Rot and Ruin: History and the Downside of Material Culture
Dept. of History, Winter 2018

“I went on looking at the filthy window above his head, and I thought, I must have things. I know a dirty window is an ancient and well-worn trope for intellectual dissatisfaction and scholarly blindness. The thing is, that the thing was also there. A real, very dirty, window, shutting out the sun. A thing.”


Description

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.

Grading Structure

Seminar Participation: 25%
Conference Paper and Presentation: 15%
Final Paper: 60%

*Note that attendance is mandatory at all sessions, unless excused by express consent of the instructor. Failure to attend will adversely affect your participation grade*

Readings and Weekly Topics

*All journal articles are available online. Unless otherwise noted, all book chapters will be scanned and made available through the course OWL website.

1. January 8

Introduction

2. January 15. Broken and Missing Things


3. January 22. Decomposing Material


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


Website, Ruin Memories: [http://ruinmemories.org/about/project-description/](http://ruinmemories.org/about/project-description/)


5. February 5. Dead Bodies

*please note that material covered this week is viscerally disturbing and may force you to confront your mortality. Participation, therefore, will be optional and an alternate assignment will be made available upon request*


Websites:

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

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

6. February 12. Ruins and Lost Spaces


(Hell and Schonle, Ruins of Modernity)

7. February 26. Broken Collections and Collecting the Broken


8. March 5. Natural Disasters and Catastrophes in General


9. March 13. Catastrophe in Film and Fiction


We’ll probably watch a film too.

10. March 19. Ruins in Art


Rot and Ruin Photography Festival!


12. April 2. Conference Day

Each student will have 20 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.
Statement on Academic Ethics and Academic Dishonesty:

Students are reminded that they should read and comply with the university’s position on academic ethics and academic dishonesty. Plagiarism and submission of work that is not one’s own or for which previous credit has been obtained are examples of academic dishonesty. Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea, or a passage of text from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence (see Scholastic Offence Policy in the Western Academic Calendar.)

Health and Wellness

As part of a successful graduate student experience at Western, we encourage students to make their health and wellness a priority. Western provides several on campus health related services to help you achieve optimum health and engage in healthy living while pursuing your graduate degree. For example, to support physical activity, all students, as part of their registration, receive membership in Western’s Campus Recreation Centre. Numerous cultural events are offered throughout the year. Please check out the Faculty of Music web page http://www.music.uwo.ca/, and our own McIntosh Gallery http://www.mcintoshgallery.ca/. Information regarding health and wellness-related services available to students may be found at http://www.health.uwo.ca/

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

To help you learn more about mental health, Western has developed an interactive mental health learning module, found here: http://www.health.uwo.ca/mental_health/module.html. This module is 30 minutes in length and provides participants with a basic understanding of mental health issues and of available campus and community resources. Topics include stress, anxiety, depression, suicide and eating disorders. After successful completion of the module, participants receive a certificate confirming their participation.