

no more stars (star wars): rä di martino

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The decaying, sand-swept dome is flanked by desert dunes and framed against a cloud-flecked sky. The ruins of a circular, industrial structure lie crumbling in the foreground, partially submerged beneath the shifting sands. "These are the remains of Luke Skywalker's house", Rä di Martino explains. "He was raised by his aunt and uncle, who had a moisture farm on the planet of Tatooine."¹ In 2010, Rä di Martino spent a month in the Tunisian deserts, tracking down the sets where *Star Wars* was originally filmed. Although the locations have now become something of a dedicated pilgrimage site for *Star Wars* fans (there are companies that host 'Tours to Tatooine', and the ruins are also listed as a "must see" in *The Lonely Planet* guide to Tunisia), at the time of Rä di Martino's visit their whereabouts was still relatively unknown.²

With the aid of a local Tunisian guide and a rented quad bike, di Martino found the abandoned sets in the salt plains of Chott el Djerid, some fifteen kilometres short of the Algerian border. As she recalls:

With only my Google map as a guide, I struggled at first to find anything. Then I met a driver who knew the desert well and offered to take me to the sites... like many people, I saw Star Wars when I was young, so it felt very nostalgic... The sand was brown-red and the speckles of salt sparkled in the sun. These are not real ruins, of course. They are just rubbish that has been left by a richer country in a poor country. But at the same time, they have a monumentality about them because they resonate with our childhood memories. Star Wars looks futuristic to us, yet this is the biological decay of past imaginations.³

What is a 'real ruin'? Isn't 'ruination' simply the end result of entropy, the material affect of time, no matter what the structure's original purpose might have been? Indeed, when the Skywalker home was first built, it was already artificially aged, coated in a thick patina of fake desert dust. If this was the future, it was neither gleaming nor shiny. The organic simplicity of Tatooine's mud-pit dwellings and the scrapyards of the Sand People were in stark contrast to the sleek, high-tech interiors of the Empire's Death Star. In Lucas' universe,

Tatooine was clearly a galactic backwater. As Luke says to C3PO at the beginning of the film, "If there's a bright centre to the universe, you're on the planet that it's farthest from."

John Powers has described Tatooine as "a place that was modern, but not new, a future long occupied, unfinished, worldly. Modernity is the presumption that the natural environment for man has yet to be built. Lucas was the first to imagine that future built environment as already old".⁴ Although Powers is right in his characterisation of modernity as both speculative and future-focused, Lucas was hardly the first to imagine the future through the ruins of the past. We need only think of Nicolas Poussin's ruin-strewn landscapes of the 1600s, Joseph Gandy's *Soane's Bank of England as a ruin* (1830), or Hubert Robert's 1796 visionary rendition of the Louvre as a crumbling 'future ruin'. Piranesi's wildly imaginative etchings of a ruined Rome, or the mock ruined temples that dotted literally hundreds of aristocratic estates across Europe in the eighteenth century, also come to mind.⁵ Indeed, the 1700s was marked by a serious craze for ruination that seeped into almost all aspects of creative practice, from poetry to art criticism to garden design. Gardens

were adorned with artificially ruined abbeys and deliberately dilapidated stone bridges; 'classical' columns and temples were carefully constructed to appear teetering on the brink on collapse. Spurred by the rediscovery of the ruins of Pompeii but also perhaps with an eye to the fragility of 'great' civilisations, the ruin became a catalyst for a new kind of melancholic pleasure for eighteenth century aesthetes, one best summed up in Diderot's claim of 1767 that "the ideas ruins evoke in me are grand. Everything comes to nothing, everything perishes, everything passes, only the world remains, only time endures. How old is this world! I walk between two eternities".⁶

However, if di Martino's *No More Stars (Star Wars)* might initially appear as a contemporary update of *Ruinenlust* (an aesthetic she would also have gleaned from her time living in Rome), its debts lie equally with the entropic visions of Robert Smithson, the wastelands imaged by Jane and Louise Wilson, or the degraded futures of J.G. Ballard's science fictions.⁷ As both Ballard and Smithson well knew, ruins encourage a kind of conceptual time travel. They are structures that offer both glimpses of potential futures (with time, this will happen), while prompting





Page 33 and opposite: R  di Martino, *No More Stars (Star Wars)*, 2010
Photos courtesy the artist and Monitor, Rome

the re-imagining of the past (what happened here?). It is this temporal permeability that lends the ruin its science fictional qualities, as numerous contemporary artists including Tacita Dean, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and The Otolith Group might attest. For these artists, as for di Martino, it is the ruin's cache of potential that is its most endurable attraction. The ruin, as Brian Dillon has noted, offers "an invitation to fulfil the as yet unexplored temporality that it contains"; the ruin as a way of envisaging what is not yet made, or what might have been; the ruin as an allegory for science fiction.⁸

Beyond this science fictional element, R  di Martino's interest in the *Star Wars*' sets is emblematic of her long-standing fascination with navigating what she calls the "loop" between fiction and reality, described by the artist as a kind of "continuous ping-pong" state, where "reality changes the imaginary, and the imaginary changes reality".⁹ Although exploring this loop has been a recurrent aspect of di Martino's practice – from her early short films such as the Pasolini-esque *Between* (2001), which featured a character 'lost' in another character's narrative and unable to effectively communicate, or *La Camera* (2006), in which two actors recited verbatim other people's recollections of films that had influenced them – with *No More Stars (Star Wars)*, the exchange between reality and fiction gains an extra dimension. After the release of her images, a group of *Star Wars* fans, appalled at the dilapidated state of Luke's home, organised a campaign to restore the crumbling edifice to its former glory.¹⁰ The restoration left the structure looking like a 'white igloo' in the middle of the desert, gifting it with a newness clearly absent from the original film, and making R  di Martino's images into both documents of a lost monument and premonitions of its possible future.

Jean-Christophe Royoux, speculating on the end of narrative in art and cinema, has linked the ruin's resurgence in contemporary practice with its potential to act as a metonym for the ruined state of contemporary representation itself. Uncoupled from narrative, representation is now remade, he suggests, out of the rubble of a semiotic wasteland. In applying this to cinema, Royoux traces the origins of ruination back, firstly, to the displacement of cinematic narrative onto singular images in the process of film consumption – the so-called 'freeze frame' effect, in which a movie is remembered more for its singular images than for its plot or narrative – and secondly to the transformation of cinema from a sequenced flow of images (montage) into an 'accumulation of images'

(a heap of still frames). By the time of Godard's *Histoire(s) du cin ma et de la t l vision* (1998), Royoux argues, the cinema had become "nothing but an immense archive composed of the debris left by the subjective memory of films... as if the history of cinema could from that point on (could) be understood only as an 'introspective' one, a conversation that each individual has with himself through cinema".¹¹

I suspect R  di Martino would also find something compelling in this claim. Instead of a 'story', her work exposes an archive of mnemonic fragments, each part of a landscape purpose built for representation. Critically, in illustrating his argument, Royoux also makes reference to a number of photographs of abandoned film sets, captured in the Algerian desert by the artist Marco Poloni in 2006.

In Poloni's *The Desert Room*, Royoux explains, *images of the hotel depicted in Michelangelo Antonioni's famous film The Passenger [1975] are blended with archival images and contemporary ones made by the artist for the exhibition... the film set – today converted into an old-age home for veterans of the Algerian Front de Lib ration Nationale – is juxtaposed against various phases of its transformation.*¹²

Royoux's reading of the layering of fiction and history, material and cinematic reality in Poloni's work leads towards his identification of a contemporary reciprocity between 'tracks' and 'traces' (*le trac  et la trace*) in the ruins of contemporary representation. Although Royoux does not say as much directly, such reciprocity might also be said to mark the archival and mnemonic aspects of contemporary artistic production, a diagnosis that speaks most clearly to those artists who act as archaeologists of the present. "One might say", he writes, "that the trace is the tangible element of memory; that which constitutes an archive, that which tends toward 'volume', a 'material' dimension: drawings and photographs... unlike the other arts, cinema is imprinted directly on memory without leaving tangible traces: it is when it is exhibited (exposed) that cinema produces traces. Tracks, on the other hand, represent a 'going toward': a forward movement that clears the path of the real."¹³

Tracking the traces of cinematic memory – is this what R  di Martino is after? "It is clear", she has remarked, "that we need to find our own way through the real and the unreal, even though, in reality, they are all real."¹⁴ As structures purpose-built for the elaboration of fiction, the abandoned *Star Wars* sets partially illuminate these circles of logic, but the effect is amplified as the locations are re-discovered, re-photographed and

re-circulated as frozen images. di Martino's works might then be described as both 'tracks' and as 'traces' in Royoux's sense of the term. As material traces of a decaying cinematic environment, her images offer a tangible exposition of cinematic memory. As representational 'tracks', they serve to 'clear the path of the real', forging a route away from the barren salt plains of Tunisia and back towards a galaxy far, far away.

Notes

¹ R  di Martino, interview with Sarah Phillips, 'Luke Skywalker's House: R  di Martino's Best Photograph', *The Guardian*, 7 March 2013; <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/mar/06/luke-skywalker-house-ra-di-martino#>, accessed 20 Jan, 2014

² For first-person accounts of tourist visits to the sets, see Stefan Roesch, *The Experiences of Film Location Tourists*, Channel View Publications: UK, 2009

³ R  di Martino, in Sarah Phillips, 'Luke Skywalker's House'. See also Chiara Bertola, 'Chasing reality through the remains of imagination', in Andrea Busto (ed.), *R  di Martino 2011-2001*, Fregi e Majuscole trans., Carlo Cambi Editore: Poggibonsi, 2012: 14-20

⁴ John Powers, 'Star Wars: A New Heap', *Triple Canopy* issue 4, 11 November, 2008. Available at http://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/star_wars__a_new_heap, accessed 27 Jan, 2014

⁵ For a study of the shifting history of the 'ruin aesthetic', see Rose Macauley, *Pleasure of Ruins*, Walker and Company: New York, 1953

⁶ Denis Diderot, 'Le Salon de 1767' in *Diderot on Art II: The Salon of 1767*, John Goodman trans., New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995: 198

⁷ There is a quote from Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) on R  di Martino's website: "Deserts possess a particular magic, since they have exhausted their own futures, and are thus free of time. Anything erected there, a city, a pyramid, a motel, stands outside time."

⁸ Brian Dillon, 'A Short History of Decay', in *Ruins, Documents of Contemporary Art*, London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2011: 18

⁹ "Forse l'idea di un loop, tra l'immaginario e la realt , in cui l'immaginario cambia la realt , e la realt  cambia a sua volta l'immaginario in un ping-pong continuo." R  di Martino, interview with Chiara Bertola, 'Dov'  la realt ?', *Flash Art* 294, June 2011; http://www.flashartonline.it/interno.php?pagina=articolo_det&id_art=742&det=ok&articolo=R%C3%84-DI-MARTINO

¹⁰ An alternate version of the restoration by Mark Derbul, *Star Wars fan and tour guide to Tatooine*, can be found at: <http://www.npr.org/2012/07/01/156050161/fans-save-luke-skywalkers-tunisia-home>

¹¹ Jean-Christophe Royoux, 'Beyond the end of narrative: allegories, constellations, dispositifs', Michael Gilson trans., in Marie Fraser (ed.), *Explorations narratives/Replaying Narrative*, Le mois de la photo   Montr al: Montr al 2007: 309

¹² Jean-Christophe Royoux, *ibid*: 304-305. NB: George Lucas also originally wanted to film *Star Wars* at this same site where Antonioni's *The Passenger* was shot, but Fox deemed Algeria too volatile a location. J.W. Rinzler, *The Making of Star Wars: The Definitive Story Behind the Original Film*, Ebury Press: London, 2008: 98

¹³ *ibid*: 309

¹⁴ R  di Martino cited in Chiara Bertola, *op cit*: 20

R  di Martino's *No More Stars (Star Wars)* will be presented at the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, Adelaide, *Adelaide International 2014: Worlds in Collision*