# Catastrophe and its Fallout

## Notes on Cataclysms, Art and Aesthetics, 1755-1945

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La poésie veut quelque chose d'énorme, de barbare, de sauvage.
(Denis Diderot, *Discours sur la poésie dramatique*, 1758)

In the summer of 2008, a remarkable group show was installed at the New Museum in New York: *After Nature* presented the work of twenty-six international artists, from a surprising 'celestograph' by August Strindberg to contemporary work by Berlinde De Bruyckere and the Pakistani-American female artist Huma Bhabha. The title of the exhibition was taken from *Nach der Natur*, a book-length prose poem by W. G. Sebald, a meditation on the sources of the catastrophic imagination and on the inexorable interweaving of desire and destruction, proliferation and decay, in both human nature and nature as such (Sebald 2002). With omnipresent film stills of Werner Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) – the director's breathtaking and grim film on the aftermath of the first Gulf War – it proposed a new, saturnine direction in art. The New Museum's director, Lisa Phillips, referred to the earthquake and flooding in China, the cyclone in Myanmar, and the tornadoes and flooding in Iowa. In a review of the exhibition, Peter Schjeldahl, the acclaimed critic from *The New Yorker* noted, "something is happening in artists' studios: a shift of emphasis, from surface to depth, and a shift of mood, from mania to melancholy, shrugging off the allures of the money-hypnotized market and the spectacle-bedizened biennials circuit", and he concluded: "get ready for neo-Romantic doting on miscellaneous catastrophes, with global warming the default alarm" (Schjeldahl 2008, 74-75).

### RUIN, DESTRUCTION, CATASTROPHE

Ruin and destruction entered the heart of aesthetic discourse in the eighteenth century. Ruins are, as Annie Le Brun once put it, "the disquieting vegetation that forms the mental forest of the mid-eighteenth century" (Le Brun 1986, 124; my translation). And while the same century invented liberty, as Jean Starobinski has shown, it also invented catastrophe (See Mercier-Faivre and Thomas 2008, 7ff).

Destruction is an essential, inherent component of modern art – at least since the late nineteenth century's definition of the artist as a genius destined to transgression of aesthetic and social rules. Yet, catastrophe goes beyond the artistic merits and aesthetic categories of ruin and destruction. It is one thing to aestheticize the gradual decay of monumental buildings, sometimes even going so far as to build fake ruins – an activity on which the eighteenth-century British architect Sanderson Miller built a whole career; it is yet another thing to consider catastrophes as an artistic or aesthetic opportunity. The most mediatized catastrophic event, the one which, one could argue, got the twenty-first century really started, did provoke lots of artistic reactions, but hardly any art. Only Gerhard Richter's painting, made four years later and simply called *September*, showing with the typical Richter blur a fragment of a rather common image of the smoking towers

overlaid with rough swipes of paint across the canvas, was able to convey something more than the mere aesthetization of televized repetition.

Since ancient times, catastrophes have been lived mostly as apocalypses, sacrifices, connected to divine wrath, and have subsequently been represented as such in art. Occasionally, the disastrous consequences of divine wrath have given way to surprising, even entertaining artistic results, such as Giulio Romano's Sala dei Giganti in the Pallazo Te in Mantova in the 1530s, where the entirely frescoed room seems to collapse around the visitor. Later, the fascination with the ruin sometimes came close to the aesthetization of catastrophe. For instance, when in 1825 the enormous, cathedral-high tower of Fonthill Abbey, the private house of the gothic novel writer and eccentric William Beckford, collapsed while Beckford was absent, he lamented only that he had missed such a sublime and impressive event.

In a time span of three centuries, the Renaissance architect's interest in the remains of classical buildings had steadily developed into a cult of the ruin, into a fascination with decay as the expression of the irresistible process of time. Into a fascination, also, with the fragment rescued from oblivion, that authenticates mythological origins, that exemplifies the achievements of past cultures, transmits moral lessons, or sustains and promotes national identities. By the mid-eighteenth century, aesthetic theory and early-modern tourism were prepared for events of a more dramatic nature; the remains of modern destruction too – even rapid, terrifying, man-made catastrophes – could by then exert an eerie fascination. Such travel books as William Stukeley's *Itinerarium curiosum* (1724) guide the English *connoisseur* to the sublime experience of and the charm and beauty radiating from the remains of man-made catastrophes such as the dissolution of the British monasteries.

That eerie fascination with man-made catastrophes continues up to our own times, and might even be un-, or, subconscious. Two summers ago, during a trip in North-Western Scotland, it took me a while before I realized that the beauty and emptiness of these stark landscapes that I found so thrilling resulted from two enormous catastrophes. First, an ecological one: the millennia-long steady and nearly complete deforestation by Scotland's earliest inhabitants, accompanied by a climate change that was unfavourable for tree growth – a combined process that resulted in the replacement of the *Ur*-forest in my much admired endless stretches of empty bog and wetlands. Second, a humanitarian catastrophe: the eighteenth-century 'highland clearances', the brutal, forced displacement of a whole population as a result of agricultural and feudal change in the United Kingdom, which (essentially) replaced for reasons of profit, men with sheep. Only recently, while working on this text, did I discover that Sebald had had a similar experience during his walks, not in Scotland, but through Suffolk, that "melancholy region" where the landscape is the result of "the steady and advancing destruction, over a period of many centuries and indeed millennia, of the dense forests that extended over the entire British Isles after the last Ice Age" (Sebald 1998, 201). For Sebald, human civilization is itself a massive, ongoing process of burning and destruction (See Brockmann 2005, 15-28).

Giulio Romano, view of the *Sala dei Giganti*, in Pallazo Te, Mantova, ca. 1530. ▸

Martin Engelbrecht, *Praesentation eines Erdbebens*, Augsburg, late 1750s, set of seven etchings, hand coloured. Collection The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. (96.R.3)

## CITIES, CATASTROPHES AND PHILOSOPHERS

From the Old Testament to Hollywood B-movies, from Sodom and Gomorrah to Los Angeles, the *topos* of burning and destruction is the city, not the forest. The first citywide natural catastrophe that would have a major impact on modern European thinking occurred in Lisbon. One can even argue that the reconstruction following this catastrophe formed the starting point of urban planning as a modern practice. The disaster happened on the morning of November 1, 1755. While thousands of people were attending church services for All Saints Day, an earthquake, the scale of which has been estimated as the equivalent of 8.5 to 9.0 on the Richter scale, and the subsequent tsunami, reduced Lisbon to ruins. Churches collapsed onto congregations, some 55 convents and monasteries were severely damaged, the Royal Palace destroyed, and the riverfront quay sank and disappeared. The disaster killed about one tenth of Lisbon's population of some 180,000.

Being one of the most destructive earthquakes in history, various accounts were published and numerous representations were printed all over Europe. In Paris, the *Recueil des plus belles ruines de Lisbonne*, "dessiné sur les lieux", was published in 1757. Yet one of the most remarkable artefacts that commemorates the catastrophic earthquake is a 'theatre' produced by the German Martin Engelbrecht in the years following the disaster. Such cardboard theatres were common at the time, as a means of three-dimensional representation, often of princely palace interiors, but in this case the viewer peered through openings in a series of brightly coloured cards to see a three-dimensional rendering of the crumbling city.

Although Lisbon was the capital of a devoutly Catholic country, heavily involved in evangelization all over the world, Catholics felt they had no other option than to explain the disaster as God's wrath, invited by the sinfulness of the people of Portugal and the presence of some Protestants and, why not, Jesuits. Protestants from their side blamed the Portuguese for being Catholic, thus being punished by God. Whatever the reason, the earthquake had an unprecedented fallout among European Enlightenment thinkers.

Voltaire would be among the first to use the Lisbon catastrophe in his arguments. Some personal events, the atrocities of the Seven Year's War (started in 1756), and particularly the Lisbon earthquake all nourished Voltaire's dissatisfaction with other philosophers' explanations for human suffering. It is well-known that *Candide, ou l'Optimisme* (1759) is a sarcastic attack against Leibniz's "tout est pour le mieux dans le meilleur des mondes possibles" (Leibniz 1710). The real-life hardships of psychological pain, war and natural disaster could not, according to Voltaire, be rationalized away by philosophy. Less well-known is that, three years before his creation of the eternally optimistic character of Dr. Pangloss, Voltaire had already voiced his anti-Leibnizian stance in his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* (1756). As the complete title suggests, *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne, ou examen de cet axiome, 'tout est bien'*, Voltaire's main target was Leibniz's optimistic vision of a world closely supervised by a benevolent deity. The earthquake only strengthened Voltaire's philosophical pessimism, according to which no benign and concerned deity existed that would guide the virtuous and punish the sinful. Voltaire asserted that *accident* played a major part in life and that people were basically weak, helpless and ignorant of their destiny:

> Deluded philosophers who cry, "All is well,"
> Hasten, contemplate these frightful ruins
> This wreck, these shreds, these wretched ashes of the dead;
> These women and children heaped on one another.
> These scattered members under broken marble;
> One-hundred thousand unfortunates devoured by the earth
> Who, bleeding, lacerated, and still alive,
> Buried under their roofs without aid in their anguish,
> End their sad days!

In answer to the half-formed cries of their dying voices.
At the frightful sight of their smoking ashes,
Will you say: "This is result of eternal laws
Directing the acts of a free and good God!"
Will you say, in seeing this mass of victims:
"God is revenged. their death is the price for their crimes?"
What crime, what error did these children,
Crushed and bloody on their mothers' breasts, commit?
Did fallen Lisbon deeper drink of vice
Than London, Paris, or sunlit Madrid?
In these men dance; at Lisbon yawns the abyss.[1]

In a letter addressed to Voltaire, the so-called *Lettre sur la providence*, written in August 1756, Jean-Jacques Rousseau reacted on the Lisbon poem. For Rousseau, people could learn from the terrible effects of the catastrophe. He argued that the severity of the devastation was due to too many people living within the close quarters of the city and he used the earthquake as an argument against cities as part of his desire for a more naturalistic way of life:

Sans quitter votre sujet de Lisbonne. convenez. par exemple. que la nature n'avait point rassemblé là vingt mille maisons de six à sept étages. et que si les habitants de cette grande ville eussent été dispersés plus également, et plus légèrement logés, le dégât eût été beaucoup moindre. et peut-être nul. (Rousseau 1756)

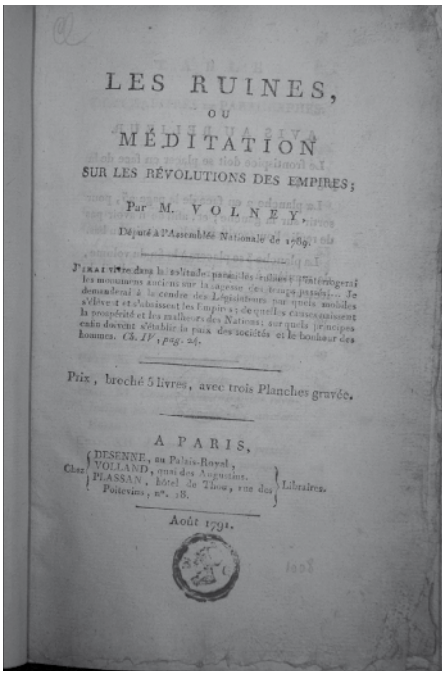
Voltaire and Rousseau were not the only philosophers who engaged in a debate on the origins and effects of the Lisbon disaster. In that same year, 1756, Immanuel Kant also published a study of the Lisbon earthquake: *Geschichte und Naturbeschreibung der merkwürdigsten Vorfälle des Erdbebens welches an dem Ende des 1755sten Jahres einen großen Theil der Erde erschüttert hat* (History and Natural Description of the Most Remarkable Occurrences associated with the Earthquake which at the End of the Year 1755 Shook a Great Part of the Earth) Here, he formulated one of the first systematic modern attempts to explain earthquakes by positing natural, rather than supernatural, causes. Kant's observations on the earthquake were influential

Robert Wood, *Ruins of Baalbec*. London, 1753. Collection University Library, Ghent University.

in further developing his ideas on the sublime, based on Edmund Burke's concept, in the *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen* (Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime) of 1764.

The thinking exposed in both Voltaire and Kant's studies had even more far-reaching and grim consequences. If, as both authors implied, disasters have natural causes – and happen, so to say, behind God's back – then catastrophes might be able not only to destroy man-made artefacts such as cities, but even parts of God's own creation. These reflections came at a time (the second half of the eighteenth century) when it was still widely believed that no species of God's creation had ever become extinct. As an outcome of Voltaire's pessimism, however, the French zoologist Georges Cuvier observed, near the end of his 1796 paper on living and fossilized elephants, *Mémoires sur les espèces d'éléphants tant vivantes que fossiles*, that "all of these facts ... seem to me to prove the existence of a world previous to ours, destroyed by some kind of catastrophe" (Cuvier 1796, 444; my translation). In later publications, Cuvier would return to this idea in more detail, in particular in his *Recherches sur les ossements fossiles de quadrupèdes, ou l'on rétablit les caractères de plusieurs espèces d'animaux que les révolutions du globe paroissent avoir détruite* of 1812.[2] This eventually led to a geological school of thought called 'catastrophism' that maintained that many of the geological features of the earth and the history of life could be explained by catastrophic events that had caused the extinction of many species of animals.[3]

In the same decade as Cuvier's first paper, the Compte de Volney contemplated the ruins of Palmyra, a once magnificent stronghold of the late-Roman Empire, which he knew from the marvellous plates in Robert Wood's book *Ruins of Palmyra* (1753). Inspired by these ruins, Volney, in *Les ruines, ou Méditations sur les révolutions des empires* (1791), theorized the possibility of the total destruction of powerful


LES RUINES,
OU
MÉDITATION
SUR LES RÉVOLUTIONS DES EMPIRES;
Par M. VOLNEY,
Député à l'Assemblée Nationale de 1789.
Prix, broché 5 livres, avec trois Planches gravée.
A PARIS,
Août 1791.

Constantin-François Chasseboeuf de Volney, *Les ruines, ou Méditation sur les révolutions des empires*, Paris, Desenne/Volland/Plassan, 1791.
Collection University Library, Ghent University.

empires that were once destined for eternity, but that finally perished under the inevitable laws of nature or political conflict. What Cuvier and Volney were about to discover was that quintessentially modern concept that would later be coined by Paul Valéry in his opening sentence of *La crise de l'esprit*: "nous autres civilisations, nous savons maintenant que nous sommes mortelles" (Valéry 1973, 988). Among late eighteenth-century European scientists, philosophers and artists, there was a growing awareness that future generations might very well study the remains of their civilization, after its cataclysmic extinction – a sensation that post-Cold War generations are familiar with, if not through political insight, then at least via post-apocalyptic novels and movies. Five years after Volney's publication, Hubert Robert painted his *Vue imaginaire de la grande Galerie du Louvre en ruine* (1796), and, a couple of years later, Caspar David Friedrich drew his

*Jacobikirche in Greifswald als Ruine* (1815). During this period, not only do painters start to represent existing, intact buildings in their future state as ruins, architects join by representing their yet to be built projects as future ruins. For example, John Soane, the architect of the Bank of England, had his draftsman, Joseph Michael Gandy, present his new plan for the Bank as a ruin.

The idea of the anticipated ruin of buildings, if not of complete cities or civilizations – which would eventually lead to Speer and Hitler's so-called 'ruin value' – would be a motif throughout the nineteenth century in various illustrations and publications. For the frontispiece of his *Eaux-Fortes sur Paris* (1852), Charles Meryon chose an inscribed stone that recalls Piranesi's frontispieces for his publications on Ancient Rome. Gustave Doré, in *Londres, un pèlerinage* (1872), showed not only the catastrophic conditions of the British working class, but the British capital itself as a ruin. An anonymous writer (whom some suggest is Alfred Franklin or, others suggest, a certain Léo Lespès) published a strange booklet in 1875: *Les ruines de Paris en 4875, documents officiels et inédits* (see de Palacio 2003, 235-236). It contains fictive documents of an expedition that, 3000 years later, discovers the remains of Paris and reports to ministers and scientists in Nouméa, Caledonia. The author ridicules the archaeologists who try completely in vain to understand the uncovered fragments of texts and symbols. But the meaning of French civilization has been lost. Seemingly prefiguring these difficulties and confusion, the architect Charles Garnier once commented that he put lyres everywhere on his Paris Opéra in order to enlighten future archaeologists about the function of the building.

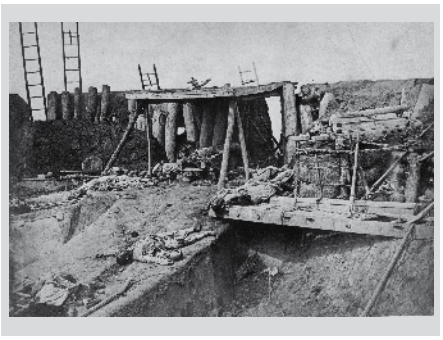
What these artists, architects and writers had in common is their new awareness that even their own, powerful empires could quickly perish into oblivion and ruin. There is no better reminder of this than the contemporaneous, somewhat gritty, images that French photographer Désiré Charney sent to Europe, from 1857 onwards, of the Mayan ruins in the Yucatán.

## MAN-MADE CATASTROPHES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MODERN ICONOGRAPHY

The end of representing ruin and disaster in a Romantic vein arrived with the first photographic representations of man-made catastrophes; ruin and death created not by divine wrath or nature, but disasters that were political in origin. The rise of new techniques of photography made it possible to document devastation quickly and to communicate it to a wide audience. While the earliest photographs refer to existing aesthetic models – compare for instance Charney's photographs with Piranesi's etchings of Roman tombs along the Via Appia – the new art form rapidly developed its own modern iconographies.

The first to present images of a major conflict was British photographer Roger Fenton. Fenton's reputation was based on his photographs of picturesque England. Following picturesque principles, his landscape photographs were appreciated for their likeness to (painted) art. Fenton was comissioned by the commercial firm of Thomas Agnews & Co to take photographs of the Crimean War, in which Russia fought Britain, France and Turkey. Fenton could depict multiple aspects of the war except one crucial element: battle. Since the primitive technology of photography available at the time required that subjects be still at the moment the camera's shutter snapped, photographs show camp life, routines, war preparations, the moments just prior to battle, and, most famously, the aftermath of battle. His picture of *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (1855) became an icon of the war: a curving road, through a deserted landscape, empty but for numerous cannonballs. While audiences were more accustomed to smoke-filled battle scenes, often done by studio painters creating panoramas or propaganda paintings, Fenton's minimal approach, dictated

Roger Fenton *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, 1855. Collection Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Felice Beato, *Interior of Angle of North Fort Immediately after Its Capture*, 21st August, 1860. Upper North Taku Fort, Taku (now Dagu), near Tientsin (now Tianjin), China.

by the slow shutter speed of early cameras, coincided with what the people had come to appreciate in his landscapes: the picturesque. Essential picturesque qualities, such as roughness, irregularity and variety, could easily be found – if not produced – when presenting the atrocities of war. Moreover, Fenton made two versions of *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, one without the cannonballs, and one with. Susan Sontag has argued, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, that it is the second shot that includes cannonballs, and that Fenton had them arranged for better picturesque effect (Sontag 2003, 47ff). It is also noteworthy that when Fenton returned to England, his war photographs first went on show at the London Water Colour Society. Since the same artists were producing pictures of landscapes *and* of war, and since the audience seemed to have been roughly the same as well (i.e. the members of gentlemen's clubs at Pall Mall who attended the Water Colour Society), battle scenes were appreciated for their likeness to art, in the way that landscapes were. In the salons of the Water Colour Society, Fenton's distribution of the cannonballs could arouse aesthetic delight, much in the way that the perfect distribution of clumps of trees would have enchanted Gilpin, or the clients of Repton and Capability Brown.

While the British War Ministry had ordered Fenton to avoid pictures of dead, injured or mutilated soldiers (Sontag 2003, 47ff), the Italian-British photographer Felice Beato, who had also worked in the Crimea following Fenton's departure, seems to have had no such restrictions during his photographic mission in the aftermath of the so-called Indian Rebellion, or First War of Indian Independence, of 1857. Beato photographed the interior of the Sikandrah Bagh Palace in Lucknow, Northern India, after the slaughter of 2,000 rebels by British troops. What the cannonballs are to Fenton's photograph, the skulls and bones are to Beato's. And there is a similar issue with both pictures: as a British officer noted in his memoires, Beato had the skulls and bones disinterred or rearranged to heighten the photograph's impact and composition.[4]

Being probably the first-ever photographer to produce images of corpses, Beato went on producing images of the horror of war. In 1860, he left India to cover the Anglo-French military expedition against the Chinese in the Second Opium War. The sequence of the photographs in his albums reconstructed how the military campaign had unfolded: the approach to the forts, the damage of the bombardments to the fortifications and finally the devastation within the forts, including the bodies of dead Chinese soldiers. Given the fact that the purchasers of his images were mostly British soldiers, colonial administrators, merchants and tourists,

Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner, *Dead Confederate soldiers in the 'devil's den'*, American Civil War, Gettysburg, PA, 1863. Collection Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

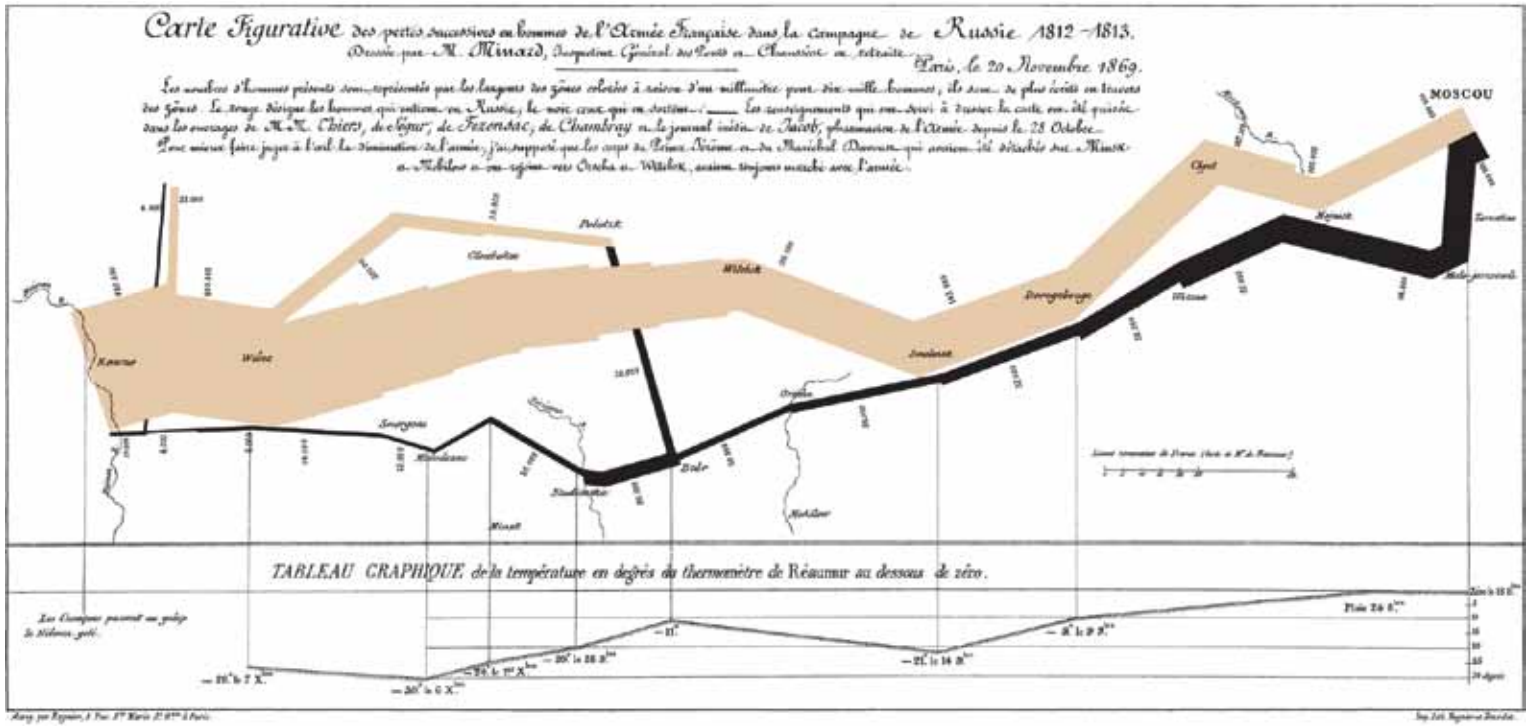
Beato never photographed British or French dead. The ladders and corpses in his photograph of the ruins of the Upper North Taku Fort recall Jacques Callot's etchings of the *Misères et mal-heurs de la guerre* of 1633[5], with their gallows trees and startling representation, without precedent in art history, of the savagery of a conquering army. While not at all staged, Beato had clear ideas about good compositions. A doctor who was a member of the expedition wrote in his campaign memoir:

> I passed into the fort and a distressing scene of carnage disclosed itself: frightful mutilations and groups of dead and dying meeting the eye in every direction. I walked round the ramparts on the west side. They were thickly strewed with dead – in the north-west angle thirteen were lying in one group around a gun. Signor Beato was here in great excitement, characterising the group as 'beautiful', and begging that it might not be interfered with until perpetuated by his photographic apparatus, which was done a few minutes afterwards. (Rennie 1860. 112; quoted in Harris 1999. 29-30)

The most large-scale enterprise of this type, however, was Matthew Brady's extensive photographic coverage of the American Civil War (1861-1865). With more than twenty collaborators, each of whom were given a travelling darkroom, Mathew Brady served the American public more than 10,000 plates. From this time forward, all military conflicts would have illustrations and graphic art as a standard part of the press coverage.[6] On 17 September 1862, Brady's men photographed the aftermath of the battle of Antietam, near Sharpsburg, Maryland – the deadliest single day, not only of the entire war but of American history, with 23,000 casualties. Brady's shocking images of battlefield corpses became, for the first time in history, temporary monuments commemorating, to the entire American public, the sacrifices of soldiers who fought and died in unprecedented numbers.

A bitter critique of the merciless thirst for military glory and probably the driest and undramatic representation of the madness of war, was created contemporaneously, in 1869, by a retired French civil engineer. He used yet another new medium: graphic design, or more precisely, the graphic representation of data. In the *Carte figurative des pertes successives en hommes de l'armée française dans la campagne de Russie, 1812-1813*, Charles Joseph Minard put to use innovative graphic techniques to tell the disastrous story of Napoleon's Russian campaign in one single image.[7] Minard's chart shows six types of information: geography, the course and direction of the army's movement, the number of troops, time and temperature. The widths of the gold (outward) and black (returning) paths represent the size of the force, one millimetre for every 10,000 men. Geographical features and major battles are marked and named, and plummeting temperatures on the return journey are shown along the bottom. The chart tells the dreadful story with painful clarity: in 1812, *la Grande Armée* set out from Poland with a force of 422,000, 100,000 reached Moscow and only 10,000 returned. The detail and understatement with which such horrifying loss is represented make this document as innovative and clear as it is blood-curdling.

But let us turn back to the horrors of that other war, the American Civil War. Through




Charles Joseph Minard, *Carte figurative des pertes successives en hommes de l'armée française dans la campagne de Russie, 1812-1813*. Lith., 20 November 1869.
Collection Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées, Paris.

Eugène Disderi, *La colonne Vendôme renversée* (Destroyed Vendôme column), 1871, albumen silver print.

Eugène Disderi, *Barricades devant la Madeleine* (Barricades in front of the La Madeleine Church), 1871, albumen silver print.

Brady's photographs, Americans suddenly were confronted with ruins, ruins of buildings and whole cities, images formerly attached to painterly representations of European history. Suddenly, Goethe's image of America as a blessedly blank slate seemed to have become quite inapt:

America, you have it better
Than our old continent
You have no ruined castles
And no primordial stones.
Your soul, your inner life
Remain untroubled by
Useless memory
And wasted strife[8]

Remarkably, the placid representations of American ruins, like the ones shot in South Carolina by one of Brady's men, George Barnard, closely resemble those of Ancient Palmyra, in Robert Wood's magnificent publication. It is also interesting to note how some of today's photographers return to this early iconography of catastrophe. Simon Norfolk's photographs of Kabul from 2002 demonstrate a comparable fascination with the strong visual impact of post-conflict emptiness – originally imposed upon Fenton, Brady and their colleagues by the technical constraints of early photography. Moreover, Norfolk's Kabul looks very much like Giorgio Sommer's Pompei: an entirely empty city in the calm aftermath of total destruction.

New developments in printing and photographic illustration allowed commercial photographers, especially in the United States, to invest in new techniques to cover catastrophes. Like the Lisbon earthquake a century and a half earlier, the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 was the occasion for numerous publications, but also for photographers venturing into ever larger formats and investments. Aviation had hardly left the ground, literally – the Wright brothers' first flight was only two years before – and could not yet provide photographers with the means of aerial photography. Hence, in order to capture the unseen dimension of the disaster, George Lawrence developed what he called a 'captive airship', a structure consisting of a panoramic camera and a system of kites, to shoot his large and incredibly detailed record of the San Francisco cataclysm.

With the exception of the Crimean War, the battlefields of all these large commercial photographic campaigns lay outside Europe. In the heart of the old continent, the association of large scale, violent devastation and detailed photographic documentation first occurred during the Paris Commune of 1871. Two months of a social utopia, a five-week siege by the army of Versailles and the reprisals that followed left many landmark buildings in ruins and tens of thousands dead. The photography of these dramatic weeks – a still largely unexplored field – played a complex role in the violent upheaval. While the pictures mirrored the technical possibilities of a medium that hardly allowed the instantaneous shots of today's photojournalism, they were used by the Communards to document what they expected to be the overthrow of yet another Ancien Régime. The Communards' Bastille was the Place Vendôme column. As such, the column was immortalized by Parisian photographers Eugène Disderi and Bruno Braquehais: flattened, broken and with proud Communards posing on top of the debris. Yet, while these men were clearly convinced that they were laying the foundations of a new era, they would only succeed (as the grim outcome of the Commune would show) in laying those of a new imagery of revolution.[9]

After the restoration of order, the same revolutionary images often found their way into the hands of the police, eager to identify Communards for arrest and prosecution. Contrary to the mid-eighteenth century, making a ruin had become a dangerous business – the well-known photograph,

attributed to Disderi, of corpses of Communards shows this in an unsettling way. In the end, photography would above all be used as propaganda *against* the Commune. Photomontages and photographs of entirely staged reconstructions of 'historical' scenes were meant to convince bourgeois France of the atrocities committed by the Communards. In these reconstructions, such as Eugène Appert's 1871 photocollage *Execution of the Hostages at The Rocket Prison*, the Commune is presented as an attempt at the ruthless destruction of the French nation. Within a few weeks' time, the same images of catastrophe were being used in two opposite ways: first as revolutionary icons to remind the masses of the power they could assume when they took charge of their own destiny; subsequently, as conservative demonstrations of the horrors of revolution and the dangers of political activity by the masses.[10]

The political use of the visual remains (photographic and real) of the disaster was a significant facet of political debate in France during the early Third Republic. The ruins of the Palais des Tuileries remained for more than a decade as a *memento*, a monument to the destructive powers of popular revolt. Before they were finally restored, British tourists (readers of the *Gentleman's Magazine*) rushed to Paris as if it were a new Palmyra; they visited the ruins to experience a "terrible grace" and "delicious shiver". Obviously, to the French bourgeoisie, the fact that it had been recent dramatic political events, not nature or time, that had overwhelmed these stones, made it more difficult to appreciate these ruins in a merely sublime or picturesque way. Using the remains of catastrophe as scenes of moral instruction would become a convention half a century later, when postcards of ruins were to function as sombre reminders of the destructive power of the mechanized warfare of the First World War. Ruins had evolved from cult objects into monuments with moral, cultural or political meaning.

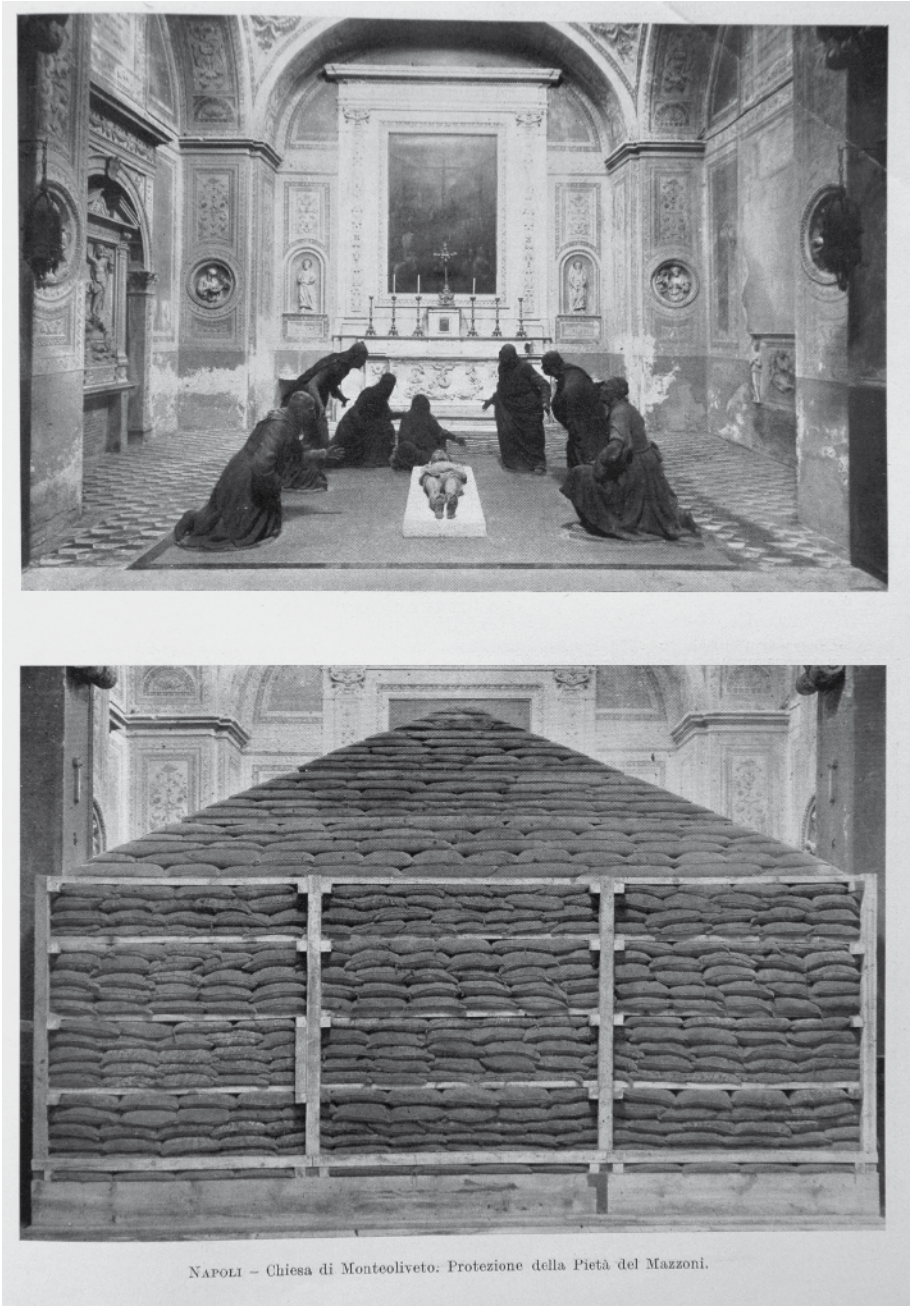
## RUIN VALUE VERSUS HERITAGE PROTECTION: MONUMENTS TO IMMINENT CATASTROPHE

Sometime in 1934, Albert Speer, Hitler's architect and prospective Minister of War, made a now lost "romantic drawing", which he described later in his memoirs:

> It showed what the reviewing stand on the Zeppelin Field would look like after generations of neglect, overgrown with ivy, its columns fallen, the walls crumbling here and there, but the outlines still clearly recognizable. In Hitler's entourage this drawing was regarded as blasphemous. That I could even conceive of a period of decline for the newly founded Reich destined to last a thousand years seemed outrageous to many of Hitler's closest followers. But he himself accepted my ideas as logical and illuminating.
> He gave orders that in the future the important buildings of his Reich were to be erected in keeping with the principles of this 'law of ruins'.
> (Speer 1970, 56)

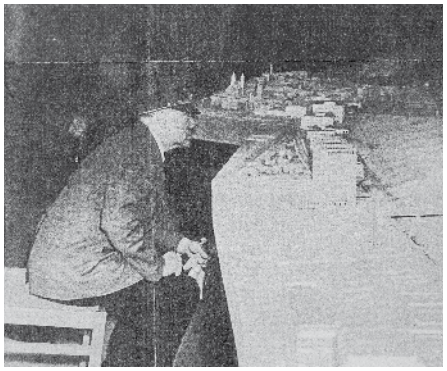
Much like Soane's Bank, the theory of *Ruinenwert* (ruin value) requires that the aura and aesthetic appeal of the ruined building in the future would already be present in the mind of the architect, and in his choice of the building materials and design.

Considered in this context, there is an absolutely striking photograph of a rather badly lit Hitler contemplating the large plaster model for the monumentalization of Linz, the Austrian town where he was born. What is striking is not what we see – there are numerous better staged photographs of Hitler carefully studying models of cities. What is striking is the date of the photograph; it is taken in the bunker under the Chancellery, the night of 13 February 1945. That night, Hitler spent hours on the model, studying the simulation of shadows under sun- and moonlight. At the very same moment, the squadrons of 'Bomber' Harris were making a total ruin of one of Germany's most beautiful cities, Dresden. Clearly, by February 1945, the necessary time lapse of prospective



NAPOLI – Chiesa di Monteoliveto: Protezione della Pietà del Mazzoni.

Protection works of the *Pietà Mazzoni*, Chiesa di Montoliveto, Napoli, in: Direzione Generale delle Arti (a cura di), *La protezione del patrimonio artistico nazionale dalle offese della guerra aerea*. Firenze, Casa editrice Felice Le Monnier, year XX [i.e. 1942], unnumbered illustration p. 291. Coll. Dirk De Meyer, Brussels.



Unknown photographer, *Hitler contemplating the large plaster model for the monumentalization of Linz*, photograph taken in the bunker under the Chancellery, in the night of February 13, 1945.

memory implied by the concept of ruin value had become extremely short.

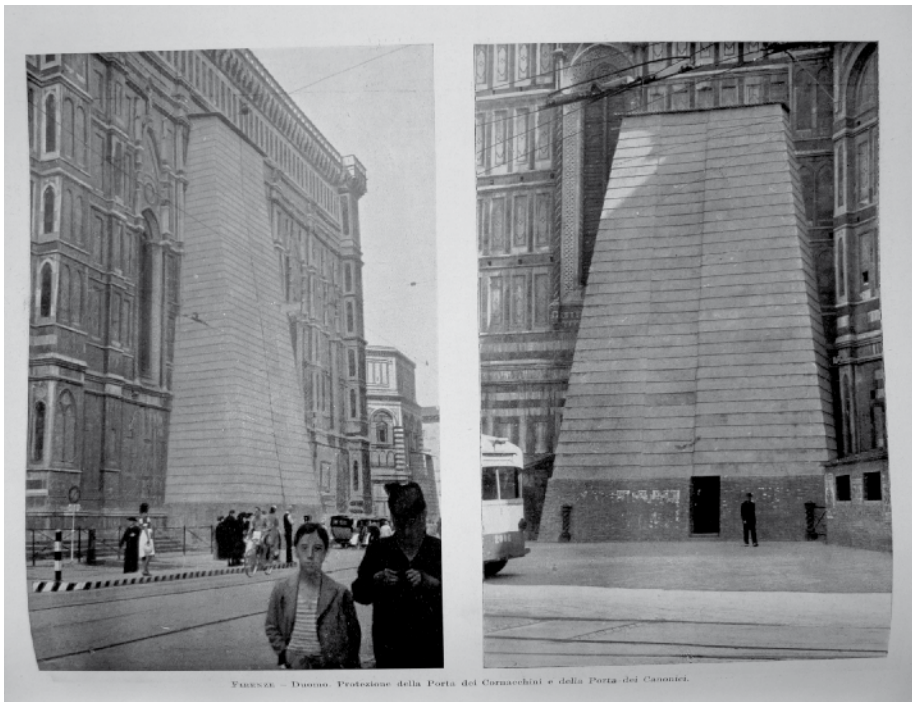
The model for Speer's concept of ruin value was, of course, Mussolini's ideological use of the remains of Ancient Rome. As Speer explains:

> Mussolini could point to the building of the Roman Empire as symbolizing the heroic spirit of Rome. Thus he could fire his nation with the idea of a modern empire. Our architectural works should also speak to the conscience of a future Germany centuries from now. (Speer 1970, 56)

Mussolini could build in the modern materials so despised by Hitler, since he already had the ruins of the Roman Empire at hand. He had only to protect them from destruction by air raids until Italy had won the war. Therefore, a large-scale programme was launched to protect Ancient Roman and, later, Italian art and architecture. In the year XX (i.e. 1942), a report was published with an extensive photographic survey of the protective constructions. *La protezione del patrimonio artistico nazionale dalle offese della guerra aerea* (The protection of the national artistic heritage from the offenses of air warfare) documents the efforts and explains its political, even more than cultural, aim: "because the Duce wants the Italian artistic heritage intact so that it shows to the world Italy's right to guide the European civilization" (Direzione 1942, ix; my translation). Even though the final outcome of the war was not what Mussolini had hoped for, the protective structures did their job. An impressive photograph in *La guerra contro l'arte*, a 1944 publication edited by 'Domus', the publisher of the homonymous Italian architecture and design magazine, shows how, among other treasures of Italian heritage, Leonardo's *Last Supper* survived the bombing of the cloister of Santa Maria delle Grazie during the Anglo-American air raids on Milan (La guerra, Anon. 1944).

The images of the painstaking works of heritage protection published in *La protezione del patrimonio artistico nazionale* show the structures as dark, mute monuments to an uncertain but imminent catastrophe. They are eschatological, apocalyptic structures, waiting for the ghastly, total obliteration of everything that surrounds them and of all that once gave them their meaning: the city of which they are part, the community, its history and rituals. As silent premonitions of the ending of time, or in the words of Karl Krauss, of the last days of humanity (*Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*, 1915-1922), they stand with dignity and resignation, as the logical and inevitable outcome of world history as an ongoing process of destruction and suffering.

History itself as a process of almost inevitable suffering, leading to decay, destruction and death, is at the core of Sebald's thinking, as he first developed it in *Nach der Natur*, the book that was at the origin of the New Museum's show. And air raids are precisely the latest and most perfected stage of a history that is "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" – as Sebald, towards the end of the second part of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, refers directly to Walter Benjamin's angel of history (Sebald 2003, 67-68; Benjamin 1968, 88).[11]




Protection works of the Porta dei Cornachini of the Duomo in Florence, in: Direzione Generale delle Arti (a cura di), *La protezione del patrimonio artistico nazionale dalle offese della guerra aerea*. Firenze, Casa editrice Felice Le Monnier, year XX [i.e. 1942], unnumbered illustration p. 218. Coll. Dirk De Meyer, Brussels.

How does man react to this? In the first poem of *Nach der Natur*, Sebald writes about Matthias Grünewald, the sixteenth-century German painter.

In this fashion Grünewald,
silently wielding his paintbrush,
rendered the scream, the wailing, the gurgling
and the shrieking of a pathological spectacle
to which he and his art, as he must have known,
themselves belong.
(Sebald 2002, 5)

In these lines, Sebald describes how Grünewald, in what seems like an act combining fear, repulsion and resignation, covers his face with a dark bandage after hearing about the battle of Frankenhausen, in which 5000 peasants allowed themselves to be scythed down without putting up any resistance, as if submitting to their inevitable destiny. Something of an inevitable destiny is present in the Italians walking by these taciturn constructions, as one can see, for instance, in the photograph of the protection works of the Porta dei Cornachini of the Duomo in Florence (Direzione 1942, 218). Ordinary people seemingly "without any / idea of destruction", as Sebald describes his own childhood in the third part of *Nach der Natur* – yet oddly haunted by the prospective ravages of history and by intimations of "a silent catastrophe that occurs / almost unperceived" (Sebald 2002, 88).[12]

The new constructions that they are passing by, and that, unintendedly, at once recollect primeval architecture and formally prefigure works of post-war art, look like relics of an already lost civilization. They are bearing the dark secret within them of a destiny, not only after nature, but after history.

## NOTES

[1] My translation, based on the dated: Voltaire 1911, p. 1. For the original French text see Voltaire 1756, or later eds., here: 1817, 105.

[2] See in particular Cuvier 1812, 178-179.

[3] On Cuvier's catastrophism, see Larrère 2008, 133ff and 146-149.

[4] On Beato in Lucknow, see Harris 2000, 119-31. On the photographic representation of death in war situations, see Sontag 2002.

[5] Callot's book comprised of a suite of eighteen etchings, which depicted the atrocities committed against civilians by French troops during the invasion and occupation of his native Lorraine in the early 1630s.

[6] Photographs would not appear in newspapers and magazines until the next generation. But Brady's images served as the basis for graphic illustrations that appeared in the print media throughout the Civil War.

[7] Charles Joseph Minard, *Carte figurative des pertes successives en hommes de l'armée française dans la campagne de Russie, 1812-1813*. Lith., 20 November 1869. Paris, ENPC, Fol 10975, 10974/ C612. The map was published together with a map of Hannibal's Campaign of the Alps.

[8] My translation. Original German:
Amerika, du hast es besser
Als unser Continent, das alte,
Hast keine verfallene Schlösser
Und keine Basalte.
Dich stört nicht im Innern,
Zu lebendiger Zeit,
Unnützes Erinnern
Und vergeblicher Streit ... (Goethe 1827 (1842), 96)

[9] It might be regarded as quintessentially French that this new iconography was created by the very same photographers responsible for the establishment of a completely different genre, that of erotic photography. See for instance: Andre-Adolphe Eugene Disderi, *Portrait of Mery Laurent* and untitled photographs by Bruno Braquehais from around 1855-1856. In 1859, Disderi also popularized the *carte de visite*; these small pictures (the size of a visiting card) rapidly became a popular novelty as thousands of these images were created and sold in the United States and Europe.

[10] See, among others: Allinari archives, *The ruins of the peristyle of the Royal Palace de Les Tuileries, Paris, extensively damaged and burned during the Commune insurrection of 1871.*

[11] Original citation from Benjamin 1968, 88. In *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, Sebald put forth his thesis that postwar German literature had failed to adequately represent the devastating effects of the Allied bombing campaign for the German nation.

[12] The passage of the poem I am referring to reads:
I grew up,
despite the dreadful course
of events elsewhere ...
without any
idea of destruction.
But the habit
of often falling down in the street and
often sitting with bandaged hands
by the open window between the potted
fuchsias, waiting for the
pain to subside and for hours
doing nothing but looking out,
early on induced me to imagine
a silent catastrophe that occurs
almost unperceived. (Sebald 2002, 88)

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