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## Framed Memories of Berlin

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## **Framed Memories of Berlin: Film, Architecture and Remembrance**

### **Abstract**

Collective memory can be defined as a shared notion of how a social group constructs its past. Architecture and cinema play a major role in the creation of collective memory, buildings by structuring lived experiences and films by framing, re-presenting and fixing those experiences so that they can be collectively revisited. In this study, well-known films of Berlin from throughout the twentieth century, both fiction and non-fiction, are studied to explore their contribution to the memory-making process in a city subject to repeated destruction. In images, the current version of various prominent film locations is juxtaposed with its filmic counterpart, to highlight both continuities and discontinuities and ask after their role in remembrance.

### **Keywords**

film architecture, collective memory, Berlin, cinematic city, urban development, location film

### **Author Biographies**

**Dr Gul Kacmaz Erk** is BSc Architecture Program Coordinator at Queen's University Belfast, UK. Having received her BArch/MArch degrees (METU) and Ph.D. in Architecture (Istanbul Technical University), she researched at University of Pennsylvania and University College Dublin. She taught at Philadelphia University, TUDelft and Izmir University of Economics, and conducted urban filmmaking workshops in Ireland, UK and Turkey. In 2009, she published *Architecture in Cinema: A Relation of Representation Based on Space*.

**Dr Christopher Wilson** is Architecture and Design Historian at Ringling College of Art+Design, Sarasota, Florida. He holds a BArch degree (Temple University), MA (the Architectural Association, London), and Ph.D. in Architecture (METU). He practiced and taught in the USA, UK and Turkey as well as Berlin. In 2013, he published *Beyond Anıtkabir: The Construction and Maintenance of National Memory in the Funerary Architecture of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk* with Ashgate Press.

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Buildings matter... because they are the symbols and the repositories of memory.

**Brian Ladd<sup>1</sup>**

We live in an age in which film has become the frame of reference for our urban existence, and our activities and thoughts are intertwined with screen-based realities.

**Richard Koeck<sup>2</sup>**

### Introduction

The Skladanowsky Brothers' 20-second film *Alexanderplatz*, made in 1895, uses a fixed cine-camera to capture constant movement within its frame. Both now, and in the Skladanowskys' film, Berlin's Alexanderplatz – particularly the area in and around the train station – is dynamic and lively, with people and vehicles moving in all directions. The square feels remarkably similar today, even though the buildings that surround it have all changed. It is as though, in a few short moments, the brothers have grasped the *genius loci* of Alexanderplatz. Watching the film we become aware of the continuity of the place, of the way in which past and present overlap. The film seems to fix a memory of the square which today's experience of it reinforces, a collective memory that persists.

“Visual images of sites can generate constructed images that in turn can create a memory of a place,” writes architectural historian Shelley Hornstein.<sup>3</sup> Films, which from their very early days played to mass audiences, make that memory a shared one. They allow us to enter the past in ways that written or oral histories cannot – and even more so once they capture sound as well as image and movement. Berlin, Germany's political and economic capital, and one of the most vibrant cities in Europe, has been a ‘cinematic city’ – a city familiar through film – since the very invention of cinema. It has had a central role in films not simply as a backdrop to action, but as a character in its own right. “Berlin is a city that generates itself through its projections, pre-eminently those held by its film and art images, and through the intersection of those projections with its urban surfaces,” claims Stephen Barber, a cultural theorist who has studied the Skladanowsky Brothers.<sup>4</sup>

The story of Berlin in cinema has shifted throughout the twentieth century. From a city celebrating its growing industrial prowess to the headquarters of authoritarian Nazi rule, from a city divided and in ruins to a cosmopolitan centre attempting to cope with an influx of immigrants, it has continued to draw in both local and international filmmakers. Well-known film directors such as Fritz Lang, Roberto Rossellini, Billy Wilder, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Wim Wenders have made Berlin the setting and the focus of their films. In this essay, we use film as a way to reflect on the process of Berlin's memory-making, examining a range of films from the city's various historical episodes. Architecture, the fabric of the city, as it is built and re-built, inevitably plays a key role. By tracing the footsteps of the films' protagonists, or physically exploring Berlin as protagonist, through buildings, places and spaces in the films, we attempt to discover the framed memories of this city.

"Cities in discourse have no absolute and fixed meaning, only a temporary, positional one," writes film scholar Colin McArthur.<sup>5</sup> It is this shifting meaning that we trace, while being acutely aware of Berlin's continuity despite its radical changes. Berlin's twentieth century history, shaped by political and military decisions, can be organised into distinct time-periods: pre-World War I, Weimar Republican, National Socialist or Nazi, post-World War II, Berlin Wall and post-reunification. We gather these into three chronological 'episodes', and concentrate our study on seven films made in the time-period they depict – films that were and are widely known, and therefore prominent in their relationship to collective memory. As historian Todd Herzog has written, "perhaps more than any other city in the world, Berlin is haunted by the ghosts of its history," and film, surely, is a form of haunting.<sup>6</sup>

### Episode 1: Capital City Berlin

In cinema's first fifty years, from the 1890s to the 1940s, the new technology of film-making helped to proclaim and to establish Berlin's status as the vibrant capital city of a modern nation. During this time Berlin was also, of course, a military and revolutionary capital, the nerve centre of two world wars and the

symbolic centre of an empire-turned-republic. Berlin in film gave expression to the city's shifting moods and roles – assertive and confident, frenetic and unruly, pensive, militant.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Skladanowsky brothers, Max and Emil, were travelling artisan-showmen who performed magic lantern spectacles (their older brother, Eugen, worked as a clown and an acrobat). In 1895, just before the Lumière brothers in France created the 'cinématographe', the Skladanowskys invented a differently-conceived movie projector, the 'Bioskop', which could show 16 frames per second through two lenses. *Alexanderplatz* and other short documentary films of Berlin – *Unter den Linden*, *Schönholz Station*, or the *Fire Brigade Turnout* showing Berlin's fire brigade in action – were made on a home-made cine-camera in order to demonstrate the powers of their magical projection machine. Their audiences, in a workers' café in northern Berlin where the apparatus was trialled, and in the Wintergarten ballroom of Berlin's Central Hotel, watched the films, each less than a minute, each repeated several times, as part of a programme of variety acts. They showed Berliners fleeting glimpses of their city, revealing it as a fantastical, exuberant place, dense with people and with buildings, and affirming its prestige as an industrious modern metropolis.

Barber suggests that the Skladanowskys' shows helped to alter Berlin's image and reputation after it had been dismissed for many decades as militaristic and austere. Their first-ever film images of Alexanderplatz (Figure 1), alive with horse-drawn carriages, trams and busy people against a backdrop of high-level trains, helped to establish the role of this urban square as a hub of activity and energy – a role confirmed throughout the 1910s and 20s as it became Berlin's busiest commercial centre and transport exchange (the Hermann Tietz department store opened there in 1904; the familiar steel and glass vaulted station dates originally from the 1920s), and reinforced in the 1930s by the building of Peter Behrens' Alexanderhaus (home of the Berliner Stadtbank) and Berolinahaus (with clothing store, café, and rooftop dancing terrace) to form a gateway to the square. It is no coincidence that in the 1960s the East German Government sited their iconic Fernsehturm or TV Tower – intended to be a

symbol of East German industrial prowess, and still one of Europe's tallest structures – just behind Alexanderplatz Station, and the constantly-turning 'World Clock', declaration of urbanity, in front of it. Even when the square itself was pedestrianized, leaving it often windswept and empty, and in the period when the metro lines from West Berlin passed through the station without stopping, rendering it a ghost station, the memory of its liveliness persisted, preserved in the Skladanowskys' film. Reinforced by images, collective memory of a place can exist separately from its physical actuality, and can help to keep that place alive.

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The character that the Skladanowsky brothers helped to establish for Berlin survives, but altered. The end of the First World War, although politically and economically catastrophic for Germany, did not negate Berlin's reputation as a modern European capital, full of action and excitement. Its status as a place that produced innovative art, design, literature and cinema was enhanced under the Weimar Republic, and, where film was concerned, continued into the Nazi era. In the 1920s, cabaret and jazz thrived; movie theatres, which had begun to appear before the War, multiplied as cinema shifted from fairground spectacle or variety act to more formalized mass entertainment. But it is not just hindsight that identifies, underlying the excitement, an angry pessimism. It is visible in the post-World War One work of the Expressionists, with their themes of insanity, destruction and betrayal, or in Dada, which inverted the logic and reason of modern society to revel in nonsense and irrationality. Berlin's liveliness is hard to distinguish from a bleaker, more desperate hedonism.

Walter Ruttmann's 1927 film *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* is characteristic of this uneasiness. Renowned for its lyrical documentary style, in fifty minutes it tells the story of a typical day in Berlin, from dawn until after dark.<sup>7</sup> In the morning, trains rush towards the city, factories open their gates and machinery jolts into action. Rubbish is collected, mail delivered, and children walk to school. Shops' blinds open; café tables are set out on pavements; stables are swept while straight-backed riders gather on horseback under the trees for a morning canter; office-workers make their way to work, by train, by tram, or by

chauffeur-driven car. There is a wedding, a funeral, a brawl. In the afternoon, trolley cars jostle, women window-shop, patrons dine, and beggars scavenge for food. Boats full of goods glide gently along the canal, powered by burly bargemen. In the evening, as the lights come on one by one, lovers huddle, dancers jive, the orchestra strikes up and the cabaret begins; taxis race for custom; drunkards sing in the street. The Skladanowskys' staccato scenes have been expanded, teased out, softened, and a pensiveness is ushered in. Where the Skladanowskys leapt out from behind the projector once the movies were over, as if to say "here we are, live continuation of the action", Ruttmann's film seems to keep its distance from all that it records, fascinated but reflexive.

Trained originally as an architect, Ruttmann had previously made abstract films, rhythmic, dynamic compositions of shapes in light. Here, he worked to attract, almost to seduce, a much wider public. But his composition and juxtaposition of images is just as artful and carefully judged as in his abstract work. Most of the film is shot from a still camera, as if simply observing that which comes to pass. Occasionally, the camera is mounted on a moving vehicle, and it seems as though the cityscape itself rushes past. Ruttmann had worked for director Fritz Lang as a cinematographer (on *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried*, 1924 and *Metropolis*, 1927). However, unlike Lang's dystopian *Metropolis*, Ruttmann's city film does not set out to criticize Germany's industrial society – its manifest inequalities, its obsession with technology at the expense of humanity. Instead, Ruttmann simply juxtaposes rich and poor, machine and labourer (the machines the film shows, harsh and powerful as they are, make things directly for people – bottles for milk, or loaves of bread). Serenity co-exists with violence; all are part of the same whole.

Where Lang's *Metropolis* exaggerates the *Großstadt* in its Expressionist sets, Ruttmann simply shows it. While some locations are easily identified (Felix Mendelssohn's Mossehaus of 1923, for example, home to liberal newspapers such as the *Berlin Tageblatt*), most are used merely to evoke a generalised 'Berlin-ness'. One image that has often been used to promote the film is an aerial shot of Potsdamerplatz, showing Germany's first traffic-light tower (Figure 2).

After German reunification in 1989, when Potsdamerplatz was made whole again after nearly twenty-five years of being physically divided in two, a replica of the tower was re-installed there as a “new reminder” of the past.<sup>8</sup> But in Ruttmann’s editing, the tower is not so much specific to the place as to the atmosphere – the hustle and bustle of a slightly frenetic capital city, a city that can be harsh or gentle, attentive or indifferent, simultaneously open-minded and moralistic. If the new traffic tower has been reabsorbed into the city despite its “fakeness”, it is because Berlin has regained some of that atmosphere. *Berlin Symphony* echoes from the past into the present.<sup>9</sup> The determined resilience and continuity that characterized Berlin after the First World War is being reasserted.

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Seven years after *Berlin Symphony*, Ruttmann worked briefly with Leni Riefenstahl on her film *Triumph of the Will*, which documented the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg. The success of the film – it was a box-office hit in Berlin, and also won a gold medal at the 1935 Venice Biennale – led Hitler to ask Riefenstahl to film the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The result was two feature-length movies, *Olympia Part I: Festival of Nations* and *Olympia Part II: Festival of Beauty*, which appeared in 1938, again to critical acclaim both nationally and internationally. Part I opens with lingering shots of the Acropolis, its temples, and ancient Greek sculptures, one of which slowly comes to life to throw his discus. A runner emerges from mist and smoke brandishing the Olympic torch, which is carried by relay across Europe (maps become birds’ eye views become the skylines of capital cities before sinking back to become maps again) until its flame reaches Berlin and the newly built Olympic stadium, whose columns, thrown into bright relief against the shade, echo those of the Parthenon.<sup>10</sup> The opening ceremony begins. The message appears explicit: Berlin is capital not just of Germany, but of an entire classical civilization.

The city itself barely appears in the films. Only when the torch-bearer runs through the Brandenburg Gate do we see any of its buildings, and even this shot is cropped to focus sharply on runner and monument. It is the stadium (designed by Werner March in stripped classical style), seen first in aerial view



before we descend slowly into it, that comes to stand in for Berlin, the enthusiastic crowds for its people, the endurance and determination of the athletes for its ethos (Figure 3). Marathon runners, cyclists and military horse-riders on a terrifying steeplechase leave the stadium to demonstrate their mastery over the Berlin Grönwald, the ur-nature that is backdrop and foundation to this newly rediscovered mythical civilization. Riefenstahl's filming is lavish for its time. Cameras were mounted on rails to follow runners and hurdlers, underwater to capture the elegance of swimmers, and frequently used a telephoto lens to focus on an athlete's face, a spectator in the crowd, or the Führer himself, often aggrandized by being seen from below. Each cut is carefully juxtaposed with the next (Riefenstahl had over thirty cameramen) to heighten the sense of tension, concentration, and effort.<sup>11</sup> At the end of Part II, slow motion bodies of divers leap and curve against the Berlin sky in a pattern of almost abstract movement. "I am fascinated by what is beautiful, strong, healthy ...", said Riefenstahl; "I seek harmony. When harmony is produced, I am happy."<sup>12</sup>

Riefenstahl's *Olympia* films indelibly linked Berlin's Olympic Stadium with Hitler. In Holocaust scholar Carson Philips' words, "the stadium represents a temple that teeming masses of spectators enter to worship the athletes' success while being anointed with the values of National Socialism."<sup>13</sup> The building was included on West Berlin's list of protected monuments in 1966, hosted a number of football matches in the 1974 FIFA World Cup and was fully renovated for the 2006 World Cup. The stadium is also a venue for concerts. But all of these attempts to allow the building to represent the hopes and desires of a new Germany are tinged with memories of its past, fixed fast in Riefenstahl's unforgettable portrayal.

Films such as these – *Alexanderplatz*, *Berlin Symphony* and *Olympia* – provide evidence of particular moments in history, but all do so in such a way that that history persists into the present. Pre-World War One films tend to be documentaries rather than narrative stories; the emphasis is on observation rather than construction. The Skladanowskys' film is no exception (Oskar

Messter's *A Ride through Berlin* of 1910 might be another example). But perhaps because *Alexanderplatz* is one of the first films where we see Berlin in motion, the city seems literally to have been animated, to have come alive, and this is why it haunts. Ruttmann's film is more ambiguous in terms of genre; the composition is too artfully contrived to be mere reportage, and Berlin becomes a character – busy, purposeful, but also moody. Riefenstahl always tried to insist that *Olympia* was a documentary, but some parts of it were re-staged when she deemed the original footage inadequate, and the composition, again, is calculated for effect. Facts are re-presented as propaganda; they disseminate an ideal, which Susan Sontag describes as “the ideal of life as art, the cult of beauty, the fetishism of courage, and dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community.”<sup>14</sup> Watching *Olympia*, the viewer is lured into this community. Berlin is left tainted with suspicion of seduction.

#### Episode 2: Fragmented Berlin

In 1945, *The Fall of Berlin*, directed by Soviet film-makers Yuri Raizman and Yelizaveta Svilova, was released, first in Russia, then in the U.S., with English subtitles.<sup>15</sup> Like *Olympia*, it begins with maps that transmute into film sequences, this time of the rivers crossed by the Red army in their advance on Berlin. It shows documentary footage of Russian troops fighting street by street, building by building, to wrest the city from German control. The footage is interspersed with clips from Nazi propaganda films of German soldiers on parade along those same streets before Allied bombing had reduced them to largely burnt-out shells. The climax of the film is the raising of the Red Flag over the Reichstag; it draws to a close with the signing of the official surrender by German military leaders, countersigned by Russian and other Allied commanders, and ends with the jubilant victory parade in Moscow's Red Square. Whether propaganda or simply reportage, it is perhaps the first film to reveal Berlin's utter destruction to an international audience.

With Germany's defeat, Berlin was divided for administrative purposes into four zones, under Russian, American, British and French control. By 1948, the U.S., British and French zones had merged as West Berlin, but East Berlin remained

separate, the much-reduced capital city of the new East Germany. West Berlin lost its status as a capital, and became an outpost of the new West Germany, surrounded by East German territory. Like twins separated at birth, East and West Berlin existed separately, each shaped by their particular circumstances.<sup>16</sup> Construction of the Wall between the two in 1961 served to reinforce their differences.

The films of the early post-war period are known as *Trümmerfilme*, rubble films. They depict Berlin – zoned, but not yet fully divided – as a ruin, eerily quiet and yet still occupied, its inhabitants living in pockets of barely habitable rooms in bullet-strafed, fire-bombed buildings. Wolfgang Staudte's *The Murderers are Among Us* of 1946 was the first of these films, and the first to be made by DEFA, the official East German cinema production company.<sup>17</sup> It uses a fictional narrative in an immediate reckoning with Nazism: a young woman returns to Berlin from a concentration camp (perhaps she was a Communist? The audience never learns exactly why she was interned). Her love helps to redeem a former Wehrmacht doctor who is sinking into destructive guilt and self-pity as a result of his involvement in the war. The two meet because he has taken over what is left of her apartment, and their relationship builds amongst the debris. Billy Wilder's much less earnest film *A Foreign Affair* (1948) was made by Paramount, ostensibly to justify the American presence in Berlin, to “seduce the orphaned child of Europe,” as film critic Elaine Lennon puts it.<sup>18</sup> Again against a backdrop of urban destruction, an American officer conducts an affair with a one-time Nazi chanteuse, bringing her goods he has managed to find on the black market, but he is also involved with a straight-laced Congresswoman who is in Berlin to investigate conditions and morale. In the end it is not quite clear whether America seduces Berlin, or vice versa.<sup>19</sup> In both these films, the utter devastation of the city renders any attempt to pursue ordinary daily life extraordinary. Berliners who survived the war had simultaneously to cope with the psychological and the physical consequences of the war.

*Germany Year Zero*, directed in 1947 by neo-realist Italian filmmaker Roberto Rossellini, is the most haunting of these rubble films. Made by an Italian

production company, it was not subject to alteration by either American or Soviet authorities. The opening sequence features continuous footage of block after block of bombed-out buildings; “to find the streets again under the ruins, people had cleared the rubble into piles. Grass had begun to grow through the cracks in the asphalt. Silence reigned. Each noise intensified the silence,” wrote Rossellini.<sup>20</sup>

Rossellini’s film uses non-professional actors – people he met and auditioned while in Berlin – to portray the reality of the struggle for survival. Plot and characters were fixed, but the actors were encouraged to improvise; we are somewhere between documentary and fiction. The audience follows Edmund Kohler, a boy of twelve or thirteen, through the city as he tries to find food and fuel for his family to augment their meagre rations. He cannot get work, and finds himself instead involved with petty crime and selling goods on the black market. He meets one of his old schoolteachers who spouts recent ideological platitudes about the survival of the strong and the need for courage. His father, suffering from a heart condition, speaks endlessly of being a burden on the family and wishing he were dead. Edmund resolves to help him, and steals poison to administer in his tea. The family assume their father has died through malnutrition. Berlin’s ruins come to stand for the city’s fractured sense of morality and possibility, and Edmund’s own sense of guilt and hopelessness. He climbs a crumbling staircase that now leads to nowhere before plunging through the ruins to his death. The camera’s last shot shows him as simply part of the debris. Rossellini’s film, utterly without redemption, was too bleak to be popular, but the power of its unforgettable images has always been recognised.<sup>21</sup>

“Rubble films established a way of depicting life in post-war Berlin that was notable not only for its stark realism but also for the multiple blind spots masked by the heavy symbolism of the ‘ruin’. In other words, these films revealed as much as they concealed,” writes Mila Ganeva.<sup>22</sup> The rubble demonstrates the extent to which the city was destroyed, and at the same time hides the “normal” city, the city in which civic life could take place. The huge practical effort to clear the rubble, often depicted in these films, also seemed to obscure the enormity of

what had happened under Nazism. In one of the scenes in *Germany Year Zero*, Edmund goes to the ruins of the New Reich Chancellery, the Nazi government headquarters, on Voßstrasse, close to Potsdamerplatz (Figure 4). He has been lent a portable record player, and uses it to play a record of Hitler's rousing and triumphant speeches, which he then sells to two Allied soldiers. A father and a little boy who are wandering past stop for an instant, their attention caught by the sound of Hitler's voice. Then they quickly walk on.

In his memoirs, the architect of the Reich Chancellery, Albert Speer, describes its grandeur:

“By way of an outside staircase [a visitor] first entered a medium-sized reception room from which double doors almost seventeen feet high opened into a large hall clad with mosaic. He then ascended several steps, passed through a round room with [a] domed ceiling, and saw before him a gallery [150m] long. Hitler was particularly impressed by this gallery because it was twice as long as Hall of Mirrors at Versailles.”<sup>23</sup>

All of this has been reduced to ruins. Shortly after Rossellini's film was made, the Soviet occupying forces removed the remaining shell of the building in order to prevent the creation of a Nazi or Hitler site of memory – it was under the Reich Chancellery that Hitler committed suicide in his bunker. Since 1986, the site has been covered with an unremarkable apartment complex. No part of the Chancellery, which once covered an entire city block, has survived. Demolition was used as a way to try to enforce forgetting – a demolished building cannot impress people, nor can its presence allow us to recall times past. Yet as urban historian Christine Boyer puts it, “Collective memory is formed in such ruptures and breaks.”<sup>24</sup>

The effect of Rossellini's film, now that the Chancellery is gone, is to imprint the building on our minds as a shadowy symbol of that which is lost, shattered, rather than as a specific place. For playwright Harold Pinter, “memory is what you remember, imagine what you remember, convince yourself you remember or pretend to remember.”<sup>25</sup> Collective memory – the memory by which a society establishes its identity – is equally a construction, a selective process. It is a

question of what is collectively forgotten as much what is remembered. The rubble movies have made Berlin the archetypical ruined city in our minds, a place of extraordinary resilience, but also of a kind of oblivion.

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By the time of the construction of the Berlin Wall, in 1961, most of the rubble had been cleared. The Wall was built by the East German government in order to prevent migration to the West, and inevitably became the front line in the Cold War. West Berlin, which increasingly came to seem like a prison to its inhabitants, was for East Berliners a place of freedom. In films made in the West, many of them spy thrillers, the Wall is hugely prominent. Len Deighton's *Funeral in Berlin* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain*, both 1966, are just two examples of the way that Berlin as a whole becomes associated with intrigue and suspense; Margarethe von Trotta's *Promise* (1961) and Robert Siodmak's *Tunnel 28: Escape from East Berlin* (1962) both dramatize attempts at escape from East to West. However, in Heiner Carow's 1973 film *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*, made, like all East German films, under the auspices of DEFA, the Wall does not feature at all.

*The Legend of Paul and Paula* opens with the dramatic implosion of a typical nineteenth century "Berliner Block." Throughout the film, nineteenth century masonry apartment buildings are destroyed in order to clear the way for new, prismatic blocks made from tile-clad pre-cast concrete panels (Figure 5). Rubble is now equated with progress, as East Berlin demolishes its past to create a bright, Socialist future. The film's protagonists live on opposite sides of Singerstraße, not far from Alexanderplatz. Paul, a government employee, is housed in a shiny new block; Paula, single mother of two, struggles to get by in a crumbling old one, already condemned, where her neighbors are mostly elderly Berliners. Paul and Paula's torrid affair (Paul is married and also has a son) is both ecstatic and hopeless, glorious and destructive. The process of demolition is "when buildings fall, when monuments drop off into memory," writes architectural theorist Jeff Byles.<sup>26</sup> The state-sponsored manipulation of memory becomes in Carow's film much more nuanced, as Paul and Paula's legend veers off into a dream-like fantasy.<sup>27</sup> Socialist realism shifts to magic realism against

the rhythmic rumble of falling buildings and clouds of dust. Hugely popular in the East before it was banned (when both lead actors defected to the West in the early 1980s), then something of a cult movie after reunification, the film seems to suspend real time, lingering instead over transitory moments of uneasy promise.

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As the Wall became simply a fact of Berlin life, films made in West Berlin also became less obsessed with it as a physical impediment, and turned to focus on what it felt like to be confined in a tiny enclave of supposed freedom in the middle of Soviet-backed East Germany. Uli Edel's *Christian F – We Children of Bahnhof Zoo* (1978) charts the hopelessness and drug-driven corruption of a group of West Berlin teenagers; there was “no great idea to enthuse people, particularly the young,” write film theorists Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli.<sup>28</sup> Wim Wenders' *Der Himmel über Berlin* of 1987, given the English title *Wings of Desire*, is a much more gentle, languorous exploration of the aimless, introverted lives of West Berliners.

Instantly internationally famous, *Wings of Desire* portrays the fragmented city largely from the viewpoint of two angels. Few can see them (only children, who are open to their presence), but from ‘der Himmel’, the sky or the heavens, they are able to look down on the whole of Berlin, including the Wall and the no-man’s land that lies between its two skins. They can also descend to earth and mingle with people, listening to their thoughts. Their overview is temporal as well as spatial – the angels “were there before the city was there, when there were still glaciers. They saw the city being built, they saw Napoleon come through. They saw the city being destroyed. They saw it all go down the drain. They saw it at its most terrifying, as the capital of Fascism. They are the witnesses.”<sup>29</sup>

What the film shows, though, is not the deep past, but the contemporary city, cleared of war debris but dismembered instead by empty sites, which Wenders juxtaposes with footage of the rubble from 1945. Contemporary Berlin appears in slightly softened black and white through the eyes of the angels; the human

gaze is in color. The overlaying and blending of time, the blurring of reality and remembrance, is taken further when, within the film, another film is being made, a thriller set in the Nazi-era city. Remembering here goes hand in hand with fabricating and editing, a version of the need to forget.

The film hovers often over Potsdamerplatz. Heavily bombed during World War Two because of its central location close to the Reich Chancellery, with the advent of the Wall it became an awkward, peripheral wasteland (Figure 6). We know it now as Berlin's slick new business centre. Film scholar James Hay argues that "if cinema can only be understood through particular sites, then we also need to think about how a cinematic connection to certain places transforms those places, their relations, and social subjects' relation to them."<sup>30</sup> The new Potsdamerplatz tries to take us back to an updated version of Ruttman's *Berlin Symphony*. But after the films of Rossellini and Wenders, after the instability of *Paul und Paula* and the sleek artifice of *Olympia*, it is hard to see it without sensing its brittleness, pondering what constitutes the "real" story behind its smooth facades.

### Episode 3: Reunified Berlin

The Wall was dismantled only two years after *Wings of Desire* was released, removed piece by piece in a popular festival of reunification. Small pieces of Wall instantly became collectible fetish objects. Films like *Wings* and *Paul und Paula* came to seem like harbingers of the Wall's disappearance and the implosion of the GDR, the East German Republic. The process of reunifying East and West, however, was painful and disorienting – just as violently real and dreamily artificial-seeming as the construction, destruction and division that had come before.

*Goodbye Lenin* (2003), by West German director Wolfgang Becker, looks at the moment of reunification with a wry, tender humour. In the film's fantastical plot, Christiane, single mother of two teenagers and an ardent supporter of the East German regime, suffers a heart attack shortly before the fall of the Wall and remains in a coma. When she re-awakens six months later, her doctor advises



that any further shock might be fatal to her. Her children set out to make sure that she does not learn of East Germany's demise. The family live in a Soviet-style apartment building of prefabricated concrete on Berolinastraße, not far from the street where *Paul und Paula* is set (Figure 7). The teenagers reinstate the 1970s décor of their flat, re-acquire old East German furniture and go back to wearing drab clothes – like many East Berliners, they had given the apartment and themselves a complete make-over in a moment of heady euphoria when the Wall came down. They rifle through dustbins to find old East German packets and jars in which to repackage their new Western food. In one poignant scene, Christiane wanders out into the street to witness piles of abandoned East German goods, Westerners moving into her block, second hand BMWs for sale, advertisements for IKEA furniture, and a giant statue of Lenin being flown away by helicopter bit by bit. Her son, together with his new West German friends, makes a fake news broadcast in which the East German government generously welcomes political refugees from the West, in a gradual takeover of former West Germany.

The film's careful satire highlights the way in which reunification was not a coming-together of East and West, but the swift appropriation of East Germany by Western liberal capitalism. Jobs changed (Christiane's daughter now works for Burger King, her son for a West German TV company), décor changed, the city changed – all this almost overnight. "Construction site Berlin" was the city's nickname during the 1990s, as the Wall's former no-man's land and other empty lots were quickly filled in. Hubertus Siegert's documentary film of 2001, *Berlin Babylon*, interviews architects and politicians, local, national, and international, involved in the extraordinary construction process. The fictional *Run Lola Run* (1998), directed by Becker's colleague Tom Twyker,<sup>31</sup> shows the established urban fabric rapidly subsumed in a maze of cranes. Familiar places were rendered once again unfamiliar, as Berlin became "impersonal, interchangeable, dehumanizing."<sup>32</sup> The literal re-membling of the city involved yet another enforced forgetting. The revisionist version of events fabricated for Christiane by her children demonstrates just how much had to be cast off.

## Conclusion

Potsdamerplatz now is not the same square it was in 1905, 1935, 1965, or 1995. Its urban and architectural presence, its density and use, and its political role have been in constant transition. Despite this, we still on some level recognize its continuity, together with that of the city as a whole. It is not just that the place names stay the same, it is that an understanding of what the city *is* persists. The city endures as a meaningful entity, a character, an *ethos*.

In this study we have looked at how Berlin is constituted not just by its changing material reality, but also by its “after-image,” the way it is recorded and remembered. If memory is the mental faculty by which a subject retains, recalls and represents lived experience, it is also a way of making sense of that experience. Collective memory is then the communal representation or narrative of the past through which together we make sense of the present and conceptualize the future. In the 1920s, sociologist Maurice Halbwachs argued that it is only through participation in social groups that we are able as individuals to acquire and recall memories.<sup>33</sup> It is the joint, public construction of memory that places an individual within “a shared image of the past” which is “the reflection of the social identity of the group that framed it, view[ing] events from a single committed perspective.”<sup>34</sup>

In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, John Ruskin wrote that “we may live without [architecture], and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her.”<sup>35</sup> Architecture helps to store and to structure memories. “Memories often cleave to the physical settings of events,” writes urban historian Brian Ladd. “That is why buildings and places have so many stories to tell. They give form to a city’s history and identity.”<sup>36</sup> For Stephen Barber, this memory-forming process is reinforced through film, as from its outset “film developed into the foremost medium of visual memory, comprising the instrument by which its often-corrosive traces became engrained in urban space.”<sup>37</sup> Sociologist Barry Schwartz explicitly reminds us that memory is “an active, constructive process, not a simple matter of retrieving information,”<sup>38</sup> and in Berlin, a city which has been destroyed, divided, sewn back up, whose familiar places are constantly

being unbuilt and rebuilt, memory and identity are continually recomposed. It is as if the collective memory of the city has had to use techniques similar to those of film-making, framing and juxtaposing fragmented pieces of so-called reality, splicing them together to give the city an appearance of completeness. At the same time, the identity of a city that has been so wounded, so ruptured, “a city of bold gestures and startling incongruities, of ferment and destruction,”<sup>39</sup> is now predicated on its very incompleteness.

In Berlin, the idea of collective memory is a particularly potent one because of the rawness of its need to confront and to absorb the city’s fractures, to hold onto what was fleeting but critical to the city’s identity. Berlin’s filmic presence – bustling streets, bombed-out buildings, bullet-pocked walls – forms part of that collective memory. In other cinematic cities, the role of film in joining “the urban rhythm and the geographic narrative of cinema ... in a cumulative assemblage” seems perhaps less urgent, but it is no less present.<sup>40</sup> London is held together beneath a cloak of fog, along damp streets, with Big Ben marking time; New York’s jagged skyscrapers soar from busy sidewalks to blue skies. As architecture-film writer Francois Penz claims, “learning from the filmic spaces of the past may offer a more holistic approach to the understanding of cities in order to better anticipate the present, [and] ... also the future.”<sup>41</sup>

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Koeck, *Cine-Scapes: Cinematic Spaces in Architecture and Cities* (London: Routledge, 2013), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Shelley Hornstein. *Losing Site: Architecture, Memory and Place* (Serrey, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Barber, "The Skladanowsky Brothers: The Devil Knows," *Sense of Cinema* 56, October 2010,

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2010/feature-articles/the-skladanowsky-brothers-the-devil-knows> (accessed 8 June 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Colin McArthur in David Clarke, *The Cinematic City* (London: Routledge, 1997), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Todd Herzog in Susan Ingram, ed., *World Film Locations: Berlin* (Bristol, Chicago: Intellect Books, 2012), 116.

<sup>7</sup> Curt and Robert Siodmak's *People on Sunday* (1930) also visualises the daily life of Berlin as a growing industrial city, focusing primarily on leisure.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (London: Reaktion, 2006), 194.

<sup>9</sup> In 2002, Thomas Schadt made an updated *Berlin Symphony* depicting life in contemporary Berlin.

<sup>10</sup> The torch relay was devised originally for the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games; Riefenstahl restaged it for the film.

<sup>11</sup> See Leni Riefenstahl entry, *Fine Art Photography Series*, Visual Arts Cork,

<http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/photography/leni-riefenstahl.htm>, (accessed 12 July 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Leni Riefenstahl in Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," *New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975,

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1975/02/06/fascinating-fascism> (accessed 13 July 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Carson Philips in Ingram, *World Film Locations: Berlin*, 34.

<sup>14</sup> Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism."

<sup>15</sup> The film's title is more literally translated as *The Battle for Berlin*.

<sup>16</sup> This separation led to a kind of schizophrenia: East and West Berlin went about parallel lives, in full view of each other, but with little contact between them. The contact that was possible (separated families were able to meet occasionally) was complicated, long-winded, and painful.

<sup>17</sup> The UFA (founded 1917) film studios in Babelsberg, where *Metropolis* and *Triumph of the Will* were made, were taken over by DEFA in 1946.

<sup>18</sup> Elaine Lennon, "Billy Wilder's Berlin Women: A Foreign Affair (1948)", *Off Screen*, 19, no. 3, April 2015,

<http://offscreen.com/view/billy-wilders-a-foreign-affair> (accessed 20 November 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Wilder, who moved to the U.S. in 1933, learned in 1945 that his family had died some time earlier in Auschwitz.

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- <sup>20</sup> Rossellini was describing his first visit to the postwar city in March 1947, when much of the filming took place; he could almost have been describing his own opening sequence in this interview for *Cahiers du Cinéma* (1955). This translation is published in Brianne Schieber, "Film Review: Germany Year Zero," *Identity Theory*, February 2001, <http://www.identitytheory.com/germany-year> (accessed 20 November 2017).
- <sup>21</sup> *Germany Year Zero* won first prize at the Locarno International Film Festival in Switzerland in 1947, and Rossellini was named best director.
- <sup>22</sup> Mila Ganeva in Ingram, *World Film Locations: Berlin*, 49.
- <sup>23</sup> Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 103.
- <sup>24</sup> Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 1994), 200.
- <sup>25</sup> Harold Pinter in Thomas Adler, "Pinter's Night: A Stroll Down Memory Lane," *Modern Drama*, 17, no. 4 (1974): 462.
- <sup>26</sup> Jeff Byles, *Rubble: Unearthing the History of Demolition* (New York: Three River, 2006), 2.
- <sup>27</sup> Architecture and cinema work differently within the memory-making process. Since architecture is often an official practice performed by institutions and those in power, its relationship to memory-making frequently follows the intentions of the status quo. Instead, cinema, which often critiques the status quo, constructs an alternative process of memory-making by freezing momentary situations in time and space. Whilst the construction and demolition of buildings can be seen as direct manipulations of memory, film production manipulates memory in an indirect manner and occasionally reveals what the status quo wants society to forget.
- <sup>28</sup> Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli, *From Moscow to Madrid: Postmodern Cities, European Cinema* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 130.
- <sup>29</sup> Wim Wenders in Coco Fusco, "Angels, History and Poetic Fantasy: An Interview with Wim Wenders," *Cineaste*, 16, no. 4 (1988), 16.
- <sup>30</sup> James Hay in Clarke, *Cinematic City*, 222.
- <sup>31</sup> In the 1990s, Twyker and Becker were two of the co-founders of a film production company, X Films Creative Pool.
- <sup>32</sup> Clarke, *Cinematic City*, 165.
- <sup>33</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1925]), 84. Halbwach's title was *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (the social frameworks of memory).
- <sup>34</sup> Barbara Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), 52.
- <sup>35</sup> John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Dover, 1885), 169.
- <sup>36</sup> Ladd, *Ghosts of Berlin*, 1.
- <sup>37</sup> Stephen Barber, *Projected Cities: Cinema and Urban Space* (London: Reaktion, 2002), 8-9.
- <sup>38</sup> Barry Schwartz, "The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory," *Social Forces*, 61, no. 2 (1982): 374.
- <sup>39</sup> Ladd, *Ghosts of Berlin*, 3.
- <sup>40</sup> Alan Marcus and Dietrich Neumann, eds., *Visualizing the City* (Oxfordshire, New York: Routledge, 2007), 14.
- <sup>41</sup> Francois Penz and Andong Lu, eds., *Urban Cinematics: Understanding Urban Phenomena through the Moving Image* (Bristol, Chicago: Intellect, 2011), 8.