Violent Embrace

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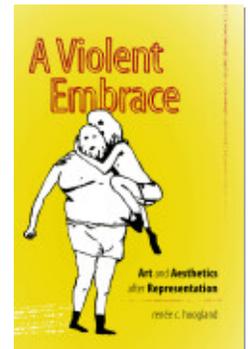
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But skepticism is precisely what I've been talking to you about: the difference between believing and seeing, between believing one sees and seeing between, catching a glimpse—or not. Before doubt ever becomes a system, *skepsis* has to do with the eyes. The word refers to a visual perception, to the observation, vigilance, and attention of the gaze during an examination. One is on the lookout, one reflects upon what one sees, reflects what one sees by delaying the moment of conclusion. Keeping the thing in sight, one keeps on looking at it. The judgment depends on the hypothesis.

Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*

FIVE THE RUSE OF THE RUINS, OR: DETROIT'S NONREAL ESTATE

In the summer of 2009, *Time* launched "Assignment Detroit," the media conglomerate's yearlong reporting project on what was hailed as a "city in crisis—but with potential for a big comeback." The project ended on November 11, 2010, with a final blog installment titled "The Future of Detroit: How to Shrink a City." A quote from John Huey's exuberant editorial of September 24, 2009, suggests something about the nature and purposes of the undertaking, which appeared both in print and validated its own interactive space on the magazine's website:

We did something a little out of the ordinary for us or, frankly, for anybody: we bought a house in Detroit. As houses go, it's nice enough—three stories, five bedrooms, 3½ baths with a yard and a basement. We paid $99,000, about $80,000 above the average price of a house in the city limits. Why would we ever do such a thing? Because we believe that Detroit right now is a great American story. . . . As a story, Detroit has been misunderstood, underreported, stereotyped, avoided and exploited for decades. To get it right, we decided to become stakeholders. . . . The house will be a gathering place and a clearinghouse; we've already had Mayor Dave Bing over for dinner and thrown a lawn party to greet our new neighbors.[1]

Huey sees and believes in Detroit as a story, a story he is convinced the dozens of journalists, photographers, videographers, and bloggers from TIME.com, Fortune.com, CNNMoney.com, even *Sports Illustrated,* all eagerly flooding the D-zone, will be able to get "right." For more than twelve months, the stories coming out of this lofty enterprise kept being spewed onto *Time*'s "The Detroit Blog"[2]—as Huey zestfully exclaims: "After spending a couple of days here, we found that you could not throw a rock in Detroit without hitting a good story." Whether Detroiters (or readers for that matter) maintain the same standards of what is a "good story" as journalists do is a question for debate, unless it is some of the more amusing anecdotes about Detroit, such as French TV crews vainly searching for the wild deer that reputedly range the pampas of the city's downtown area, or, on a more positive note, breathless reports on the successfully spreading enterprise of urban farming.[3] It seems safe to say, however, that it is not so much the stories of Detroit, but its images, the visual imprint of its ruins, the horrifying pictures of its material disintegration, that form the most abiding impression of the city today, not only in the United States but around the world.

In a sour mood, one might say that both the upbeat stories and the horror images of Detroit function as cheap entertainment for the gringos. Still, my point here is not to assert or contest the veracity, the helpfulness, or the political and social viability of these stories and images, nor to examine the integrity or, as the case may be, the questionable intentions of the rock and lawn party throwers who largely produce them. My interest primarily lies in the widely disseminated photographs of the by now in/famous Detroit ruins in their irresistible beauty, as on one hand markers of the irreversible loss of modernity and its founding premise of infinite progress, of the destruction and decay of a bygone industrial era, of complex and ongoing racial and class struggles, and on the other the operations of these photographs, not so much as inscriptions or traces of a past reality, but rather, in the words of German philosopher Lambert Wiesing, as images, which "alone make the artificial presence of things possible . . . present[ing] things as exclusively visible, released from the laws of physics."[4] As such, the ruse of these ruins not only consists in their function and operation as runes, whose significance at once lies in, but cannot be reduced to, the visualized objects themselves, but also—and more spectacularly—in their ubiquitous "presentness" as images, as instantiations of the phenomenon of pictoriality as such. The photographs of its ruins thus produce, in and of themselves, what I would like to call Detroit's "nonreal estate" in its pure visibility.

"Assignment Detroit" and *Time*'s reporters' undoubtedly well-meant exhortations for the city to become "smaller, greener, and thriftier," may now, a few years later, appear a stale, old story. The interest in what has come to be known as "ruin porn"—a phrase that a recent Internet search suggests is practically

synonymous with Detroit—has, however, by no means subsided. Since Huey and his crew left Detroit to find "good stories" elsewhere, the city has become "hot," which means that it has emerged as a cool, hipster city in some sections of the mainstream media. The indignant blogs, rants, and more serious online rejections of its visual presence in these same media as "ruin porn"[5] nonetheless suggest a tension, an ambivalence, or perhaps an indissoluble contradiction inherent in the images of the ruins themselves and in the imaging of Detroit through them. It is this tension that I would like to address in this chapter as, in the first place, a question of aesthetics, and thus as a question of central concern to my inquiry into the nonrepresentational operations of the visual in our current, postphotographical moment.

I had been thinking and writing about the visualization of Detroit for some time, when I was invited to chair a panel session at a recent American Studies conference at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan's only urban public research university in the heart of the city's cultural center.[6] The panel, titled "Getting Beyond 'Ruin Porn': The Politics and Aesthetics of Deindustrialization," evidently intended to denounce and get away from—indeed beyond—the supposedly insidious fascination of so-called outsiders with the all-pervasive visual representation of Detroit as no more than a bunch of burnt-out, half (or wholly) demolished buildings, what insiders prefer to call "urban blight." Clearly, these two phrases do not refer to the same things (as the panel's subtitle, perhaps unintentionally, suggests). The latter evokes the deterioration or collapse of Detroit as a modern industrial city, with all the social, political, economic, and cultural consequences thereof in their appallingly concrete, everyday reality. The former, in contrast, pertains to something that is decidedly real and concrete, but not material or everyday in the same way. A brief comparison between so-called regular porn and what is accurately called "ruin porn" should help to clarify the difference.

Regular porn, most of us know whether we "consume" porn or not, involves sometimes written, but increasingly primarily visual materials that explicitly represent or portray sexual subject matter and that serve the purpose of sexual arousal. Crucially, though, it does so at more than one remove. Pornography is always at a distance, always mediated, in the sense that the term applies to the depiction of sexual acts, not to the acts themselves. Such distancing or detachment is not only critical for porn to produce the desired effects, but is additionally further extended in its actual use. Indeed, the last thing those of us who read, watch, and enjoy porn want is to be in the room with the people (animals? objects?) that enact the titillating scenes of sexual activity, to be a player in those scenarios ourselves. The essence of porn, in other words, is the pleasure derived from observing something that is not actually there, from an encounter with a

two-dimensional (nowadays usually a screen) surface, a visual reality without any real-life or social depth, an image or imaginary realm without the *presence of the real.* Porn thus points up what could be argued to pertain to any image, that is to say, that vision and the production of images can never exhaust, never fully capture the totality of reality, and that that is precisely the point, the image's magic, if you will. To put it differently, it is in the nature of the image (which need not be visual)—if it is not in fact its essence—to do the opposite of capturing reality. Porn, and its operations, can only be successful if it accomplishes its task of derealization.

The same holds true for what is commonly decried as "ruin porn." The phrase itself—as much as the remarkable ease with which it has caught on, particularly with reference to Detroit (apart from suggesting that looking at images of ruins is, to say the least, a dubious if not embarrassing pastime)—strikingly brings to the fore the ambivalence at the heart of the image, and especially of the photographic image, that is, its simultaneous presence qua image, as pictorial surface, and its potential representational or semiotic functions. It equally underlines its operations to be, first and foremost, aesthetic in nature. This very ambivalence suggests that as objects of perception or, more precisely, as data or givens that may or may not provoke our concern, images cannot be expected to do the work of social critique. They are able to invite or incite us to initiate social action, to fight the blight, to combat the reality of the decay of Detroit, but images as such cannot do that work and cannot be expected to. Where urban blight, in other words, evokes Detroit in depth, the phrase "ruin porn" cannot but pertain to a pictorial surface. The problem, of course, especially when we are dealing with photographic images, is that the separation between the two is sometimes hard to make.

The fact that it is not always easy to separate the semiotic operations of the photographic image from its existence as phenomenological object is the direct result of the hegemony of the metaphysics of presence, firmly rooted in Western culture since Plato and prevailing with particular vengeance since the Enlightenment. Within the metaphysics of presence (a term originally used by Heidegger), seeing is not so much believing, as St. Thomas suggests, as it is the privileged road to knowledge, to understanding, to cognition, on the assumption that even the most complex ideas first appear to us in their visible shape. Having evolved in a variety of forms, the foundation of dominant modes of positivist or Enlightenment epistemology is that vision is not only the "noblest of senses," as Plato assumed, but also that it makes everything present, that it allows for a detached and objective perception of the world in its totality—for, literally, *com*prehension.

I am not drawing attention to the privileged position of vision in our ocular-centric culture to critique the oppressive effects of dominant organizations of

the visible, such as in terms of gender, race, class, and sexuality, nor even to evoke such critiques in deconstructive terms. I am not interested in rehearsing familiar (and convincing) arguments that the realm of vision is, by definition, not given but constructed, and that there is thus no "view-from-nowhere"—which is an ideological construct that primarily serves dominant groups (modern science, corporate capitalism, white straight middle-class males). My interest in Western culture's ocularcentrism in relation to the visualization of Detroit as "ruin porn," at least in the larger project of this book, is of a more narrowly defined, yet fundamental theoretical nature. My central concern in this chapter is the photographic image in the context of the proposed neo-aesthetics of existence, that is, the function of the visual for a metaphysics of becoming in which art assumes a privileged function.

On the face of it, the photographs featured in most discussions of Detroit-as-"ruin porn,"[7] for instance Andrew Moore's *Detroit Disassembled* (2010) and Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's *The Ruins of Detroit* (2010), would appear to fulfill the requirements of "art photography"—in its ambivalent distinction from photojournalism—as I have described them in the preceding chapter. Presented as something more than "mere realistic renderings" of their subjects, these mostly large-scale photographic works tend to be exhibited in art galleries and museums as the unique productions of individual photographers, to be collected and published as expensive, beautifully finished, limited-edition art books.[8] Their operation in the world, however, the work they do in their singularity and difference as organized aesthetic activity, is undeniably markedly dissimilar from that of the type of work produced by, say, Richard Barnes and Rineke Dijkstra, or similarly "recognized" art photographers and/or media artists. The latter invite us to approach the photographic image in its interrelations with and divergence from more traditional modes of artistic visualization (such as painting), and thus force us to reflect upon its function in its presentness and its self-presentation as art. "Ruin porn," in contrast, confronts us much more powerfully and, judging by the outraged responses to its in/famous manifestations, inescapably with the photograph's simultaneous and originally primary documentary function, or at least with its appreciation and theorization as such. This is the paradox of the mechanically produced and endlessly reproducible image, the type of image that the Czech-born writer, philosopher, and journalist Vilém Flusser (1920–1991) designates the "technical image."[9]

In common parlance, the paradox of the technical image tends to be cast in the reductive terms of a variety of related binary oppositions, such as the distinction between surface and depth, the visible and the invisible, or appearance and reality. The interplay between surface and depth as it emerges in and from the technical image (even if it pervades the field of aesthetics more generally) comes

poignantly to the fore in the imaging of Detroit, where the photograph functions at once as a representation of the sociomaterial reality of urban blight and, no less compellingly, as an aesthetic surface with a distinctly affective, captivating power. In order to be able to say something about the former, it is the latter aspect that needs to be addressed first.

To shift the attention from the enduringly disputed aesthetic credentials of photography and yet maintain my focus on Detroit "ruin porn" as aesthetic object, I wish to move away from the all-too-familiar examples that have given the phenomenon its name, fame, and notoriety.[10] My comments in the following paragraphs therefore do not pertain to any of the earlier mentioned "art photographers," or even to any image in particular, but instead refer generally to a recent collection of photographs, monumentally published under the title *Detroit: 138 Square Miles,* by local documentary photographer Julia Reyes Taubman.[11] These photographs have not (at least not as far as I know) been exhibited in any museum or art gallery, and they present themselves self-consciously as an attempt at "documenting Detroit," as the title of Elmore Leonard's foreword to the volume suggests, an effort reflected in the sheer range and number of photos (the hefty tome counts almost 500 pages and contains 454 individual images). We find a great number of by now familiarly depressing shots of the empty, abandoned, or burnt-out interiors of both commercial and residential Detroit buildings (figures 5.1 through 5.3; plates 15 and 16). A variety of street views across the enormous expanse of the city offers us a sense of the extent of its decay: whole blocks are boarded up (figure 5.4) or have been virtually razed, with the exception of one or two forlorn-looking houses still suggesting what the neighborhood might have looked liked before its ultimate demise (figure 5.5). The tragic fate of the Grand Central railway station, by now perhaps the most frequently photographed and reproduced icon of postindustrial disintegration, poignantly emerges from the contrast between its grand design and its current appearance as a spooky void, its empty windows, the dilapidating wall tiles (figure 5.6). The photos also show the "other side" of Detroit; its "can-do" spirit as the capital of the American automobile industry is palpable from the many powerful images of its remaining plants and factories (figure 5.7), the persistent sense of community emanates from churches, stadiums, bars, and park gatherings. Still, rather than inscribing itself in either a "pietistic" (à la Steichen) or in a critical tradition of social photography (à la Sander), it is precisely the apparent effort at full coverage, the seemingly exhaustive visual presentation of the "reality" of Detroit in this designated documentary work, that powerfully points up the impossibility of presenting the totality of any reality by representational means. Even such a wide range and large number of images can never offer us more than a glimpse at an imaginary world, an imaginary Detroit that here merely exists in its visuality. It is

FIG. 5.1 Julia Reyes Taubman, *East Detroit* (2005–2011). © Julia Reyes Taubman

FIG. 5.2 Julia Reyes Taubman, *Highland Park Plant* (2005–2011). © Julia Reyes Taubman

FIG. 5.3 Julia Reyes Taubman, *Highland Park Plant, Craneway* (2005–2011). © Julia Reyes Taubman

FIG. 5.5 Julia Reyes Taubman, *Central Detroit* (2005–2011). © Julia Reyes Taubman

thus this same effort at comprehensiveness that equally forcefully puts into effect the ambivalence at the heart of the image, specifically of the postphotographic, technical image, and which therefore requires the adoption of a different route of theoretical exploration than the one pursued in the previous chapter.

I have earlier expressed my reservations about phenomenological approaches of the aesthetic. Within an overall aesthetics of sensation, or a theory of feeling, along the Bakhtinian/Whiteheadian/Deleuzian lines pursued thus far, the subject does not exist prior to, but is born anew in each fresh encounter with an object (whether physical or mental). As Whitehead succinctly puts it, "The word 'object' . . . means an entity which is a potentiality for being a component in feeling; and the word 'subject' means the entity constituted by the process of feeling, and including this process. The feeler is the unity emergent from its own feelings" (*PR*, 88). For Whitehead, there is thus neither a subject, as there is for Kant, who "projects" the world, from which the world "emerges," nor is there a subject, as there is for phenomenologists, who "intends" the world. With Whitehead, I reject the presupposition of the existence of a consciousness that intends the identity of an

FIG. 5.4 Julia Reyes Taubman, *Woodward Avenue* (2005–2011). © Julia Reyes Taubman

FIG. 5.6 Julia Reyes Taubman, *Central Detroit* (2005–2011). © Julia Reyes Taubman

FIG. 5.7 Julia Reyes Taubman, *Zug Island, U.S. Steel* (2005–2011). © Julia Reyes Taubman

object, or of a perception, and I follow him, Bakhtin, and Deleuze in recognizing the constitutive or *poietic* function of the aesthetic event, as creative activity, as a process of becoming that critically hinges on the nonpersonal, or presubjective nature of affect. I nonetheless wish to approach the visualization of Detroit and the question of "ruin porn" more generally, from a phenomenological, or rather from a phenomenologically inspired perspective. My reasons for doing this are, first, that the photographic ubiquity of Detroit cannot be denied its function as phenomenological presence, and second, because the two theorists cited earlier, Wiesing and Flusser, who both write within a phenomenological philosophical framework, offer particularly helpful suggestions—some of which I will read oppositionally—about the function and operation of a visual aesthetic in the narrow sense I am attempting to bring into focus, that is, a form of visuality that specifically obtains in the photographic image.

While Wiesing's strictly philosophical concern is with the image and with image theory more generally, Flusser writes specifically about the technical image from a combined philosophical and a media theoretical perspective.[12] This difference in positioning may explain the fact that despite their shared phenomenological orientation on visual media, the latter presents an overwhelmingly negative critique of technical images and of their effects upon our world and our selves, whereas the former foregrounds the enabling and enriching function of visual mediation and the production and circulation of images. This contrast neatly expresses the profoundly divergent appreciations of Detroit "ruin porn," as much as it illuminates the vehemence with which the ceaseless dissemination of these photos tends to be rejected as socially destructive and unethical, and equally ceaselessly consumed in the form of gallery shows/museum exhibitions and art books. The very phenomenon of Detroit "ruin porn" thus testifies to the need for a theory of the technical/photographic image that adequately addresses, even if it cannot ultimately resolve, such conflicts as they play out on both the level of social reality and on what I must imprecisely call the reality of the image per se.

Flusser opens his concise treatise *Toward a Philosophy of Photography* (2000; hereafter *PP*) with a discussion of the image in its distinction from and struggle with writing. Images, he states, are "significant surfaces" the space and time of which are "none other than the world of magic." Writing, in contrast, is the world of historical consciousness, the world of cause and effect, of linearity, of conse-quences. "Structurally different" from this world of meaning and interpretation, in the world of magic images "replace events and translate them into scenes" (*PP*, 7, 8). While prehistorical—what he calls "traditional"—images are supposed to have provided people with the mediation required to render an inaccessible real-ity comprehensible, technical images, Flusser writes, do not so much succeed as they factually replace that other revolutionary transformational invention, "linear

writing," which marked, on his view, the "beginning of 'historical consciousness' and 'history' in the narrower sense" (*PP,* 10).

Technical images, Flusser claims, were invented at the very moment when texts became themselves "incomprehensible," which was at the height of a nineteenth-century "textolatry" with which history "c[a]me to an end" (*PP,* 13). He numbers Marxism, Christianity, and a specialist scientific discourse as examples of such "textolatry, of 'faithfulness to the text.'" Written accounts up to that moment served to interpret ideas. With the invention of photography, Flusser goes on to suggest, technical images, which are endlessly reproduced and distributed on a global scale, become increasingly conceptual. Photography allows for the generation of ideas that are taken at face value as truth and no longer as something that requires interpretation or decoding. Whereas they were supposed to be "maps" that enable humans to negotiate their relation to the world, they turn into "screens":

> Instead of representing the world, they obscure it until human beings' lives finally become a function of the images they create. Human beings cease to decode the images and instead project them, still encoded, into the world "out there," which meanwhile itself becomes like an image—a context of scenes, of states of things . . . the technical images currently all around us are in the process of magically restructuring our "reality" and turning it into a "global image scenario." (*PP,* 10)

Thus, even if the technical image was primarily invented to make the world of texts comprehensible again, Flusser notes that such images gradually have become abstractions of the "third order," in the sense that they "abstract from texts which abstract from traditional images which themselves abstract from the concrete world" (*PP,* 14). To be sure, the clear distinction Flusser makes between so-called traditional images and technical images may not be altogether convincing; both the earliest known images, such as cave paintings, and photographic images, at least up until the digital moment (and, as we have seen, beyond that moment) share a principal mimetic function and have and continue to be regarded as, at least potentially, indexical. The inference he draws from this distinction is nonetheless noteworthy. The reason technical images are difficult to decode, Flusser maintains, is that they appear to wear their significance on their surface, to be "objective" renderings of the world, so that they do not operate symbolically but rather "appear to be on the same level of reality as their significance." People who look at photographs hence tend to see them "not as images but as windows," and they do "not criticize them as images, but as ways of looking at the world . . . their criticism is not an analysis of their production but an analysis of the world" (*PP,* 15).

Flusser's use of the words "window" and "screen" as if they were interchange-

able is confusing; I will come back to this in a moment. Yet the strength of his analysis of the operation of the technical image lies in the fact that it, first, forces us to think about the power of images in their presentness as significant surfaces, surfaces that "translate everything into states of things," and to recognize that their "magical effect" consists in enticing "those receiving them to project this undecoded magic onto the world out there." Technical images, with their capacity for being endlessly reproduced, ever more widely disseminated, and easily distributed, to a large extent determine the "way in which we experience, know, evaluate and act as a function of these images" (*PP,* 16). If we do not learn to look critically at these images, at the ways they function in the world, and the ways they work on our selves, Flusser warns us, we lose the ability to think conceptually, to produce ideas that allow us to think productively about the kind of "magical spell" we are under. His avowedly "apocalyptic perspective" thus urges us to take the "problem" of photography, in its various political, ideological, and ethical dimensions, seriously, and it alerts us to the dangers of a rising illiteracy owing to an uncritical faith in photography's "reality."

Second, Flusser's method of approaching the photographic image through its three main aspects—the Apparatus (camera), the Functionary (photographer), and the Technical Image (photographic surface)—allows us to consider the contemporary, no longer merely "mechanically," but digitally reproduced image in its specificity and its distinction from both traditional images and from previous modes of visual mass mediation. If, as he suggests in *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (2011; hereafter *UTI*), the invention of photography has led to a "mutation of our experiences, perceptions, values, and modes of behavior, a mutation of our being-in-the-world" (5), then certainly the advent of the digital age validates the assumption that yet another such mutation has already happened or is in the process of taking place. Flusser, for one, was fully aware of this; although he wrote his two studies on the technical image before the digital revolution truly took off, he nonetheless clearly envisioned the development of a "future society that synthesizes electronic images," a "fabulous society where life is very different from our own" (*UTI,* 3).

Considering the growing theoretical importance of media and Flusser's work in the field, it is, as Mark Poster mildly puts it in his introduction to *Into the Universe of Technical Images,* "disappointing that the major cultural theorists of the 1970s and 1980s tend to overlook media theory and almost completely ignore the thought of Flusser."[13] It is clearly partly this neglect that has spurred growing numbers of more recent cultural thinkers to direct their attention to new media in both their technological and social operations from a primarily theoretical and/or philosophical perspective and to make the thought of Deleuze and Guattari, among others, relevant for the "fabulous society" we undeniably

(albeit sometimes uncomfortably) inhabit.[14] The transformation of our visual universe from a technical to a technological one has additionally given rise to more sustained theoretical reflection on the nature of the image per se. It is as a representative of the latter that Lambert Wiesing takes up the question of the image and of image studies, and to whose repeatedly mentioned book *Artificial Presence* (hereafter *AP*) I presently turn to further examine Detroit "ruin porn," not so much as a mediated image in the narrow sense, but instead as an aesthetic object in the sense that has been the focus of my inquiries in preceding chapters.

Wiesing tentatively differentiates the project of what in German is called *Bildwissenschaft* and what in English, as noted in the introduction, appears under the names "image studies," "visual studies," or "visual culture," respectively, from both more established disciplines, such as philosophy and art history, as well as from interdisciplines such as cultural and media studies. He suggests instead that "image studies" may not be a discipline at all, but rather denotes a field in which various reflections from different disciplines, each with its own content and method, converge. The premise of his own collected studies of the image is nonetheless that the "concept of the image" is a problem that "can only be solved philosophically," that it is the "task of *image theory*" (*AP,* 5). Rejecting anthropological and semiotic approaches alike, Wiesing takes his cue from nonsemiotic philosophies such as Konrad Fiedler's (1841–1895), and especially that of the principal founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), to opt for a theoretical position toward the image that is based on perception.

In Husserl's terminology, the problem of the image revolves around the theoretical distinctions between the depicting material, which he calls "image carrier" [*Bildträger*], and the referential object or the "image subject" [*Bildsujet*]. What is "decisive," however, according to Wiesing, is the name Husserl suggests for the "depiction that visibly appears in the image," which he speaks of as the "image object" [*Bildobjekt*] (*AP,* 18–19). Husserl's purpose in identifying the depiction in the image as an object, instead of a sense or content, is to give depiction, Wiesing asserts, a "special ontological status": depiction is a "special object that becomes visible in an image," and that which thereby distinguishes itself from a real object. As he continues in his characteristically refreshing, straightforward terms: "The image object is not a real object; it is exclusively the object that is described when someone says what he or she thinks he or she sees on an image carrier" (*AP,* 19).

The suggestion to describe that which becomes visible in an image as an object rather than as sense or content notably allows for a distinction or, more precisely, for a specification of different forms of presence. There are real objects in the world, materialities or substances that are subject to the laws of physics, Wiesing submits, whose presentness requires or combines with "substantial attendance [*Anwesenheit*]." He complicates what at first sight appears to be a simple adher-

ence to a traditional metaphysics of presence, however, by making a distinction between different modes of such substances' "realness." It is precisely because the presence of such materialities and substances can be defined as "real"—as he laconically points out, "to speak of real presence is not a pleonasm"—that there can also be a "nonreal, an artificial presence—a presence, precisely, without substantial attendance." An image object is a presentness the particular kind of being-an-object of which consists in the fact that it exists only and exclusively in its "pure visibility"—"pure," that is, in a Kantian sense, as opposed to "attached." Things in images are exclusively visible; they cannot be touched, smelled, heard, or tasted, and hence they are not connected to any substance that can be so perceived. Wiesing infers from this that the "implication of presence and substantiality dissolves in the image" and, furthermore, that images can thus be understood as a medium "with which it becomes possible to produce a nonphysical yet still visible object *sui generis* (even though this object is addressed differently, as image object, imaginary thing, pure visibility, or false unity" (*AP,* 20).

By describing the depiction in the image "not as a form of sense or content, but as a kind of object" (*AP,* 19), Husserl provides us with what Wiesing defines as a "decidedly antisemiotic counterconcept" to common determinations of image reception in terms of meaning and interpretation. Still, Wiesing's Husserlian theory of the image does not so much run against the commonly held belief that every picture tells a story. The artificial presence of things in and through images does not obviate the latter's function as signs. What it does do, however, is point up the ontological differences between the image carrier, the image subject, and the image object and, in contrast to semiotic approaches to the image, Husserl's phenomenological perspective, centering as it does on the "artificial presence" of things, on the image object in its ontological status distinct from both the depicting material and from the real or referential object, poses the question of whether images must always be representation and thus must always refer to something else. Put slightly differently, and more assertively, whereas a semiotic view assumes that images can and should be read, Husserl's notion of the image object suggests that when we look at an image, we are not reading but seeing, and that we are, hence, "dealing with a sensual consciousness of the presentness of something" (*AP,* 22) that does not necessarily refer, that does not necessarily give meaning or content, but that is pure visibility. Images, of course, like everything else, can become signs, carriers of meaning, can tell stories requiring interpretation as well, but they need not do so; that is to say, in Wiesing's own concise terms, "What resembles does not have to refer" (*AP,* 23).

In its distinction from both the image carrier and the image subject, the notion of the image object additionally points to a difference lodged in the equivocation of the concept of the image per se, a difference that in the case of photography

has often been articulated in terms of "double exposure," that is, to indicate the photograph's dual function in terms of what I have earlier called its documentary capacity and its operation as a medium of artistic creation, its "nonreal presence" qua image object. This ambiguity accounts for the fact that a photographic image can but need not function in significatory terms and that it does not do so in our actual encounter with it. Being exposed to a thing, looking at it, even studying it, does not, Wiesing aptly points out, "turn this thing into a sign, does not give meaning to it" (*AP,* 23). Following Husserl, Wiesing evidently deviates from Whitehead and Deleuze—who both, we recall, reject phenomenology—in that he presupposes a consciousness, a someone for whom an image object appears as such. He nonetheless reaches a similar conclusion about the ways an image does its work as, first and foremost, an object of perception, an aesthetic object. For it is, he submits, only after the image object has been "brought into appearance [*Erscheinung*]" that it can (but need not) be *used* as a carrier of meaning, as a sign, and thereby become a signifier (*AP,* 35).

Wiesing's theory of the image fundamentally questions the supposition that a photographic image, even in its most ostensibly documentary appearance, in and of itself necessarily operates as a carrier of meaning, as a phenomenological object whose referential or real object we can infer or read off of its significant surface. Husserl's notion of the image object in its artificial or nonreal presence additionally allows Wiesing effectively to problematize a metaphor we have already encountered in Flusser (if only to be simply rejected), which is the idea of the photographic image as a window onto the world. Harking back to the Renaissance artist and theoretician Leon Battista Alberti, as Wiesing helpfully reminds us, the metaphor of the open window has profoundly marked the philosophical reflection not only on technical images but on images generally. In one sense, Wiesing concedes, the comparison should be considered accurate:

> The look we take at the image, as well as the look we take through a window, directs our attention toward things and events that are not in the same space. By means of a window, we normally look out of a house at the outside; by means of an image, we see an image object in an imaginary space. Images and windows make it possible to look at something other than themselves. (*AP,* 80)

In another sense the metaphor must nonetheless be firmly rejected, for we look through a window into an existing world, whereas we look at an image into an imaginary one. Even if, as Husserl himself admits, we may *feel* as if we are in the presence of a person when we look at a portrait, this is clearly not the case. Indeed, a "thing depicted in an image 'appears' in the way in which an actual physical thing appears, but in conflict with the actual presence [*Gegenwart*] that conflict-free perception brings about."[15] Our empirical experience of images,

Wiesing hence infers, confirms that the window metaphor does not in fact work at all: "Hardly anyone will look at an image and then greet the person depicted there because he or she presumes that person to be present" (*AP,* 81). The appearance of the image object cannot possibly be confused with the appearance of the thing itself. Furthermore, the limitations of the window metaphor not only show up in relation to the framed painting or photograph, but become equally manifest when we consider the "screen windows" associated with both old and new media. Such screens may well offer a "display for the presentation of things," but the things they present are either necessarily elsewhere, at a distance, as in the case of television, or the things are both "visible and in attendance," yet not real but "virtual things," as is the case with computer screens (*AP,* 85).

The two aspects of Wiesing's theoretical reflections on the image—much more extensive than I can discuss here—that I have foregrounded, first, the erroneous idea that when we look at a photograph we are looking as if through a window into an actual, existing reality, rather than into an imaginary one, and second, the supposition that every image in and of itself functions as a carrier of meaning, as a sign, are particularly helpful in thinking through the complex operations of "ruin porn." More specifically, the photographic visualization of Detroit brings the difference lodged in the equivocation of the concept of the image strikingly to the fore. When addressed in their representational or referential function, that is, as signifiers or signs, it is the image subject of such images in its relation to the image object, rather than the latter in relation to the image carrier, that is at stake. In other words, it is not the "real thing," the actual dilapidated or burnt-out building in the street, but the immaterial object of perception in its artificial presence that is called upon to tell its story about that which it is, in and of itself, not. The question, then, becomes what *are* these objects, and what kind of skepticism is at play in the "difference between believing and seeing" the ruins not only in their significatory function, as runes, each with its own magical significance, but also in their artificial presence, as imaginary things, pure visibility, or false unity? What is the nature, to evoke Derrida's words, of the "glimpse" that we catch—or not—of Detroit in its real presence when we look through the picture window into an imaginary world, at a pictorial surface that appears to act as a transparent plane and thus denies it own existence as a medium? And what would or could be the "hypothesis" upon which to base our "judgment"—aesthetic, ethicopolitical, or otherwise—of these images?

Are the endlessly reproduced images of urban decay the work of "vultures picking at the bones again," as Ron Williams, media-writer and president of 3rdWhaleMobile (a small green tech company based in Canada), maintains?[16] In his 2010 article on "Green Detroit," Williams follows a by now familiar argumentative trajectory in his denunciation of "ruin porn." The foreign and out-

of-state photographers coming to Detroit are not considered to be sufficiently knowledgeable about the Motor City to produce "authentic" images of its streets, let alone of its people, who are essentially, Williams correctly points out, largely abjected from Detroit's horrible beauty. The mainstream media coverage of Detroit is furthermore, he continues, "messed up," and misses the fact that "D-troit is the truth . . . [that] D-troit is the end result of a global economic system . . . the deadly consequence of capital freely moving across the planet," as well as of the "utter lack of *vision* (and too often *integrity*) on the part of the local business and political leadership." By no means do I wish to downplay Williams' outrage about Detroit's decline (which is heartfelt) or deny that his identification of its causes bears further discussion. The question, however, is what kind of work the images of the Detroit ruins are supposed to be doing—or not to be doing, as the case here seems to be? If "D-troit is the truth," how might its "authenticity" be captured in any image, in precisely that which, to recall Wiesing's expression, "alone make[s] the artificial presence of things possible . . . present[ing] things as exclusively visible, released from the laws of physics"?

If, as Derrida suggests in the passage from *Memoirs of the Blind* cited at the beginning of this chapter, *skepsis* has to do with the eyes, and judgment of what one keeps looking at depends on the hypothesis, what does Williams believe he is seeing when he dismisses the mainstream visualization of the Detroit ruins/ runes for their lack of authenticity, their failure to capture Detroit as "the truth"? What is the hypothesis underlying this judgment? What would happen to our prehension of these images if we accept the hypothesis that photography, as a medium, can be used not only, or even not so much, to picture or visibly *reproduce* but instead to form or visibly *produce* something in its artificial presence? In light of the phenomenological insights explored in the preceding paragraphs, it appears to me that we must follow Derrida in order to begin to think about the function of these photographs through the difference lodged in the equivocation of the concept of the image itself, to try to account for what we see when we look at the depiction of "ruin porn" as "pure visibility, or false unity," and to reflect upon what we see by "delaying the moment of conclusion."

As image objects, and thus as objects of perception or aesthetic objects, the Detroit ruins neatly fit into what Andreas Huyssen calls "The Ruin Craze," the contemporary obsession with ruins in the "countries of the northern transatlantic," which, he submits, "hides a nostalgia for an earlier age that had not yet lost its power to imagine other futures."[17] Huyssen situates the current nostalgia for ruins at the tail end of the history of modernity, whose trajectory, "all the way into postmodernism," he perceives to be "overshadowed by a catastrophic imagination and imaginary of ruins."[18] While the Western fascination with ruins can be traced back to the Renaissance, during which, as Brian Dillon points out,

the "ruin was first of all a legible remnant, a repository of written knowledge,"[19] it is only with the "advent of a modernity that conceives itself in relation to the remains of the past," as Dillon elsewhere puts it, that the ruin becomes an "essential aesthetic concept and recurrent image in Western art."[20] Huyssen sees the twenty-first-century fascination with ruins as a form of nostalgia for modernity itself, a "modernity that dare not speak its name after acknowledging the catastrophes of the twentieth century and the lingering injuries of inner and outer colonization."[21] This supposition allows him to couple the "concreteness of ruins" with the equally historically specific, in casu, modern concept of "authenticity." Whereas he does not deny that the "authentic ruin" as a particular conceptual and architectural configuration finds its origins in the beginnings of modernity in the eighteenth century, it is in the twentieth century, more precisely in the "age of mechanical reproduction," that, Huyssen argues, the "fear of inauthenticity, the lack of existential meaning, and the absence of individual originality" produces the idea of and fascination with "authentic ruins," that is to say, with real ruins of different kinds that come to "function as projective screens for modernity's articulation of asynchronous temporalities and fear of and obsession with the passing of time."[22]

To be sure, the concern with originality and uniqueness predates Benjamin's in/famous elaboration of the aura of the work of art in terms of authenticity, but as Huyssen persuasively suggests, it is only in the early twentieth century that a "gap opens up between intellectual insight into the obsolescence of authenticity and the life world's desire for the authentic—cuisine, clothing, identity."[23] This desire is undoubtedly romantic, aimed at the promise of something that does not exist or is no longer there. The paradox of the "romantic ruin" for Huyssen is therefore that what is "allegedly present and transparent . . . is present only as an absence." The modern ruin, then, posits the "problem of a double exposure to the present and past" whereby "its temporality, which points to past glory and greatness," is clearly different from the "claims of plenitude and presentness invariably at stake in the discourse of authenticity." Rather than accepting the "ruin craze" to be the result of a false belief in an authentic and glorified past, which he considers merely to promote the need for "further mythmaking," Huyssen posits the "idea of the authentic ruin as a product of modernity itself," as an "architectonic cipher for the temporal and spatial doubts that modernity always harboured about itself."[24]

Huyssen conceives of the ruin as an instance of the "double exposure to the present and the past." Dillon, in the first of the essays cited above, traces the trajectory of the ruin from its eighteenth-century function as an "image both of natural disaster and of the catastrophes of human history"—which he admits are hard to tell apart because it is precisely the simultaneously emerging "aesthetics of the

sublime" that serves to name the "confusion that comes over us with wholesale destruction," whether natural or man-made—through the romanticization of the ruin as a "symbol of all artistic creation," and the nineteenth-century imagination of nature itself "as already ruined," up to the modern ruin as "always, to some degree, a palpable, all-too-real remnant of the future."[25] In his historicization of its development, Dillon thus at first glance appears to follow Huyssen in his reading of the contemporary ruin craze. But he actually takes the argument a step further by emphasizing that the ruin, "still with us after six centuries of obsession," is not a "simple nostalgia for modernity."[26] The endlessly reproducible and endlessly reproduced images of industrial ruin, the vacant malls and abandoned theaters, the defunct railway stations, the silent foundries, the dilapidating bunkers, and amputated subway stations disseminated across thousands of websites, appearing in hundreds of lavishly produced art photography books, to him indicate a "mourning [of] the loss of the aesthetic itself." Always "totter[ing] on the edge of a certain species of kitsch," contemporary ruins, he maintains, "show us again—just like the kitsch object—a world in which beauty (or sublimity) is sealed off, its derangement safely framed and endlessly repeatable."[27]

In their respective readings of modern ruins generally, and of postindustrial ruins particularly—both marked by a profound nostalgia and firmly embedded in contingent structures of affective memory and longing, yet posing different questions—Huyssen and Dillon equally foreground both the function and the problem of the ruin as at least in part, if not primarily, an aesthetic one. From their discussions of various forms of both premodern, modern, and postmodern ruins, it does not become clear, however, whether they are talking about actual, existing ruins in the world (irrespective of their "authenticity"), or if they are concerned with visual presentations of such ruins, in the form of "mechanically reproduced" or technical images, or in the more traditionally defined artistic forms of painting and drawing. When Huyssen, for example, asks "how we can speak of a nostalgia for ruins as we remember the bombed out cities of World War II," or the "decaying residues of the industrial age and its shrinking cities" (a listing in which the "abandoned auto factories of Detroit" evidently cannot remain unmentioned),[28] one can only assume that he is not addressing the remnants and rubble of these ruinous disasters as they are, or once were, actually present in the world, in what Wiesing would call their "real presence," but instead addressing images, visualizations, as image objects in their artificial presence, most likely in the form of technical image carriers. Moreover, Huyssen's dual emphasis on the "concreteness of ruins," the "ruin in its emphatic sense," and the notion of the authentic in modern art and thought does not prevent him from visually organizing his text exclusively around the etchings of the eighteenth-century Italian artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi, whose work he introduces and discusses as

"one of the most radical articulations of the ruins problematic within modernity" (see figure 5.8).[29] And even if Dillon's essay opens onto Dimitrios Constantinou's photograph of *The Temple of Zeus,* thereby suggesting that it is actual ruins that are at stake, albeit necessarily present only in the form of technical images, all the subsequent illustrations accompanying his argument are reproductions of paintings from various historical periods, imaginary ruins even further removed from the imaginary world presented in a photograph.

By neither acknowledging or even problematizing the different forms in which ruins do, or at least *can* exist, that is, as real objects in the world, subject to the laws of physics, as distinct from their "nonreal," artificial presence as image objects, Huyssen and Dillon, whether unwittingly, intentionally, or conveniently, gloss over the tension inherent in the "ruinous imaginary" of modernity as a spectacular instantiation of a post-Kantian "horrifying sublime." And it is precisely this tension, stemming from the ambivalence lodged in the equivocation of the concept of the image per se that, as I have suggested, renders the problem of the contemporary "ruin craze" into a problem of aesthetics.

In Wiesing's phenomenological terms, the "serious equivocation" at the heart of the image, the difference between the image carrier and the image subject on one hand and the image object on the other hand, is that the first two exist materially in the world, whereas the third is a "nothing, not part of the world but an object for consciousness." How exactly an "image carrier is able to produce in the viewer the consciousness of an 'image object presently presenting itself'" is, Wiesing concedes, "at least for the moment, inexplicable" (*AP,* 36). The very fact that an image carrier, as a physical object without significatory powers in and of itself, is a necessary precondition for the image object in its artificial presence, in its visible-only existence, to come into appearance, and as such need not acquire its function as a sign, points up the necessity—theoretical, political, critical—for a theory of the image that at once allows us to account for the visible givenness of the image object and that decisively complicates its potential operation as a signifier. Whether "read" as a signifier of destruction and decay, of nostalgia and loss, of the ruthless exploitation of an ulterior and displaced "truth" or "reality" or, alternatively, "merely" seen or perceived in its "uncontrollable beauty," the fact remains that the image subject can only "presently present" itself in our encounter with the image, in its simultaneously real and nonreal presence, that is, as at once image carrier and image object. In Husserl's phenomenological terms: "The physical image awakens the mental image, and this in turn presents something else, the subject."[30]

For Flusser the technical image is a "blindly realized possibility, something invisible that has blindly become visible," a possibility that is realized by the apparatus. Media, on his account, are apparatuses that "grasp the ungraspable,
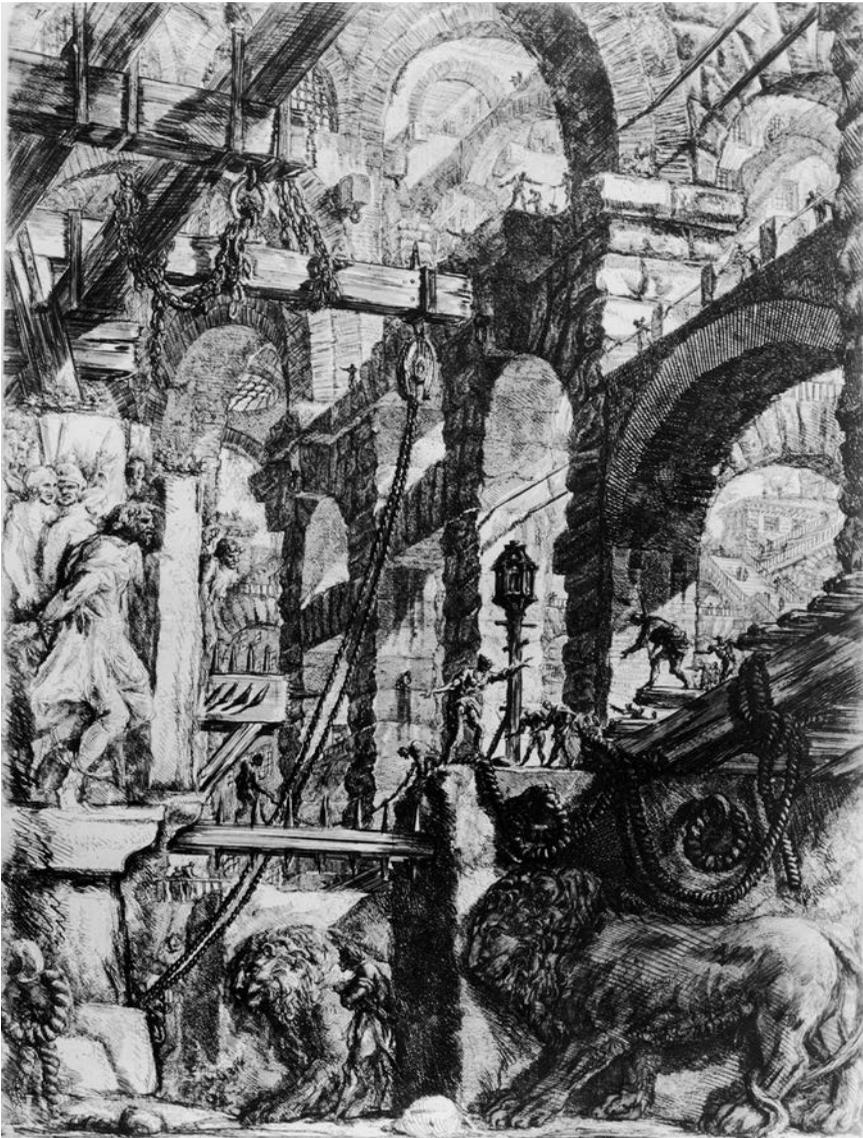
FIG. 5.8 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Prison,* 1745. From *Le Carceri*, no. XIV (1st state), 1/5, etching. Photo: bpk, Berlin / Joerg P. Anders / Art Resource, NY

visualize the invisible, and conceptualize the inconceivable" (*UTI,* 16). Technical images are "envisioned surfaces" from which we necessarily keep our distance: "On close inspection they all prove to be . . . computed from particles" (*UTI,* 33). It is for this reason that technical images "arise from completely different kinds of distancing from concrete experience" than do what he calls traditional images (*UTI,* 7). Visualization is radically different from depiction. Yet even if Flusser understands technical visualization as essentially a surface (or superficial) phenomenon, it is the "concrete experience, the adventure, the information that the visualization communicates that is interesting" (*UTI,* 36) to him; in other words, his focus remains on the image surface as sign. Wiesing, in his turn, concludes his musings on media by defining the camera as a "visibility isolation machine: it separates visibility from the present physical substance of a thing." Media, he writes, are the "only means humans have to disempower physics" in that they offer us the possibility to "think and perceive physical impossibilities" (*AP,* 132). This is, for him, the quintessential function of media: "Because there are media, humans live not only in physical nature but also in a culture, and they therefore owe their human existence to the employment of media" (*AP,* 133). Media, that is, that produce images that can but need not function as signs, since any image's only exclusive validity is its visibility. Despite these different emphases and the valuable insights they each provide into the function of images, technical and otherwise, both theorists implicitly assume the pre-existence of a viewing subject, a consciousness already fully immersed in and configured by a culture in which what is "inconceivable" and "ungraspable" is defined in relation to its opposite, the comprehensible, visible, and possible. They thus confirm, as mentioned earlier, what holds true for phenomenologists generally, which is that the "coming-to-consciousness" of an image object is a question of intention; the "mental image" that is awakened by the physical object, the image carrier, is always an object *for* a consciousness, even if, as Wiesing emphasizes, the image object's "visibility logically precedes its legibility" (*AP, 37*).

On Whitehead's much more radical view of perceptual experience, however, consciousness "with its dim intuitions" (*AI,* 267) is "in general . . . negligible." He pursues: "Blind physical purposes reign . . . blind prehensions, physical and mental, are the ultimate bricks of the physical universe" (*PR,* 308). The content of an occasion of experience nonetheless plays itself out "under two contrasted characters—Appearance and Reality," but this contrast (or "dichotomy") is only important for the functionings of the "higher phases of experience, when the mental functionings have achieved a peculiar complexity of synthesis with the physical functionings." It is only in these higher phases of experience that the contrast between Appearance and Reality—rather than the more fundamental ones, the contrasts between the mental and physical pole itself and between the

object prehended and the subjective form of the prehension—dominates "those factors of experience which are discriminated in consciousness with particular distinctness" (*AI*, 209).

Whitehead not only subordinates the contrasting characters "appearance and reality," that is, the two components in the metaphysical conception of reality, to the two other pairs of opposites exhibited in experience, he also rejects the Platonic idea that reality is genuine as opposed to deceptive and that the ultimate realities are things that are intelligible and explicable, hence objects of knowledge or of cognition. In contrast, for Whitehead the "distinction between 'appearance and reality' is grounded upon the process of self-formation of each actual occasion." The initial reception of the given, the "real antecedent world" as it exists for each new occasion, is followed by an intermediate phase in which a certain affective evaluation occurs. These "qualitative" or "conceptual feelings" derive from "qualities illustrated in the primary phase" and merge with the prehensions of the physical pole to enter into new relations with each other and to produce the "how" of the occasion, that which Whitehead calls the subjective form. In the higher types of actual occasions, the mental pole, which also derives its objective content by "abstraction" from the physical pole, provides the "propositional feelings" that integrate with the "conceptual feelings" to fulfill the "aim of the new occasion" (*AI*, 210). The integration, or rather the hybridization of the various feelings it directly or indirectly generates, constitutes the "appearance" for the occasion. More succinctly, appearance is the "effect of the activity of the mental pole, whereby the qualities and coördinations of the given physical world undergo transformation." This means that there is no metaphysical principle that can determine how in any occasion "appearance differs from the reality out of which it originates" (*AI*, 211). Conscious perception is the effect of a process of increasing distinction and what appears as reality is the result of certain sociohistorically contingent modes of coordination: "When the higher functionings of mentality are socially stabilized in an organism, appearance merges into reality" (*AI*, 212). The difference between appearance and reality is thus not an absolute one, in the sense that it is ultimately determinable, but rather a qualification of experience in a complex sensual trajectory of differentiation, specification, and transformation. This trajectory is, moreover, not fixed once and for all, but dependent on the social configuration in which it functions.

In addition to complicating the phenomenological assumption of a consciousness for whom an image appears, as well as the clear distinction between the image object as mental image, which in its turn presents a real subject, Whitehead's account of the formation of "high-grade occasions" of experience (*AI*, 211) dramatically shifts the terms of the interrelations among truth, authenticity, and reality that feature so prominently in the heated debates on Detroit-as-"ruin-porn."

Truth, Whitehead, claims, is a narrower, less fundamental concept than beauty. Truth concerns the relations between appearance and reality; it is the "conformation of Appearance to Reality." Beauty, however, is the "internal conformation of the various items of experience with each other, for the production of maximum effectiveness." Beauty is thus a wider concept than truth because it concerns both the "inter-relations of the various components of reality," the "inter-relations of the various components of Appearance," as well as the "relations of Appearance to Reality" (*AI*, 365). This does not mean, however, that truth has no significance for Whitehead. There is a "blunt force" about truth, he writes; it carries a "sense of directness" with it, which can (but need not: truth can be ugly or evil) function in the service of beauty, realize "some hidden, penetrating Truth with a keenness beyond compare" (*AI*, 266). When this kind of a "truth-relation" establishes itself, "Appearance summons up new resources of feeling from the depths of Reality," but the truth thus generated is neither a truth of understanding or cognition, nor of language or "verbalization," but essentially a truth of feeling. And it is art, as the "purposeful adaptation of Appearance to Reality," which has the dual aim of perfecting such "Truthful Beauty" (*AI*, 267).

In its ability to adapt appearance to reality, art, if it succeeds, engages the higher phases of experience. Though never not integrally related to the sensa—the sensa as "qualifications of affective tone," which gives them their "immense aesthetic importance" (*AI*, 245)—it is consciousness, Whitehead asserts, that "renders Art possible." Consciousness, he writes, is "like everything else . . . in a sense indefinable." It is "just itself and must be experienced." Yet consciousness is not simply a given, but rather "that quality which emerges into the objective content as the result of the conjunction of a fact and a supposition about that fact" (*AI*, 269). Consciousness is a form of attention: it "provides the extreme of selective emphasis" within the mass of "blind prehensions," both physical and mental, that make up our overall animal experience. Every fresh prehension may find its way toward consciousness and produce ideas available to our conscious attention. Art plays a crucial role in this specialized mode of "high-grade" experience. In exhibiting a "finite fragment of human effort achieving its own perfection within its own limits" (*AI*, 270), art offers us occasions for novelty, for new forms of feeling, but it is precisely because of its "adventurousness" (*AI*, 268), its relative freedom from categories and from cognitive systematicity, that art must be both finite and artificial. Art encompasses an artificiality, which is its "essence." While consciousness, Whitehead posits, is the "weapon which strengthens the artificiality of an occasion of experience" (*AI*, 270), the "secret of art lies in its freedom," in its ability to re-enact feelings and elements of experience divorced from the moments of necessity in which they first emerge and to make them newly and differently available within the artificiality of its own being.

In an earlier chapter, I advanced the idea that art is good to think with. White-head's elaboration of the essence of art in its finiteness and artificiality, as much as in its adventurousness, its freedom, and its ability to purposefully adapt appearance to reality, encourages us to engage the images of the Detroit (and other postindustrial) ruins in their "uncontrollable beauty" as both occasions for embodied, aesthetic experience and as the "high-grade" occasions of conscious attention, as the higher type of actual occasions where propositional feelings prevail. Such an approach will not necessarily provide us with the "truth" of Detroit, nor reveal the city's, its ruins', or its stories' "authenticity." It does not preclude the possibility, however, for the generation of thought, for making interesting propositions about them. And as Whitehead boldly proclaims, "It is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true," for it is a proposition's interest and importance that gives it its "emotional lure" (*AI,* 244).

Rather than reflecting a nostalgia for a lost power to imagine possible futures, as Huyssen would like us to believe, the images of the Detroit ruins in their "doubly exposing" function as documents and as, in Deleuze's phrase, "blocs of sensation," do not so much, as Dillon in his turn suggests, operate as a "means of mourning the loss of the aesthetic itself." On the contrary, Detroit "ruin porn" exposes the aesthetic as an operational force—a force, for sure, that is just as subject to history and thus just as political, ethical, and ideological as the history of ruins in which the contemporary craze with Detroit "nonreal estate" inscribes itself. Yet it is such a neo-aesthetic that cannot but insist on the kind of skepticism that Derrida introduces into his reflections upon self-portraits and other ruins: a *skepsis* that "has to do with the eyes," with "keeping the thing in sight," while "delaying the moment of conclusion." Our judgment will depend on the hypothesis.