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Layers of debris, layers of text:
Lars von Trier's early neo-rubble films

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This study interprets Lars von Trier's first four released films, i.e. his graduation film *Befrielsesbilleder* (*Images of a Relief*) and the better-known *Europa Trilogy*, as a narrative and aesthetic unity, bound together by an overarching concern with the German defeat and the immediate aftermath of World War II. Through an in-depth analysis of the trilogy's two final instalments, *Epidemic* and *Europa*, it explores recurring motifs and references associated with Germanic history and culture and, more to the point, with the War and post-war eras, as well as a number of aesthetic strategies that link the films to German rubble cinema. Finally, it is shown how the notion of palimpsest can be used as an adequate tool to describe Trier's poetic strategies and in what sense his early works can be described as 'neo-rubble films'.

1. Lars von Trier and the concept of 'neo-rubble film'

> *„Und den halbverkohlten Band vom ‚Buch der Lieder'*
>
> *fand ich in einer Ruine in Berlin."*
>
> From the end credits song of *The Element of Crime*

German rubble film, as a cinematic style or a genre, cannot be said to have had a lasting impact on film history. Though aesthetically advanced and, at least in some instances, politically astute, the films had limited success in their own time and country. The young directors of 1960s and 70s New German Cinema did not show much interest in the generation immediately preceding them, preferring instead to look for inspiration to Weimar cinema, golden age Hollywood, and the various contemporaneous New Waves. Both in German and international cinema since the 1950s, the immediate post-war period has been thematically neglected, overshadowed by other, more dramatically charged phases of 20th century German history such as the Third Reich and the reunification of the two Germanys. Nor has the specific visual style of rubble film attracted significant revivals. Still, every now and then an isolated example of what one

might call 'neo-rubble film' makes its appearance: films which thematically engage with the air raids against German cities, the German defeat, and the aftermath of the war and which do so by referencing, quoting or parodying elements of 1940s rubble film. Fassbinder's *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*, 1979), Thomas Brasch's *Engel aus Eisen* (*Angels of Iron*, 1981), Steven Soderbergh's *The Good German* (2006), and most recently Christian Petzold's *Phoenix* (2014) are cases in point, as are a number of German TV productions. Yet the most ambitious and aesthetically advanced of these curios is probably Lars von Trier's early *Europa Trilogy*, to which for thematic and stylistic reasons must be added his 1982 graduation film *Befrielsesbilleder* (*Images of a Relief*). The four films are best understood as a stylistically evolving continuum; both their formal specifics and their common thematic interest in exploring the imaginative possibilities of post-war Germany bind them together so firmly that it might actually be more apt to speak of Trier's 'German tetralogy'. This preoccupation with Germany becomes more and more explicit: Whereas the first three films refer to post-war Germany mainly on a plot level or (in the case of *Epidemic*) through the discussion of the German *Luftkrieg* trauma by one of the characters, the final *Europa* (1991) not only thematically evokes the historical setting of 1940s rubble films but explicitly borrows imagery and tropes from them.

I will begin this study by outlining the four films, with a more detailed analysis of the post-war and rubble film references in *Epidemic* and *Europa*. Recurring leitmotifs are shown to be heavily centred precisely on the German and post-war aspects of the films. Finally, I will analyse the aesthetics and poetics of the tetralogy as a whole by demonstrating how the notion of *palimpsest* as a textual strategy can contribute to our understanding of Trier's artistic project.[1]

2. Flesh and stone: *Epidemic* (1987)

The aftermath of the German defeat in World War II had already been the thematic horizon of Trier's graduation film and of his first feature. *Befrielsesbilleder* (1982) is a 57-minute cinepoem with heavy visual influences from Dreyer, Murnau, and Tarkovsky

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[1] This article is obviously indebted to previous scholarship, especially by Linda Badley (2011), Rosalind Galt (2006), and Jan Simons (2007). Björkman (2003) and Stevenson (2002) have been valuable sources of factual information. My ideas about *Trümmerfilm* have been shaped by many conversations with Martina Moeller, and by her recent book-length study of rubble film (2013).

that tells the story of a German soldier at the liberation of Denmark who is betrayed by his Danish mistress, led into the woods, and blinded in an almost ritualistic act of revenge. While the woman rests in her new American lover's arms, the blind and humiliated German slowly ascends above the Caspar David Friedrich-inspired scenery, apparently undergoing a sort of mystic transfiguration.

Compared to this essentially formalistic succession of tableaux, Trier's debut feature *The Element of Crime* (1984) is a narrative tour de force with a full-fledged, generic film noir plot. The film's fictional universe is a post-apocalyptic netherworld that appears half flooded most of the time, a dreamlike and surrealistic 'Germany' under the impact of some radical version of the Morgenthau plan. Fisher, a retired police detective now living in Cairo, undergoes hypnosis in order to relive his experiences investigating a murder series in this damp post-war world. Following his old mentor Osborne's 'method' of psychological immersion into the criminal mind, he accumulates more and more evidence that links first Osborne and then himself to the murder spree. His sanity deteriorates to the point where he snaps and kills a girl he is supposed to protect: The vicious hermeneutic circle of the 'method' has come full round. While the film's location is never explicitly identified as 'Germany', Teutonic references and allusions abound. Nevertheless, the concrete post-war reality of German rubble cinema only comes into thematic focus in the last two instalments of the trilogy, and it is on them that I will focus my analysis.

In a more radical way than its predecessor, *Epidemic* makes use of narrative framing devices: The construct employed here is the film-within-a-film trope, mainly in its 'film about (not) making a film' variant. The film's authors, Lars von Trier and Niels Vørsel, play versions of themselves as two bored, disorganized, and slightly cynical would-be screenwriters who, after losing the finished script of a film they had been working on for a year, proceed to write another one within less than a week, a kind of dystopic arthouse/SF/horror movie revolving around the outbreak of a plague-like epidemic in a modern society. As they conduct research for the new film (scenes of which are alternated with the 'real-world' plotline of the two writers), an ominous off-screen commentary suggests that an actual epidemic is about to break out, an event finally brought about by a female medium who is hypnotized and sent on a journey into the unclear plot structure of the project, resulting in everybody's death. In a way, *Epidemic* constitutes a narrative radicalisation of *The Element of Crime*: Both films are about

'fictions' (as Osborne calls his criminological method) that ultimately produce the realities they are merely supposed to evoke. In this respect, the two films are also somewhat megalomaniac fantasies celebrating the demiurgic power of fantasy itself.

Unlike the two earlier films, *Epidemic* is partly set in a recognizable, real-world 1980s Germany. But even apart from its setting, the film contains a great number of unequivocal allusions and references to German culture. Although this is by far the most 'Danish' instalment of the trilogy, Danish being the film's original language and the larger part of the action taking place in Copenhagen, there are dialogue elements in German, as had been the case in the earlier films: During a wine tasting at Lars's apartment, their Danish connoisseur friend suddenly, and apparently without reason, launches into a monologue in German about Moselle wines. Other German references abound: Some of the physicians in the film-within-the-film have German names, e.g. 'Rosenberg' (incidentally a frequent German-Jewish name as well as the name of National Socialism's chief ideologue, Alfred Rosenberg). Franz Kafka is explicitly mentioned at one point, but his presence is also felt on a more subliminal level through the highly Kafkaesque character of the helpless and doomed physician Dr Mesmer[2] who is roaming the countryside in the futile hope of saving lives. Finally, Richard Wagner is very present in the film (or rather 'both films'): Elements of the *Tannhäuser* overture are heard over several sequences of the fictitious film, a fact marked by Lars with the code word WAGTANN on the makeshift timeline he paints on the wall of his apartment; and in one of the real-world episodes, the only German character in the film mentions a Richard-Wagner-Straße.

This character, played by Udo Kier, again as a version of himself, is also the film's most direct link to Germany and, more specifically, World War II. In an episode that is at once central to the film and yet feels almost like a narrative digression[3], the two writers embark on a journey to Cologne where they visit their mutual friend. Udo welcomes them in his apartment and tells them about a war experience his mother told him about just before her recent death: The day he was born, an incendiary bomb hit the maternity ward, killing a great number of newborns, mothers and nurses. She managed to make it out of the burning building with her son and was trying to find a way out of the blaze

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[2]   The name itself is an allusion to the theorist of animal magnetism and founder of medical hypnosis, Franz Anton Mesmer.

when she arrived at a (still existing) pond. People had jumped into the water to protect themselves from the burning phosphorus. Some were screaming, others had already drowned or succumbed to their injuries. As she approached the edge of the lake, she suddenly saw a hand sticking out of the water, the flesh burnt and hanging off the bone in shreds, like the skin of a person died from the plague.

Clocking in at nearly five minutes, Kier's account of his mother's traumatic experience, placed at the exact centre of the film, is one of the longest continuous sequences. The sincerity of Kier's rendition and his unrestrained sobbing at the end create an authenticity at odds with the film's overall playful and ironic tone and which translates into an awkward silence shared by the two listening protagonists and the spectator. The unexpectedly intense scene creates the impression that a line between fiction and documentary has been crossed, that Kier's presence in the film is not so much that of an actor than a witness, a *Zeitzeuge*. This impression is never explicitly substantiated[4], but the suspicion that we have witnessed the authentic revelation of a war experience alters the status and stakes of the film. What Linda Badley (2011: 35) writes about the performance of the female medium at the end of the film is equally valid concerning Kier's account: "[Trier] had bracketed off a space within a film (one suffused in postmodern irony) for a 'sincere' performance and created a contradiction in terms, a space within which real emotion is reached and communicated by the performer, disarming the audience's knee-jerk irony." Yet, while Kier's revelation thus bears the aura of the (at least presumably) factual, Trier still subjects it to his great European myth-recycling operation: During Kier's account of the burning maternity ward, the camera pans up the wall to a Baroque painting depicting the Massacre of the Innocents. In Trier's cinematic garage sale of collective memory where meaning is only allowed to manifest itself in ephemeral scraps and fragmentary allusion, even the uniquely personal experience of war trauma can only be admitted as one more element in a pre-existing and all-encompassing inventory of stories that have invariably already sunk from the historical to the mythical level.

Factual and metaphorical elements are essentially interchangeable, one story can associatively stand in for another, which is precisely what happens in *Epidemic*: For it is

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[3] The episode in question is the third of the film's five 'chapters', each of which represents one day, and is simply entitled 'Tyskland' (Germany).

clear from various unambiguous hints that the fictitious illness of the film-within-the-film is a thinly veiled symbolic stand-in for the German *Luftkrieg* trauma. The skin of the dead hand burnt raw by the phosphorus dropped on the city, which so resembles the descriptions of the rotten flesh of medieval plague victims in the chronicles quoted at the beginning of the film, is but one indicator of this metaphorical substitution. The saltpetre-covered walls of the archives where Lars finds these old accounts of suffering constitute another analogy, their surface being covered with grotesque bubbles that resemble either plague-spots or blisters resulting from burns. This is a frequent trope in Trier's early films: the analogy between wall and skin, between damage to buildings and wounds, between the fragility of architecture and the vulnerability of man. There are still other hints: In the very last scene from the fictitious film, we meet a black priest, submerged up to the neck in a pond and surrounded by other figures in the same situation, who bemoans his fate and tells us about the big fire that has spread across the city as a result of the government's negligence (the latter now being exclusively staffed by physicians). It is no longer clear what poses the greater threat: the epidemic or the fire. They blend into each other until they seem like two manifestations of one and the same phenomenon. After all, both are referred to by the very same terms: They 'break out', 'spread', 'get out of control'. During their first script conference, Lars already tells Niels about this conjunction between fire and illness: "One detail I'd like to include is that after [Dr Mesmer] leaves the city, it should burn behind him. I really think it ought to. After he leaves the city, that's when the disease first starts to spread." Finally, the medium's vision during the final séance, where she sees infected and dying people erring desperately through the city's streets, is an unmistakeable reprise of Kier's earlier account of his mother's traumatic experience.

Through the paradigmatic substitution of 'flesh' for 'stone' and 'plague' for 'firebombing', Trier is thus able to confront and at the same time repel the unresolved trauma of the War: Through the words of his German 'informant' Kier he can integrate it into the film, and even manages to bring the trauma home to Denmark, yet once there, it can only be acted out in terms of a fiction, albeit (just as in *The Element of Crime*) a fiction running rampant and threatening to devour its own creators, infecting a reality from which it used to be successfully isolated.

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[4] Kier later confirmed the authenticity of his account in an interview for a Swiss newspaper, republished on Kier's website. Cf. Allenbach (2004).

3. Murder on the Occident Express: *Europa* (1991)

Like the central episode of *Epidemic*, its 1991 successor *Europa* explicitly takes place in Germany, a country with a recognizable geography at an identifiable moment of is history (autumn and winter of 1945). Yet, as in *The Element of Crime*, it is also a dreamland, a fictionalized and stylized location under the name of 'Germany', a state of mind as much as a place. Like *The Element of Crime*, the film has a taut storyline that makes ample use of plot clichés borrowed from several cinematic genres, particularly political thriller, film noir, and 1940s and 50s melodrama[5]. Filmed largely in black and white, with striking Technicolor-like touches in some scenes and frequent use of back projection and superimposition, the film is remarkable as a virtuosic pastiche and exercise in style.

Leo Kessler (who shares his first name with the protagonist of *Befrielsesbilleder*), a young American idealist of German origin, travels to Germany in late 1945, probably for the first time in his life, to help with the reconstruction effort, as he feels "it's time someone showed this country a little kindness". He takes on a job as a sleeping car attendant, grudgingly helped by his gruff and authoritarian uncle, the embodiment of a conscientious German public servant. On the train, he meets the enigmatic Katharina Hartmann, daughter of the railway company's founder and owner, and is soon drawn into the family's morbid circle. Max Hartmann, a high-profile Nazi collaborator, is urged by the American authorities to have his name cleared through the false testimony of a Jew[6], but he finally succumbs to the perceived absurdity of his situation and takes his own life. Meanwhile, Katharina turns out to be a member of the 'Werewolves' Nazi terror cell and Leo finds himself forced to take part in some of their violent sabotage operations. In a parody of a thriller showdown, Leo's train crashes from a bridge into the icy river below and the hapless protagonist drowns.

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[5] Classic texts of these genres are more or less explicitly referenced: *Berlin Express* (Jacques Tourneur, 1948), *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949), and *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) are among the most obvious examples.

[6] Interestingly, the film criticizes the American occupation forces and their 'hidden agenda' in almost the same terms as Steven Soderbergh's more recent neo-rubble film *The Good German* (2006). Trier himself has commented on the film's "almost anti-American attitude". Cf. Björkman (2003: 130). In his review of the film, Jonathan Rosenbaum (1992) picked up on this attitude, interpreting it as a thinly veiled critique of American domination of the European film market and seeing the whole film (a multinational European coproduction) as a symbolic comment on power relations between 'small' and 'big' countries (Denmark/Germany; Germany/USA).

Trains serve as the film's central and polysemous metaphor. The film opens with a two-minute shot of rail tracks as seen from a moving train, over the acousmatic voice of a hypnotist lulling the (as yet unseen) protagonist, as well as the spectator, into a state of hypnotic trance that will grant him access to 'Europa': The railway, hypnosis, and cinema are presented as similar if not interchangeable modes of transport, blending into one powerful psycho-spatial medium. They share the same incantatory power, potentially inducing drowsiness and at the same time awakening the subconscious to unknown experiences. At one point, old Kessler complains to his nephew about the horror of waking up and no longer knowing in which direction the train is going: "I don't know if we're going forwards or backwards. Or what I thought was forwards has suddenly become backwards." Leo tries to reassure him by explaining that the train has simply been turned around without the sleeper noticing it. But to uncle Kessler, as to the spectator, the imperceptible switching of directions in the dark of night has a more sinister meaning: It is a metaphor for Germany's forced and never consciously achieved *Stunde Null*. The train becomes a symbol for society itself, the old Germanic emblem of the *Staatsschiff* (ship of state) is reinterpreted as a 'state railway'. Earlier in the film, Trier employs yet another striking rail-related image to evoke Germany's post-apocalyptic society: One of the company's first-class sleeping cars has finally been restored and is about to be recommissioned. As the doors of the engine shed open, we see a horde of tired, slave-like human figures reminiscent of the proletarian masses in *Metropolis* (1927) as they pull out the coach on ropes, Lilliputians about to be crushed by the juggernaut they service: *Europa*'s Germany is a mixture of Prussian *Beamtenstaat* (state run by bureaucrats) and oriental despotism. In the attic of the Hartmann villa, there is a gigantic model railway, a comforting copy of old Germany where the trains never stopped: a gift from Max Hartmann to his son, who refused to play with the monstrous toy and thus symbolically rejected his familial heritage. Leo and Katharina will use the model as a symbolic marriage bed for their lovemaking, crushing trains and houses and thereby demonstrating the frailness of this well-ordered and harmless world.

Europa is the only instalment of the trilogy that precisely coincides with the period and settings of postwar rubble cinema. While the film uses a number of character types, themes, motifs and visual strategies of 1940s rubble film, these borrowings are so self-consciously on display that they can never blend into a simple and unproblematic

exercise in nostalgic imitation: The rubble film elements are recognizable as quotes, with the quotation marks standing out awkwardly, signifying displacement rather than integration. Some of the borrowed elements are certain more generalized visual techniques of aesthetically advanced rubble films (cf. Moeller 2013: 126ff.): stark black and white contrasts, exaggerated high and low angle shots, frequent use of dissolves, elliptic editing, and frequent use of window and mirror elements to structure and fragment filmic space. Yet there are other, more literal borrowings of imagery and entire scene configurations, referencing in particular Wolfgang Staudte's seminal *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers Are Among Us*, 1946).

There is especially one sequence that constitutes a clear dramaturgic and aesthetic transposition from Staudte's film to Trier's. In both films, a humble Christmas celebration in a private home is followed by midnight mass. This iconic scene in *Europa*, in a roofless cathedral with snow falling on the congregation, is a literal quote from Staudte's film. The next sequence, where Leo follows Katharina through the ruins of the dark city and which ends with them standing on a bridge where he promises to marry her, equally harks back to an earlier scene in *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, where a similar walk across the debris fields of Berlin leads up to the protagonist's declaration of love to his leading lady (Hildegard Knef). Both scenes constitute the respective film's romantic climax, and both play on the contrast between fragile romance and physical destruction. All along this climactic sequence, Trier references two classic films, as the visual quote from *Die Mörder sind unter uns* in the church scene is accompanied by a musical quote of Bernard Herrmann's *Vertigo* theme; the following scene on the bridge is constructed entirely as a parody of the famous Golden Gate Bridge sequence in *Vertigo*, transporting Hitchcock's melodramatic sensibility into Staudte's bleak rubble universe. Yet another icon which Trier imports literally from one of the opening scenes of Staudte's drama is the image of an overloaded train, with passengers clinging to the locomotive or huddled together on top of the carriages.

Europa's relation to 1940s formalist rubble cinema has to be assessed in the broader context of the film's pastiche. The Staudte quotes and the film's ruin setting are standing alongside other conspicuous references: to Weimar cinema, to film noir, to 1940s melodramas and 1950s war films. The wealth of obvious and sometimes crudely juxtaposed filmic references translates into a labyrinthine filmic experience matching that of the protagonist in a mysterious and inscrutable Europe, with its 'weight of

history' crushing him just as the weight of film history comes crashing down on Trier's audience. Indeed, the film ends with one comic and clumsy attempt by Leo to free himself of all this burdensome, history-laden Europeanness: In an awkward and droll parody of contemporary American action movies, he seizes a G.I.'s machine gun and proceeds to hold a whole train hostage, a bespectacled American terminator. Yet his sudden outburst is nothing but another filmic quote, the only reference to contemporary cinema and pop culture the film allows itself, and it will soon be crushed under the overwhelming weight of cinematic heritage and cultural history: Only a few moments later, Leo's train crashes into the river and the would-be hero dies an unheroic death, dragged down amidst floating seaweed and a flow of magical realist imagery. American pragmatism and common sense (but also American ambitions of physical domination) have been invalidated by the sheer force of undigested, impenetrable history, a Gordian Knot of genealogies, quotes, and references neither empathy nor reason nor physical violence can cut through.

4. *Leitmotifs* and palimpsest: the unity of Trier's early work

4.1 Spaces of the psyche: water and hypnosis

The brief analysis of Trier's early tetralogy has brought to light certain individual elements linking the films both to German post-war history and German culture in general and to German rubble cinema in particular. Some of these elements have already been shown to surface at various moments throughout his early work. In fact, there are a number of recurring motifs and strategies that bind the *Europa Trilogy* together (many of which can already be traced back to *Befrielsesbilleder*). It is particularly these transversal elements that define the early films' relation to history, provide them with inner unity as a coherent body of work, and represent the trilogy's poetic programme. I will identify some of these recurring components and finally outline some of the principal poetic strategies of Trier's neo-rubble cinema.

One of the most obvious thematic connections within the trilogy is the motif of water. Rain is heavily present in all three films, as it was already in the initial indoor sequence of *Befrielsesbilleder*. The final five minutes of *Europa* show the protagonist's death by drowning, his body finally washed out into the sea. In *Epidemic*, water is present at various moments, such as in Kier's account of his mother, after which he goes on to

show us the actual pond where the traumatic events took place; and also at various points in the fictitious film, where Dr Mesmer and the black priest are shown towing a raft up an irrigation channel, and where the final scene has the priest standing up to his neck in water with other plague/fire victims. Finally, in *The Element of Crime* the whole fictional universe of the film appears to be a swampland of floods and incessant rain. At various points, the camera moves through a submarine world of submerged bodies and objects, with a horse cadaver staring at us from the depths. It is the same eerie world of submerged relics that ten years later informs the title sequence and much of the 'gothic' parts of Trier's TV miniseries *Riget*. The reappearance is hardly coincidental: Both works share the same narrative premise, a world emerged from a deep crisis (post-war in *The Element of Crime*, post-enlightenment in *Riget*) where the atrocities of the past have been clumsily buried and are ready to resurface and haunt the living at any moment.

A tableau-like scene appears in similar configuration in both *The Element of Crime* and *Epidemic*: a well-dressed man (Fisher/the priest) lying on his back, floating in a canal while rain is pouring down on his face. In both scenes, the water appears simultaneously as dangerous (cold, deep, opaque) and as protective: It is the only place that offers the characters the possibility of temporary relaxation and respite from pain. Leo Kessler's floating body at the end of *Europa* belongs in the same category and completes the trilogy. Again, the ambiguous connotations of water are obvious: murderous element of death, but also redemptive source of final relief and eternal sleep. Interestingly, submerged or drifting human figures are also a prominent motif in *Medea*, Trier's 1988 telefilm produced between *Epidemic* and *Europa*. The film's foggy marshes are reminiscent of the dream landscapes in both *The Element of Crime* and *Epidemic* and anticipate the archaic world of the *Riget* title sequence, while all of them echo the watery wasteland of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). In all cases, the films' images repeatedly perforate the border between dry and wet, above and below, exposed and submerged.

Water thus serves in Trier's early work as a complex metaphor: On the one hand, it is a rather conventional and easily decipherable image for the unconscious, holding repressed objects 'under the surface' whence they might reappear without warning. On the other hand, it has ambiguous connotations as an either menacing (dragging down, drowning) or protective (cooling, relaxing, fire-stopping) element; both aspects are

repeatedly present in the trilogy and their uncanny synthesis is most explicitly realised in Kier's central account of the German *Luftkrieg* victims seeking refuge in the lake and subsequently drowning there.

The two functions of the water metaphor as a symbol for the unconscious and as a menacing/protective environment link it to the second transversal narrative element of the trilogy: hypnosis. It is explicitly presenting all three films, as a plot element and/or narratorial device. While in *The Element of Crime* it has a clearly therapeutic function in a psychoanalytic context of 'working through' the patient-protagonist's traumas, its connotation in *Epidemic* is closer to a séance. In both films, the hypnotist is present as a character: an obese and stoically benevolent guru-therapist and a borderline hysterical female medium. In *Europa*, however, both the protagonist and the spectator are subjected to the hypnotic conditioning of a disembodied voice. The hypnotist has finally made the transition from a physically present character to a perfect *acousmetre*, in terms of Michel Chion's theory of cinematic sound agents.[7] This anonymous voice is simultaneously seducer and threat, luring the spectator/protagonist into the film's maze and not permitting him to leave any more. In fact, all three films end with an identical narrative (non)resolution: the protagonists' inability to wake up and end their hypnotic journey. In two of the films (*Epidemic* and *Europa*), this incapacity results in death; in the case of *Europa*, it could even be argued that the disembodied hypnotist represents Death Himself, as the omniscient narrator of a story that in retrospect can be read as a near-death experience or a form of posthumous vision. In *The Element of Crime*, while the inability to wake up does not lead to the protagonist's physical death, it leaves him literally stuck in his own traumatic past; the film's final image has him peering down a hole in the ground, as if trying to find an emergency exit, a wormhole through which to escape the spatiotemporal impasse he is caught in; yet he only finds a shivering, frightened loris staring back at him through the dark, a small nocturnal animal belonging to the 'Lemuriformes' infraorder of primates (whose name derives from the Roman *lemures*, the shades of the restless dead) and known to move slowly, trance-like through the jungle night.

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[7]   Chion (1999: 21ff.) defines an *acousmetre* as an off-screen agent, a purely vocal entity with special power over the film's characters and audience. The *acousmetre* is characterized by the four powers of unlimited vision, omniscience, omnipotence, and ubiquity.

Hypnosis, then, is an ambiguous and dangerous cognitive technique in the trilogy. More than dreams it appears as Trier's 'royal road to the unconscious', opening up the way to repressed memories and fantasies, both on an individual and collective level. Gaining access to one's unconscious is a seductive prospect for the trilogy's protagonists, promising respite from traumatic pain and a potential for healing. Yet, as it turns out, diving into the ocean of the unconscious is not without risk; the visions waiting there have been repressed for a reason and they might just be too overwhelming for the swimmer. The artificial sleep of hypnosis might lead him not towards healing but towards an even deeper, deadly unconsciousness. Presented in the trilogy as a psychoanalytically charged method of (self-)exploration, hypnosis is successful only as a heuristic tool, not as a therapeutic method: It leads into the abysses of the traumatized psyche, but never back out.

The complex analogical construction equating 'water' with 'the unconscious' and 'hypnosis' with 'navigational tool' becomes apparent over the course of the three films, and it is never more evident than in the closing scene of *Europa*, as Leo Kessler's submerged and lifeless body slowly drifts across a moonlit ocean, accompanied by the hypnotist-narrator's final words: "You want to wake up. To free yourself of the image of Europa. But it is not possible."

If water as an image for the traumatic European experience of the 1940s is the most potent and ubiquitous motif binding together the three features, there are various other elements whose recurrence provides the trilogy with inner unity and thematic continuity. Many if not most of these recurring motifs link the films to the encompassing 'Germanic' and post-war thematic fields.

All of Trier's early films, from *Befrielsesbilleder* to *Europa*, use lists of German city names as a kind of litany, like a recitation of magical words; among them are the names of some of the cities most severely and notoriously damaged by bombing: Dresden, Halberstadt, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Essen, Cologne. Equally present in all four films is the figure of a Black American man: Recognizable as a G.I. in *Befrielsesbilleder* and *Europa*, he recurs first in the guise of a taxi driver and later as an evangelical preacher in *Epidemic*, and as the fleeting figure of an undefined official who mocks the returning emigrant Fisher at the police headquarters in *The Element of Crime*. Some leitmotifs are more sporadic: In *The Element of Crime*, the burnt wreck of a car turns up during the investigation; that same object passingly resurfaces in *Europa*. *Befrielsesbilleder*'s

catacomb-like cellar with its randomly placed antique sculptures has a second life as the hospital basement filled with classical statuary of *Epidemic*. The white scarf the Danish woman wraps around her head after blinding her German lover in *Befrielsesbilleder* resurfaces as the white, samurai-like headbands of the ritual suicides in *The Element of Crime*. An autopsy performed in *The Element of Crime* is echoed by one in *Epidemic* (and by similar scenes in the hospital series *Riget*). Hanged, hanging or dangling human bodies are present in *Befrielsesbilleder*, the trilogy, and *Medea*.

Several more of these leitmotifs could be cited; together they form a tissue of allusions, reminders, and self-quotations permeating the trilogy, while at its seams it links to other early works by Trier, from *Befrielsesbilleder* to *Medea* and *Riget*. It is not, therefore, a unified storyline that justifies Trier's calling his three early features a 'trilogy', but rather this continuous play with recurrent elements, with mirror effects and repetition, which all serve to link back the individual films to the overarching thematic concern with the trauma of World War II.

A poetic strategy becomes apparent through these fleeting cross-references: Trier's early body of work appears as a multi-layered whole, an evolving hypertext structured by acts of rewriting and overwriting – a *palimpsest*. In fact, the notion of palimpsest is in multiple ways adequate to an understanding of Trier's artistic project; it can be said to be the aesthetic and poetic mechanism at the heart of his early oeuvre.[8]

4.2 Palimpsest as intertextuality

On an intertextual level, palimpsestic strategies have already been shown to operate through reference, repetition, and variation, both between the instalments of the trilogy itself and between Trier's films and texts by other authors. Elements are reused, recontextualized, and varied, but instead of developing an earlier reflexion, their reappearance remains fragmentary. Each new film adds a new layer to the developing corpus, yet it merely allows the earlier strata to shine through, to sporadically and suddenly come to the surface as traces. Trier's constant rewriting and overwriting of recurring themes forms an ever-growing archival vault in which elements of European

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[8]   The notion of palimpsest in connection with Trier's films has been introduced by Galt (2006) in a chapter dedicated to an in-depth analysis of *Europa*, where it is used as a metaphor for the geopolitical and historical overlaying of maps and periods at play in the film, an idea taken up by Badley (2011: 46). In the following chapters, I expand that particular idea,

history and of popular culture, his own earlier work, but also the films, directors, and genres alluded to (German rubble cinema, 40s melodrama, Staudte, Tarkovsky etc.) darkly reverberate.

Yet there are other, more surprising instances of a palimpsestic poetics in the trilogy.

4.3 Bio-filmographical palimpsests

In his early trilogy, Trier makes use of a personal poetic strategy to be found elsewhere in his oeuvre, but he employs it nowhere more obviously and insistently than here: the casting of actors whose roles echo their own biographies and/or previous filmographies.

Biographical resonance is of course the very principle of *Epidemic*, with Trier and Vørsel essentially playing fictionalized and ironized versions of themselves and Kier appearing as a witness representing his own family's traumatic past.

For *Europa*'s Leo Kessler, the first-generation American coming back to Europe, Jean-Marc Barr arrived complete with his own complex backstory as the bilingual American son of a French mother, born in West Germany and returning to Europe where he had had his breakthrough playing freediver Jacques Mayol in Luc Besson's cult hit *Le Grand Bleu* (1988). The latter film's obsession with diving into oceanic depths ends with the hero drowning, a last suicidal immersion that can also be interpreted as a transfiguration: man metamorphosing into dolphin, the unconscious depths finally embracing and absorbing the human presence. One cannot help but feel the echo of that scene in Leo Kessler's death by drowning, itself a mystic transfiguration, a being swallowed up by that strange European history and civilization the surface of which the hapless hero had unsuccessfully tried to penetrate. Eddie Constantine, another Europeanized American expat, plays the forlorn figure of the good-natured Colonel Harris: Again, the actor's status as insider/outsider is reflected in the character.

Udo Kier reprises his role as a traumatized dandy from *Epidemic*, now playing the cynically clear-sighted homosexual son of Max Hartmann. His role is characterized by a threefold transparency: On the one hand, the melancholy aesthete Lawrence Hartmann mirrors Kier's own public persona as a sexually ambivalent modern dandy. But on another level, the character is also reminiscent of Martin von Essenbeck, the decadent

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showing how the notion of palimpsest applies in fact to all aesthetic, narrative, and semiotic levels of Trier's early work.

heir played by Helmut Berger in Luchino Visconti's *La caduta degli dei* (*The Damned*, 1969), an association helped by the fact that Kier bears a stunning physical likeness to Berger, to say nothing of the two actors' obvious biographical similarities. In fact, the whole Hartmann family appears as a thinly veiled reflexion of Visconti's doomed Essenbeck clan of industrialists and Nazi collaborators. Multiple levels of palimpsestic translucence are thus at play: The referential chain Lawrence Hartmann → Udo Kier → Helmut Berger → Martin von Essenbeck ultimately links the Hartmann family back to the incestuous and deviant universe of the Essenbecks, thus highlighting the unsavoury undertones already hinted at by Katharina. And on a more general level of artistic genealogy, Trier's trilogy suggests the ancestry of Visconti's own *German Trilogy*[9], thus measuring his project's scope and ambition against an older, yet surprisingly congenial cinematic endeavour.

Yet the most striking case of biographical palimpsest is Lars von Trier's own cameo as a Jew recently liberated from a concentration camp who is coerced by the Americans into assisting in the denazification process of Max Hartmann. It was during the early stages of development of *Europa* that Trier learnt that his Danish-Jewish father, an activist in the resistance movement during World War II, was in fact not his biological father. Much to his dismay, his biological father turned out to be a Danish civil servant of German ancestry named Hartmann[10]. Trier's appearance as the Jew (still wearing a concentration camp uniform) thus takes on a complex autobiographical signification. Trier, the 'false Jew', plays a Jew who is a false witness; and to seal his testimony, he gives an uneasy hug to the false German father figure, Hartmann. Biographical palimpsest becomes a therapeutic strategy whereby personal trauma is reflected and absorbed by the larger traumatic experience of History.

4.4 Palimpsest as an aesthetic principle

Throughout the trilogy Trier makes abundant use of visual tropes of superimposition, collage, and coexistence of images. Dissolves are the technique of choice for connecting one scene to another; many of them are extraordinarily drawn out. This omnipresence of

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[9]   *The Damned* (1969); *Death in Venice* (1971); *Ludwig* (1972).

[10] For a detailed account of the frequently quoted story of Trier's mother's 'deathbed revelation', cf. Stevenson (2002: 63ff.). Trier's presumed 'Jewishness' had already been reflected in some of his early short films, dating back to his film school days. Cf. Badley (2011: 16f.).

fading images is a mannerism Trier shares with Staudte who in *Die Mörder sind unter uns* equally resorted to conspicuously long dissolves. It can of course be argued that dissolves as scene connectors are a stylistic staple of film noir and of 1940s cinema in general. But in both Staudte's and Trier's case, their use goes beyond the mere technicality. Both directors like to linger on their scene transitions, letting images slowly fade and appear. And in both cases, this insistence works on a semiotic level: The past (image) refuses to go away, the present is impregnated and contaminated by it.

However, this palimpsestic coexistence of images concerns more than just transitional dissolves. About half an hour into *The Element of Crime*, Osborne tells Fisher about the fatal car accident of a suspect several years ago. The scene is visually constructed as a triple superimposition: Osborne's face in the dark is overlaid by the image of a windscreen with moving wipers; on a third level, we see another car, engulfed in flames. The 'foreground image' then changes to a view of Fisher, holding a photograph of Osborne standing in front of the car's charred carcass; yet superimposed, the car keeps on blazing in the background, and in the past.

In *Europa*, various techniques of front and back projection, superimposition and other modes of coexisting images are at play, resulting in up to seven layers of images present in a frame, often shot with different cameras and following different aesthetic principles. Grainy colour images share a frame with noirish, saturated black and white. Various filmic modes, but also various time levels coexist within the vertical construction of images: The palimpsestic principle is physically present in the visual construction of the trilogy's filmic space.

4.5 Palimpsest as narrative structure

Overwriting and translucence are principles to be found also on the level of narrative construction of the three films.

The plot of *The Element of Crime* is entirely based on the slow revelation of a repetitive structure: Fisher's adventures are ultimately shown to be exact copies of an earlier story, which in turn might be a copy of an even earlier 'original'. The present is intimately linked to a past it simultaneously reveals and repeats.

Epidemic refers back to its predecessor: The title of the lost screenplay is 'Kommisæren og Luderen' (The Cop and the Whore), an appropriate alternative title for *The Element*

of Crime and a clear allusion. *Epidemic*'s 'new' subplot of Dr Mesmer's journey across the plague-ravaged country is therefore a literal overwriting of Fisher's earlier, equally doomed travels. But it is also an overwriting in another sense, as the fictitious plotline of a modern-day epidemic is in fact the symbolic reappearance of two older stories: that of the medieval plague pandemic which is chronicled in the archives Lars visits at the beginning of the film, and that of the firebombing of German cities for which Udo's memories function as an immaterial archive. Both of these archival texts are extensively quoted in the film, and their underlying presence is noticeable at every point.

Europa is less obviously constructed around narrative patterns of overwriting and repetition. But just as the other films, it carries the weight of an ominous and ever-present backstory: In this case, it is the whole history of World War II and of fascist Germany. A story that has already ended when the naïve protagonist first stumbles onto the scene; yet its traces keep appearing in various forms: the Werewolves, a transport of Jews, Max Hartmann's suicide. History is never explained in *Europa*, never openly spoken of, only alluded to, and it is constantly insinuated that neither the protagonist nor the spectator could ever be able to comprehend its complexity and horror. The past is not over in *Europa*, but neither is it present; it is an elusive web of traces, signs, relics, and ruins that lurks just under the surface of things.

At one point in *Europa*, the camera appears to cut through the structure of the Hartmann villa, from the attic through the ceiling all the way down into the bathroom, like a demonstration of archaeological strata (cf. Simons 2007: 99f.). Similar shots occur in *The Element of Crime*. The filmic space is vertically stratified and the camera is free to roam between layers of time and space: The old is buried deep down under the new, yet ready to resurface. This spatio-historical vision constitutes a compositional principle as well as a narrative one. Already present in the trilogy, it will later be at the very heart of *Riget*. Once again, the notion of palimpsest is at the centre of Trier's artistic project. It is operational as a concept of History; yet at the same time, it is also materially present as a pattern governing the organisation of the films' physical world.

4.6 Palimpsest as historical-political commentary

Rosalind Galt (2006), in a close reading of *Europa*'s textual politics, points to yet another palimpsestic structure. She reads the film as one of a whole group of texts produced in the late 1980s and early 90s that are engaged in 'remapping' European

politics, geography, and identity in response to the challenges presented by the collapse of communism, the German reunification, the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the foundation and expansion of the European Union. The layered images of the film function as the aesthetic equivalent of an intellectual 'overlaying' of maps and of historical situations: The turmoil, anxiety, and problematic future of Europe in 1945, just before its division, are revisited in terms of those of an equally 'new' and still emergent Europe in 1990. In this reading, "Germany is what haunts Europe, exceeding its borders to stand for the continent. […] Refracted through the lens of 1945 film references, and shorn of the indexical images of the ruined city, 'Germany' is conjured not as a national landscape but as a haunting presence for postwar European history" (ibid.: 193).

5. Conclusion

I have interpreted the beginnings of Lars von Trier's directorial career as a unified body of work by focusing on the aesthetic and thematic coherence of his four earliest released films. The most obvious connection between these films has been shown to be their common reference to the German defeat and its immediate aftermath, which is reimagined in sometimes surrealistic, sometimes post-romantic terms as a phantasmagorical world in violent transition. I have identified a number of recurring narrative and aesthetic tropes in the four films through which this preoccupation with Germany and the aftermath of World War II manifests itself and which together justify reading the films as a unified whole: Trier's 'German tetralogy'. It has been shown that these films are bound together by an intricate web of references, reprises, and allusions: to one another, to history, to earlier films and epochs of film history. And finally, I have argued that the way this web is constructed may best be conceptualized using the notion of palimpsest. One of the layers of this palimpsest, particularly noticeable in *Europa*, is 1940s German rubble cinema; therefore, and in view of their subject matter, I have suggested for the four films the generic label of 'neo-rubble film'. Yet, what exactly does this mean?

Certainly, Trier's films are not 'period dramas' in the sense that his ambition would be to make any factual statement about a precise historical place and moment. None of the four films could teach their audience anything about Germany in 1945 they did not already know. Rather than offering an informed look at post-war Germany, the films

function as an echo chamber where historical factoids, quotes, associations, and pop culture references constantly bounce of the walls and into each other, reverberating in the dark. If the films' historical vision is therefore a simulacrum, it functions not according to a logic of nostalgic homage and imitation, as is the case with Soderbergh's *The Good German*, a neo-rubble film in a more immediate and conventional sense. Jan Simons points to an interesting aspect of the trilogy when he speaks of its poetic strategies in terms of "compositing" (Simons 2007: 101) and of Trier as a DJ indulging in a "culture of eclecticism and quotation, but also of the *sampling* and *cut-and-paste* aesthetics which have since come to characterise the language of new media" (ibid.: 89). The resulting simulacrum is a "closed, virtual universe, built with cinematographic means and having a very casual relationship with historical truth" (89) in which the decontextualized fragments of history and popular culture reappear as part of a "consensual hallucination" (103), analogous to Freud's *Tagesreste* in a dream (88).

The four films inhabit a zone where historical record, collective imagination, and highly personal artistic universes intersect. Their relationship with the 'rubble era' is not characterized by the kind of lovingly executed reconstitution typical of period dramas, but by an unabashedly morbid fascination with peering into history's abyss, with the fictional potential of a violent and chaotic past. If Trier's early works can therefore be labelled as 'neo-rubble films', it is not because of any specific aesthetic similarities or indebtedness to classic rubble cinema (although, as I have shown, these do exist), but precisely because of their inventive and idiosyncratic treatment of historical memory: The 'rubble' they work with is less the physical trace of destruction than the fragments, quotes, and non-sequiturs of collective imagination. In lieu of the indexical layers of debris of 1940s cinema, Trier's neo-rubble films confront the spectator with symbolic layers of text.

But in spite of their virtuosic compositing, it would be too easy to (dis)qualify the films as a mere stylistic tour de force, a smugly virtuosic exercise in postmodern irony. Their obsessive circling around issues of defeat, victimhood, guilt, punishment, and trauma relativizes any readings that simply try to make light of their ostensive aesthetic posturing. The scene of Udo Kier's tearful autobiographical on-camera confession, at the very heart of the trilogy, anchors Trier's freewheeling storytelling machine in the historical reality of a 'world of pain'. Trier's storylines may be flights of fancy and his style elaborately artificial, but the traumas underlying his project are real and

identifiable: In *Epidemic*, it is the traumatic collective experience of the World War II air raids that acts as the centre of gravity of the film's allegorical musings. And in *Europa* (as well as, less explicitly, in *The Element of Crime*), the trauma evoked is that of a Europe occupied, first by totalitarian Germany and then by a pragmatically hegemonic America, but 'occupied' also by the spectre of its own unspeakable guilt and by the horrors of a history that can never be completely purged nor therapeutically exorcised. Indeed, Trier's repeated use of hypnosis as a symbolically deficient plot mechanism amounts to a fatalistic and pessimistic view of the possibilities offered by psychoanalytically inspired healing methods of 'working through', 'grief work', and intellectually 'coming to terms' with the past by (actually or fictionally) revisiting the old crime scenes of history. In this respect, the trilogy is in agreement with such late German rubble films as Peter Lorre's *Der Verlorene* (*The Lost*, 1951) and Josef von Baky's *Der Ruf* (*The Last Illusion*, 1949) whose forlorn male protagonists are all denied healing and are finally crushed by a past that never allows them to arrive in the present of a presumably 'new' post-war reality.

Trier's ultimate field of reference is collective memory, the memory of a past still as undead in Denmark as it is in Germany. The four films can be said to artistically mark a transitional phase in the representation of the War and its immediate aftermath: The precise moment when eyewitness testimony and the historian's research no longer constitute the default approaches to the rubble era, as a new generation, who had lived under the shadow of the post-war years without consciously living through them, starts taking possession of its own 'prehistory', devising new ways of appropriating a past not easily accessed, yet simultaneously haunting and intriguing.

It is in this way that Lars von Trier's four early neo-rubble films are best understood: as phantasmagorical dream constructs that are part of a more general transition in the popular reception of World War II and its aftermath that made itself felt in the 1980s and 90s – a transition from first-hand testimony and critical historiography towards individual mythmaking. The four films represent Trier's first major attempt to delve into the depths of personal and cultural trauma, coming up with a highly idiosyncratic representation of collective nightmares.

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Biography

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