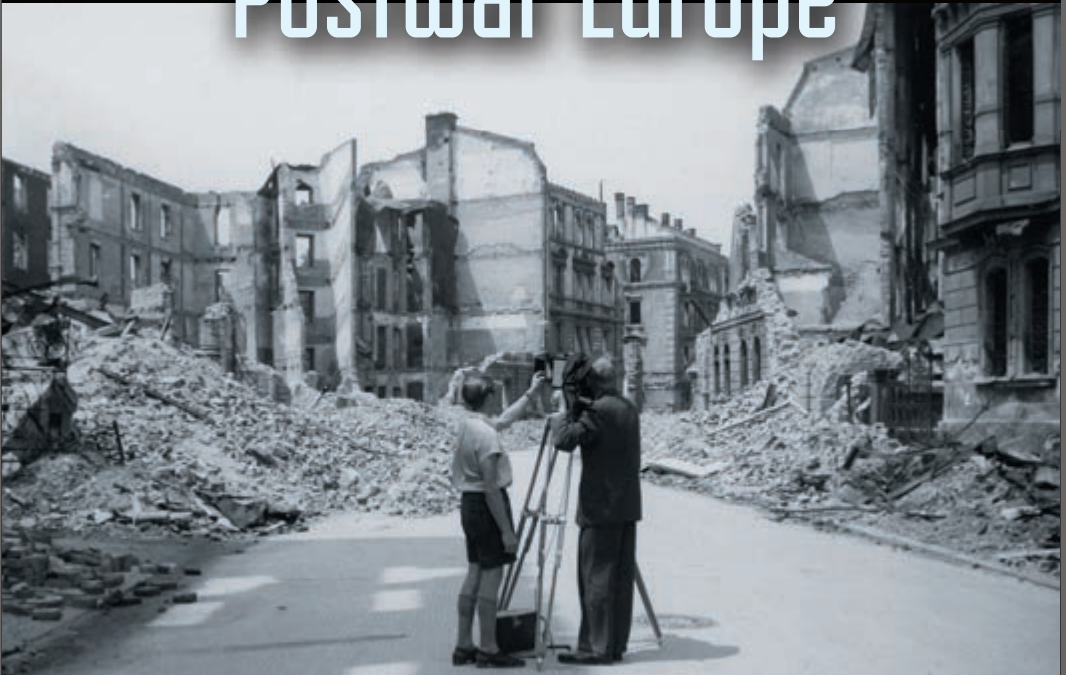


FILM
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

Non-Fiction Cinema in Postwar Europe



Visual Culture and the Reconstruction of Public Space

EDITED BY

LUCIE ČESÁLKOVÁ

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Amsterdam
University
Press

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*Edited by
Lucie Česálková,
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Table of Contents

List of Figures	9
Acknowledgments	15
Preface: (Re)building Europe through Cinema (Studies) <i>Vinzenz Hediger</i>	17
Frames of Reconstruction: An Introduction <i>Lucie Česálková, Johannes Praetorius-Rhein, Perrine Val, and Paolo Villa</i>	21

Section 1 Locating Non-fiction Film

1. <i>Itinerari Italiani</i> : A Visual Information Campaign to Reclaim Italian Regionalisms and Remap US–Italian Economic Interdependence under the Marshall Plan <i>Regina M. Longo</i>	49
2. Documentary Filmmaking in Postwar Germany, 1945–55 An Essay on the History of Production, Distribution, and Technology <i>Jeanpaul Goergen and Kay Hoffmann</i>	75
3. Finding the Best Time for Shorts Non-fiction Film, Non-stop Cinemas, and the Temporalities of Everyday Life of Post-WWII Audiences <i>Lucie Česálková</i>	107
4. Coproducing Postwar Socialist (Re)construction Transnational Documentaries in Eastern Europe <i>Marsha Siefert</i>	129
5. From Enemy Images to Friend Images after WWII, or How France Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Germany <i>Matthias Steinle and Perrine Val</i>	157

Section 2 Reconstructing Realities

6. "Room to Move and Space to Play" 183
Architecture and the Marshall Plan's Cinematic Reconfiguration of Space
Maria Fritsche and Dennis Pohl
7. Screening Dortmund in Ruins 207
The Role of Elisabeth Wilms's Postwar Film Footage in City Politics and Local Remembrance Culture
Alexander Stark
8. From Rubble to Ruins 225
War Destruction, Postwar Reconstruction, and Tamed Modernization
Francesco Pitassio, Johannes Praetorius-Rhein, and Perrine Val
9. Screening (at) the Workplace 249
Postwar Non-fiction Cinema and the Gendered and Political Spaces of Labor
Lucie Česálková and Simone Dotto
10. Choreographies of Public Space 277
Non-fiction Film and Performances of Citizenship in Postwar Europe
Johannes Praetorius-Rhein and Andrea Průchová Hružová

Section 3 Spaces of Cultural Trauma

11. Ruins, Iconic Sites, and Cultural Heritage in Italy and Poland in the Aftermath of World War II 303
Rossella Catanese and Ania Szczepanska
12. Moving Accountability 325
Trials, Transitional Justice, and Documentary Cinema
Sylvie Lindeperg and Francesco Pitassio
13. (De)constructing the Architect 353
Modern Architecture between Praise and Criticism in Postwar Non-fiction Cinema
Perrine Val and Paolo Villa

14. Restructuring (Post)colonial Relationships	375
European Empires between Decolonization, Trusteeships, and a New Projection in Africa	
<i>Gianmarco Mancosu</i>	

Section 4 Creating New Paths

15. Virtual Topographies of Memory	399
Liberation Films as Mobile Models of Atrocity Sites	
<i>Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Fabian Schmidt</i>	
16. Curating Reconstruction in the Digital Realm	425
The Online Exhibition <i>Frames of Reconstruction</i>	
<i>Rossella Catanese and Andrea Průchová Hružová</i>	
17. Teaching (with) Postwar Cinema	447
Fostering Media Education and Transnational Historical Thinking through Non-fiction Film Heritage	
<i>Ondřej Haváč and Paolo Villa</i>	
List of Acronyms	467
Bibliography	469
Index	509

8. From Rubble to Ruins

War Destruction, Postwar Reconstruction, and Tamed Modernization¹

Francesco Pitassio, Johannes Praetorius-Rhein, and Perrine Val

Abstract

This chapter focuses on the role non-fiction cinema played in depicting the destruction caused by warfare and the effort of reconstruction. The basic assumption, which refers to the work of philosopher Michel de Certeau and social anthropologist Paul Connerton, is that urban space brings together two features: on the one hand, it is a built environment; on the other hand, its appropriation and experience create memory and identity. The postwar era set a major task for European nations: How to reconstruct urban environments and mend the social fabric? Focusing on examples from Italy, France, and Germany, this chapter discusses how non-fiction cinema contributed to promoting this endeavor and negotiated new urban spaces with reference to previous experience and traditions, in narrative and visual terms.

Keywords: urban space, urban planning, public housing, collective memory, place memory

Framing and Reconstructing

European cities faced an unprecedented annihilation of their public spaces and private dwellings during the postwar period. Massive destruction affected major cities such as Warsaw, Rotterdam, Le Havre, Riga, Danzig,

¹ The authors discussed and shared the structure and content of the chapter. Francesco Pitassio wrote the sections “Framing and Reconstructing,” “Proceed with Caution: Presenting Italian New Townscapes,” and “Conclusions”; Perrine Val wrote “Envisioning a ‘Bright New Future’ in France”; and Johannes Praetorius-Rhein wrote “Taming the 1920s in Germany.”

Stalingrad (now Volgograd), and the majority of German urban areas, as well as minor centers, such as Cassino, Guernica, Oradour-sur-Glane, or Lidice. The range of devastation, as an effect of air bombing, long battles within the urban areas, or reprisals, was so extensive that the expression “urbicide,” meaning the intentional destruction of built environments as a way to crush social bonds (Coward 2009), seems to perfectly fit into what the survivors faced after 1945. The metaphor of the “zero hour” for the immediate postwar era implied the end of civilization and, therefore, of History as progress: “It was a description of negation, the emptying out of historical time. [...] It signalled the fall of value and civilisation itself, a kind of ground zero of European culture” (Betts 2020, 38–39). The condition of most European urban areas could be called a “space of exception,” by adapting the notion of “state of exception,” which Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben coined (Agamben 2005). The concept, whose juridical genealogy Agamben scrutinizes, describes a peculiar condition, at the threshold of the law, happening at times of social turmoil, revolution, or major transitions. A state of exception therefore corresponds to a precariousness or absence of usual forms of power and, in topological terms, to marginality: “Being-outside and yet belonging: this is the topological structure of the state of exception [...]. The state of exception is an anomic space in which what is at stake is a force of law without law” (Agamben 2005, 35, 39).

We claim that this marginality and uncertainty can be adapted through the notion of “space of exception,” with specific reference to the transition between war destruction and postwar reconstruction (Rifkin 2014; Schindel and Colombo 2014), when both sovereign power and spatial structures were unsteady or barely identified. The subsequent cultural and building endeavor aimed at bringing about a new state and space, steady, solid, and modern.

The reconstruction of private housing during the war’s aftermath intertwined various concerns. It dealt with a humanitarian crisis and a social and political emergency. Accordingly, it incarnated a postwar ideology of progress, which went hand-in-hand with an alleged consideration for individuals and communities. Finally, by reconfiguring urban planning and space, it affected collective memory. Rebuilding European cities and housing was a matter of civilization for postwar policies and administrations. Restoring what most European societies assumed to be their basic kernel, that is, families and their shelter, was a condition to reinstate the social fabric warfare tore apart and to re-establish history and memory after the “zero hour.” Recovery agencies, such as UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), or plans, such as the ERP (European Recovery Plan), better known as the Marshall Plan, placed at the core of

their endeavor the reconstruction and, together with it, the re-establishing of proper living conditions for the population (Ellwood 1992; Scrivano 2013).

We assume that urban space is a social construct, a network of relationships embodied in buildings and related functions, and experienced through generations and individual and collective bodies. Thus, we realize how intermingled postwar urban planning, public spaces, private housing, and memory are. Urban planning is first and foremost the realization of a built environment. According to the pioneering work of French historian and social scientist Michel de Certeau, the city is both a system, which he compares to language, and its appropriation/usage by individuals, which he associates with enunciation or an act of speech (De Certeau 1984). Therefore, the city is a plan and its individual and social experience. Urban destruction and reconstruction molded both the plan and the experience. The postwar era was the epoch of a major reshaping of European urban plans and, because of the association of popular housing with the welfare state, of huge initiatives for popular housing. Urban planners and historians highlight the relation between reconstruction and social concerns. This relation took different forms. On the one hand, reconstruction coincided with notions of progress. It implied projects for healing metropolitan environments (Dierendorff 1990) and implementing a shift in terms of civilization: this is well incarnated by the recurring metaphor of moving from a primitive to a modern condition, from caves to well-equipped and rational flats (Morgante 2019). On the other hand, reconstruction created brand-new neighborhoods, which accelerated the transformation of cities into abstract spaces. Social anthropologist Paul Connerton claims that there are two types of place memory, which he respectively calls “memorial” and “locus.” The former, epitomized by place names (for instance, Trafalgar Square in London, or Náměstí Jana Palacha in Prague, or Willy-Brandt-Platz in Frankfurt am Main) or pilgrimages, reactivates “intentionally” collective memories. The latter, exemplified by the house and the city street, defines memory through multilayered and multigenerational everyday experience.

There is, in other words, a certain matter-of-factness, a *taken for grantedness*, which distinguishes our experience of a locus from our experience of a memorial. A memorial has something in common with a work of art, in the sense that we assume that a work of art, a painting or piece of sculpture, is a more or less demanding message, explicitly addressed to us, something that asks of us a focused interest, a degree of concentration, even absorption. [...]. But we experience a locus *inattentively*, in a state of distraction. If we are aware of thinking of it at all, we think of it not so

much as a set of objects which are available for us to look at or listen to, rather as something which is inconspicuously familiar to us. It is there for us to live in, to move about in, even while we in a sense ignore it. We just accept it as a fact of life, a regular aspect of how things are. This is the power of the locus. That is why the locus is more important than the memorial—whose construction is so often motivated by the conscious wish to commemorate or the unavowed fear of forgetting—as a carrier of place memory. (Connerton 2009, 34–35)

War destruction and the ensuing reconstruction did away with century-old urban areas and intensified the shift to a new urban milieu. This latter allegedly rationalized collective life and, in practice, produced a rupture between workplace and residence, thus severing ancient bonds and related memory. This transition can be discussed as the work of “cultural trauma,” a term coined by Neil Smelser and Jeffrey C. Alexander. Cultural trauma is the process of turning a social crisis into a cultural one, therefore enabling a collectivity to experience them. In fact, traumas are culturally perceived. As Alexander claims, “only if the patterned meanings of the collectivity are abruptly dislodged is traumatic status attributed to an event. It is the meaning that provide the sense of shock and fear, not the events in themselves.” Accordingly, cultural trauma “is the result of an exercise of human agency, of the successful imposition of a new system of cultural classification” (Alexander 2004, 10). Moreover, collective memory, and particularly between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is associated with nationhood. Jeffrey K. Olick moves from a constructivist perspective and argues that “there are no identities, national or otherwise, that are not constituted and challenged in time and with histories, but nations have had a special place in the history of memory and in the history of their relations. Memory and the nation have a peculiar synergy” (Olick 2003, 2). However, nations remember differently; they activate different cultural references, and mold their memories with different styles.

To sum up, European cities faced brutal destruction of their environments, which created spaces of exception, whose rule and identity were precarious. Mending the social fabric required providing new dwellings and designing new neighborhoods. This deep alteration affected the experience inhabitants had of the cities they lived in and collective memory. How did different European nations depict war destruction and ensuing reconstruction of private and related public spaces? How did they perform this work of cultural trauma to lead respective communities into a new era?

European urban areas had been centripetal and gated communities until the late nineteenth century. World War II and its aftermath eroded urban

boundaries and, therefore, urban identity, transforming its memory into something more fluid or short-termed. The shift to new notions of urban life and private and public spaces, however, required a *cultural negotiation*. Vision played a crucial part in this negotiation, by referring to the visual memory of townscapes and to local culture. Simon Ward, in discussing the postwar visual culture of Berlin, argues:

The term “spatial image” implies that the embeddedness of the objects in a spatial framework is central to its function as a site of resistance to the wiping clean of modern space. Local tradition calls attention to the site as having a connection to its collective past and frames it as a “spatial image” that is read against the (otherwise anonymous) abstracting forces of urban transformation. The “framing” is crucial, for it must not simply preserve the object, but also the mode of encounter. (Ward 2016, 16)

The heyday of urban planning and townscape design, in postwar Europe, therefore relied on visibility as a means to address communities and induce the shift from previous to new urban experience (Erten, Pendlebury, and Larkham 2015). Cinema played a non-negligible part in conveying these visions and deploying its “useful” role, to refer to the notion of “useful cinema” coined by Wasson and Acland (2011). Using this term, the two scholars do away with inherited distinctions between fiction and non-fiction cinema and describe a production which aims at performing an action on society, education, public affairs, industry, and so on. As the two scholars put it, useful cinema is “a body of films and technologies that perform tasks and serve as instruments in an ongoing struggle for aesthetic, social, and political capital” (Wasson and Acland 2011, 3).

Postwar cinema frequently performed a utilitarian function, to describe a state of exception and lead the transition to an unprecedented condition; to achieve such goal, it carried out a work of cultural trauma, which national collective memories inflected in their respective styles.

Proceed with Caution: Presenting Italian New Townscapes

The corpus scrutinized here comprises two groups of sources. Firstly, the productions originated in the activities of the Centro di Documentazione (Documentation Center), depending on the prime minister’s cabinet. Created in 1951, this center offered media support for policies that the ruling administration undertook (Frabotta 2002; Presidenza del Consiglio dei

Ministri 2009). With regard to film productions, this endeavor often went in disguise. Productions were outsourced and viewed as private initiatives, but promoted the efforts of the administration (Bonifazio 2011 and 2014; Hemsing 1994). Furthermore, newsreels and particularly those from *Notiziario Nuova Luce* and *La settimana Incom*, were taken into account. These productions, and particularly the latter, even though were private initiatives, because of three bills approved between 1947 and 1949, were highly subject to the ruling administration (Quaglietti 1980). Thematically speaking, the scrutiny refers to the representation of war destruction and the subsequent reconstruction of private dwellings and related townscape. For this reason, the period chosen spans from 1945 to 1956. These years coincide with two major endeavors for reconstruction, those being the UNRRA action, between 1946 and 1949, and the first plan for public housing, the INA-Casa plan,² between 1949 and 1956. The former, under the aegis of the newly created United Nations, mostly addressed the emergency of displaced persons (for instance, exiles from historical Italian settlements in Dalmatia or Istria) or population evacuated after the destruction of their houses (Scrivano 2013). The UNRRA action also maintained an impressive amount of visual materials, including photographs and utility films, to promote its initiatives. The latter was and still is the major endeavor to provide the Italian population with popular housing, and it was a unique solution for hitting two birds with one stone. In fact, the INA-Casa plan, whose two parts cover fourteen years (1949–55 and 1956–63), offered huge masses of the unemployed an occupation in the construction industry and a house, which they could rent or buy at discounted rates (Di Biagi 2001 and 2003; Fanfani e la casa 2002; Pilat 2014). It therefore acted as a welfare state initiative and a way to bring about social peace in Italy.

Utility films are, very often, highly standardized and serialized (Hediger and Vonderau 2009). Their performance relies on repetition more than on aesthetic uniqueness. Postwar Italian useful films acted as informative agencies, by circulating breaking news and framing political actions; reinforced the sense of belonging, by disseminating the representations of multifarious regional landscapes, heritage, and identities; and instructed the population on the rituals and requirements of newborn democracy. As Paola Bonifazio posits, postwar useful films administered a pastoral power, leading Italian citizens into the new opportunities implied by democracy and modernity (Bonifazio 2014). To do so, they also championed the efforts that the ruling administration made in reconstructing the nation, heralding them through

2 The acronym INA refers to the company overseeing the financial side of the reconstruction plan, the Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni (National Insurance Company).

the trope of a new life. For instance, in supporting the National Loan for Reconstruction, La settimana Incom produced a fictional short in 1946. Two husbands wait for their newborn children in a hospital waiting room. This fictional sequence, describing the anxiety and joy of two fathers, is followed by a documentary sequence displaying newborn babies, toddlers, and children playing and moving in a school or orphanage, while a voice-over invites the viewer to subscribe to the national loan in order to secure a future for their children. Therefore, reconstruction in and of itself means embracing a new life.³ But why is the trope of the new life so crucial? And how can past identities be kept if the past is wiped away?

As previously explained, Agamben argues that due to its juridical peculiarity, the state of exception is topologically liminal to the law, anomic but functional to the *nomos*. We would like to convert this notion into that of “space of exception,” since it matches the condition of many peripheral spaces depicted in postwar non-fiction cinema: marginal, but reinforcing the norm, through their misery; transitional, between the city and the countryside, but also between a primitive past and a shiny modernity; anomic, in that no authority seems to rule them, and therefore they require normalization and inclusion into postwar society.

Useful films advertise the transition to normalcy, and from ruins to modernity, in various ways. Firstly, by promoting self-management. Repeatedly, La settimana Incom newsreels describe displaced persons, forced to abandon their households because of warfare, that build new houses outside the law, at the outskirts of the cities. For instance, the short *Chi s'aiuta Dio l'aiuta. Si costruiscono una casa i sinistrati di Milano* (God helps whoever helps themselves: The victims of Milan build a house, La settimana Incom, no. 212, IT, November 17, 1948) depicts a new settlement on the southeastern periphery of Milan. While celebrating the industriousness of homeless people who autonomously took care of their condition and build their shacks without any help, the voice-over explains that these dwellings are made of rubble or industrial waste but recreate the conditions for what is maintained as a social cornerstone: the family hearth.⁴

3 *Evviva la vita!* (Hooray for life!, La settimana Incom, no. 32, IT, November 14, 1946), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKthioTFWhA>.

4 See *Chi s'aiuta Dio l'aiuta. Si costruiscono una casa i sinistrati di Milano* (God helps whoever helps themselves: The victims of Milan build a house, La settimana Incom, no. 212, IT, November 17, 1948), [https://patrimonio.archivioluice.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000010926/2/nel-quartiere-noto-come-porto-mare-milano-i-senza-tetto-si-autorganizzano-ricostruire-proprie-abitazioni.html?startPage=0&jsonVal={%22jsonVal%22:%22query%22:\[%22chi%20s%27aiuta%20dio%20l%27aiuta%22\],%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22_perPage%22:20,%22archiveType_st ring%22:\[%22xDamsCineLuce%22\]}}](https://patrimonio.archivioluice.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000010926/2/nel-quartiere-noto-come-porto-mare-milano-i-senza-tetto-si-autorganizzano-ricostruire-proprie-abitazioni.html?startPage=0&jsonVal={%22jsonVal%22:%22query%22:[%22chi%20s%27aiuta%20dio%20l%27aiuta%22],%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22_perPage%22:20,%22archiveType_st ring%22:[%22xDamsCineLuce%22]}}). Similar examples are to be found in *Sotto il cielo di*

Sheltering childhood, fostering family life, and producing the opportunities for its thriving are the conditions for moving beyond the transitional phase into stability. To heal the wounds of warfare, protecting abandoned children is the first step. *I figli delle macerie* (Children of the rubble, dir. Amedeo Castellazzi, IT, 1948), a short film produced by the Veterans' National Association, opens with a long pan describing the rubble left behind by the war. Amid them, little orphans wander in the wasteland, on the outskirts of the metropolis; in an unsettling way, their behavior resembles that of adults from the underworld. Little girls paint their faces and stand in sexualized poses, while boys ape gamblers, petty criminals, or firing squads. However, charitable initiatives recover them, through education and a healthy life within comfortable, modern environments. The same can be said of many newsreels, describing the fate of exiles from the Julian March region. After roaming across Italy, they finally find modern, functional settlements, often built thanks to the support of UNRRA, where they can marry, bring up children, and regain the pivot around which they revolve: the hearth.⁵

What is at stake here is moving beyond the state and space of exception, while incorporating its memory. Because of this, while heralding the role of supranational agencies, such as the UNRRA-Casas initiative, these films associate previous ruins with newly introduced modernity, as in *La via del ritorno* (The returning pathway, dir. Romolo Marcellini, IT, 1946–47). The film describes the rubble left behind by the war, in both material and spiritual terms: the wreckage of a village in sun-drenched Southern Italy populated by survivors, a man driven to madness by the mass killings perpetrated by the Nazis in his village, and a young girl showing the scars a German firing squad produced on her legs, and yet surviving by miracle. The endeavor supported by UNRRA-Casas, epitomized by a truck driving through these villages, overcomes this state and space of exception by helping the population create new dwellings. The issue is not wiping away

Roma. Casette a Montemario (Under the sky of Rome: Houses in Montemario, La settimana Incom, no. 224, IT, December 15, 1948); *Chi fa da sé. Costruiscono da soli la casa* (Whoever helps themselves. They build themselves their houses, La settimana Incom, no. 259, IT, March 4, 1949). All these newsreels can be found at the institutional website: <https://www.archivioluca.com/>.

⁵ See, for example: *Per i profughi giuliani. Villaggio alla Cecchignola* (For the refugees from the Julian March: Cecchignola village, La settimana Incom, no. 124, IT, February 25, 1948); *Per i profughi giuliani nasce un villaggio alle porte di Roma* (A village is created on the outskirts of Rome for refugees from the Julian March, La settimana Incom, no. 211, IT, December 11, 1948); *Alloggi U.N.R.R.A. Visita nel Veneto* (UNRRA projects. A visit in Veneto, La settimana Incom, no. 408, IT, February 24, 1950).

the past but keeping it together with the following steps. What is at stake here is tempering modernity with the memory of the past.

Trauma studies scholars argue that carrier groups lead to cultural traumas, that is, social groups having both material and ideal interests in reallocating meanings that had been dislodged by unexpected events or developments. To do so, carrier groups design cultural traumas according to specific cultural tropes and features. With regard to the politics of the memory of World War II, Claudio Fogu and Wulf Kansteiner posit two determinant factors: the generational turnover and the “poetics of history” (Fogu and Kansteiner 2006). By “history” they mean a specific tradition of rendering the past in professional accounts. Historical culture and its leakage in cultural production overall fashion styles of memory. In fact, most of these useful films bring about modernity, while negotiating its advent with the relics of a glorious past. And this continuity between the Roman age and modernity, through Christianity, is a poetics of history shaping the politics of memory.

Western European urban planning and architecture underwent a major cultural shift after World War II. Whereas interwar urban planning relied on modernism, abstraction, and rational design, the postwar one preferred organicism and continuity with the past (Erten, Pendlebury, and Larkham 2015). Furthermore, the massive destruction caused by heavy bombings on European cities created unprecedented opportunities for reconsidering the foundations of the urban environment and the policies of public housing. Postwar humanism and the rising welfare state greatly contributed to this culture.

In Italy the architectural debate incorporated widespread cultural and political concerns about democracy, social inclusion, local diversity, and historical traditions, which coupled this new trend with the issues raised by cinematic neorealism (Escudero 2020; Fabbri 1975; Marmo 2018; Shiel 2006 and 2008; Tafuri 1964 and 1986). Postwar urban planning attempted to tame modernization, adapting it to local circumstances and preserving historic cities. Useful cinema promoting reconstruction and popular housing initiatives rendered this twofold approach visually.

Firstly, most of these films rely on a “before/after” narrative pattern. Reconstruction is successful because it improves the disaster warfare brought onto the nation. Compared to the representation of the past conveyed by most of postwar cinema, partly or fully oblivious of twenty years of Fascist rule, this body of work frequently hints at the responsibilities Italian fascism had in causing the destruction of the nation. Accordingly, it builds democracy *and* national memory, by opposing modern inclusion



Figure 8.1 and 8.2. Mediating classical ruins and new housing needs. 045. *Ricostruzione edilizia* (045. House reconstruction, dir. Vittorio Sala, IT, 1952).

and progress to past authoritarianism and warfare. For instance, *Braccia e lavoro* (Arms and work, dir. Giovanni Pieri, IT, 1952), a short film implicitly promoting public housing and reconstruction, initially juxtaposes war veterans coming home and the rubble of previous households; then it associates the unemployed workforce with totalitarian military parades and

warfare. Therefore, the film narrative sets up two crucial questions: What did veterans coming home find and who is responsible for destruction and social unrest?

Mostly, however, this body of works negotiates modernization with tradition, according to two different tropes: visually embedding new, rational neighborhoods in the past; or incorporating modernity into the landscape, conceived as an anthropological creation.

The past can be depicted as the ruins of Roman buildings, as in *045. Ricostruzione edilizia* (045. House reconstruction, dir. Vittorio Sala, IT, 1952),⁶ or as the monuments of Christianity, and notably the Montecassino abbey, as in *Ieri e oggi* (Yesterday and today, dir. Giorgio Ferroni, IT, 1951) and *Cassino anno X* (Cassino year X, dir. Edmondo Albertini, IT, 1954),⁷ or the negotiation between expanding urban spaces and the surrounding countryside, as in *Ai margini della città* (On the edge of the city, dir. Giorgio Ferroni, IT, 1954). This latter describes the dissolution of the European city, which is a centripetal, enclosed space. In fact, it portrays the countryside and rural dwellings punctuating the landscape, while extradiegetic music provides an idyllic background. As the camera pans up, huge, rational, modern buildings tower over this landscape. Again, the camera pans left and associates this modern architecture with rural houses. This same pattern recurs later, in bringing together modern neighborhoods and Roman ruins. While the voice-over nostalgically eulogizes the taste and veracity of the past countryside, now surrounded by the advancing city, it visually merges the two spaces, thus mitigating the most alienating effects of the abstract place modernity creates.

The massive endeavor for providing the nation with popular housing between 1949 and 1956 was promoted by negotiating urban design and modern architecture with cultural tradition and local landscape. For instance, in *Uomini e case* (Men and houses, dir. Raffaello Pacini, IT, 1955), urban expansion and new housing cannot dispense with the landscape in the background. This latter is nothing but the living memory of the past generations inhabiting it. The film is a very telling example of the

6 See also *Per i senza tetto. Il Villaggio S. Francesco* (For the homeless: The village St. Francesco, La settimana Incom, no. 263, IT, March 16, 1949). This newsreel can be found at the institutional website: <https://www.archivioluca.com/>.

7 See also *Ricostruzione. La basilica di S. Lorenzo Fuori le Mura prima e dopo la guerra* (Reconstruction: The basilica of S. Lorenzo Fuori le Mura before and after the war), *Notiziario Nuova Luce*, no. 21 (1946). This newsreel can be found at the institutional website: <https://www.archivioluca.com/>.



Figure 8.3. Mediating townscape and countryside. *Ai margini della città* (On the edge of the city, dir. Giorgio Ferroni, IT, 1954).



Figure 8.4. Mediating local traditions and new housing. *Uomini e case* (Men and houses, dir. Raffaello Pacini, IT, 1955).

ideology underpinning the INA-Casa plan and the townscapes it created. In fact, the film's narrative echoes the concerns urban planners had in designing the new neighborhoods in Italy. The INA-Casa plan governance allocated to local teams the responsibility for individual projects, which were supposed to consider regional traditions and cultures as much as the structure of society (Di Biagi 2001 and 2003; Escudero 2020; Pilat 2014). The film opens with a fictional sequence, depicting a young architect visiting his teacher and mentor, who lives in a luxurious, old-fashioned flat in the

center of Rome. However, the elder architect oversees a plan for providing the Italian population with new, modern households. These are located in different areas of the country, in Northern, Central, and Southern Italy. As the voice-over painstakingly explains and the images well illustrate, the endeavor merges all the advantages modernity can offer, in terms of comfort and functionality, while securing traditional ways of living and architectural style. And the relation between the mentor and the younger pupil perfectly incarnates the negotiation between tradition and modernity, or the taming of this latter.

Envisioning a “Bright New Future” in France

Despite the Vichy regime and its close collaboration with Nazi Germany, and thanks to the Resistance, France joined the ranks of the Allies after the war. Thus, it simultaneously claimed the status of winner and that of victim of the German occupation. The changeover after the Liberation is reflected in non-fiction film by a comparison between “before” and “after,” with the wartime bombing as the tipping point. The “after” refer to the landscapes of destroyed cities, while the “before” recalls the prewar situation of the cities and the monuments.⁸ The newsreels and documentaries seem to be confronted with a paradox. The most visible and visually impressive immediate traces of the trauma were not necessarily those of the German occupation, but rather those of the bombings carried out by the Allies to liberate occupied France, without it being possible to attenuate the extent of the devastation. In the immediate postwar period, the Germans were nevertheless presented unambiguously as the only ones responsible for the destruction.⁹ The evolution of geopolitical relations and the beginnings of the Cold War, however, led to a rapid evolution of the discourse in the newsreels. The weekly reports testified to the extent of the work to be carried out everywhere in France, but above all contributed to developing the vision, so necessary to the “cultural negotiation.” Indeed, we observe that the reports on French cities produced by *Actualités Françaises*, whatever the state of ruin of the city, always conclude by assuring a radiant future, a future of all possibilities, as if the sometimes almost total destruction of the cities also made it possible to “wipe the slate clean” of the past and the

8 For instance, the documentary *Rouen, martyre d'une cité* (Rouen, martyrdom of a city, Louis Cuny, FR, 1945).

9 See Steinle and Val, in this volume.

compromises of the war.¹⁰ This discourse is all the more striking because it applies exclusively to France and not to the neighboring countries, which were also marked by massive destruction. French newsreels on Germany very frequently end with doubts and questioning of Germany's ability to democratize,¹¹ and even newsreels on the Netherlands,¹² Belgium,¹³ or Great Britain¹⁴ simply record the extent of the work to be done, without prejudging the countries' ability to rebuild or not. The vision of a bright future therefore only applies to France.

This "bright future" is embodied above all in the construction of new modern housing. The challenge faced by the French Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme (MRU, Ministry of Reconstruction and Urban Development) is similar to that of the Italian INA-Casa plan: to modernize urban centers and housing, while respecting and integrating local specificities. The fear of having a standard model of housing imposed at the expense of local identity is shared by many French people. Since its creation, the MRU has regularly produced short and medium-length documentaries, in particular to reassure viewers in this respect.¹⁵ In particular, the aim was to explain to the inhabitants the role of the new local interlocutors responsible for rebuilding the cities, that is, the MRU delegates, town planners, and architects like in *Le Bosquet, un village renaît* (Le Bosquet, a village is reborn, dir. Paul de Roubaix, FR, 1945). These films also help to forge a new vision of the future and a new model of society. Indeed, they are both largely anchored in reality and record sometimes unique images of the scale of the destruction and the building sites launched, they do not hide the misery of a whole segment of the population still living in slums, like Marc Cantagrel does in *Se loger* (Finding accommodation, FR, 1948),¹⁶ and at the same time they also contribute to categorizing and normalizing society, particularly with regard to the gendered division of labor. Outdoor construction sites are seen as a male-only world, while women are presented as the primary beneficiaries of indoor modernizations and are increasingly

10 For instance, the end of the report *Ci-gît Le Havre* (Here lies Le Havre, Actualités Françaises, March 2, 1945), <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclair-actu/video/afe86003004/ci-git-le-havre>.

11 For instance, *Le quatrième Reich: l'Allemagne de l'Ouest* (The Fourth Reich, West Germany, Actualités Françaises, FR, September 22, 1949), <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclair-actu/video/afe85003235/le-quatrieme-reich-l-allemande-de-l-ouest>.

12 For instance, *Réparation du port de Rotterdam* (1948) produced by Pathé.

13 For instance, *La vie qui reprend* (1946), produced by Gaumont in Anvers.

14 For instance, *Londres: reconstruction de la chambre des communes* (1950), produced by Gaumont.

15 See Canteux 2014.

16 Or also Eli Lothar in *Aubervilliers* (1946). See Blüminger 2016.

absent from public spaces. It is particularly striking to observe the evolution of the discourse on women. While the reports of the immediate postwar period show women mainly as hard-working mothers who also embody the continuity of daily life (getting food and shelter) despite the destruction, ten years later their wandering in the streets is mocked and reprimanded, as illustrated by a report on parking in Paris. In *Ily a "stationner et stationner"* (There's "parking" and "parking," FR, June 14, 1955),¹⁷ two women stop their taxi and block all traffic. Another woman then leaves her car on the road to go to the hairdresser. She then causes a traffic jam in which the camera films a close-up of a doctor at the wheel, showing the nuisance and even the potential danger to others that the young woman represents. A policeman immediately reprimands her. The male voice-over comments ironically (and misogynistically) on the sequence. In France, the urban space that has been rebuilt or recovered from the war no longer seems to be suitable for women, who are largely encouraged to leave the public space and confine themselves to their domestic role. Similarly, MRU films and newsreels on the reconstruction completely ignore workers from the colonies, while the beginning of the 1950s saw the development of new slums, particularly in the Paris suburbs, which were home to the "French Muslims," who were then joining the construction sites in increasing numbers. Very few newsreels report on the precariousness and insalubrious conditions in which these workers live. One of the few reports to do so is entitled *Centre d'hébergement nord-africain à Marseille et Lille* (North African accommodation center in Marseille and Lille, FR, 1957).¹⁸ Released in May 1957, when the Algerian war of independence had already started, the report aims first of all to highlight the progress made in housing North African workers through the construction of accommodation centers for them. The slums are mentioned, but the report does not at any time question the segregation of these workers from the rest of the population.

Taming the 1920s in Germany

Unlike in Italy and France, the reconstruction of the largely destroyed urban centers and especially housing construction was not initially a national project in Germany. Of course, providing shelter for the bombed-out and

17 <https://www.ina.fr/video/AFE85006202/il-y-a-stationner-et-stationner-video.html>.

18 <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclairer-actu/video/afe85007399/centre-d-hebergement-nord-africain-a-marseille-et-lille>.

homeless population and accommodating arriving refugees and expellees was of utmost urgency in many cities throughout the country. But as long as Germany was occupied and divided into several zones, these problems had to be tackled on a local or regional level.¹⁹ As long as the question of national sovereignty and territorial integrity was still open, however, no particular type of housing became a visually dominant model. In movies of the so-called “rubble film” genre as well as in documentaries and newsreels, the late 1940s were largely defined by images of provisional and temporary dwellings, such as half-destroyed apartments and even caves in the rubble or quickly built barracks such as the iconic Nissen huts of the refugee and displaced person camps. Typical and apparently also visually appealing during this time of transition were former bunkers that had been repurposed as hotels (*Blick in die Welt*, no. 37/1946), maternity clinics (*Welt im Film*, no. 94/1947), or boarding homes (*Der Augenzeuge*, no. 30/1949). But the creative solutions of local initiatives were not only filmed as curiosities for a newsreel audience, they were also echoed in a dramatic shift in the visual representation of destroyed cities. The images of ruins of iconic buildings as traces of once familiar cityscapes soon faded and were replaced with views of anonymous stony landscapes, waiting to be quarried and turned into new building materials—a strategy that was most famously developed by the Trümmerverwertungsgesellschaft (Rubble Recycling Company) in Frankfurt am Main and implemented in many German cities (Jähner 2019, 42–46). As Hannah Arendt observed during a trip to postwar Germany, traumatic restlessness was a cultural core of the reconstruction:

Beneath the surface, the German attitude to work has undergone a deep change. The old virtue [...] has yielded to a mere blind need to keep busy, a greedy craving for something to do every moment of the day. Watching the Germans busily stumble through the ruins of a thousand years of

19 This is reflected in many films from the immediate postwar era that focus on local and regional reconstruction efforts. Films like *Berlin im Aufbau* (Berlin under construction, dir. Kurt Maetzig, GER-Soviet occupation zone, 1946), *Potsdam baut auf* (Potsdam is building up, dir. Joop Huiskens, GER-Soviet occupation zone, 1946), *Halle baut auf* (Halle is building up, dir. Fred Braun, GER-Soviet occupation zone, 1947), *Eine Stadt baut auf—Saarlouis* (A town is building up—Saarlouis, dir. F. B. Nier/B. v. Tyzka, Saar Protectorate, 1950), the serial *Sieh Dich um—Hessen baut auf* (Look around you—Hesse is building up, dir. Alphons Dettenbach, FRG, 1950), *Niedersachsen im Aufbau* (Lower Saxony is being built up, dir. Willi Mohaupt, FRG, 1951), or *Frankfurt am Main—Zerstörung und Wiederaufbau* (Frankfurt am Main—Destruction and reconstruction, Alphons Dettenbach, FRG, 1952) were produced in East and in West Germany and usually targeted local citizens to demonstrate the achievements and the effectiveness of local administrations.

their own history [...] one comes to realize that busyness has become their chief defense against reality. (Arendt 1950)

Useful cinema helped to transform the meaning of rubble and ruins and to turn the reminders of a destroyed past into resources for a better future, thereby not only promoting a pragmatic necessity but also making it a work of cultural trauma.

Half a decade later, West German cities like Frankfurt had become presentable again, as vibrant cities with a high living standard, defined by modern conveniences as well as by a sense of local tradition and identity (Goergen 2015b). The short documentary *Unser Frankfurt heute* (Our Frankfurt today, dir. Ludwig Nau, FRG, 1954) is an exemplary case of locally commissioned promotional films as they have been produced in and for many cities in West Germany. Frankfurt appears as a city defined by a socially and technically modern infrastructure with schools, hospitals, and power plants, but also by familiar institutions such as the zoo, the natural history museum, or the museum of art—popular institutions that were filled with personal memories for local audiences (Unterholzner 2018). The difference between these functional and nostalgic places is underscored by a contrast of modern and historic architecture—while a third kind of space appears to be positioned in the middle of this contrast. In the center of the film—and of Frankfurt itself—we see newly built residential areas which appear modern, but not modernist. Gable roofs, green gardens, and decorative flowers make these neighborhoods appear more suburban than urban—and in fact, the housing developed at the outskirts of the city looks just like that. The voice-over emphasizes the harmony between the modern new and the little that is left of the traditional old. Considering that these new houses were built on the site of the historic city center, which was completely destroyed in the 1944 bombings, this is a remarkable statement. Since the 1920s, the old town has been a highly controversial issue between traditionalist and conservative advocates of local identity and the Neues Frankfurt (New Frankfurt) modernist movement, which pointed out the poor living conditions in the medieval architecture. But this conflict-laden history is completely denied in the film—the modern new Frankfurt created by postwar reconstruction has little to do with the modernist vision of the “New Frankfurt” of the 1920s and its spirit of social reform.

In the early federal republic, the normative model was not welfare-state public housing, but the suburban home of the nuclear family, ideally built with private initiative and as a family space. This becomes particularly clear in films that deal with groups that initially did not benefit from the

achievements of reconstruction. The protagonists of short films like *Ein Dach über dem Kopf* (A roof over your head, FRG, 1950) or *Flüchtlinge helfen sich selbst* (Refugees helping themselves, dir. Peter Patti, FRG, 1951) feel unfairly treated or even marginalized because they do not profit from the social and economic progress and, as proletarians or refugees, still have to live in provisional and cramped postwar dwellings with their families.²⁰ But instead of promoting public housing schemes and welfare state initiatives, these films stress that the technically and politically modern society allows everyone to get ahead through private initiative and personal willingness.

This was quite different in East Germany. In order to become the home of the German working class, the GDR had to promise to provide decent housing for everyone as a proof of proletarian solidarity. In later years—starting in the 1960s—the *Plattenbau* (structures built with prefabricated concrete slabs) became the iconic cliché of large-scale public housing (if not of all architecture) in the GDR. Before the *Plattenbau* the first prototype of an ideal socialist neighborhood was realized in Berlin in Frankfurter Allee, which was then renamed Stalinallee and lauded as “the street that wears the face of the future” (*Der Augenzeuge*, no. 19, GDR, 1955). In the early 1950s, the entire avenue was filled with apartment blocks in the style of socialist classicism, which served both as “worker palaces” and as a monument to the Stalinist regime. The DEFA newsreel *Der Augenzeuge* regularly reported on progress at the construction site and it later became a severe setback for state propaganda when the uprising of June 1953 began with a strike of construction workers from Stalinallee. In the following year, DEFA released two documentaries about the construction of Stalinallee. *Wir bauen Wohnungen* (We built apartments, dir. Heinz Fischer, GDR, 1952–53) was an educational film that had been commissioned by the Ministry for Reconstruction, while *Die Geschichte einer Straße* (The story of a street, dir. Bruno Kleberg and Walter Marten, GDR, 1954) was mainly based on archival footage and the ongoing newsreel reports about Stalinallee. Even if the films were produced by different departments of DEFA and for different audiences, both films emphasize three basic aspects that make Stalinallee the supposed prototype of socialist housing. First, both films present the generous, modern, and comfortable apartment blocks not only as a part of reconstruction, but foremost as a way out of the miserable living conditions under capitalism; the “imperialist war” here appears not so much as a state of exception, but rather as an extreme form of capitalism. So these

20 Both films can be found in the ViCTOR-E collection on the European Film Gateway, <https://www.europeanfilmgateway.eu/search-efg/VICTOR-E>.

“worker palaces” do not only lead out of postwar misery, but put an end to the crisis that proletarian life under capitalism had been. As we can see in *Die Geschichte einer Straße*: “Zille’s Milljö,” the poor proletarian milieu as it was depicted by the Berlin illustrator and photographer Heinrich Zille in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, has only become a memory that the residents of Stalinallee recall through books they can buy in bookshops today. Second, both films emphasize the national importance the Stalinallee has as a beacon project; the entire nation looked at Stalinallee as an example, and the entire nation also contributed materials, resources, and workers, which were sent to Berlin (Hain 1992). Stalinallee is explicitly not a local project of Berlin, but a manifestation of solidarity in the workers’ and peasants’ state. And third, both films emphasize that these buildings were built for a collective. While the generosity, equipment, and furnishing of the individual apartments and plenty of shopping facilities in the street are clearly intended to be reminiscent of a bourgeois (and perhaps even a West German) way of life, both films show the process of moving in and seizing these buildings not as a private, but as a collective process. As seen in *Wir bauen Wohnungen*, the future residents had the opportunity to express their opinions on the building and furnishing plans in public presentations and exhibitions; and the arrival of the first residents, shown in *Die Geschichte einer Straße*, is a political manifestation with banners more than a move-in.

Comparing the films from East and West Germany, it becomes clear that reconstruction in both states was a project of architectural and cultural modernization while also answering certain experiences of modern crises that became directly or indirectly linked to the traumatic past. West German films emphasize the possibility to use modern means for traditional values, introducing the postwar city with its patchwork of old and modern buildings as well as family homes built with concrete without losing their *Gemütlichkeit* (comfortableness) as proof that the ideological oppositions of the Weimar Republic have been reconciled. If reconstruction heals such old wounds from the prewar era, the war becomes falsely remembered as an escalation of these cultural and political conflicts. In a similar way, films from East Germany framed the World War as a violent excess of class war and a consequence of the political struggles in prewar Germany. But in sharp contrast to West Germany, these conflicts do not appear harmonized and reconciled, but found a late, but clear victor: The Soviet Union and with it the people of the GDR. Yet as works of cultural trauma, both strategies have something in common: By remembering World War II as an escalation of modern crisis, they escape questions of guilt and responsibility.

Conclusions

To summarize, what kind of work did this useful cinema do? By promoting and disseminating the efforts of reconstruction and related modernization, it designed the transition between spaces of exception and new, regulated spaces. All productions surveyed represent the transition from rubble and past dwellings and conditions into modern housing and public spaces. Furthermore, most of these films describe the need to mitigate the most radical effects of modernization and rebut modernist interwar urban planning and architecture by privileging plans and housing incorporating forms of life, society, and constructions that are not oblivious of traditions and communities. The modes of supporting and governing this transition vary, however, according to the political national and international circumstances and the ideological framework regulating them. In the Italian case, useful cinema performed the work of cultural trauma by relocating past meanings—for instance, Roman ruins—outside totalitarian narratives, into a more fitting poetics of history. This latter considered continuity between the antiquity, Christianity, and modernity as a consistent flow, which tamed modernization, comforted local communities by mending social fabric and reactivating their memory, and helped the nation to move forward while looking back. French productions enhanced the “radiant future” awaiting the populace even more, but reassured them that what was to come would not dispense with tradition, including traditional gender roles. The German situation was more complex, because of the polarization induced by the Cold War. Whereas the West German production promoted new housing by selling a model revolving around the family unit and suburbanization, much associated with similar transatlantic developments, the East German model heralded the sense of community and shared endeavor instead. Making sense of rubble and ruins and building new spaces required new communities whose identity was fashioned by different carrier groups according to their respective agendas, thus turning private spaces into public ones.

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