

Rubble, Ruins and Romanticism: Visual Style, Narration and Identity in German Post-War Cinema

by Martina Moeller

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In *Rubble, Ruins and Romanticism: Visual Style, Narration and Identity in German Post-War Cinema* Martina Moeller offers a whole new perspective on the subject of German rubble films: Through an in-depth analysis of a selection of rubble films she investigates how visual style and questions of identity construction in the genre are aesthetically and narratively informed by powerful Romantic discourses.

Earlier studies (e.g. Shandley 2001, Pleyer 1965) usually define the period of rubble films as the years between 1945 and 1949, more or less arbitrarily taking as their terminus ante quem the foundation of both the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR. Moeller's study, however, extends the widely accepted timeframe of rubble films to 1951 in order to include important later films, such as *Second Hand Destiny* (*Schicksal aus zweiter Hand*, 1949) by Wolfgang Staudte, *The Last Illusion* (*Der Ruf*, 1949) by Josef von Báky and Fritz Kortner, and *The Lost* (*Der Verlorene*, 1951) by Peter Lorre. These films were produced after the monetary reform of 1948, when material wealth began to return to German society. Moeller shows that this change of economic circumstances lessened the already fading interest of German audiences in rubble films. At the same time, late rubble film directors were discussing post-war West-German society in a more critical light. This extension of the timeframe is important to Moeller's argument, because in these late rubble films elements borrowed from Romantic discourses appear to be particularly significant in discussing German national identity.

The earlier rubble films she analyses are: *The Murderers Are Among Us* (*Die Mörder sind unter uns*, East Germany, 1946) by Wolfgang Staudte; *Film Without a Name* (*Film ohne Titel*, West Germany, 1947) by Rudolph Jugert; *The Blum Affair* (*Affaire Blum*,

East Germany, 1948) by Erich Engel. Moeller shows that in particular the genre's foundational film *The Murderers Are Among Us* has an outstanding position concerning the evocation of key Romantic elements: "The film presents a unique aesthetic: visual and narrative patterns of fragmentation, decline, and crisis invoke a Romantic discourse. These patterns went on to dominate many later rubble films. The film can therefore be defined as a trendsetter." (p. 119)

The particular Romantic motifs and themes she identifies are "doubles (*Doppelgänger*), doomed wanderers, demonic citizens, antiheroes, iconic representations of landscapes and ruins." (p. 15) In addition, she argues that these narrative elements

are combined with techniques that invoke other Romantic aspects such as uncanny and fatal atmospheres, irony (between the fictive narrator and the film text), images of ruins and landscapes (evoking the impression of fragmentation), and open-end narration. (p. Ibid.)

Moeller's selection of rubble films analysed in the book is based on these aspects. Her most important finding is that these Romantic elements, on both a visual and a narrative level, contribute to produce a point of view on controversial issues by accentuating problematic and usually oppressed or tabooed aspects of contextual reality.

The book's first chapter discusses methodological questions concerning the neoformalist approach to film analyses, which Moeller employs in investigating her selection of rubble films. In her second chapter she analyses how Romantic literature and art (in particular E.T.A. Hoffmann's story *The Sandman* and paintings by Caspar David Friedrich) developed visual and narrative elements that re-emerge in rubble films and fulfil similar functions in the production of meaning. The third and last chapter is dedicated to in-depth analyses of six selected films. In her studies, Moeller further develops the film historian Lotte H. Eisner's¹ approach to Weimar cinema. Eisner argued in 1952 that Weimar cinema largely depended on the narrative devices and motifs of Romanticism. More recently Thomas Elsaesser highlighted the importance of the Romantic impact on style, narrative, and motif in Weimar cinema in *Expressionist Film. New Perspectives* (2003), edited by Dietrich Scheunemann. Thus Moeller shows that the rubble films under discussion are strongly reminiscent of Weimar cinema and reflect the Romantic impact on the latter.

¹ Eisner's book was first published in France in 1952 with the title *L'écran démoniaque*. In 1969, the English language version was published under the title *The Haunted Screen*.

Another finding of Moeller's is that in the six selected films visual style accentuates problems of male identity as a symbol for the crisis in the post-war German society. Visual style therefore emerges as a central narrative device:

The visual form present in these films evokes the impression of fragmentation that sets the stage for the subversive potential of leading Romantic motifs, such as the double, the demonic citizen, and the doomed wanderer, all of which appear as central elements in said films. (p. 30)

By referring to both film reviews and more recent research, Moeller argues that most German audiences and critics did not appreciate the subversive potential of rubble film style (and narratives) and its allegoric images of defeat and crisis. "The traditional, negative view of post-war German cinema defines rubble films as simplistic film texts of low artistic quality that lack a serious impact towards the past and present times." (p. 14) Rubble films are considered to "reaffirm the spectator's image of him or herself as 'good Germans' during 'bad times.'" (Ibid.) Moeller shows that these prejudices are justified for "those rubble films that refer to the problems of the recent past and present period in a reconciliatory manner without any critical discussion about German national identity and society in the aftermath of war and Nazism." (Ibid.) According to Moeller, they were often produced in a "pseudo-neorealist" film style (such as *In Those Days*, *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*): She concludes that these films "largely depend on principles of classical cinema style, which show a strong resemblance to patterns of Hollywood cinema" (Ibid.) onto which isolated visual elements of neorealist style were superficially grafted. Moeller argues that the films in her selection, in opposition to these classical patterns, refer to contextual reality quite differently, in a way where style is not the product of a naïve outward realism but a transformative element of filmic discourse about moral and psychological experience: "Style depends here on a stylised realism that creates signification by transcending a representation of external reality. This transcendence works to embody the inner subjective world and feelings of the protagonists in these films." (p. 14)

Moeller is able to show that in each of the film samples a variety of the above-mentioned key aspects can be found that fulfil similar narrative and visual functions: Visual devices non-conforming to classical style and Romantic narrative motifs and icons work together to formulate ambiguous and potentially subversive viewpoints on the period of the late Weimar Republic, the up-and-coming National Socialist regime and the post-war period. Romantic elements thus foster a discussion about German

national identity, notably an identity that is male-gendered. Moeller's conclusion is that this effect of the Romantic discourse is not necessarily based on a complete break with the visual conventions of classical style: "A combination of classical and non-classical elements can also irritate the audience and thereby challenge the harmonising cinematographic structures of classical style." (p. 31)

Interesting points in Moeller's approach include her use of contemporary film reviews to support her interpretations and the inclusion in her analyses of an important late rubble film which has until now been largely neglected by research: *Second Hand Destiny* (*Schicksal aus zweiter Hand*, 1949) by Wolfgang Staudte.

On the whole, Moeller's book on Romantic discourse in rubble films is an interesting study that provides new insight on its subject, although at times her argumentation offers an idea or two too many and might have benefitted from a tighter structure. This quibble aside, *Rubble, Ruins and Romanticism* offers an original new perspective and closes a gap in research, seeing that the importance, function, and meaning of Romantic discourse in rubble films had never been discussed at large and that an in-depth analysis of visual style in these films had been sorely lacking.