



The University of Western Ontario

HISTORY 9835A

Rot and Ruin:

History and the Downside of Material Culture

Fall 2025

Instructor: James A. Flath

Office Hours: By Appointment

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Course Description:

This is a graduate course in history intended for students who are interested in material culture.

Prerequisites: none

Antirequisites: none

Graduate Course Level Learning Outcomes/Objectives

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

Analyze material culture from a historical perspective,
Understand and discuss major debates in the field of material culture,
Appreciate how diverse cultures understand and manage historical remains,
Design and produce a major research project on material culture.

Enrolment Restrictions

Enrollment in this course is restricted to graduate students in (Insert name of program(s)), as well as any student that has obtained special permission to enroll in this course from the course instructor as well as the Graduate Chair (or equivalent) from the student's home program

Course Timeline and Format

The course materials and discussions are not restricted to any time period or to any individual culture.

Weekly readings and discussions are arranged thematically, and classes are discussion based with minimal lecturing.

Enrollment Restrictions

Enrollment in this course is restricted to graduate students in History, as well as any student that has obtained special permission to enroll in this course from the course instructor as well as the Graduate Chair (or equivalent) from the student's home program.

Course Syllabus:

This is a course about things – rotten and ruined things. More importantly, it is about how history has been shaped by loss and decay, and how we understand the past in terms of what it leaves behind as fragments and remnants of objects and collections, decomposing matter and ruined spaces and places. Finally, we will question how we structure the past by managing what it leaves behind.

Course Materials:

All articles and book chapters will be made available on the course website. See weekly readings for specifics.

Methods of Evaluation:

The expectation is that students will be thoroughly prepared on a weekly basis, that they will conduct themselves professionally in debate and discussion, and that written assignments will be polished and completed according to disciplinary standards.

Seminar Participation: 25%

Attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absence and failure to actively participate will result in a reduced participation grade.

Final Paper Proposal 10%

Due in Week 4

Conference Paper and Presentation: 15%

Last Week of Class

Final Paper: 50%

Due December 15

Late assignments will not be accepted, except by permission of the Graduate Chair.

Course Schedule and Readings

*Readings are subject to change.

1. Introduction

2. Theory of Things

Brown, B. 'Thing theory', *Critical Inquiry* 28 (1) 2001: 1–22.

Andersson, Dag T. 'Trusted vagueness: the language of things and the order of incompleteness' in *Ruin Memories: materialities, aesthetics and the archaeology of the recent past*. Edited by Bjornar Olsen. Routledge, 2014.

Meyer, Morgan. 'Placing and tracing absence: A material culture of the immaterial', *Journal of Material Culture* 17 (1) 2012: 103-110.

3. Materials and Materiality

Ingold, T. 'Materials against materiality'. *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 (1) 2007: 1–16.

Tilley, Christopher. 'Materials in Materiality; *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 (1) 2007: 16 – 20.

Knappett, Carl. 'Materials with Materiality' *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 (1) 2007: 20 – 23.

4. Heritage and Waste

Pétursdóttir, Þóra. 'Concrete matters: Ruins of modernity and the things called heritage'. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 13 (1) 2013: 31-53.

Lee, Haiyan. "The Ruins of Yuanmingyuan: Or, How to Enjoy a National Wound." *Modern China* 35 (2) 2009: 155-90.

Stille, Alexander. *The Future of the Past*. New York: Picador, 2002. (Chapter 1, 'The Sphinx, Virtual and Real').

Frederiksen, Martin Demant. 'Material Dys-Appearance : Decaying Futures and Contested Temporal Passage', in *Materialities of Passing: Transformation, Transition and Transcience*. Edited by Peter Bjerregaard (et al). Routledge, 2016.

Hauser, Susanne, "Wastes into Heritage: Materials in the Arts, Memories and the Museum". In *Waste-Site Stories. The Recyclings of Memory*, SUNY Press, 2002.

5. Dead Things

please note that material covered this week is viscerally disturbing. Participation, therefore, will be optional and an alternate assignment will be made available upon request

Domanska, Ewa. 'Toward the Archaeontology of the dead body'. *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 9 (4) 2005: 389-413.

Violi, Patrizi. 'Trauma Site Museums and Politics of Memory: Tuol Sleng, Villa Grimaldi and the Bologna Ustica Museum. *Theory, Culture & Society* 29, 2012: 36-75.

Harries, John. 'Of bleeding skulls and the postcolonial uncanny: bones and the presence of Nonosabasut and Demasduit' *Journal of Material Culture* 15 (4) 2010: 403-421.

Verdery, Katherine. *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. Columbia UP, 1999. 1-53.

Websites:

<http://www.yale.edu/cgp/>

<http://sallymann.com/selected-works/body-farm>

6. Urban Wastelands

Edensor, T. 'Waste matter – the debris of industrial ruins and the disordering of the material world. *Journal of Material Culture* 10, 2005: 311–332.

Hudson, Joanne. 'The affordances and potentialities of derelict urban spaces' in *Ruin Memories: materialities, aesthetics and the archaeology of the recent past*. Edited by Bjornar Olsen. Routledge, 2014.

Steinmetz, George. 'Colonial Melancholy and Fordist Nostalgia: The Ruinscapes of Namibia and Detroit'. In *Ruins of Modernity*. Edited by Julia Hell and Andreas Schonle, Duke UP, 2010.

Stoler, Ann, "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination. *Cultural Anthropology* 23 (2) 2008.

Mah, Alice, "Ruination and Post-Industrial Urban Decline", *Sage Handbook of the 21st Century City*, eds. S. Hall and R. Burdett, Sage Publications, 2017.

7. Ghost Towns and Empty Places

Lucas, Gavin. 'Conduits of dispersal: dematerializing an early 20th century village in Iceland' in *Ruin Memories: materialities, aesthetics and the archaeology of the recent past*. Edited by Bjornar Olsen. Routledge, 2014.

DeSilvey C. 'Observed decay: Telling stories with mutable things', *Journal of Material Culture* 11 (3) 2006: 318–338.

Armstrong, Justin. "Everyday Afterlife: Walter Benjamin and the politics of abandonment in Saskatchewan, Canada", *Cultural Studies* 25 (3) 11, 2011.

Anderson, Dag. 'No Man's Land: the ontology of a space left over' in *Ruin Memories: materialities, aesthetics and the archaeology of the recent past*. Edited by Bjornar Olsen, Routledge, 2014.

Stewart, Kathleen, *A Space by the Side of the Road*, Princeton University Press, 1996. (chapter 4, Chronotopes)

8. Disasters and Catastrophes

Gray, Peter. 'Memory and the Commemoration of the Great Irish Famine', in Peter Gray, Oliver Kendrick eds. *The Memory of Catastrophe*. Manchester UP, 2004. 46-64.

Kirschenbaum, Lisa A. 'Commemorations of the siege of Leningrad: a catastrophe in memory and myth' in Peter Gray, Oliver Kendrick eds. *The Memory of Catastrophe*. Manchester UP, 2004. 106-117.

Flath, James. 'Crack: Beichuan in Ruins', *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 2 (2) 2017: 239-262.

9. Ruin Film and Fiction

Schuppli, Susan. 'The Most Dangerous Film in the World' in Frederik Roy (ed). *Tickle Your Catastrophe!: Imagining Catastrophe in Art, Architecture and Philosophy*. Gent: Academia Press, 2011.

(<https://aeon.co/essays/only-the-deep-past-can-make-sense-of-terrifying-nuclear-futures>)

Noe, Eli. 'Mapping the Present Through Catastrophe --- On Philip K. Dick, Science Fiction and the Critique of Ideology' in Frederik Roy (ed). *Tickle Your Catastrophe!: Imagining Catastrophe in Art, Architecture and Philosophy*. Gent: Academia Press, 2011.

Von Moltke, Johannes. 'Ruin Cinema'. In *Ruins of Modernity*. Edited by Julia Hell and Andreas Schonle, Duke UP, 2010.

10. Ruin Art

Smithson, Robert. 'Entropy Made Visible' (Interview with Alison Sky), 1973. In *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Edited by Jack Flam. University of California Press, 1996. 301-309.

Bois, Yve and Rosalind E. Krauss. *Formless: A User's Guide*. New York: Zone Books, 1997. 13-40.

Wu, Hung. *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture*. Princeton UP, 2012. 11-91.

De Meyer, Dirk. 'Catastrophe and its Fallout --- Notes on Cataclysms, Art and Aesthetics, 1755-1945' in *Tickle Your Catastrophe!: Imagining Catastrophe in Art, Architecture and Philosophy*. Gent: Academia Press, 2011.

Stewart, Susan, *The Ruins Lesson: Meaning and Material in Western Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. Introduction.

Orvell, Miles. *Empire of Ruins: American Culture, Photography, and the Spectacle of Ruin*, Oxford University Press, 2001. Introduction.

11. TBA

12. Urban Exploring

Sarah Arnold, "Urban Decay Photography and Film: Fetishism and the Apocalyptic Imagination," *Journal of Urban History* 41, 2 (2015), 326-339.

Garrett, B.L, 'Urban explorers: quests for myth, mystery and meaning' *Geography Compass*, 4, 2010: 1448-1467; AND <https://vimeo.com> › Bradley L. Garrett › Videos

Carrie Mott and Susan M. Roberts, "Not Everyone Has (the) Balls: Urban Exploration and the Persistence of Masculinist Geography," *Antipode* 46, 1 (2014), 229-245.

Mah, Alice. (2014) The dereliction tourist : ethical issues of conducting research in areas of industrial ruination. *Sociological Research Online*, 19 (4). 13

12. Conference Day

Each student will have 15 minutes to present a topic chosen in consultation with the instructor, presumably the same topic that has been chosen for the final paper. Papers will be organized into sessions, with assigned chairs and commentators.

Additional Statements

Health/Wellness Services:

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health Support at <https://www.uwo.ca/health/psych/index.html> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Students seeking help regarding mental health concerns are advised to speak to someone they feel comfortable confiding in, such as their faculty supervisor, their program director (graduate chair), or other relevant administrators in their unit. Campus mental health resources may be found at http://www.health.uwo.ca/mental_health/resources.html

Accessibility Options:

Western is committed to achieving barrier-free accessibility for all its members, including graduate students. As part of this commitment, Western provides a variety of services devoted to promoting, advocating, and accommodating persons with disabilities in their respective graduate program. Graduate students with disabilities (for example, chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, mobility impairments) are strongly encouraged to register with Accessible Education Western (AEW), a confidential service designed to support graduate and undergraduate students through their academic program. With the appropriate documentation, the student will work with both AEW and their graduate programs (normally their Graduate Chair and/or Course instructor) to ensure that appropriate academic accommodations to program requirements are arranged. These accommodations include individual counselling, alternative formatted literature, accessible campus transportation, learning strategy instruction, writing exams and assistive technology instruction. Request for Accommodations/Medical Issues

Students are entitled to their privacy and consequently they do not need to disclose personal information to their course professors. In the event that students feel the need to discuss personal information, they should see the graduate chair. Unlike undergraduate students, graduate students cannot be referred to Social Science Academic Counselling to have their medical or non-medical circumstances evaluated and to receive a recommendation for accommodation. Those facilities are for undergraduates only, and there is no process beyond the department to secure recommendations for accommodation. Our process is that faculty should deal with routine requests for extensions. However, a student's request for accommodation (on medical, non-medical, compassionate grounds) should go to the graduate chair, Prof. Francine McKenzie (historygradchair@uwo.ca) who will consult and communicate with faculty. Additionally, faculty and students should communicate with the grad chair about any case in which

work is not submitted before grades are due. In the event that the graduate chair is also the course professor, then a request for accommodation can be taken to the department chair.

Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI):

The use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools/software/apps is permitted for research, but not for written assignments. Other uses of AI may be approved in consultation with the professor.

Academic Offences:

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf.

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual Course Outlines similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com>).

NOTE: See Policies and Statements on the Graduate section of the History Department Website, https://history.uwo.ca/graduate/program_information/graduate_policies_and_statements.html. This includes additional information on academic support services for health and wellness and gender based sexual violence. You can also find information on other academic policies, including copyright, plagiarism, and accessibility.

Statement on Gender-Based and Sexual Violence:

Western is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts at the following website: https://www.uwo.ca/health/student_support/survivor_support/get-help.html. To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca