# The city in ruins and the divided city: Berlin, Belfast, and Beirut

The fronts are everywhere. The trenches are dug in the towns and the streets.

Winston Churchill

# Learning objectives

- To understand the two different traditions and functions of the trope of the ruin
- To describe rubble films and engage with the moral, historical, and political questions they raise

- To contextualize the postmodern use of the ruin in its historical, geographical, and philosophical dimensions
- To be able to analyze the spatial politics of films about war, resistance, and divided cities as reflections of ideological positions

# Introduction

This lesson discusses the cinematic representation of the destroyed, the ruined, and the divided city and relates films about war and postwar moments to the conditions for production in destroyed, occupied, and divided film industries. In order to capture and put analytical pressure on the relationship of historical conditions of destruction and their aesthetic manifestations, the lesson is organized around the figure of the ruin on the one hand and the spatial topography of the divided city on the other.

Ruins can have two different functions, which are rooted in distinct traditions: on the one hand, they mark precise historical moments, for example in the rubble film of the immediate German postwar moment. In these films from 1946–48, Berlin in ruins becomes the site for negotiating guilt, redemption, and rebuilding in regard to the Holocaust and the Second World War.

On the other hand, ruins as a postmodern cipher invoke historical moments and iconic images but empty them of their historical and geographical specificity in what I call the retro-rubble film.Marc Caro and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's Delicatessen (1991) and Lars van Trier's Zentropa (1991) are postmodern fantasy reworkings of the city in ruins that conjure up iconic images of war-torn urbanity but without being bound by historical accuracy.

Instead, the topography of division relates to films set in a relatively small number of cities that represent political and historical anomalies, and here the chapter focuses on films about Berlin, Beirut, and Belfast.

# Cities and war in urban studies

“Warfare, like everything else, is being urbanized,” explains Stephen Graham, and he goes on to show that “cities are key sites [in the] ‘new’ wars” that are being fought in the post-Cold War era. This development began during the Second World War when the conflict moved from clearly demarcated battlefields to the urban environment, where it affected life in the city and the daily experience of its citizens.

Michael North, for example, points out that by May of 1941 one-sixth of Londoners had been made homeless. Whereas the First World War is associated with the names of battlefields, the Second is marked by a list of cities synonymous with absolute destruction.

However, Graham sees another contemporary shift in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 periods that largely "entail systematic and planned targeting of cities and urban places," and he suggests the term"'urbicide': the deliberate denial, or killing, of the city" for "the intersections of war, terrorism, and subnational – specifically urban – spaces"

Divided cities pose a different and particular challenge to urban planning and show exceptional characteristics in urban development; however, contemporary approaches to the unique situations of Berlin and Belfast shift to an emphasis on the potential for realizing productive and culturally inclusive visions of integration.

“Wounded cities” is a concept by a group of urban ethnographers who address a continuum of destruction to urban environments that includes natural catastrophes, urban terrorism, civil and pre-emptive wars in addition to traditional warfare on cities. They suggest “wounding” as an “organic metaphor” which “implies a vision of collective well-being that must be negotiated within an identifiable, bounded place”.

# The city at war

Films about the effects of current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, such as Bahman Ghobadi's Turtles Can Fly (2004), co-produced in Iran, France, and Iraq, and Mohsen Makhmalbaf's Kandahar (2001), co-produced in Iran and France, present desolate landscapes of disabled and traumatized refugees and survivors based on the destruction of cities that are not represented in the film.

In the past, few cities have become a national reference point to rally around, either for the entry into war, as was the case with the US and Michael Curtiz's 1942 *Casablanca*, or for colonial liberation, as was the case with Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 *Battle of Algiers*. One of the most important films to mobilize a city is René Clément's Is Paris Burning? (1966). Set in Paris in 1944 during the German occupation, the film shows the fight of the Resistance against the Germans, who intend to destroy the city.

It concludes with the ultimate victory of the Resistance liberating Paris. Because of the film's careful and detailed restaging of historical events, only the cast of international stars – Jean-Paul Belmondo, Alain Delon, Kirk Douglas, Glenn Ford, Gert Fröbe, Yves Montand, Anthony Perkins, Simone Signoret, and Orson Welles – betrays that the film is a historical re-nactment.

The city of Paris is the setting of the film as well as its subject and object. The French flag provides a national dimension; symbols of Paris such as the Eiffel Tower, the Seine, and Notre Dame appear in several shots; but the city is empty. Locations were carefully chosen, all signs of contemporaneity removed, and the urban landscape enhanced with signs and lampposts to look like 1944.

This real setting validates the film's projected truth value and supports its national message of French triumph, but the film was created by an international collaboration, including a script by Gore Vidal and Francis Ford Coppola, and an international cast. Paris takes on a double function as the symbol for the French Resistance against German occupation,

but in addition the emptiness of the urban landscape and the historical distance turns that landscape into a metaphysical site for a moral encounter in which self determination and democracy win over dictatorship, violence, and destruction. The film was made at the height of the Cold War, four years after the Berlin Wall was built, when the moral impetus of the Second World War provided a rhetorical model of democratic (read capitalist) good against dictatorial (read communist) evil.

René Clément. *Is Paris Burning?* (1966): The empty city shot from below

The narrative of Is Paris Burning? functions in a national context but also in the transnational context of post-Second World War European cities. When the Resistance fighters discuss their options, one of them refers to the destruction of Warsaw, arguing that if they wait too long they will liberate only ruins. This perspective is juxtaposed to the Nazi occupation represented by General Dietrich von Choltitz, who is proud that it is the Führer's command to destroy the whole city.

When he and the Swedish Consul discuss the fate of Paris, they frame the discussion in terms of “5,000 years of history going to the dust,” negotiating occupation and Resistance in terms of the city and not the nation. The film’s rhetoric of anti-fascism is based on a narrative of action against injustice, a discourse of liberation and mobilization that is very different from the discourse associated with ruins which, as I will show in the rest of the chapter, is often associated with nostalgia and morality.

# *Is Paris Burning?*: The city comes alive

The comparison with Warsaw as a city of ruins emphasizes the historical context of cities in Europe during and immediately after the Second World War, and also distances the political position of this film from the philosophical and metaphorical discourse associated with ruins.

# The aesthetics of ruins

Ruins function in two distinct ways in films about war on cities: on the one hand, a setting of ruins claims realism, particularly in the rubble film; and, on the other hand, in postmodern film the trope of the ruin harks back to another genealogy from Romanticism and Baroque to contemporary film that does not entail realist specificity.

Susanne Marshall traces different physiognomies of two different kinds of ruins: “The scars are inscribed differently into the ruin created by war and terror than in those old buildings created by the patient gnawing of the teeth of time”. The latter, she suggests, is a threshold between culture and nature in the process of decay.

Traditionally the ruin was a site of memory and contemplation. Marshall connects the pictures of ruins by painters Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), Hubert Robert (1733–1808), and Francesco Piranesi (1720–78) to the meditative films of Andrej Tarkowski, in which the characters slowly wander through ruins. According to Marshall the “aesthetics of ruins” shows that “concrete history demonstrates its power over the buildings created by human hand and again destroyed”

Because the trope of the ruin relates back to a tradition of paintings, particularly in the Baroque style, where it functioned as allegory, Marshall argues that the ruin can also be read as marking the passing of time on a symbolic level instead of as a specific historical reference. So the trope of the ruin can function paradoxically to exceed the particular historical moment.

Michael North shows how in English poetry written during the Second World War ruins take on a spiritual function when “the destruction of boundaries frees the imagination to roam an ambiguous territory between the historical and the mythological”. The immediate postwar rubble film employs the ruin primarily to claim a specific historical moment, but it can also move beyond the historical moment into metaphysical and moral meditations.

The “nostalgic ruin” of the nineteenth century has turned into the “traumatic ruins” of the twentieth century.

# The rubble film: the city in ruins

In the immediate postwar period in Germany, the screening of films was intensely public for two disparate reasons: Germans were forced to confront their collective guilt for the atrocities of the Holocaust in mandatory film screenings about the concentration camps; but they also went to the movies to escape reality and their crowded, destroyed, and cold apartments.

The term “rubble film” denotes primarily films directed and produced in Germany directly after the Second World War, beginning in 1946 with Wolfgang Staudte’s The Murderers Are among Us (1946) and ending with a satire of the rubble film, Robert A. Stemmle’s The Ballad of Berlin in 1948. Most of the films are set in Berlin, including the three rubble films discussed here, Wolfgang Staudte’s *The Murderers Are among Us* (1946),

Gerhard Lamprecht's *Somewhere in Berlin* (1946) and Roberto Rossillini *Germany Year Zero* (1948).All three were produced by DEFA, which was founded in the Soviet Zone of occupied Germany in early 1946 by "a committee of Soviet officers, returning German expatriates, and resident German filmmakers [as] the first active postwar German film company," which subsequently became the only film company in the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

The connection between the ruins of civilization and feral children that underlies rubble films such as Germany Year Zero and Somewhere in Berlin continued in later DEFA films depicting teenagers in need of socialist socialization. They reflect the generation of children whose fathers did not return from the war, requiring the children to take on a mature role within the family. At the same time, this young generation can carry symbolic weight because it is not associated with the guilt of the Third Reich.

**Wolfgang Staudte. *The Murderers Are among Us* (1946): Walking through the landscape of ruins**

The argument implicit in The Murderers Are among Us is diametrically opposed to that of Germany Year Zero, even though both films address the continuation of fascist thought. Whereas the former presents the continuation of fascism as capitalism, the latter Italian film approaches it as sexual perversion.

In contrast to Somewhere in Berlin, in which the answer to the disorientation of the next generation is productive labor to reconstruct the city, in Germany Year Zero the legacy of fascism in sexual perversion leads to suicide. In all three films, Somewhere in Berlin, The Murderers Are among Us, and Germany Year Zero, the ruins and rubble mark historical specificity but also create a space for moral and metaphysical negotiation precisely because ruins enable abstraction from urban specificity.

# The retro-rubble film

The rubble film is intimately tied to the postwar moment of the destruction left by the Second World War in the years 1946–48. In the early 1990s, Europe witnessed the emergence of films that I label retro-rubble, films which create intense nostalgia not for a specific and real moment, but for an imaginary, indeterminate past.

The French film Delicatessen (1991) by Marc Caro and Jean-Pierre Jeunet disregards the historical discourse of post-Second World War but is simultaneously a product of that history. Not before 1990 could a film so closely invoke the traumatic history of the Second World War and at the same time disavow its specificity and historical weight by translating the traces of memory into absurd play. Delicatessen is part of the French cinéma du look, very much influenced by Hollywood and a departure from the French New Wave.

Delicatessen takes place in a ruined house in a post-apocalyptic but fantastic landscape populated by characters who represent absurd and exaggerated versions of Frenchness. A food shortage leads the inhabitants of the house to engage in cannibalism. An impoverished clown is supposed to be the next victim but he not only outsmarts the butcher who does the killing, but falls in love with his daughter.

The ruin itself is obviously and fantastically staged as both dark and humorous, citing the bleak conventions of the rubble film and turning them into an endearing play of comedic action and ironic signifiers. In a reference to the conventions of the rubble film, children are witnesses in the setting of the house while the adults are primarily immoral. Members of the Resistance live underground in a fantasy space and use plungers to move along the wet walls, literalizing the term “underground.”

Their comedic representation goes to the heart of French national self-understanding and rewrites such important films as The Third Man (discussed in the case study) and Is Paris Burning? Only historical distance from the trauma of the Second World War and the disappearance of actual ruins makes the postmodern play of the signifier of the ruin possible.

Similarly, Lars van Trier's Zentropa (1991) returns to the German postwar period to create a slick, black-and-white, noir thriller that relies on recreating the mood and feeling of the postwar moment without being governed by the demands of the historical moment or geographical location that it invokes. The film employs the transportation system as its main site for addressing the past.

Zentropa relies on a voice-over that narrates and addresses the American main character of the film and the audience, beginning as hypnosis: “My voice will help and guide you still deeper into Europa . . . open, relaxed . . . I shall now count from 1 to 10. By the count of 10 you will be in Europa . . . on the mental count of ten you will be in Europa . . . I say 10.”

During the opening voice-over the screen shows only train tracks, which in immediate postwar Germany signify transportation to the concentration camps. The narrative addresses the re-establishment of the train network in Germany and poses the question of how to reconstruct an infrastructure that is so representative of past horrors. The hypnotic rhythm of the film mirrors long journeys by train, back and forth.

The film announces its historical and geographical place early on when the voice-over says, “From New York . . .you are in Germany . . . the year is 1945.” That year becomes symbolic of defeat. The film creates a disorienting space, with hardly any recognizable cities. The film’s plot line concerns the “Werewolf,” a myth about Nazis who continued fighting after 1945, sabotaging the work of the Allied forces and liquidating Germans who cooperate with them.

It addresses postwar anti-Semitism and shows Jewish returnees, but none of these characters is awarded any kind of interiority or subjectivity. The film is not intended as realism. In several instances, characters crouch on the floor and a text is projected onto on the wall behind them, for example, when the word “WEREWOLF” appears in capital letters on the screen behind the main character. The film thus announces itself as an art film that references the specific historical moment and place but is not indebted to negotiating its precise politics.

Zentropa and Delicatessen stylize the periods they cite. In neither case is a city central, in contrast to the famous rubble and ruin films made immediately in the postwar moment. It is precisely the deterritorialization of the space that is evoked and its anonymity, either in the no-man's-land of Delicatessen, which refers to the city but never shows it, or in the train tracks as the permanent connection between different cities that are referenced but inhabit neither characteristics nor territory.

The postmodern retro-rubble film relies on the abstraction of the city in which the rubble becomes a simulacrum of the immediate postwar moment invoking devastation without engaging with its politics or its trauma. Delicatessen needs to be not-Paris and Zentropa not-Berlin to emphasize the deterritorializing and detemporalizing aspect of postmodern, stylized ruins and rubble.

Of course,though highly stylized, both films nevertheless speak to the politics of the early 1990s, at the end of the Cold War and almost two generations after the end of the Second World War, when the visible traces and the memories of that war’s trauma were fading into the past.

# The divided city

This section considers films set in divided cities, with a particular emphasis on Berlin because of its position as pawn and buffer between the former two superpowers during the Cold War. Divided Berlin created two different kinds of urban spaces despite its historical development as one city.

Because Berlin occupied two states, the films discussed here were created by distinct film industries which created two distinctive urban cinematic aesthetics. Because the division of East and West Berlin was a process that took place throughout the postwar period, the filmic texts accompany the urban reconfiguration, provide ideological fodder for, and cinematically present ways to read the new urban environment to its respective citizens.

The cityscape of war articulates the dynamics of resistance against occupation; the rubble film becomes the setting for a moral engagement with reconstruction, in contrast to the retro-rubble film that invokes but disavows the past. The divided cinematic city is either used for a state-sanctioned position in state-produced films or as a biographical investigation of individual attachment and despair in relation to the divided city.