
15. According to Dietrich’s biographer Steven Bach, Hollaender wrote the songs not for the film but for his failed Hollywood cabaret, “Tingeltangel.” “They are dark, corrosive, mockingly romantic. Their voice is that of a survivor not sure survival is all it’s cracked up to be.” See Steven Bach, Marlene Dietrich: Life and Legend (New York: Morrow, 1992), p.332.

16. The careers of Jean Arthur (1900–1951) and Marlene Dietrich (1901–1992) offer some striking parallels. Both had their beginnings in the silent age, but did not find success until the sound era. Both actresses tried to hide their age, and both were often paired with younger men, as they were in A Foreign Affair.


Chapter Eight
Rubble Noir

Jennifer Fay

Spatial structures are the dreams of a society. Whenever the hieroglyph of any such spatial structure is decoded, the foundation of the social reality is revealed.

—Siegfried Kracauer

It is perhaps appropriate that the first German feature film made in the American zone of occupation, Zwischen Gestern und Morgen (1947), was a criminal thriller, a noir of sorts, shot in what remained of Munich’s Regina Palast Hotel. The plot, fragmented through a series of flashbacks, shuttles between the immediate postwar era and the Nazi period as various characters recount the events surrounding the tragic fate of one of the hotel’s late guests, the Jewish stage actress, Nelly Dreyfuss (Sybille Schmitz). In the 1930s, Nelly furtively breaks the Nuremberg laws when she checks into the Regina so that she may experience, one last time, the luxury of her cosmopolitan Weimar life. When the Nazi secret police (“disguised” in trench coats and fedoras) pursue her through the hotel’s dark corridors, Nelly takes her own life by throwing herself from the banister of the interior grand staircase. Now, in 1946, one of her acquaintances, Michael Rott (Viktor de Kowa), has returned to the Regina from his exile in Switzerland. He comes in search of another woman he loved only to find himself accused of having stolen Nelly’s jewels before he himself fled the Nazis. To clear his name, these jewels must be recovered from the rubble that is already in the process of being removed.

Director Harald Braun recalled that the idea for this film came to him when he first beheld the Regina in its half-intact state. In a building where
total destruction was only a wall away from the eerily preserved splendor of plush accommodations, action could be filmed, and shifts in temporality signaled, by simply moving the camera and crew from the structure that survived the war to the spaces that succumbed. Thus filmed images of the hotel signify both palimpsestically and spatially: for, in every scene that takes place in the prewar period, postwar rubble lies only a few meters away, and the rubble, suffused with the traces of the hotel’s luminous past, is in the shadow of the still-intact half structure. In tribute to his architectural muse, Braun initially called the film *Palast Hotel*. The title on which he finally settled, however, *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, is a rather awkward ode to not the hotel as the palace it once was, but to the oscillating temporality that encomasses its rise and ruin.4

As *Zwischen* circulated in Germany from 1947 through 1949, Hollywood noirs brought to the American zone captured a U.S. metropolis intact and untouched by war, but in the process of disappearing. As Edward Dimendberg writes of *Naked City* (1948), *Lost Weekend* (1945), and the film discussed below, *Call Northside 777* (1948)—all of which were shown in occupied Germany—film noir was drawn to “urban topoi on the verge of destruction.”5 These films’ investigation of ethnic neighborhoods and working-class slums brings to attention the hidden places that would soon fall prey to urban redevelopment. Other “educational” documentaries about the U.S. city shown in the occupied territory, such as *A Better Tomorrow* (1944) and *Zehn Minuten in Amerika* (*Ten Minutes in America*, 1949), showcase postwar urban planning that proposes to demolish ghettos, clear the debris, and create in city centers the built environments that would become the housing projects of the 1950s and 1960s. Hollywood noirs share with *Zwischen* a complicated relationship to the buildings that both hide and protect the ethnic variety and criminal history that made the prewar city so exciting and alluring, and perhaps worth forgetting.6

In the spirit of the epigraph above, this essay aims to decode the imagistic and spatial affinities between *Zwischen* and the American films brought to and shot in U.S.-occupied Germany including *Call Northside, Berlin Express* (1948), and *A Foreign Affair* (1948) for what they reveal about social reality of postwar urbanism. These films all have subplots in which a character searches for a person or thing in a metropolitan area that is so fragile, impermanent, and on the cusp of complete demolition that the evidence and history it contains threaten to vanish forever. Dimendberg argues that the “historical content” of film noir is the American city of the 1940s and 1950s, a space “increasingly bereft of its former glories, a site of social and technological alienation, the domain of the old ‘invisible city’ now increasingly overtaken by expanding rings of centerless suburbs.”7 Noir registers the experience of late modernity as the experience of dwelling in the ruins of man’s grandest ambitions. *Zwischen* is particularly interesting in this regard, and not only because it uses Regina’s ruin in temporally significant ways. Symptomatic of film’s architectural melancholia, the plot enact how we get from the urban grandeur of the Weimar period to the entangled present by destroying those spaces that remain. In the final shot from the last flashback sequence the camera lingers in the 1930s hotel lobby where Nelly’s husband (Willy Birgel), mourning her death and his own moral weakness against Nazism, passively sits in an armchair as the ceiling gives way to the Allied bombs from above. To represent the violence of the past, Braun had to reenact this cycle of destruction in the present. *Zwischen*, then, literalizes modernity’s ravaging force and questions its progress narrative in a way that American noirs could at best inadvertently signal. But Braun’s film also traces something more: as a noir made under the conditions of military defeat and foreign occupation it encrypts the provisionality and temporality of life in catastrophe’s wake. More than its American film counterparts, *Zwischen* participates in a materialist historical reckoning that is concerned with the erasure of history and the ends of a corrupt social order whose remnants are everywhere.

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*Zwischen* has been largely overlooked as an important and inventive film about postwar Germany in large measure because, at the time of its release, German critics lambasted Braun for trivializing Nazi treachery through the tired conventions of a thriller.8 These reviews, like Braun’s film, bear the signs and stress of occupation film culture. Writing for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Gunther Groß lamented:

> From the first postwar film in this zone we had hoped for not the familiar and well-tried, but for new directions. New insights, New people. At least (and with this alone we would be satisfied) we would like to detect a few new profiles, new ideas, a few points of departure [...]. It is great that the Nazi tendency has been replaced, but it is not all that useful when in other respects, stylistically and substantively, everything old remains.9

Berlin’s *Tägliche Rundschau* summarily dismissed the film, derisively retitling it, *Between the Day before Yesterday and Some Other Time*—a mock title that, not incidentally, bespeaks *Zwischen’s* unstable temporality.10 Most damning of all was the review in the Berlin *Tribune* that attacked Braun for promoting a counterfactual fantasy of Germany during the war. “It is difficult,” the writer concedes, “to see the world of yesterday through the eyes of today as it really was and not as we would like it to have been.”
But in the yesterday of this film there are so many anti-Nazis all living in this hotel, "that the average viewer, confirming his good opinion of himself, will abandon his high consciousness in the movie theater and think, 'we were all against it.'" Apostrophizing those self-satisfied spectators, the critic concludes the review with this incriminating corrective: "But you were not against it, Herr Professor, nor you Herr Actor, nor you Herr Businessman, and all you others."10

U.S. military censorship required that German films demonstrably reorient viewers away from Nazism by dramatizing the devastating toll of Hitler's reign on civil society and by emphasizing the average German's complicity with genocide.11 As one film officer explained: "The central problem in reorientation is to convince the individual German that he was responsible for National Socialism, not a helpless victim of it."12 On the other hand, no film would be approved for screening that the U.S. authorities perceived as glorifying the ideology of Fascism, Nazism, or racial distinction, idealizing "war or militarism," "politically subverting," or perverting German history" or that was "in any way derivative of the Allied peoples, their governments, their political or national leaders."13 Which is to say, German directors were expected to take up the problem of German history, Nazism, and the postwar conditions without presenting this history in a way that could be interpreted as sympathetic to German collaboration or equivocal about the complexities of Nazi citizenship. The American Film Control Branch vetted and often rejected scripts because filmmakers had failed to interpret these directives according to American wishes.14 At the same time, these occupation films were expected to be both commercially popular with audiences in Germany and to serve as hard-currency-generating exports abroad, even as Hollywood dominated the American zone and was aggressively reclaiming European markets.15 German critics took up the mantle of reeducation by pressuring directors to develop a new postwar aesthetic that was politically responsible, historically sensitive, and aesthetically inventive. Public opinion polls conducted by the U.S. Military Government in 1946, however, indicated that German filmmakers were eager to see entertainment films that could help them to forget the miseries of the past and of reconstruction. "In general," the survey concluded "purely escapist fare would on the whole be most welcome, provided it's the German type of glamour."16 Braun's colleague, director Helmut Käutner, expressed his disappointment with audiences who, he believed, were unwilling to watch anything but the most conventional dramas. In 1947, while film attendance in Germany reached record numbers, postwar German productions were barely breaking even.17 Käutner could only conclude: "The audience wants suspense and conflict instead of problems. They want external action instead of experience."18 Germans, he surmised, wanted to see images of the interwar period; they want to go back to the time before Hitler.

Caught between the rubble-fatigued public and the political mandate of historical accountability, Braun's film may have satisfied the vagaries of U.S. military censorship, but it disappointed its opposing German constituencies. I am not concerned here to redeem the plot of Zwischen Gestern und Morgen as a complex indictment of Nazi anti-Semitism. Rather, as an artifact of war and occupation, Zwischen commands our attention less for the particular story about the past that it tells, and more for the destructive and cyclical history of urban ruin and catastrophe it both realizes and forecasts.

* * *

Like so many rubble films, Zwischen's visual style is marked by the privations that follow in the wake of total war and unconditional surrender. Most interior scenes Braun shot at night because there was insufficient electricity during the day, and day scenes he illuminated primarily with natural light. Even as the film attempts to transport us from 1946 back to the more plentiful Nazi era, these flashback sequences have the poverty of the occupation: characters in this film conspicuously drink, occasionally smoke, but never eat, because in these postwar hunger years, food, like electricity, is in dangerously short supply.19 In some ways, Zwischen's credit sequence, shot against what we are to take as Regina's once-rotating door, recalls a similar shot from Murna's Der Letzte Mann (The Last Laugh, 1924). As a homage to UPA's past, this shot announces that the days of Weimar cinema—and the era of "German glamour"—are over. UPA's Berlin studio is now under Soviet jurisdiction, and the Munich studio, which in 1945 served as a temporary displaced person camp, is, in 1947, occupied with the dubbing of American and British films and the production of "reeducational" documentaries for Germany.20 Thus Braun not only shot, but lived with his actors on location in the bombed-out Munich hotel.21 In a strange reversal of architectural determinism, the occupation turns movie studios into temporary housing and half-destroyed hotels into temporary studies.

It is in comparison to other American films shot (but not shown) in the occupied territory, however, that Zwischen's impoverished style, political tone, and relationship to history become distinct signifiers of defeat. For example, Jacques Tourneur's Berlin Express is a noir thriller that shuffles its characters from Paris to Frankfurt to the American sector of Berlin on the U.S. military train Berlin Train, a locomotive the film describes as a "traveling grand hotel." As the train approaches the city, a voiceover
introduces viewers to Frankfurt as "a ghost town, a community of hollow shells chipped and battered by Allied bombings according to a methodical plan." As we watch the unpeopled ruins flit by through the window, our narrator explains that the "methodical plan" was to "cancel out the city as a tough enemy center and still retain some choice spots" for occupation authority. In the next scene, the camera is mounted on top of the bus the Express passengers take to the military base. As if narrating a travelogue, the voiceover directs our gaze to what the film refers to as the "modern touches" of Frankfurt's scrubbed architecture. The film jokingly coins the aesthetic of the ruins' "new lines" and "new shapes" as an example of "early twentieth century modern warfare." "So universal is the destruction" our narrator remarks "that it blends into one continuous pattern." The New York Times was especially impressed with the film's "realistic, awesome, and impressive vista" of the German city: "it is the panoramic and close view of life amid the 'new architecture' of Frankfurt and Berlin [...] which gives the adventure the authentic impact of a documentary."23

Or consider the opening sequence from Billy Wilder’s comedy noir A Foreign Affair, shot on location in 1947 but banned in Germany until 1977.24 Flying over postwar Berlin, U.S. representatives from Congress approvingly behold, and even film, the destructive power of American tax dollars, as their plane casts a shadow on the Allies-made destruction below. Wilder’s opening sequence pays ironic homage to Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph des Willens (Triumph of the Will, 1935) that similarly begins with Hitler’s extraterrestrial descent into Nuremberg. Hitler’s plane also casts a shadow, this time over the dazzling orchestration of parades below in which individuals are subsumed into geometric forms, their design so vast that it can only be captured from the air. In quoting Triumph, Wilder not only compares Nazi and American triumphalism, he invites us to consider how the abstracting logic of the former has given way to other worldly ruin of the latter. In Wilder’s film too, the politicians view the rubble at such a physical and emotional remove that they may entertain its formal imagistic properties. One of the group exclaims of Berlin: "Look at it! Like packrats been gnawin’ at a hunk of old moldy Roquefort cheese." These American films are shot through the mobile, congressional gaze that masters the cityscape as a panoramic and touristic view of a conquered territory, and they do so through the technology that just a few years earlier rendered it a target.

Zwischen, by contrast, is bound by a terreene, quite literally, pedestrian vision. In the first scene, Braun’s camera perambulates with Rott from the train station to the Regina hotel, as he slowly takes in Munich’s catastrophic scene and the seemingly random effects of air war where a destroyed apartment building is just a stone’s throw from an intact church. Daring across the frame are bedraggled survivors of this “cancelled out” city who push carts of rubble and salvageable goods down roads banked with debris. Once Rott finds the Regina, the camera, stationed just outside the hotel entrance, shows us a portion of what appears to be the Regina miraculously preserved. Coming in through the hotel atrium however, Rott once again finds himself outside. The hotel’s ceiling has collapsed, taking with it half of the stairwell. The lobby now opens up onto a field of exposed rubble where the café once thrived. Though Braun’s camera often gazes up at the ruins from below—that is, from Rott’s perspective—it never gains purchase on Munich’s ruin from above, except when Rott, opening the door to what once was his lover’s fifth-floor hotel room, shockingly discovers in its place a vertiginous vista of Munich’s disintegrated rooftops. Compared to the aerial optics of American and Nazi films, in this shot, the only one of its kind in the film, the camera constructs an acrobatic point of view that frames the rublescape as an eruptive site of intimate loss. We assume, as does Rott at this moment, that the lover he seeks has suffered the same fate as her room. Where Rott, above all, sees a woman’s absence, we register the enormity of war’s destructive power. But this is not the abstracting view of an erased city from afar; it is a vision and space that is particularized, personalized, and historically grounded. Seeing at eye level, Braun shows us Rott’s encounter with Regina’s disappeared spaces through the no less defamiliarizing proximity of what Kracauer aptly describes as “the abyss of nearness.”25

* * *

As an abyssal space, Regina’s foyer unannually exposes and fully materializes the void, the “vis-à-vis de rien” that Kracauer famously argued was architecturally aestheticized in Weimar’s grand hotel lobby.26 His critique of the hotel lobby as a space of idle distraction merits brief elaboration insofar as it reaches its apotheosis in Braun’s film. Kracauer likened the hotel lobby of the 1920s to an “inverted church,” because both spaces, through different means and toward different ends, deindividualize those who visit. Equality in the congregation, Kracauer explains, is achieved through each member’s relationship to God; their differences are erased in spiritual transcendence, or, what Kracauer calls “the question of the provisional.” But the hotel lobby is a space of “relaxation and indifference.” It convenes guests who share no higher purpose, who come to meet no one, and who achieve an equality not in relationship to God, but to “the nothing” of fragmented modernity.27 The hotel lobby “signifies only its own eminence.”28 The cold rationalism of secular reason that, as Kracauer sees it, levels all things to abstract concepts, all individuals to anonymous
members of society, and that posits historical events as "progress in
one-dimensional time," is the same abstracting logic that governs the
estrangement of the hotel's disintegrated sociality. For this reason, the
hotel lobby is the exemplary setting for the detective novel, a fiction that
assembles the elements of fragmented culture into an aesthetic totality
rendering the state of affairs legible.

Just as the detective discovers the secret that people have concealed, the
detective novel discloses in the aesthetic medium the secret of a society
bereft of reality, as well as the secret of its insubstantial marionettes. The
composition of the detective novel transforms an ungraspable life into a
translatable analogue of actual reality.9

If the lobby of the 1920s hides the reality of an unreal world, Braun's lobby,
with its gaping holes and scrubbed architecture reveals ungraspable life of
a new order. Regina's lobby lays bare the deaestheticized and disenchanting
catastrophe that was always enshrined in the 1920s space. The hotel's
secular guests are now all too aware of their provisional life and the cyclical,
multidimensional nature of history. Here in the Regina, the abstracting
and violent logic of Ratio has been actualized not in the restitution of
genuine reason, but in warfare, strategic bombing, and mass annihilation.

Against this postwar backdrop, the drama of detection—the search for
a necklace—may be a trivialization of the past. But the incommensurability
between story and setting speaks to the challenge of any diegesis set in the
rubble to contain or explain the surfeit of catastrophic detail. Put differently,
because he uses the conventions of the thriller, Braun unmask's what
Kracauer called the "disguised quality of lived existence" in the world of
yesterday's hotel lobbies and detective novels, and Braun does so through a
medium that, by its very nature, elucidates rather than effaces this
incommensurability. Where the hotel of the 1920s "conceals from its
guests the real event which could put an end to the false aesthetic situation
shrouding that nothing," there is no concealing the real events of Regina's
past and current state that far exceed the plot circumscribing Rott's
departure and return.91 And the hermeticism of the detective story in
which all clues and details are subsumed into a tidy cause and effect chain
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Zwischen registers the shock of destruction from the perspective of one
who returns to find neither home nor homeland, but their traces. For
German audiences who walked through the rubble to see a film shot in the
rubble, the representation of Germany's destruction hardly registered. To
rephrase an observation from the critic above: it is difficult to see the world
of today through the eyes of today as it really is. But the fate of German
cities did stand out once images of postwar America were projected on
German screens. In 1947, the same year of Zwischen's release, The Best Years
of Our Lives (1946), itself a homecoming film, premiered in German
theaters. One sequence in particular announces that the differing toll of
war on these two countries could not have been more pronounced. Three
returning veterans hitch a ride to Boon City in a B-17, the "Flying Fortress"
made famous for its bombing missions over Germany. Sitting in the nose
of the low-flying plane at the bombardier's station, the three marvel at the
familiar, unaffected topography below. "The old hometown hasn't changed
very much, has it?" remarks Sgt. Derry (Dana Andrews) with just a touch of
disappointment. "There's the golf course. People playing golf like just as
if nothing had ever happened."92 In contrast to Munich's uncanny ruins that
externalize the horrors of war, the life-as-usual American city refuses the
eventfulness of the last six years—that is, until the plane turns toward
the new airport and we survey the sublime scene of the B-17 graveyard,
this plane's final destination. From this aerial perspective the bombers,
grounded in formation, are patterned like the lachuster suburban develop-
ment that would soon be forming on the outskirts of this city. At the end of
the film, Derry finally secures work constructing prefabricated houses
from the metal of these very planes. Where Germans live in the wake of
the Allied bombers, Boon City's veterans will take up residency in their
discarded hulls. The "tomorrow" of Best Years' soon-to-be-built suburb is
thus already marked as refuse by the building materials that, like these
characters, have given their best years to the war. The synthetic track hous-
ing intimates that despite America's being spared the bombs, here, as in
Europe, in Theodor Adorno's words, "the house is past."93 Writing from
his American exile, and having taken up intellectual residence in what
Georg Lukács called the "Grand Hotel Abyss," Adorno observed that "the
bombing of European cities, as well as the labor and concentration camps,
merely proceed as executors, with what the imminent development of
technology has long decided was to be the fate of houses. They are now
good only to be thrown away like old food cans."94

As a counterpoint to Best Years' bleak prognosis for Boon City residents,
the first episode of Zehn Minuten in Amerika (Ten Minutes in America), a
ten-part series on American life and culture produced for German audiences
in 1949 by the U.S. High Commissioner for Germany, provided evidence of
America's cold-war optimism.95 The first segment "A City District Gets
a New Look" takes us down into the streets of New York, to Harlem's
dilapidated prewar tenement flats. We are told that these buildings, left
behind by the city's urban development, will be razed and replaced by new, modern apartments. This is no sooner declared, then we see a demolition ball lay waste to a brick exterior. In a wider shot, skeletons of new construction loom over the rubble of old Harlem, and suddenly postwar New York looks much like postwar Munich. It is only as these structures take shape as modern apartment buildings, however, that the narrator invites the comparison to Germany, which, he understates, is also seeing improved construction of this proportion. In just a few minutes, much of the complex is complete. A tracking shot shows us treeless block after block of uniform, functional, high-rise apartment buildings, and it becomes clear that modern seriality has replaced the eccentric shabbiness of Harlem's nineteenth-century dwellings. A montage sequence introduces us to the new building's residents by showing them first in their work place and then at home. The African-American machinist, the white female copist, the Buick engineer, the automotive mechanic all live in uncluttered, white-walled, standardized quarters akin to their standardizing jobs, an arrangement that evinces urban democracy through a mass architectural technology of deindividuation. While this film was made chiefly to debunk Soviet anti-American propaganda in Germany, particularly Soviet critiques of America's treatment of its underprivileged and minority citizens, this segment suggests that Krakauer's hotel lobby for the rich has found an abyssal rejoinder in the apartment complexes for the poor. Coincident with this documentary's German exhibition, Hollywood noirs played in Germany that were shot on location in America's vanishing neighborhoods, films that show us the secret life of America's unreconstructed underclass.

* * *

Call Northside 777 was shot on location in Chicago's decrepit South Wabash and South State slums, as well as inside the Criminal Courts Building and the state penitentiary in Joliet, Illinois. Like Zwischen, Call Northside, unearths the crimes of the 1930s by seeking out their traces in the 1940s. Unlike Zwischen, however, Northside abides by a progress narrative by which cities are always born again and improved through destruction. This story, based on true events, begins with a recreated panorama of Chicago in 1871 engulfed by the flames of the Great Fire, an image evoking Munich, Dresden, and Berlin in the wake of fire bombing. As the image track dissolves into a bird's eye view of the 1930s skyline, a voiceover introduces the geographic and historical contours of this "new Chicago" that rose "out of the ashes of that catastrophe." This city "of brick and brawn, concrete and guns" has its own "short history of violence beating in its pulse." That short epoch is not the fire, but the prohibition era, inaugurated in 1932 with a record 365 murders. Newsreel and stock footage of liquor raids, bootlegging, and scenes of Chicago's legendary windy streets establish the milieu of the film's crime scene: Wanda Skurnik's speakeasy on South Ashland Avenue, a tiny storefront in the heart of Chicago's Polish district. Here in 1932 a police officer was brutally murdered, and due to the corruption of those days, Frank Wieck (Richard Conte) was wrongfully found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. Now in 1943, newspaper man P. J. McNeal (Jimmy Stewart) investigates the case by digging up new evidence that exonerates Wieck and sets him free from his eleven-year stay at the penitentiary. In search of clues, McNeal takes to the bars and back alleys that abut Chicago's stockyard and slaughter houses. His investigation leads him to Wanda and reveals a real Chicago district rundown by years of depression and a belt-tightening war economy, a district that even in the 1940s, is destined to get a "new look."

To impress upon Germans the film's democratic lesson, the U.S. Military Government arranged a special screening of Northside for members of the Bavarian press and film circles in 1948. From this film they would learn that despite the gross miscarriage of justice in Chicago history, thanks to investigative journalism, the state reverses the judgment against Wieck and sets the record straight. "It's a big thing," McNeal explains to Wieck in the film's final scene, "when a sovereign state admits an error. Remember this: there aren't many governments in the world that would do it." But what impressed the German film reviewers was not the story of juridical process and justice so much as the film's real, gritty location: "The director captures genuine life in the streets of Chicago made possible through the camera's mobility which is missing in most films of this kind. It presents truth and passion without falling into the incredible." The Rheinische Post announced that the film's "perfect Realism," "prosaic and everyday," heralds a new Neue Sachlichkeit. Indeed, when McNeal visits Wanda at night, we see the details of her ramshackle, dimly lit tenement apartment, filthy from the soot of passing trains and crumbling from decades of neglect, a mise-en-scène that resembles those Weimar studio films associated with the Neue Sachlichkeit such as G. W. Pabst's Die Liebe der Jenny Ney (The Loves of Jenny Ney, 1928) or Karl Grune's Die Straße (The Street, 1923). Various translated as the "New Objectivity" or "New Sobriety," the Neue Sachlichkeit was coined by Gustav Hartlaub to describe the vision of 1920s German artists who "in the midst of the catastrophe have begun to ponder what is most immediate, certain, and durable: truth and craft." In the context of postwar America, the Weimar use of Sachlichkeit collided with another translation, "functionality," that described the fate of these neighborhoods. Chicago's postwar urban designs proposed not to restore the rough world in which Wanda Skurnik lived—to lay it bare for the truths about poverty and immigrant life it contains—but to replace it with buildings that realize the Chicago School
of skyscraper modernism, an architectural movement that developed in the wake of the Great Fire. That is, planners looked back to the architectural promises of the nineteenth century in order to envision a more utopic future free of the ghettos and debris amassed in the failure of Chicago's first attempt at systematic urban planning. The 1950s witnessed the mass demolition of Chicago's prewar buildings (most of which housed the poor immigrants and working-class African Americans) that would be replaced by structures and people city planners believed to be more true to the vision of the "Chicago School." In this respect, the opening scene of the Great Fire, an event that matters not so much in the film's plot, gestures to the cyclical ruin of the twentieth-century city and the displacement of its poor and disenfranchised in the name of progress. This is a cycle of total destruction the film knows but does not quite speak of or worry about.

The only sign of Chicago's new architecture in Call Northside, significantly, is neither the public housing of Zehn Minuten, nor the Mies van der Rohe structures of the new city, but rather the modern State Penitentiary in Joliet. We first see the building from a faux aerial perspective of its model on display in the visitor's lobby, a lobby that looks more like the entrance to a fashionable apartment building than prison. Indeed, with its clean lines, white smooth surfaces, bright illumination, and well-ordered visual and sonic environment, the prison is, ironically, a vast improvement over the stockyard ghetto, and resembles an upscale version of the public housing in New York. In fact, the prison incarcerates innocent ethnics and a few miscreants who, in this film, once called the stockyard ghetto "home." But once we visit the prisoners, we see the panoptic tower that presides over the five-story block of cells. In the buildings of this future there are no mysteries to solve, or people to seek, because there is nowhere to hide.

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Dinendberg writes that film noir is saturated with a "nostalgia and longing for older urban forms combined with a fear of new alienating urban realities" such as the "loss of public space" and "the homogenization of everyday life." The heroes of noir "appear cursed by an inability to dwell comfortably anywhere." Where American noirs nostalgically juxtapose decrepit old buildings against the new alienating structures, rubble films are paradoxically suspended between the past that is no longer and a future that has yet to be built. The hero of Braunt's film, returning to what was already a temporary residence, can find no comfort in memories of 1930s. And Nelly Dreyfuss pays for her urban, Weimar longings with her life. To put it simply, there is no past to which these character may comfortably or safely return. By inviting us to tarry for a while in the ruins, Zwischen suggests, moreover, that uncomfortable dwelling has become not just a postwar truth of life in debris or the experience of a few individuals resistant to modern development; such dwelling is an ethical imperative in war's aftermath. Adorno cryptically mused from his exile: "It is part of morality not to be at home in one's home." As Nico Israel argues, Adorno's aphorism attacks "the prefabricated, ready-made thought that could produce the concentration and death camps along with the single-family suburban house with garden." But City's soon-to-be-built tract housing and the new prison in Northside are not the opposite of the slums they replace, nor are they the antithesis of the concentration camp. They are merely new iterations of the same architectural logic.

Above all, then, rubble films, and Zwischen in particular, offer a critique of the change-as-progress narrative that American features discussed here ambivalently uphold. In Berlin Express and (perhaps ironically) in A Foreign Affair, Germany's ruin is evidence of American military and moral superiority; Northside's prison is a clean, new building of postwar order where justice prevails; even New Year's Boon City behold from the bomber is a testament to American endurance. Whatever war's cost, these films tell us that this country is worth it. Filming in the aftermath of war and genocide, rubble films offer a more profound confrontation with history and disaster. In her analysis of Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, Susan Buck-Morss writes that the "debris of industrial culture teaches us not the necessity of submitting to historical catastrophe, but the fragility of the social order that tells us this catastrophe is necessary. The crumbling of the monuments that were built to signify the immortality of civilization becomes proof, rather, of its transience." Rubble noir is a requiem for a social order and cataclysmic modernity to which postwar American noir nostalgically clings. Against the optimism of U.S. Cold War renewal that demolishes the ghettos along with the visible signs of democratic neglect (only to reproduce these ghettos and neglect in the coming decades), rubble films, in confronting us with the overwhelming details of destruction, remind us that while we must remove the debris in order to live, we clear our consciences of its dismal history at the peril of abetting that history's return.

Notes


3. Ibid.
5. In a recently published essay, Tim Bergfelder argues that there is little continuity between American and postwar German noir, in part, because the key milieu of noir—the city—is simply absent in postwar Germany, obliterated by strategic bombing. The “literal or metaphorical absence of the city in postwar German cinema” is, in turn, the “foundation on which other cinematic absences” such as the missing femme fatale also rest. My essay argues that the city and its destruction are precisely what connect the rubble films to American noir (quite apart from the question of influence). Both “genres” were, in U.S. controlled Germany at least, anchored in the culture of occupation, reeducation, and the “dialogue” between American and German films. “German Cinema and Film Noir,” in *European Film Noir*, ed. Andrew Spicer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp.141–142.

6. Ibid., p.18.


14. That German films should emphasize the average German’s participation in Nazism is explicit in U.S. military government rejection of the proposed script *The Other Side*. “Response to The Other Side,” From Film, Theater, and Music Branch to Eric Pommer, March 3, 1946. OMGUS, folder 14, box 16–3, shipment 10, RG Z45F, BA.

15. Mandate that German films be both pedagogical and commercial is made explicit in the “Press Release no. 74” Information Control Division, August 6, 1947. OMGUS, folder 14, box 16–3, shipment 10, RG Z45F, BA.

16. “Film Situation in all zones of Germany,” Motion Picture Branch Report, May 5, 1946, OMGUS, folder 1, box 11–3, shipment 10, RG Z45F, BA.

17. In 1946 film attendance in western zones of Germany was at 300 million. It rose to 459.6 million in 1947. In 1948, however, the currency reform, attendance dipped to 443 million. Berthold Drehmer, *Filmförderung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1976), p.66.


20. Memorandum “Report on the German Motion Picture Industry in the U.S. zone,” from the Film, Theater, and Music Division, Information Control, May 22, 1947, OMGUS, folder 12, box 17–2, shipment 10, RG Z45F, BA.

21. “Es rührte sich in Geiselgasteig,” *Stettinische Zeitung* December 13, 1947, ZGM, SDK.


27. Ibid., p.184.
26. Ibid., p.179.
28. Ibid., p.177.
29. Ibid., p.175.
30. Ibid., p.184.

31. Though *Best Years* earned rave reviews from German critics, several commented on the stark contrast between the U.S. and German city. One wrote that *Best Years* reveals “another, a foreign world.” “For those living in devastated Europe... the way back [home] has been reduced so that there is no ‘back’ to which one might return.” “Wenn Männer heimkehren,” *Berlinische Zeitung* July 18, 1947: Another critic likewise praised *Best Years* as a great film accomplishment but noted: “we have yet to return home because we no longer have a home.” “Die bittere Jahre unseres Lebens.” *Berlin am Mittag* July 22, 1947. Both from *Best Years* press clippings and SDK.


33. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971, 1983), p.22. The hotel abyss is the wonderful architectural metaphor Lukács uses to describe the community of German intellectual exiles in the United States who live in a “beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, or nothingness, of absurdity.” This phrase has also come to characterize the spirit of Frankfurt School

34. The Zeit im Film series was created by the Motion Picture Branch division of the Office of Military Government in Germany. Henry P. Pilgert describes the series as "reveal[ing] the accomplishments of democratic governments and their peoples." Zehn Minuten in America was the American portion of this series, though no release date is listed, these films likely began in 1949. Press, Radio and Film in West Germany, 1945–1953 (n.p.: Historical Division of the Office of the Executive Secretary, Office of the U.S. High Commissioner for Germany, 1953), p.99. Only the first two episodes of this series are currently available at the National Archives, Motion Pictures, Sound and Video Unit, College Park, Maryland.

35. These, in fact, are the public housing projects built in Harlem with Title One funds under the 1949 Federal Housing Act. "City Plans Scored of Slum Projects," New York Times July 15, 1949, p.33.


39. Ibid.

40. "Neue Sachlichkeit im Film," Rheinische Post (Duisburg) December 10, 1950, Kensaor777 press clippings, DF.


43. For example, in Chicago's South Side, more than 800 prewar buildings were destroyed to make room for new buildings built in the spirit of the older Chicago School. Ibid., p.214.

44. Dimendberg, Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity, p.7.

45. Adorno, Minima Moralia, p.39.

46. Israel, Outlandish, p.83.


CHAPTER NINE
WHEN LIEBE WAS JUST A FIVE-LETTER WORD: WOLFGANG LIEBENBINDER'S LOVE 47

Robert G. Moeller

A man comes to Germany.

And there he sees a quite fantastic film [...] And when at the end he's standing in the street again [...] he realises that it was really a perfectly ordinary everyday film [...] About a man who comes to Germany, one of the many, one of the many who come home—and then don't come home, because there's no home there for them any more. And their home is outside the door.¹

So begins Wolfgang Borchert's Draussen vor der Tür (The Man Outside), a "play," the subtitle tells us, "no theatre will produce and no public will want to see." Borchert completed The Man Outside only a little over a year after the end of World War II. Produced as a radio play in early 1947, a stage production followed, but Borchert never saw it. He died, a victim of diseases contracted during the war. The play was a hit. Its protagonist is Beckmann, a Wehrmacht soldier whose homecoming is delayed because of an involuntary stay of "three years in Siberia" in a Soviet prison of war camp. He is tortured by the knowledge that by following his orders, eleven men detailed on a reconnaissance mission went to their deaths. But he has also suffered. He explains: "We are murdered each day, and each day we commit murder!" He plunges into the Elbe, but the river "spits[es] on [his] suicide," forcing him to seek another way out.

Condemned to "limp through life" because the Russians "stole" his kneecap, he faces other tragedies. He wears prescription glasses, fitted for his gas mask. They are precariously held onto his head by gray bands that