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Book Review

The Conquest of Ruins: The Third Reich and the Fall of Rome

by **Julia Hell**. The University of Chicago Press, 2019. 618 pp. \$35

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Building on her past work in the field of ruin studies, Julia Hell's monumental project *The Conquest of Ruins: The Third Reich and the Fall of Rome* examines how European imperial sovereigns and theorists looked back to Rome to both legitimate and attempt to prolong their empire. Written as both an intellectual and cultural history, Hell examines a "wide array of aesthetic, performative, and architectural practices of imitation" of the Roman Empire that transcend the antiquity/modernity divide (2). Beginning with how Roman intellectuals themselves envisioned their empire, Hell then traces strands of continuity in neo-Roman mimesis in the context of the Holy Roman Empire's conquests, British naval expansion, France under Napoleon, and the rise of Germany's *Kaiserreich* in the late 19th century, concluding with the Nazi racial empire and its aftermath. The central performance of imitation in each of these cases consists of what Hell calls "scopic scenarios" of ruin gazing, that is, the desire to both see and master one central predicament of all neo-Roman imitators: the fact that Rome fell.

The Conquest of Ruins is thus one of the first works to combine imperium studies with ruin studies. Hell relies heavily on literary and visual analysis to illustrate how neo-Roman imperialists resurrected the past for their present, confronted new barbarians, and wore Augustus's death mask, filling in the void of Roman ruins with their own imaginations.

Hell concentrates the bulk of her attention on texts produced by important thinkers, supporting her thick descriptions of their writings with paintings, monuments, staged parades, and even film produced during the same time period. She begins with Polybius's *Histories*, detailing the scene in which Scipio looks upon the destruction of Carthage. In this

moment of victory, Scipio also foreshadows the arrival of Hannibal, juxtaposing both the power and fragility of empire in the form of the “barbarian.” It is Polybius who first introduced the concept of *the time before the end*, or the natural law that each empire is destined to fall (44). In examining the theorists who followed, from the apostle Paul to Edward Gibbon to Carl Schmitt, Hell posits that imperial thinkers sought to establish that their empires were “almost the same, but better” (127). Sovereigns and theorists alike sought to prolong the “endtime” introduced by Polybius, modifying structures of conquest, power, and rule in an attempt to improve upon the original and create their own ruins of the future past.

Hell’s survey is understandably fragmentary in investigating the *longue durée* of neo-Roman mimesis in Western Europe, yet her overarching model of neo-Roman mimesis will be of interest to anyone studying empire building. Perhaps her most significant contribution is to the field of postcolonial theory. Through her case studies, Hell expands Homi Bhabha’s two-way praxis between colonizer and colonized to a “triangulation of the neo-Roman sovereign with the Roman model and the conquered barbarian” (29). In essence, not only do colonized subjects mimic the colonizers, colonizers themselves mime, or put on the mask of ancient Rome. Each relationship thus establishes “a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite,” quoting Bhabha’s well-known phrase (129). I would argue that this creation of difference goes even one step further in Hell’s reading, as each subsequent empire not only compared themselves with Rome, but with the empires that came before. For example, Britain’s Edward Gibbon attacked the Spanish conquistadors for not promoting “progress” and “civilization” (175), while the *Kaiserreich*’s Oswald Spengler later championed “*Kultur*” as the imperial solution to the failings of said “civilization” in the British and French colonial pursuits (288).

In this vein of comparison, it is surprising that Hell did not dedicate more time

comparing Mussolini's Third Rome to Hitler's Third Reich. Though the resurrected architecture of Rome does receive attention in two brief chapters, Hell's emphasis is more on the effect the neo-Roman city had on Hitler. Italian fascist theorists, on the other hand, are notably absent. Still, the penultimate and final sections of Hell's book on the Third Reich and its theoretical ramifications provide rich reading for scholars of Nazi Germany, particularly those interested in the constellations of architecture and how the National Socialist spatiotemporal imaginary became racialized. In these chapters, Hell argues that Hitler's designs and Speer's architectural plans "enacted a particular form of neo-Roman mimesis: the mimesis of Rome's end" (365). Rather than shying away from "endtime," Nazi leadership embraced it, attempting to visualize a "glorious end in ruins" while redefining the neo-Roman "barbarian" in racialized terms (329). Only by understanding the long history of mimesis, Hell argues, can one fully understand plans for Berlin/*Germania*, the legitimation of Nazi expansion East, and why Hitler compared himself to Aeneas, Dido, and Hannibal just before committing suicide and wearing his own death mask.

All in all, *The Conquest of Ruins* is a supremely detailed and well-researched history of the theories, practices, and performances of the empire. Hell illustrates that the Roman stage is not dead but lives on.