’s ruins and his jails are artifice through and through. That is what constitutes their authenticity within his rather dark vision of a modernity still much in the shadows of a glorious Roman past. It is an authenticity that is captured by Adorno: “The proof of the tour de force, the realization of the unrealizable, could be adduced from the most authentic works.”

What else are the Carceri if not unrealizable as architecture
and tour de force as drawing? For Piranesi and for Adorno, who never wrote about this Italian artist, the refusal of wholeness and classical closure is the sign of authenticity. Authentic ruins in Piranesi and authentic artworks in Adorno point to an absence, the utopia that cannot be named in Adorno, the nightmarish dystopia that is inscribed into the utopia of neoclassicism in Piranesi. The tour de force in Piranesi's craft points to that moment of coercion and violence implicit in all authenticity as carrier of authority. Authentic works for Adorno are fragmentary works whose achievement must be located in their lack of completion and whose "failure [is] the measure of their success," works such as those by Lenz, Hölderlin, Kleist, or Büchner "that succumbed to the terror of idealism's scorn." At first popular in France and England, Piranesi's etchings, both of the Carceri and of the antique ruins, eventually suffered a similar fate and fell into oblivion only to be rediscovered after World War II. For the nineteenth-century ideologues of the classical tradition they were not reconcilable with a post-Winkelmannian idea of classicism, and they didn't allow for Matthew Arnold's vision of antiquity as sweetness and light.

The height of authentic architecture for Piranesi was the monumental Roman temples, palaces, triumphal arches, and tombs of the Via Appia. In his many volumes of etchings, from the Prima Parte di Architetture, e Prospettive (1743) and the Varie Vedute di Roma (1743) to the four volumes of Le Antichità Romane (1756) and Della Magnificenza ed Architettura de' Romani (1761), he captured their overgrown residues with archival precision and in a decidedly unique style. Even in decay, the monumentality and sublimity of these ruins of the past were more impressive than the miserable present that denied the trained architect Piranesi any real possibility to build in grand style. Piranesi mobilized all available visual tricks to achieve the monumental mise en scène of those ruins. In the dedication to Prima Parte di Architetture of 1743 he writes, "Io vi dirò solamente, che di tali immagini mi hanno riempito lo spirito queste parlanti ruine, che di simili non arrivai a poter..."
mene mai formare sopra i disegni, benchè accuratissimi, che di queste stesse ha fatto l’immortale Palladio, e che io pur sempre mi teneva innanzi agli occhi.” [I would only say that these speaking ruins have filled my spirit with images of a kind which even precise drawings such as those by the immortal Palladio, which I always kept before my eyes, can never conjure up.]

At stake here is the subjective effect achieved by the representation, the production of phantasms that the ruins bring to life. Speaking ruins flood the senses with architectonic images that include not only the views of antique Rome but also the Carceri. Especially in their second, significantly darker version, the Carceri show close affinities with the etchings of antique ruins. In their spatial configuration, the Carceri belong with Piranesi’s imagined antiquity rather than with the concentration camps of the twentieth century or the panoptic jails of modern industrial societies. Roman architectural elements such as arcades of columns, broad flights of stairs, large portrait busts, tomb sculptures, and Latin inscriptions fill Piranesi’s vast jails down to their distant corners. In their style of representation, however, the Carceri as well as the overgrown ruins of Rome itself belong with a present-day modernity, and not just that of the eighteenth century.

Despite all affinities, Piranesi’s views of Roman ruins are ultimately distinguished from the prison etchings and stand in productive tension with them. The ruins are located in an outside, in the urban landscape of Rome and its environs, the Campagna. Their erosion and natural decay point to that central aspect of the imaginary of ruins that Georg Simmel has emphasized best: the return of architecture to nature.

What appears all too romantically as a reconciliation of spirit and nature in Simmel, however, assumes features of the uncanny in Piranesi. Masonry and soil are organically coupled and made to look as if the ruins have grown out of the innards of the earth. In their erosion, some of the buildings appear like sublimely threatening and inhospitable rock formations. Mysteriously and uncannily these eroding and decaying monuments and remnants of gigantic buildings tower over
a dwarflike present. The voices of the dead appear to speak through Piranesi's ruin images. Instead of nature morte, Piranesi created an architettura morta, which not only reminds the present of its own transitoriness but seems to include a warning about a culturally destructive forgetting of the past. While his etchings of antique remnants focus on the intertwining of nature and architecture in decay, the Carceri present, as it were, pure architectural spaces far from all nature, complex interior halls that seem to be partly ruins, partly unfinished buildings.

This impression is exacerbated by the fact that spatial constrictions typical of any prison is not constituted by the absence of space but paradoxically by an opening up of space toward infinity.14 Passages, staircases, and halls seem to disperse in all directions and lack spatial closure. The possibility of an outside (even when not represented) is therefore not in principle excluded. Certainly, the natural light streaming into the prisons points indirectly to some outside space. The Carceri are so fascinating because both their temporality and their spatiality remain so indefinable. Just as the opposition of proximity and distance seems abolished in their confusing spatial arrangements, the borders between past, present, and future no longer seem to obtain. Even though Piranesi was influenced by baroque theater decorations for prison dramas, his mise-en-scène of the prisons has to be read primarily as a formal architectonic proposition rather than as a simple message about the condition humaine. Bruno Reudenbach put it well when he wrote, “We see illogical spatial structures not because the goal is to represent prisons. On the contrary, building on an already developed iconography of prisons, the Carceri represent experimental space.”15 Piranesi was interested in prisons as a model for a vast interior space whose representation allows the artist's architectonic fantasy to take off independent of any realistic limitations. As he had done in some of the architectonic fantasies of the Prima Parte, Piranesi canceled the laws of Euclidean...
space. Units of built space are connected atectonically and illogically. Any single etching requires several distinct perspectives so that the gaze of the spectator never comes to rest. The closer the spectator looks, the more his or her gaze is disturbed. In a detailed analysis of the architectural structure of the *Carceri*, Ulya Vogt-Göknil has shown how three-dimensional spaces evolve into two-dimensional planes, how depth dimensions are being pulled apart and breadth dimensions are being shrunk. Especially uncanny is the relationship between space and a kind of light that seems to produce darkness. Rays of light leave their natural trajectory. They bend and curve around things, sliding from one object to another, occasionally jumping over interstitial spaces. In all these instances, the walls seem to be sucking up the light instead of reflecting it. The rules of tectonics and central perspective are canceled. Horace Walpole noted of Piranesi: “He has imagined scenes that would startle geometry.” And Goethe in his *Italienische Reise* emphasized the difference between his perception of real ruins and Piranesi’s attempt to create effects through fabulation.

Contrary to certain claims, such observations must not be attributed to some inability or to simple playfulness on Piranesi’s part. Piranesi refused to represent homogeneous enlightened space in which above and below, inside and outside could be clearly distinguished. Instead he privileged arches and bridges, ladders and staircases, anterooms and passageways. While massive and static in their encasings, the prisons do suggest motion and transition, a back and forth, up and down that disturbs and unmors the gaze of the spectator. Instead of viewing limited spaces from a fixed-observer perspective and from a safe distance, the spectator is drawn into a proliferating labyrinth of staircases, bridges, and passageways that seem to lead into infinite depths left, right, and center. It is as if the spectator’s gaze is imprisoned by the represented space, lured in and captured because no firm point of view can be had as the eye wanders around in this labyrinth. Contrary to what Alexander Kupfer claims, this does not suggest that space and time lose all meaning. The lack of central perspective and a firm point of view, the proliferation of perspectives and unfolding of spaces must be read differently: Piranesi followed to their logical conclusion the spatialization of history and the temporalization of space that already characterized his etchings of antiquities. In his *Carceri d’invenzione*—the modifying noun is significant—times and spaces are shoved into each other, telescoped and superimposed as if in a palimpsest whereby this complex temporally fraying imagination of space becomes itself a prison of invention. Tour de force, as Adorno says of what are to him the most authentic works of art.

Manfredo Tafuri has argued that by breaking with the temporal and spatial
perspectivalism of the Renaissance, the Carceri d’invenzione already point toward basic principles of construction as developed much later by the cubists, constructivists, and surrealists. Equally important, however, is a fundamental difference between Piranesi and the historical avant-garde. Piranesi’s imagination is not energized by some constructive utopian ideal of multiperspectivalism and spatial fluidity (Eisenstein); nor does he privilege montage or the fragment in the same way. He rather remains haunted by the threatening aura of ruins, by their oppressive interlocking of past and present, nature and culture, death and life. The work undermines any enlightened and secure standpoint in the course of time and in the location in space, and it is quite distant from the avant-garde’s ethos of alternative futures. Ultimately, Piranesi’s prisons are also ruins, more authentic even than the Roman ruins of the Vedute di Roma. The irritating and threatening simultaneity of times and spaces, of condensed and displaced perspectives, which is exacerbated in the second version of the prison etchings by the increased presence of torture instruments, pushes the impression of uncanny space to an extreme only in the Carceri.

Conclusion
In their reciprocal tension and their obsessive intermingling of times and spaces, Piranesi’s prisons and ruins can be read as allegories of a modernity whose utopia of freedom and progress, linear time and geometric space they not only question but cancel out. A past embodied in ruined and memory-laden architecture seems to tower over the present of the age of Enlightenment. Piranesi’s imaginary of ruins is thus the product of an age that only slowly freed itself from the overwhelming ideal of classical antiquity. In its decay, antique architecture articulates that dialectical constellation of nature and history that posits the changeability and contingency of both nature and history instead of opposing blind mythological nature to history as enlightened ontological agency. Piranesi’s work thus belongs with a self-critical consciousness that has accompanied enlightened modernity from its beginning. The authenticity of Piranesi’s imaginary of ruins lies in this critical aesthetic consciousness and its articulation in terrifyingly beautiful etchings. If the etchings of decaying classical architecture point to a natural history of destruction in a Sebaldian mode, then the Carceri suggest a cultural history of incarceration in an infinite inner space that no longer has any outside—a critique of Romanticism avant la lettre.

Reading Piranesi through Adorno and through Benjamin’s concept of natural history, which is grounded in a philosophy of history, will also reveal the historical
The limits of this authentic imaginary of ruins. As a form of secularized theology with its rises and falls, declines and redemptions of cultures, the philosophy of history produced by the Enlightenment stands itself like a ruin in our twenty-first-century present. Analogously, Piranesi’s imaginary of ruins has itself become a ruin. Modernist architecture points to another historical boundary of an imaginary of ruins à la Piranesi. Concrete, steel, and glass building materials aren’t subject to erosion and decay the way stone is. Modernist architecture refuses the return of culture to nature. Furthermore, the real catastrophes of the twentieth century have mainly left rubble rather than ruins in Piranesi’s sense, even if some of that rubble has lent itself quite well to beautifying representations. The age of the “authentic ruin,” at any rate, is over; its genealogy can be written, but it cannot be resurrected. The present is an age of preservation, restoration, and authentic remakes, all of which cancel out the idea of the authentic ruin that has itself become historical. But Piranesi’s ruins are accessible to reflective nostalgia. They embody a dialectic of modernity that should be remembered as we try to imagine a future beyond the false promises of corporate neoliberalism and the globalized shopping mall. The future, not just of nostalgia, is at stake.
Notes
20. Tafuri, 55–64.