

Lasting Remains: The Anesthetizing Gaze in German Postwar Cinema and Photography

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Abstract

The essay analyzes the traumatic dimension of the images of rubble produced by German cinema and photography in the aftermath of the Second World War. Drawing on Sebald's reflections on the inability of literature to bear witness to the atrocious experience of the bombings endured by millions of German citizens, this contribution proposes an analysis of the gaze employed in depicting the dramatic condition of the country. In particular, the refusal of the codes of realism and the impulse towards the scenographic portrayal of rubble and ruins, about which scholars largely agree, is here re-read not as evidence for an escape from reality, but as a re-emergence of an *ornamental* (Kracauer) and *anesthetizing* (Jünger) visual matrix typical of the aerial point of view and, so, typical of the attacker's gaze. This resurfacing is testified by two key figures engraved in the landscape of rubble: the skeleton in X-rays and the surface of abstract signs which cross-references the view from above; both strip the flesh from the body/landscape, so that the former is in some way included in the latter. As it coincides not only with the gaze that Germany suffered at the end of the war, but also with that imposed by the Nazis at its beginning, the aerial perspective and the corresponding affectless mode summarizes the specificity of the trauma that Germany underwent, rekindling the conflict of self-representation of the defeated country.

We are indebted to W.G. Sebald for bringing into focus the symptomatic collective amnesia that affected a devastated Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War. For more than fifty years, the trauma suffered by the German people as a result of the disastrous aerial bombing, which in the last stages of the conflict razed cities such as Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne and Dresden, was not discussed until Sebald raised the question in the influential Zurich lectures of 1998, exploring the absence in German culture of literary accounts able to bear witness to the experience of annihilation undergone by millions of people.¹ The German

* I would like to thank firstly Sara Damiani for sharing bibliographies, Valeria Dalle Donne (Cineteca di Bologna) and Pier Maria Bocchi for helping in finding movies, Maurizio Guerri for his

writer's views were much debated and in part criticized,² but today his main thesis proves to be undeniable and even logical. It is almost superfluous to point out that the national taboo, which was produced unconsciously, is intertwined with the need to remove the memory of other atrocious events that Germany was responsible for during the Nazi period. In what was probably a complicated mixture of feelings, the guilt for the crimes committed overlapped with the Germans' self-perception as victims of an unprecedented repression, causing the collapse of memory and a shared sense of time as oriented exclusively to the future.³ With this unspeakable conflict of self-representation, added to the extremely dramatic nature of the events, the German experience of being bombed takes on the shape of a quintessential collective trauma. Trauma as "unclaimed experience," in Cathy Caruth's words, a catastrophic event characterised by "the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival. These two stories [are] both incompatible and absolutely inextricable [...],"⁴ but also trauma as horror which repeats itself without ever being fully lived through, without the possibility of being translated into images or words, without the consciousness of the unavoidable inner conflict it produces. And again Caruth asks in the wake of Freud: "Is trauma the encounter with death or the ongoing experience of having survived it?"⁵

I see no rubble...

The number of German people killed by the air raids is uncertain; estimates of mortalities range from 323.000 to 570.000,⁶ and doctors' accounts report the most horrible causes of death: suffocation in the cellars, combustion in the firestorms, burial under the debris, dismemberment by explosions, liquefaction or petrification by the heat. The devastation of Germany produced a pile of rubble measuring several hundred million cubic meters, nearly thirty-eight cubic meters per inhabitant in the major cities. Life after the bombing was dehumanizing experience for a very long time, not unlike a return to the Stone Age, but in a

suggestions on Jünger, John Eaglesham for his help with the English version and Richard Davies for his final reading. A special thanks to Alessandra Violi for her inspiring research.

¹ Winfried Georg Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur. Mit einem Essay zu Alfred Andersch*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München 1999 (Eng. ed. *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Random House, New York 2003).

² For the German reception of Sebald's book, see Susanne Veas Gulani, *Trauma and Guilt: Literature of Wartime Bombing in Germany*, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 2003.

³ See the seminal work of Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage* (1946), Piper, München 2012 (Eng. ed. *The Question of German Guilt*, Capricorn, New York 1961).

⁴ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1996, p. 7.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ See Susanne Veas Gulani, *Trauma and Guilt*, cit.

devastatingly unhealthy landscape: everywhere the unending pyres of decaying corpses, among the rubble a proliferation of rats and flies, on the bodies the most disgusting parasitic fauna resurfaced from prehistoric times, the displaced in permanent transit, wandering around like ghosts unable to take in the tragedy surrounding them; as Alfred Döblin notoriously wrote, people sprang out from every crack, silent and barely visible, relentlessly walking on incomprehensible routes to incomprehensible destinations. In those days, doctors talked of “lethargy due to shock;” today, psychiatrists would diagnose acute post-traumatic stress disorder, whose flipside is hyperactivity, in this case the compulsive need to clean the streets, to clear away debris and to rebuild as fast as possible. German people were anaesthetizing their eyes in order to be able to bear not only the horrific slaughter of their fellow-citizens, which they could not avoid witnessing, but also the shock of their basically unjustifiable survival.

In Sebald’s view, these gruesome images – which only now can we focus on after decades and thanks to the resurrection of some buried eye-witness accounts – remained unknown to the so-called *Trümmerliteratur*, misguidedly praised for its courageous realism, but in fact only able to draw upon all the clichés of the catastrophe genre, by reintroducing, one work after another, the same generic metaphors of destruction. Sebald’s argument is accompanied by some photographs: the gutted Kammerstrasse; the postcard *Frankfurt yesterday and today*, which compares the view of the city reduced to rubble in 1947 and in dazzling condition in 1997; the image of German shoes falling to pieces inserted in an English reportage; the photograph of the first concert given by the Munich Philharmonic after the surrender. Although the writer does not develop an articulated line of thought about the contribution of those pictures, he assigns to them implicitly another role, as if they could bear witness also to realities inaccessible to consciousness, as if they could possess a capacity of expression of the unbearable much more powerful than words. But was it really like this? In this historical moment, were the images the true deposit of a trauma and the starting-point for future elaboration of grief?⁷

If we consider the images created by the Germans, both in cinema and in photography, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, we face a different, but equivalent, refusal of reality. The rubble which gives the name to the cinematic trend represents a great natural scenery, it is the object of a transfiguration which contemporary critics, significantly, did not recognize and which today on the contrary is widely noticed. Eric Rentschler recently illustrated one of the aspects of the filmic de-realization of rubble: its transformation into a psychic landscape, the conversion of historical fact into symbolic motif. According to Rentschler, the *Trümmerfilm* inserts itself into the general trend towards diverting the gaze, which, in literature, transformed a national history of violence into a “natural history of destruction,” with the state of annihilation appearing

⁷ Note that in Ulrich Baer’s essay, photography is not only considered a place for, but also a form of, trauma. See Id., *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2002.

as the outcome of the forces of nature rather than as the responsibility of certain human agents.⁸ The choice of very vague titles, both in terms of space and time (*Somewhere in Berlin, Between Yesterday and Tomorrow, And the Sky above Us, In Those Days*) is the first clue of that drive to divert the gaze, the second one is the allegorical treatment of debris in a seminal movie such as *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*Murderers Are among Us*, Wolfgang Staudte, 1946). Here the physical destruction of German cities equates repeatedly with the mental devastation of the protagonist, the doctor Hans Mertens, so that debris becomes an inner theatre that has little or nothing to do with reality.

*Two sorts of ruins become intertwined: the rubble on the streets and the ruin in a returned soldier's mind, material damage and psychic torment both of which have both been caused by outside forces. Rubble, a signifier of destruction, assumes a mythic status within a vanquished nation's fantasy of reconstruction.*⁹

Moreover, the mythicization of rubble in the *Trümmerfilm* was also explained by critics in the recognition of the explicit references made to Expressionistic cinema. Besides lending to the scenery of devastation a general hallucinatory dimension, the quotation of that visual style connects post-war Germany to its glorious Weimar past, burying the intermediate period.¹⁰ In fact, the use of strong light contrasts, the accentuation of shadows and the evident tilting of the shooting angles (as we see at the beginning of Staudte's movie) de-realize the ruins transforming them into a pure graphic sign, so that, in some sequences, the jagged shards of bombed buildings make us think of the stylized profile of Hostenwall, the mountain village depicted on the backdrop of *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Robert Wiene, 1920). But *Die Mörder sind unter uns* is more often considered as a rewriting of *M – Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (*M*, Fritz Lang, 1931), whose original title should have been *Mörder unter uns*.¹¹ According to Jaimey Fisher, the figure of the metropolitan flâneur resurfaces in Staudte's movie, re-codifying a central character of modern imaginary which in turn was rewritten in Expressionistic cinema. If the paedophile in *M* indeed revealed "the darker side of the flâneur,"¹² by offering a version of wandering alone in the city as connected to the impulse to kill and to mental illness, the reappearance of the anguished walks of a man in post-war Berlin indirectly reintroduces the theme of sin, shame and collective guilt.

⁸ Eric Rentschler, *The Place of Rubble in the Trümmerfilm*, in Julia Hell, Andreas Schönle (eds.), *Ruins of Modernity*, Duke University Press, Durham-London 2010, pp. 418-438.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 438.

¹⁰ See Thomas Brandlmeier, *Von Hitler zu Adenauer. Deutsche Trümmerfilme*, in Hilmar Hoffman, Walter Schobert (eds.), *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen. Westdeutscher Nachkriegsfilm 1945-1962*, Deutsches Filmmuseum, Frankfurt a.M. 1989.

¹¹ Jaimey Fisher, "Wandering in/to the Rubble-Film: Filmic Flânerie and the Exploded Panorama after 1945," in *The German Quarterly*, vol. 78, no. 4, Fall 2005, pp. 461-480.

¹² An intuition of Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary*, Routledge, New York 2000, p. 145.

The evident positioning of rubble in the realm of specifically cinematic imagery, has also suggested other analogies. Robert Shandley reads the *Trümmerfilm* as a modern Western, in which cities reduced to rubble represent a variation on the American desert, equally uninhabitable and wild, a land of conquest that needs to be civilized thanks to the contribution of every citizen, especially the women (the icon of hard-working *Trümmerfrau*).¹³ Therefore rubble is a canyon to be crossed, and this affinity between the mythic landscape of the West and that of the historical Germany, both of them harsh and sublime, also entails identical themes, such as the same series of ethical imperatives: “the establishment of a moral order, confrontation of one’s own shady past, and confrontation of evil within a community.”¹⁴ Furthermore, other scholars have noted a sort of gangster movie atmosphere in the rubble stories, and in particular the same phobia associated with urban spaces, so typical of that American genre, which in turn reveals an unfamiliar face in its two-way relation with *Trümmerfilm*.¹⁵

In the final analysis, it is worthy of notice that the multivalent transfiguration of rubble in post-war German cinema represents the most acute symptom of the trauma endured by the nation. It does not depend on the visionary and, more often than not, foreign view of later generations, but on the contrary it represents the immediate self-defensive gesture of people who lived through the disaster. Perhaps, to German eyes, rubble never appears as such. Its metamorphosis into *landscape* – exotic, savage, prehistoric – was immediate, its positioning in the realm of the image instantaneous. The account of Hans Erich Nossack – in Sebald’s view the only writer of the time able to record plainly what he actually saw – includes a clear symptom of that early exercise in imagination. After his chance survival of Operation Gomorrha, which turned Hamburg into a hell on earth, Nossack feels the urgent need to set down immediately what he experienced, and in a crucial page of his *Der Untergang*, he describes his first impact with the destroyed city; the sea of rubble he faces already appears to be something else.

*What we saw all around did not remind us in any way of what we had lost. Nothing to do with it. It was something else, it was strangeness itself, it was the essentially ‘not possible.’ In Northern Finland there are forests that are frozen solid. At home we had a paintings of one of them. But who still thinks of forests in those circumstances? It was not even the skeleton of a forest. Something is there, to be sure, even more than if it were only a skeleton, but what is the meaning of these signs and runes? Perhaps the inconceivable inversion of the concept ‘forest’?*¹⁶

¹³ Robert Shandley, *Coming Home Through Rubble Canyons*, in Id., *Rubble Films: German Cinema in the Shadow of the Third Reich*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2001, pp. 25-46.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 26.

¹⁵ See Jennifer Fay, *Rubble Noir*, in William Rasch, Wilfried Wilms (eds.), *German Postwar Films: Life and Love in the Ruins*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2008, pp. 125-140.

¹⁶ Hans Erich Nossack, *Der Untergang*, Kruger Verlag, Hamburg 1948 (Eng. ed. *The End: Hamburg 1943*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2004).

Nossack's words testify more to the national trauma than to a tragic state of things. They reveal the refusal to recognize the new German landscape. It is not Germany, wrote Nossack, it is Finland; it is not reality, it is a painting; it is not the world but its skeleton or its surface written in an ancient code to be deciphered.

...I see skeletons...

The image of petrification of living beings and the idea of landscape of signs, a writing in runes that can have a meaning, even an iconic one, only if it is decoded, represent two symptoms of the national trauma, which re-emerges also in the photo-cinematic representation of rubble.

The motif of mineralization, particularly evident in the obsession with statues in *Trümmerfotografie*, sublimates the horror of corpses charred by bombs and welded to the debris covering the city streets. Photographers such as Friedrich Seidenstücker, Herman Claasen, Herbert List, Hugo Schmöltz portray landscapes of stone where the laceration of bodies is transferred to damaged statues, amputated marble limbs, fallen heads and upturned busts. List takes pictures of a colossal charioteer lying like a dead body on the debris-strewn floor of the Technical University of Munich (*Man Leading Horse*, 1946), while in a more famous photo of the series he immortalizes a scene similar to a *forest frozen solid*, namely the plaster casts of the Academy of Art covered in ice (*Plaster Casts in the Academy I, Munich*, 1946) (fig. 1): on the floor of a gutted gallery the humanoid group turns its back on the spectator, striving to reach the light that filters through the doorframe; the mantle of snow welds together bodies and rubble, producing a single corporeal mass. Seidenstücker's pictures capture the figures of a maimed Neptune on the door of the destroyed castle, of Diana and Mercury – crippled “watchmen” of the Nationalgalerie – and of an endless series of remains in the classic style in Charlottenburg. It cannot be denied that this collection of mutilated statues also possesses a certain majesty: the places of ancient splendor are still recognizable, the destruction of works of art seems not merely the eclipse of one country but rather a harm inflicted on civilization itself.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the evocation of the injured body of Germany through the agony of statues is not yet a form of grieving. It maintains a strong hallucinatory component, the trace of a shock that makes these works much more interesting. In List's pictures of 1946 Munich, a Roman statue without head and arms at a

¹⁷ The quest for grandeur in ruins, that is the need to foresee at the planning stage the way in which a building will collapse, in order to guarantee its symbolic strength even when damaged, had been one of the key concepts of the architecture of the Third Reich. See *Die Ruinenwerttheorie (The Theory of Ruin Value)* by Albert Speer, in Id., *Erinnerungen*, Verlag Ullstein, Frankfurt-Berlin 1969 (Eng. ed. *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs by Albert Speer*, Macmillan, New York 1976). On the transition from an aesthetic of ruins to an aesthetic of rubble in German cinema see also André Habib, “Ruines, décombres, chantiers, archives: l'évolution d'un figure dans le cinéma en Allemagne (1946-1993),” in *CINÉMAS*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2007, pp. 29-52.

second look appears to be a human body resting on a stack of bones. The statue is at the centre of a wall decorated symmetrically, reminding the scheme of the body in front, and, most importantly, it is placed on an ocean of white debris similar to limbs: fragments of columns, cylindrical stones, elongated stems. A skeleton in pieces, the skeleton that Nossack saw engraved on the landscape and that sometimes the *Trümmerfotografie* also discovers: in a photo by Hermann Claasen, the frail outline of Great St. Martin Church in Cologne takes on the Christ-like shape of an emaciated skeleton with arms silhouetted against the void (*Blick vom Alter Markt auf die Westseite*, 1946).



Fig. 1 – Herbert List, *Plaster Casts in the Academy I, Munich*, 1946.

In fact, it is the cinema that elaborates in depth the crucial image of the skeleton, itself a mineral body, even though this is not due to a replacement of flesh with stone, but to the consumption of the corpse, or as a result of a gaze that picks out the inner structure of the body. A traumatic figure that recalls the horror of death abstracting from its tangible manifestation, the skeleton appears like a watermark behind many cinematic representations of rubble. The framing of bombed buildings against the light, so that the sun's rays filter through the many holes of what had been windows, renders the idea not so

much of a world in pieces but of a series of hollow staring eyes. In an episode of *In jenen Tagen* (*In Those Days*, Helmut Käutner, 1947), splinters of façades with eyes, miraculously left standing, suddenly appear behind the protagonist, thanks to a camera movement (fig. 2). But the protagonist is a car, which after many misadventures has been left empty, and in that moment starts again to tell its story; everything in that ghostly scenery possesses a voice and a body, the rattletrap vehicle, but also the skeleton-buildings behind it, with which it blends thanks to the dust and to its camouflage “suit” (actually, in the other episodes the animated car and the surrounding landscape were already one and the same thing since the rubble was often shown in reflection on the car’s windscreen). Finally, in a sequence of *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, the equivalence between bones and rubble is so precise that it deserves a more detailed comment. Dr. Mertens eventually overcomes his neurosis by performing an operation on a child; he comes home, and even his home is getting better, it is less patched up, less messy, less bare. His partner Susanne, an ex-photographer and a survivor from a concentration camp, is setting the table. In the movie, the key moments of their love have always been framed by ruins, such as in the *plan sequence* of their first romantic walk, where the couple appears minuscule in extreme long shot and moves forward in the dark of the night, alongside the damaged structures of the building. But also at home the ruins, often visible through glassless window frames, always provide a striking background to their encounters. The house is an inner space, but also an outer space, as many bombarded buildings are; being without a frontage, they let us see what is happening inside the rooms. But that evening Susanne finds a remedy for that lack of intimacy. She creates makeshift windows by using the X-rays of Mertens’ former patients. The couple sit down right under this new “glass wall,” to which they turn their backs, and the landscape of their love becomes a map of the human body, the chart of a chest, of a foot, of a jaw (fig. 3). Mertens jokes about their situation, and points out the symptoms of the disease in each body, the sick body of the country, which he will obviously now heal.



Fig. 2 – *In jenen Tagen* (*In Those Days*, Helmut Kautner, 1947).



Fig. 3 – *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*Murderers Are among Us*, Wolfgang Staudte, 1946).

But it is not only a question of symbolism. Certainly, the skeleton is also a metaphor that refers to the filleted body of Germany, and it connects with a skein of much more ancient associations: the anthropological connection between architectural and bodily structures, and the nineteenth-century analogy between the body and the city;¹⁸ nevertheless, as it appears in its medical-scientific version, it represents most of all an image linked to the visual culture of that time in a very specific way. Photography of the inner structure of the body, which depends on the application of radiographic technology to the skin, represents the supreme expression of vision close-up, so close that it no longer has anything to do with the exterior appearance of the body. There is no flesh, no blood, no pain. Radiography shows only shapes, positions, connections. And as image-code, as a film-negative to be interpreted, the X-ray skeleton is both a surface of runes and a body of stone. It is the figure that summarizes the two traumatic dimensions of the German gaze, and at the same time it refers to a way of seeing strongly identified with the culture of war of that time.

X-rays are not a discovery of those years but are as old as the cinema itself: the first X-ray of a hand, his wife's, was created by the German Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen on the 22 December 1895, six days before the first public screening of the *cinématographe* Lumière.¹⁹ But in the 1930s there was something new on the agenda: the experimentation with radiation not only for diagnostic purposes, but also with a therapeutic aim. It was then that scientists worked on the right dosage necessary not only to locate and identify cancer, but also to destroy it, not only for photographing malignant cells, but also for *bombarding* them.²⁰ It is a medical term that clearly reveals the hidden relation between radiotherapy and the military strategy of *area bombing*, between X-rays and aerial photography specifically used for target reconnaissance. This connection not only concerns the function of the two devices for producing images, but also the forms they create: in graphic terms, the extreme of close-up vision and the extreme of seeing

¹⁸ See Alessandra Violi, *Il corpo nell'immaginario letterario*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2013. On the cross-connection of the imaginaries between medicine, literature and arts, see also her seminal work, Id., *Il teatro dei nervi. Fantasmî del moderno da Mesmer a Charcot*, Mondadori, Milano 2004 (first ed. 2002). On the metaphor of the city as rotting body see Noa Steimatsky, *Ruinous: Rossellini's Corpse-Cities*, in Id., *Italian Locations: Reinhabiting the Past in Postwar Cinema*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 2008, pp. 41-78.

¹⁹ See the pivotal Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 1995. More recently, Monika Dommann analyzed in depth the introduction of X-rays into medical practice in German-speaking Switzerland during the first decades after 1895; she studied X-ray laboratories as well as the visual imagery they generated, and ultimately the changing technique of their medical interpretation. Particularly interesting is the questioning of the complex iconic status of X-rays, *shadow-images* instead of *reflected light-images*. See Monika Dommann, *Durchsicht, Einsicht, Vorsicht. Eine Geschichte der Röntgenstrahlen 1896-1963*, Chronos, Zürich 2003.

²⁰ James M. Slater, *From X-Rays to Ion Beams: A Short History of Radiation Therapy*, in Ute Linz (ed.), *Ion Beam Therapy: Fundamentals, Technology, Clinical Applications*, Springer Verlag, Berlin-Heidelberg 2012, pp. 3-16, <http://www.springer.com/us/book/9783642214134>, last visit 24 July 2014.

from afar are equivalent. In both cases the inside and the outside are inverted. And the print of a bone structure creates the same problems of decoding and 'diagnosis' as a map of shapes and lines corresponding to a landscape seen from the air. Consequently, the same traumatic gaze – a scientific way of looking, based on a radical manipulation of distances, even at an affective level, as we shall see – transfigures debris into skeletons or into abstract signs.

The interpretation of signs produced by aerial images represents the key problem of the war strategy of the time, so much so that during the war the armies set up specific divisions dedicated to image analysis, directed, in the case of the US army, by figures of the caliber of Edward Steichen and Beaumont Newhall.²¹ In England, while *The Illustrated London News* published, in double-page articles, images of the series "Cologne before and after bombing," the military weekly *Evidence in Camera* regularly published aerial photos accompanied by precise explanations of how to interpret those figurative puzzles,²² those translations of sensorial data into spatial 'calligraphy,' or, to use Nossack's word, those *runes*.

...I see runes

If the aerial view transforms the landscape into a written surface,²³ Nossack's runes represent a sort of 'negative' of the views produced by enemy photo-recognition: the point of view is certainly closer (the writer was standing inside a truck racing into Hamburg), but equally remote at an affective level, equally abstract and analytic. The view from above allows the de-sensitization of the subject, it produces a partial blindness which turns out to be functional both for the destroyers and, ultimately, for the victims.²⁴

In the period between the wars, two German thinkers as acute as Siegfried Kracauer and Ernst Jünger discuss this unprecedented optical position (the latter drawing on his long military experience to arrive at his philosophy of the image). Kracauer connects the affectless character of the aerial images to their abstract quality, which depends on the imperative nature of vision from above,

²¹ Denis Cosgrove, William L. Fox, *Photography and Flight*, Reaktion Books 2010, p. 55. On the topic see also Mark Dorrian, Frédéric Pousin (eds.), *Seeing From Above: The Aerial View in Visual Culture*, Tauris, London-New York 2013. For aerial photography in war and the mobilization of the gaze see Bernhard Siegert, "Luftwaffe Fotografie. Luftkrieg als Bildverarbeitungssystem 1911-1921," in *Fotogeschichte. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Ästhetik der Fotografie*, vol. 12, 1992, pp. 41-54.

²² In the remarkable research of Davide Deriu, *Picturing Ruinscapes: The Aerial Photograph as Image of Historical Trauma*, in Frances Guerin, Roger Hallas (eds.), *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, Wallflower Press, London 2007, pp. 189-203.

²³ See the idea of diagram in Mark Dorrian, "The Aerial View: Notes for a Cultural History," in *Strates*, vol. 13, 2007, <http://strates.revues.org/5573>, last visit 11 October 2014.

²⁴ "A German city was a hellish picture of flame, gunfire and searchlights, an unreal picture because we could not hear it or feel its breath. [...] It's the distance and the blindness which enables you to do these things." A British pilot's report quoted in Peter Adey, Mark Whitehead, Alison J. Williams (eds.), *From Above: War, Violence and Verticality*, Hurst and Company, London 2013, p. 43.

which is capable of radically reconfiguring its object. That perspective introduces from outside an order and a rationality that does not belong to the phenomenon, lending it an *ornamental* character. “The ornament resembles aerial photographs of landscape and cities in that it does not emerge out of the interior of the given condition, but rather appears above them.”²⁵ To stand above the phenomenon means to impose on it a shape, to see geometric symmetry where there is only chaos, to see organic structures where there are only isolated elements, to flatten the perception through non-existent equivalences (the ornament is in Kracauer’s thinking the key concept of the philosophy of the surface – *Oberfläche*). But seeing from above also means adopting a viewpoint entirely removed from the ground, which increases the natural distance inherent in the medium. “Photography shows cities in aerial shot,” Kracauer wrote, “brings crockets and figures down from the Gothic cathedrals. All spatial configurations are incorporated into the central archive in unusual combinations which distance them from human proximity.”²⁶ While the ground-level views of a city are a photographic account of a historical and social context, the aerial views are “a machine of the real and agent of the surreal.”²⁷ From above the city becomes an ideal, unreal and lifeless construction, incapable of arousing feelings of empathy.

Jünger examines this last aspect in depth, developing the idea of *anesthetizing vision* in the essay *On Pain*.²⁸ There, at the ideal meeting point of the three key factors of his philosophy of the image, namely, photography, war and modernity, he situates the experience of the aerial view. He wrote:

*In photographs taken from above, the gigantic military parade, the regular squares and the human columns that move forward appear in perspective as magical figures whose hidden meaning is to exorcize pain. This kind of view possesses an immediate evidence; we feel the same sensation flying above a city where the regular perimeter of an old fortress is preserved amid the maze of streets.*²⁹

Aerial photography exorcizes pain above all because it is a technique (the technique of war that is also the spectacle of war); indeed, beyond the specificity of a particular point of view, in Jünger, the modern individual is de-sensitized primarily by photography in itself, a technique that, because it is “external to the zone of sensibility,” possesses a “telescopic” nature; for this reason, it lets us see things without asking us to experience them.³⁰ Consequently, keeping pain at dis-

²⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, “Das Ornament der Masse,” in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 9 June 1927 (Eng. ed. *The Mass Ornament: Weimer Essays*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge [MA] 1995, p. 77).

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 62.

²⁷ See Anthony Vidler, *Photourbanism*, in Gary Bridge, Sophie Watson (eds.), *Companion to the City*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2002, pp. 35-45.

²⁸ Ernst Jünger, *Über den Schmerz* (1934), in *Blätter und Steine*, Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, Hamburg 1941.

²⁹ *Ivi* (my translation from the Italian edition: Ernst Jünger, *Sul dolore*, in Id., *Foglie e pietre*, Adelphi, Milano 1997, p. 160).

³⁰ See Maurizio Guerri, *Anestesia*, in Id., *Ernst Jünger. Terrore e libertà*, Agenzia X, Milano 2007,

tance, photography develops also an aggressive nature, it becomes an instrument for the vivisection of reality. Jünger draws a parallel between photography and medicine, in particular the technique of anesthesia: just as a general anaesthetic removes physical pain – he writes – temporarily reducing the body to a corpse on which the surgeon can operate, so photography anesthetizes the gaze and exposes the corpse of the world to “scientific” examination.³¹ Aerial photography – to whose concretely aggressive aims Jünger seems often to allude in *On Pain* – becomes in this way the most radical human instrument for “eradicating the zone of sensibility” in modern man, an instrument extremely close to the technology of medical gaze; the runes and the skeleton.

Significantly, it was a “scientist” of the objectivity of the camera, Auguste Sander, who was most interested in “runes” in German postwar photography. After the human catalogues he created in the 1920s and the 1930s, in postwar Germany Sander photographed the rubble of Cologne from above and with a scientific eye that recalls the town planner’s or the cartographer’s gaze: “Sander climbed up to the top of the cathedral towers and panned his camera like a surveyor doing topographic studies for a new city plan,” a critic wrote in a newspaper article.³²

But maybe it is even more interesting to find the presence of the “runes” in *Trümmerfilm*, which is to say, the appearance of abstract images that are equivalents of aerial views, both because they are framed at a distance and in movement, and because they share the same affective ‘temperature.’ The exploration of the destroyed city from a moving vehicle (a train, a car), a type of sequence that recurs in many movies, recalls the military act of photo-(and cine-)reconnaissance of a territory. The prototype is the visit to the centre of Berlin in a camera car in *Und über uns der Himmel* (*And the Sky above Us*, Josef von Báký 1947). Travelling in the car are a widow, an ex-entrepreneur and his son, back from the war with a highly symbolic neurosis: temporary blindness. Entering the city, they see rubble in subjective shot, framed by the edge of the windscreen. The frame creates distance, but the rubble seems too close and the car is moving fast; the buildings are reduced to a wrinkled mineral surface, full of holes, craters, cracks (fig. 4). The blind man asks: “Where are we now?” and the widow answers: “Potsdamerstrasse.” At that point the rubble disappears, the street comes to life, bustling, congested and joyful. The memory of the city before the war takes the place of an unbearable present, to which they are blind even when their eyes can see.

pp. 129-184.

³¹ See Maurizio Guerri, *Sguardo fotografico e seconda coscienza. Note a margine del saggio sul dolore di Jünger*, in Sandro Gorgone, Gabriele Guerra, (eds.), *L'eco delle immagini e il dominio della forma. Ernst e Friedrich Georg Jünger e la visual culture*, Mimesis, Milano 2014, pp. 165-177.

³² From the review of a catalogue on Sander: Winfried Ranke (ed.), *Auguste Sander, die Zerstörung Kölns. Fotografien 1945-1946*, Mosel, München 1985. Quoted in Hermann Glaser, “Images of Two German Post-War States,” in Klaus Honnef, Rolf Sachsse, Karin Thomas (eds.), *German Photography 1870-1970: Power of a Medium*, Dumont, Köln 1997, p. 120.



Fig. 4 – *Und über uns der Himmel* (*And the Sky Above Us*, Josef von Baky 1947).

In *Irgendwo in Berlin* (*Somewhere in Berlin*, Gerhard Lamprecht 1946), the rubble represents a stone labyrinth corresponding to the overturning of the aerial view of the city. The opening credits run over a map of central Berlin, an elementary view from above, but when the film starts the camera pans and tilts down a church steeple landing in an unnamed corner surrounded by gigantic ruins. Chasing a thief, from one path to another through the debris, we lose our bearings. We are on the surface of the moon, as against the precision of the map at the beginning. We are in a wholly uninhabitable outer space that is nevertheless capable of transforming itself into anything at all, here just as in other movies: a terrace on which to sunbathe (*Und über uns der Himmel*), a workstation such as the crater from which the girl from the hotel directs the bulldozer in *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen* (*Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, Harald Braun, 1947), an immense playground, as in *Irgendwo in Berlin*. Here children play at war around the symbolic centre of the movie: the imposing saw-toothed remains of a building pitching jaggedly down to the ground, which will be the theatre of the key event of the story. For fun or for a dare, a boy climbs to the top, but on reaching the highest point, he loses his balance and falls down. Before the tragedy, a brick dislodges and slides away: we watch it crashing down, framed from above; in this elaborately-shot scene, the dust raised by the brick appears like a cloud looming over an area that seems much further away than it really is, and whose shape is too geometric and regular (fig. 5): this is almost an aerial shot, a photo-reconnaissance... we already know that something else will fall down there.

This sudden resurfacing of the aerial visual scheme is thus added to its more imprecise and generic presence in the other sequences we have described, where,

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as we said, an *ornamental* and *anesthetized* gaze is adopted, even if the optical point of view on the rubble is not strictly from above.

In postwar German cinema and photography, therefore, the form of trauma survives without fully expressing itself and, as a visual matrix, it reactivates the memory of being seen from above, of being *X-rayed* and “transcribed” (fig. 6). This memory condenses all the conflictual dimensions of German trauma.



Fig. 5 – *Irgendwo in Berlin* (*Somewhere in Berlin*, Gerhard Lamprecht 1946).



Fig. 6 – *Diesel Motor Works*, Berlin August 6, 1944.

At a first level, the feeling of being seen from above, of being towered-over and dominated, awakens the feeling of being defeated by way of a sort of visual metaphor. At a second level, the aerial view rekindles the violent conflict of self-representation experienced by Germany at the end of the war: indeed this is not only a perspective imposed upon Nazi Germany in the last years of the war, but also a perspective inflicted by the Nazis on others at the beginning of the conflict. *Feuertaufe* (Hans Bertram, 1940) is a German propaganda documentary shot live and entirely from the aerial point of view by the pilots of the Luftwaffe during the attack on Poland; shortly afterwards, it was screened in Berlin. So, in German eyes there were also the images of an abstract Warsaw reduced to smoke and ashes, or the images of London devastated after seventy-six consecutive nights of the 'Blitz.' At a third and final level, the aerial view represents also a celebration of victory on the part of the Allied forces. In 1945, the Americans introduced the ambiguous genre of the *tourist sight*, a kind of documentary where the act of flying over the ruins of the German cities demonstrates on one hand compassion for the appalling conditions of the German populace, but on the other hand tries to turn the harsh reality into a spectacular panorama. With this gesture, they certified the damage inflicted and the appropriation of the territory; this meaning is clear in *Ein Tag im Juli* (*A Day in July*, 1945), a German production but with an American crew; here a long aerial sequence shows every scar inflicted on Berlin: the ruins of Kurfürstendamm, Unter den Linden, and the Brandenburger Tör. A few years later, the same gesture will not only attest the defeat of the enemy, but it will also "correct" his imagery: the aerial view of destroyed Berlin, coming into view through the clouds while the Americans come into land in *A Foreign Affair* (Billy Wilder, 1948), re-writes precisely the first sequence of *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefensthal, 1935), in which, instead, the Nazi flags on the spires of Nuremberg appeared from behind the clouds.

The image of the city seen from above and reduced to geometrical forms, or at ground level after the bombing, when those abstractions have become reality, or rather, have become *lasting remains*, is so powerfully traumatic that it returns even after many decades. The view of Berlin in flames re-emerges at the climax of the first modern German horror film: *Rammbock* (Marvin Kren, 2010), significantly subtitled *Berlin Undead* and referenced by the tagline "Germany is dead." It is the story of a virus that transforms the inhabitants of the city into zombies, and forces them to hide in their homes or in the cellars thus recalling the state of emergency during the Allied bombing. At every stage the city is invisible, even though the radio describes what is happening in the streets; but at the end, when the tragedy reaches its culmination, the protagonist climbs onto the roof of a building so as to let us see the true horrific image: Berlin in flames, covered in smoke and blazing fires.