an incomplete ruin

It would seem superfluous to call a ruin “incomplete”: is it not part of the very definition of a ruin that it is a structure that somehow lacks something? A ruin must always miss out on plenitude: it is decayed, disintegrated, deteriorated, destroyed, imperfect. Hence the overwhelming stress on negativity or negation (in all senses of the term) in most reflections on ruination: ruins are associated with loss, with nostalgia, with absence, with all the ways in which the ruin falls short of completion. Over and over, the focus is on what is not there, what is missing and can only be conjured up through the imagination or memory. At best, the ruin conjures up ghosts, specters, dreams, or promises: insubstantial complements to its brute and senseless materiality. A ruin is a structure that has to be completed by other means: through discourse, narrative, story-telling. It seems to ask for the intervention of archaeology, history, or politics to tell us what these fragments mean, what is the whole to which on their own they do not quite add up. Indeed, a ruin only truly becomes a ruin (rather than a series of disaggregated parts) once it is taken up by such discursive formations. It is because they are incomplete that ruins cannot speak for themselves and have to be spoken for; they demand a supplement that will ensure their representability. They demand something else. This is how the ruin comes to appear the very figure of the dependency of the material on the immaterial, of narrative’s promise to make up for loss by some other means, of the subordination of the real to the word. It is the very figure of hegemony, of the way in which discrete fragments are taken up in larger signifying chains to give the illusion of wholeness.
But in fact it is the ruin itself that is supplement or surplus to requirements. Ruins are already “something else.” We find ruins where we expect to find nothing at all: in the jungle, on mountain tops, under the sea. Ruins are almost always somehow surprising: we stumble across them, often quite literally so, as their insistent presence checks our otherwise confident onward progress. Ruins can trip us up, force us to reassess or rethink what we understand about ourselves or our environs. And they do so because they are forcefully and unarguably present, whether or not they come with some pre-packaged discursive interpretation. From this perspective it is strange, even perverse, that ruination should have been so consistently associated with the negative: a ruin is a presence where we should expect absence, the remnant of a past that refuses to disappear, an often uncomfortable reminder that there were others here before us, whose traces are never fully erased. The logic of the ruin is not negation but addition: the present and the past are forced abruptly to coexist. In this sense, the ruin is the figure of the stubbornness of the real, its refusal to be silenced or coopted by any project of representation fixated upon the present. It is the very figure of posthegemony, of the way in which there is always something more, something that escapes and thereby undoes and disrupts any claim to wholeness.

It is not so much that the ruin is incomplete, as that it forces us to reconsider our assumptions about completeness, totality, and plenitude. The ruin is then itself a force of ruination: it ruins claims to completion, perfection, and self-sufficiency. The ruin is often claimed to constitute a judgment against the past, a record of the failure of previous cultures and civilizations. But in fact the reverse is equally true: ruins present a mute criticism of the present from the past, if only for the fact that the present has not (yet) managed to supersede that past. Or to put this another way: through the ruin, the past (however silently) castigates the present for not living up to the hopes and dreams of a previous age. The ruin is evidence of a missed encounter in which is not the past that disappoints, but we who disappoint the ruinous past.

Santiago’s Ochagavia hospital is an especially good figure of the ruin’s incompleteness, because this is a structure that was never complete. It is a structure whose construction was abandoned thanks to a political intervention that claimed to initiate a new start, to begin again in a country that was allegedly going off the rails. The Pinochet coup of September 11, 1973 claimed to block Salvador Allende’s “Chilean
Way to Socialism.” But therefore with this ruin it is not so much the past that has been interrupted, it is the future: the future towards which the “Chilean Way” was to lead. The crumbling walls of the hospital, which was to have been a centerpiece of Popular Unity’s welfare state, stand as quiet reproach, as an insistent reminder of what might have been. The ruin has proved useless for the purposes of the neoliberal capitalism that Pinochet’s regime ushered in—though there have been plans to convert the structure into apartment or shops, little (so far) has ever come of them. As such, this is a ruin that is not the foundation for the present, but rather for a future that still has yet to arrive. In the meantime, it is a structure that stubbornly refuses to be overcoded or written over. It seems to resist any attempt to complete it, any attempt to articulate its meaning within a hegemonic project. It is evidence of a utopian impulse that goes beyond the bounds of present strictures and disappointments.

*utopia*

Fredric Jameson distinguishes what he calls “two distinct lines” of utopianism: “the one intent on the realization of the Utopian program, the other an obscure yet omnipresent Utopian impulse finding its way to the surface in a variety of covert expressions and practices” (*Archaeologies of the Future* 3). We might call the first, programmatic, utopianism hegemonic: the attempt to articulate and realize a hegemonic project. The second, “more obscure and more various” (Jameson 3) utopianism would then be posthegemonic. Jameson finds it in the most unlikely of places: “liberal reforms and commercial pipedreams, the deceptive yet tempting swindles of the here and now” and so on and so forth. But what could be a more unlikely home for utopia than the ruin? The entire discourse of ruination tells us that ruins are dead-ends and cul-de-sacs, brutally pragmatic reminders of dreams smashed and hopes subverted. It is as though ruins were warning us to respect our limits, to accommodate ourselves to the vagaries of time and the elements. Look on my works, ye utopians, and despair! A ruin seems to announce the victory of what is over what might have been and what some might imagine might be again. Ruins mark a geography of defeat. Moreover, ruins speak (we are told) not only of specific defeats, but of defeat in general. Hence, for Walter Benjamin, the link between ruins, allegory, and mourning. One ruin stands in for many defeats, and indeed for defeat as a whole. So Idelber Avelar, picking up on Benjamin’s
suggestions, claims in his study of post-dictatorial Latin American culture that “it is through the notion of ruins that the flourishing of allegory during times of political reaction can be best understood. [. . .] Allegory is the aesthetic face of political defeat [. . . and] ruins are the raw material that allegory possesses at its disposal” (*The Untimely Present* 69). If we are to maintain our utopian impulse, Avelar seems to say, then it would be best to turn our eyes from ruins. Is ruination then the limit to Jameson’s claim to find covert utopianism in even the most inhospitable of grounds?

But allegory does not exhaust ruination, and we might add that perhaps defeat does not exhaust allegory. There are always other stories to be told, other lessons to be drawn, even from the most ruined of projects, the most desolate of places. Again, this is because in the first place ruins are a testament to survival, to the fact that utopianism is never fully eliminated. It persists, and resists, in the stubborn insistence of its material traces. Or rather: the program may have disappeared, but the impulse remains. From hegemony, posthegemony. And the cunning of posthegemonic utopianism is precisely the way in which it installs itself in the cracks and crevices of an apparently-victorious pragmatic *real politik*. Utopia is like the dust that so-called realists can never quite shake from their shoes. It may be unconscious, as Jameson also suggests, but all the more powerful for that: what he calls “utopian corporeality” is “a haunting, which invests even the most subordinate and shamefaced products of everyday life” (*Archaeologies of the Future* 6). And though Jameson’s own examples come from commodity culture and biotechnology—“aspirins, laxatives, and deodorants, organ transplants and plastic surgery”—what could be more subordinate than the ruin, and more shamefaced than defeat? And yet it is precisely here, in the dust and detritus of hegemonic projects in ruins, that we can undertake an “archaeology of the future,” digging down among dead bones and stones to excavate political and social forms that are still to come, still even to be imagined.

For it is not only that there are always other stories to be told about ruins. There is also something in the ruins that resists narrative altogether. There was *always* something posthegemonic about a ruin, even before it entered into ruination. Another way to put this is that there is something of the ruin in every structure: the ruin haunts every edifice as an indication of another possible world. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of the Ochagavía hospital, which went straight from building site to ruin
without ever attaining even the aura of completion. It reminds us that it can be hard to
tell construction from destruction: an abandoned building site might well be an
archaeological dig. And so perhaps archaeology might be as good a foundation as any
for the task of building something new, something unforeseen.

Let us compare ruins. The most famous ruins of Pinochet’s 1973 coup are
undoubtedly those caused directly by the coup itself: the attack on La Moneda, the
presidential palace in the city centre. At around 11:55am in the late morning of
September 11, two Hawker Hunter aircraft began their bombardment of the building in
which president Allende had assembled his staff and a few loyalists. As Heraldo
Muñoz reports on the view from the inside, “a red-orange ball of fire erupted on the
ceiling and the explosion literally lifted several occupants up into the air” (The Dictator’s
Shadow 15). Oscar Guardiola-Rivera provides further details: “The attack went on for
over twenty minutes, during which the fighter jets hit the palace with at least eighteen
rockets. Ernesto Amador González, aka ‘The Bomber,’ fired the first rocket against La
Moneda, blasting the main gate of the palace. The second airplane followed, piloted by
Fernando Rojas Vender.” The vivid images of the destruction were spectacularly
captured by foreign news photographers and disseminated throughout the world. This
was the end of the socialist dream. But the damage itself was soon repaired, and the
building quite literally whitewashed. It is as though the new regime did not wish to
preserve this particular image of socialist defeat. La Moneda soon became unscrutable,
unreadable. The Ochagavía hospital may be unreadable in its own way, but for quite a
different reason: because it has plainly never been anything but ruin. For all the various
projects to put the structure to some new purpose (to incorporate it into some new
hegemonic project), it continues to resist its allegorization.

Ochagavía

I had spent a fair amount of time in the Chilean capital before I first heard of the
existence of the Hospital Ochagavía. It was not until, in 2002, I went to a small
exhibition at a suburban art gallery (the Galería Metropolitana) called “Geometría y
misterio de barrio,” “The Geometry and the Mystery of the Neighbourhood,” that it
cought my attention. The exhibition was a collaborative work organized by the Chilean
artist Juan Castillo, a former member of the neo-avantgarde group CADA (Colectivo de
Acciones de Arte). At the core of the piece was a series of interviews with the residents of a fairly non-descript area of metropolitan Santiago, Pedro Aguirre Cerda, the area in which the gallery itself was located. Nelly Richard describes the project as an effort to engage with the people in non-populist fashion. We might say then that it is an attempt to delineate something like the psychogeography of the multitude. Castillo’s preoccupation is with the memories and, particularly, the dreams that are to be uncovered in a very unremarkable place. The guiding question in each of the forty interviews that he undertook during his four-month residency in the neighbourhood was “What is your most important dream?” There is video and audio of the interviews. There are photographs of interviewees, of their homes, their living rooms, and objects of daily life. The exhibition was therefore an exercise in quasi-anthropological investigation of popular culture, and in what we might call “testimonio of the everyday.” But this nondescript everyday was transformed, in Castillo’s hands, into a zone of mystery and surprising discovery. Castillo’s point is that there is more to the place than meets the eye; or rather, that if only we used our eyes we would see things we would perhaps prefer not to acknowledge. So it was only appropriate that Castillo’s project turned out to have a ruin at its center: the Ochagavía hospital, an Allende-era project whose construction had been (permanently) interrupted by the Pinochet coup of 1973. Though I did not see this myself, as part of the exhibition some of the dreams recorded by Castillo were projected onto its concrete walls, which became literally the screen on which people’s desires, fantasies, and wishes were (however temporarily) inscribed. The image of this abandoned hospital, which I had still not visited, stayed with me, and on a subsequent trip to Chile I asked the exhibition’s curator, Luis Alarcón, to take me there and show me around.

The structure is both massively prominent and strangely hidden. It is near the center of the city, but it is not downtown and in terms of major roads and transport routes it is off the beaten track. It is marginal without in fact being on the margins. It is as though the hospital had been swallowed up by the city, but never fully digested by it. Standing in a suburb not far from the Chilean capital’s city center, it takes up several city blocks, but once you are out of its line of sight you would have little idea it was there. It is bordered by wasteground, on which a couple of boys were playing football the day I was there. Traffic around the place is light and the streets nearby are quiet
and undistinguished. Yet this concrete hulk remains one of the largest structures in the city, fairly clearly visible from the vantage point of the Santa Lucía hill, a tourist trap reached by funicular from which an oversized statue of the Virgin looks out over Santiago’s bustle and smog. The hospital’s axis is more horizontal than vertical: for sheer height, it has easily been overshadowed by the office towers that have sprung up in recent years and that dominate the middle class commercial and residential areas around the suburb of Providencia. Stuck in a lower middle class or skilled working class area of the city, near former factories and a stone’s throw from the working-class neighborhood of La Victoria that lay at the heart of resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship, this building is a beached whale of a monument whose presence has been largely repressed and ignored. Unlike the phone company Telefónica’s skyscraper, one of the city’s tallest buildings and self-referentially constructed in the shape of a mobile phone, the hospital building does not draw attention to itself; it exists somehow just over the horizon of visibility. The building is often referred to as a “white elephant,” with the implication that it stands in for all the supposed follies of the Allende era, all the attempts at state provision that were so decisively rejected once the Chicago boys came to town. But calling it an elephant also is a reference to its massive bulk. And perhaps, too, to the notion of the elephant in the room: the presence that is felt by all but can be articulated by none. It is as though the Hospital Ochagavía marked the border of the contemporary regime of representation: it cannot quite be seen or articulated, even as it cannot be fully ignored.

Yet when planned and during its construction, the hospital was envisaged as a spectacular showcase, displaying Chile’s modernity and progressivism. It is said that it would have been the largest and best-equipped hospital in Latin America, covering almost 84,000 square meters and with over 1,200 beds, and that each room would have had its own bathroom. Though originally conceived under the regime of Eduardo Frei Montalva, the project was enthusiastically taken up by the Salvador Allende’s Unidad Popular, under whom construction actually began, in 1971. The Worker’s Hospital (to use another of the names it goes by) would have been a jewel in the crown of the government plans to expand social services: a demonstration of the effectiveness and competence of the so-called “Chilean Road to Socialism.” Over a thousand workers were engaged in its construction, which was due to have finished within four years.
Chronicler Pedro Lemebel suggests that Allende donated his Lenin Peace Prize to the effort to build the hospital (210). And as Lemebel also points out, the building was essentially complete, and already half-outfitted (the elevators were in place, the outer walls had been tiled), when on September 11, 1973 the coup that brought Pinochet to power meant that work stopped and the dream remained forever unrealized. Even now, over forty years later, there are still patches of the walls to which the blue and green tiles of the original design still cling. The structure was stripped of just about everything that could be easily sold (metal and fittings), but the thing itself will not go away, and has survived three earthquakes (1971, 1985, and 2010) with barely a crack. Even now, this sturdy construction has the air less of a ruin than of a building site: one can sense that the building has still yet to find its proper use.

Performance

It is not as though, over all this time, this ruin were entirely abandoned. I first encountered it in the context of Juan Castillo’s exhibition, but his was merely one among a string of artistic interventions or performances that have used the hospital as stage or object of reflection. In 1989 Lotty Rosenfeld and Pedro Lemebel staged performances within its crumbling walls. More recently, Leonardo Portus has taken to making little maquettes of the building, as though to emphasize that it is still in the design phase. There have also been, music videos shot either within the structure itself or taking it as backdrop: the group Congreso’s “Estoy que me muero” (1986) or the hip-hop group ReZoNaNcia’s “La vldA NO Es ReCtA” (2006), for instance. A theatre piece was produced about the building (by Tomás Henríquez, in 2011), and more recently a number of films have been produced, such as the documentary short Elefante blanco (“White Elephant”; dir. Felipe Egaña, 2010), and others that can be found on YouTube. It has even featured in a TV series: El Reemplazante (2012). In short, for a building that is consistently described as “forgotten,” it has surfaced with remarkable, and increasing, frequency into consciousness. Which shows, perhaps, that it was not so much forgotten as repressed, and that it is lodged securely within the Chilean cultural unconscious, not far at all beneath the surface. Again, the stubbornness of the ruin: it is not so easily wished away or dispensed with.
But the fact that the ruin can so frequently be described as “forgotten,” even though it has evidently impinged upon discourse and consciousness many times over the past four decades, is itself significant. It is as though it has continually to be rediscovered, and that what is forgotten is not so much the ruin itself as its previous discoveries. It is also a sign that succeeding discourses have failed to “stick” to the structure. It is perhaps only very belatedly that the story of the Ochagavía hospital has become a story at all, has become part of a broader narrative. In putting on his play about the place, director Henríquez asserted that “Ochagavía is the story of Chile. The story of those who suffer as a consequence of our recent historical breakdown and who, in the face of their long wait--almost forty years of waiting--maintain the sad recollection of the still-open wounds of our land, so as not to turn into ghosts” (“XIII Festival de dramaturgia”). This suggests that the story of Chile is itself ruinous, broken, or failed. No wonder then that a ruinous structure such as the Ochagavía hospital can stand in for it. But no wonder, too, that no convincing narrative has been able to fix or capture the structure itself. It is as though, with the breakdown of Chilean history, the country’s capacity to produce narratives about that history and the detritus that remains has also shuddered to a halt. Again, it is not for instance that the hospital has been forgotten--like an open wound, it hardly goes away. What are, however, repeatedly forgotten are the narratives that claimed to explain and situate it in broader context. Hence the repeated surprise of rediscovery, the shock that should not really be a shock, as with something you trip over repeatedly even though you “know” it is there all along.

It is perhaps therefore fitting that so many of the artistic interventions that have taken this ruinous hospital as topic or stage are performances that have left behind little in the way of documentation. There are some images, for instance, of Lemebel’s piece, for which apparently he lay beneath a collection of masonry in the form of a cross, which he then proceeded to set alight. Don’t ask me exactly what it means. I have (as yet) not managed to find out much more. But in some ways this is the very essence of performance: you had to have been there; it happens in the moment, and involves the investment of the body at a particular time and place. That, at least, is clear enough for Lemebel’s act, which invokes the aura of quasi-religious ritual, an element of danger as the physical flesh is risked among the rubble and the flames, and which is destined not
to be repeated, and not simply because of Lemebel’s untimely death a year or so ago. This self-immolation, becoming one with the ruin, was an event, and those of us who were not there inevitably miss out on what seems to have been the intimacy (as well perhaps as the shock—did we know he would light himself on fire?) of the moment itself. All we have now are the photos and, for those who were there, the memories, which will presumably be different for each participant or witness. What remains or is left after any performance is always in some sense ruinous: fragmented, seemingly incomplete. But again, there is no need to stress the negative. For the event of a performance is always generative: the supposed fragments are in fact a multiplicity. It is perhaps better to say that, precisely because there is no single, stable original for any performance, or none that can be accessed in any direct way after the fact, all we have is multiplicity: myriad memories and resonances through time, as well as the physical artifacts (photographs or any other documentation) that aid and help perpetuate but also complicate those resonances.

Performance, like the ruin, is too often characterized in terms of lack. In *Performing Remains*, Rebecca Schneider tracks what she calls a “small history of ephemerality” by which “vanishing” came to be seen as “the prime budding attribute of performance” and there came to be a “general association of performance with loss, disappearance, and death” (95). The notion was that performance only ever took place in the near-inaccessible instant, and that as such, in its aftermath, it was always unretrievable, inextricably ruined. By contrast, though Schneider wants to hold on to what we could call a ruinous conception of performance, her stress is on what remains, what persists, and on materiality and embodiedness. Indeed, far from seeing it as “that which disappears,” for Schneider—basing her analysis on phenomena such as civil-war enactment—performance is “both the act of remaining and a means of re-appearance and ‘reparticipation’” (101). And so, too, surely with the ruin: it is what re-appears, to surprise and shock us, just when we think that history is dead and gone. The ruin also enables re-enactment and reparticipation. Ruined castles and forts, say, are prime sites for the kinds of performances that bring the past back to life. Or think of the would-be druids who gather at Stonehenge each summer solstice for a ritual recreation of some imagined past. But wandering any ruin, we become, however momentarily, performers in scenes that we would have thought long lost. We take on a role in so far as we step
outside our everyday life and begin to imagine how things must have been before this place was ruined.

It is no wonder then that ruins seem to incite performances. It helps that so many of the most notable classic ruined sites are theatres or stadia of one sort or another, such as the Colisseum or the numerous amphitheatres scattered across the former Greek and Roman world from Epidaurus to Chester. In the New World, we might think of the Mayan ball courts at Tikal or Chichen Itza. Visiting such places, we are encouraged to imagine ourselves playing or performing to a crowd, or being part of the crowd itself, bringing the place back to life. Similarly, then, the various performances clustered in and around the Ochagavía Hospital affirm, in perhaps utopian manner, that this building is anything but the useless “white elephant” as has so often been charged. As with Enríquez’s play, which charts four fictional lives as they would have continued had the hospital not been allowed to become ruin, the structure’s persistence allows us (however strange this sounds) to re-enact a future that is still yet to come.

conclusion

The Ochagavía hospital is not so much a remnant or residue, more a part object; not the remainder of what once was, nor even a foretelling of what will one day be, but the recollection of what could have been. It is not so much the past that has been interrupted; it is a future. This is a ruin that comes to us from the future. But it is perhaps better to say that it is one particular future that has been interrupted. The hospital remains open to many possible futures, none of which have ever managed to claim or colonize it. As such it challenges both the defeated hegemony of the unidad popular and also the victorious present of neoliberal facticity and utility. The best that the present can do is try to ignore it. As the military regime, the post-transition civilian government, and the free market have all failed to supplant or to build on the ruins, preferring on the whole almost to wish they went away, there has been little attempt to elicit any moral or political lesson from the structure’s incompleteness. The Ochagavía hospital is pointedly no lieu de mémoire for any but a marginalized avant-garde and perhaps for the inhabitants of the immediate vicinity. Rather, in short, than being elaborated into a series of conflicting discourses, absorbed or appropriated for distinct ideological projects, the Worker’s Hospital, once so entrenched within the ideological
justification for the Unidad Popular, long almost dropped out of discourse. None of the stories or representations that set out to explain or justify its existence have ever really stuck. Now it is simply a Thing, marking the very limit of neoliberalism’s intelligibility. It challenges neoliberalism’s accounts twice over: it is a sullen reminder of the shortcomings of market logic, that not everything can be bought or sold or made to count; and it equally falls out of any story told by attempts to construct some kind of post-transition hegemony. It is at the Hospital Ochagavía that the smug self-satisfaction of the Chilean present finds its ruin. But it is here, too, that we can reimagine the possibility of a utopian future.

postscript

It is 2015 and, after a long period of latency, it seems as though the Ochagavía Hospital is once more the site of construction and activity. In 1999 the site had been sold to a private enterprise, Inmobiliaria Mapocho, for a knockdown price (an estimated 1% of its true value), on the promise that they would develop it into a complex of apartments and shops. Despite some publicity at the time, no real advances were made on the project. Arguments and recriminations broke out between the developer and the city as to whom to blame for the lack of progress. For a long time, all the site’s owner did was pay for fencing and guards. In 2009, they declared that artists were no longer allowed to enter and perform or record. But now the building has changed hands again, being purchased in 2013 by a firm that glories in the name of “Megacentro.” Their plan is (in their words) to “recycle” the site by turning it into a complex of offices, shops, and exhibition halls that will go by the name of “Núcleo Ochagavía.” The place is, once again, a building site. Perhaps this is a ruin that will finally disappear, swallowed up at last by commerce and business. Somewhat perversely, the slogan on the enormous tarpaulin that Megacentro have slung over the building proclaims: “An Old Dream is Reborn” (“Un viejo sueño que renace”). It was hardly the original dream, at least, that this should be site of offices and shops. Indeed, there are still some who insist that it should become a hospital. In the meantime, Megacentro are offering guided tours of the site every Sunday, as if in acknowledgement that this is not quite a normal building project, or as though they, too, are simply the latest to perform on what has become an increasingly visible stage. Megacentro’s own website describes these visits in terms of a
“resignification of the building” involving “rescuing the historical memory of the building and its environment” (“Relación con la comunidad”). Still, someday soon this may be simply a commercial development practically indistinguishable from any other. But it may not be too utopian to imagine that many will still remember the ruin within.
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