The lecture discusses American ghost towns as signs of the failure of the U.S. discourse of the “end of history” (America as the endpoint of Western civilization) and subjects of alternative, anecdotal ‘histories’ (tall tales). As cultural objects, they have an unstable status, oscillating between monuments of the heroic past and chaotic places full of junk and trash, which, however, gets further transformed into objects valued by collectors.

As a result, American ghost towns are part of a process of economic, aesthetic, as well as fetishistic transformations, which Stephen Greenblatt called “the circulation of social energy.” While their ‘spectrality’ (the semblance of the presence of life) is often connected with desire and nostalgia, it may also evoke the demise of civilization and the meaningless repetition of history. This feature is also typical of representation of ghost towns in recent American literature (Robert Coover’s novel Ghost Town), which also point out some more general structural features - ghost town history as a “play of substitutions” (Derrida) - and the symbolic link between ghost towns, and the present uprooted, migratory way of life.

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