“The Romans spent [...] 200 years using their great engineering skills to construct ruins all over Europe”. Who else could look upon European history in such a way other than an American, in this case the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Dave Berry? His guidebook has become a true companion to many of his fellow citizens touring through Europe in three weeks or less. It seems that time has come for Europe to strike back and take a look itself at a specific American type of ruin: “Monuments or Trash?” is the question Professor Martin Procházka asks in his lecture on ghost towns in American history and culture.

In fact, Procházka seems like the perfect travel guide himself: well-informed about the terrain, contagious in his enthusiasm and speaking with a light foreign accent. At the beginning he takes his audience on a tour de force through the depths of the cultural histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the vastness of the American landscape. His aim is to grasp
America’s ambivalent relationship with the past: on the one hand, the feeling of being a new nation freed from the burdens of the past and on the other, the nostalgia and idealisation of the culture of the Old World.

According to Procházka this very tension can be observed in the representation of ruins in the American landscape art of the nineteenth century. In his analysis of Thomas Cole’s paintings, Procházka describes how columns become tree stumps, a Roman aqueduct gets lost in the vastness of space and thus history becomes nature. In Cole’s paintings ruins are hybrids between culture and nature depicting the decay of all empires and civilisations. In contrast to this, European representations of ruins, according to Procházka, are still connected to history; they reflect past greatness and therefore allow an experience of “sacredness”. Following Foucault’s thoughts Procházka speaks of a merging of place and time: they become interchangeable and the observer is thus transcended beyond these dimensions.

Now, after having collected enough information, Procházka approaches his final destination. He offers a systematic typology of ghost towns, reveals the
origin of the term itself in the 1950s and draws a chronology beginning with the first settlers and ending with the current state of ghost towns as part of the tourist industry. Finally, Procházka turns to an analysis of the poetic representation of a ghost town and its semiotic function in Robert Coover’s novel *Ghost Town*. Procházka states that the town as a non-space reveals the non-meaning of the text. Thus the deconstructed ghost town becomes the epitome of deconstruction itself and so, in a way, monuments of our time.

Procházka concludes his lecture by turning to the most prominent ruins of the 21st century: for him the destruction of the twin towers in New York could be read as the annihilation of ghost towns-to-be, as a fast-forward of history. Reaching ground zero and looking back at the journey, his audience perhaps felt as if they themselves had just been on a three week-long trip through Europe and America: overwhelmed and exhausted, but also inspired.