

Trümmerfilm: *Murderers Among Us* (October 17, 1946)

Abstract

Murderers Among Us was not only the first German film made after World War II but it was also the first so-called *Trümmerfilm* [rubble film]. *Trümmerfilme* set the problems that postwar European countries faced among the rubble and ruin that the war had wrought on European cities. Postwar Berlin was unique: much of the city's buildings had been constructed with steel frames, which remained standing through the bombing; *Trümmerfilme* set in Berlin made use of the jagged steel frames that dotted the city's postwar landscape. The films used the rubble of postwar cities to represent the deep psychological and physical ruin that had been wrought on the cities and their inhabitants and reckoned with the psyche of a traumatized nation.

Source

The Path Through the Ruins Impressions from New German Cinema

The camera clings to ruins, creating terrifyingly beautiful rubble landscapes. It clings to shattered lives, creating magnificently dark landscapes of the soul. The elements of this film are not light and shadow, but shadow whose weighty black is rendered darker still by the few hesitant, pale highlights. Cast shadows repeatedly beat down any arising glimmer of hope.

The effects are incredibly picturesque. The stairwell: a shaft of shaded darkness. The human face: a scene of devastated hopes. Abysses yawn here and there. A façade caves in, expectations collapse. Clouds tower over ruins, difficult memories darken faces. We stumble, feel our way and tumble between images and symbols. Shadows become bizarre grimaces, travesties of gossip. A crucifix is desecrated as a rifle stand. Some of this is reminiscent of Goya's uncanny courts, the camera creates gloomy, moving graphics: Art accuses. Grim satire bares its teeth: The thoughtless and unprincipled philistine's breakfast sandwich is wrapped in a newspaper bearing the terrible headline "Two Million People Gassed." And the philistine relishes it! The wrong turns that people have taken are occasionally breathtakingly underlined by the slant of the camera. Opposites clash harshly. From a nearby dive, tinny music drizzles down over a soldier's grave between the ruins; the shrieks of excited women are superimposed on the groans of a dying child.

The man who created the film *Murderers Among Us*, from which these impressions are drawn, resembles the man who trudges heavily through the plot. He avoids nothing, doesn't make things easy for himself and eschews the smooth, well-traveled path. He makes no concessions to the audience's taste in entertainment. He takes the task assigned to him by Germany's first anti-fascist film far too seriously for that: settling scores, shaking up, clearing out, removing psychic rubble and above all documenting the new German attitude. It is a great task, and a heavy one.

No wonder, then, that Wolfgang Staudte is somewhat breathless. And that the story takes on something of the protagonists' weary, dragging steps. (We refer here to the review and outline of the plot in yesterday's paper. It is the story of a doctor who returns from the war psychologically wounded and tries to drown his horrific impressions in hard liquor until a young girl coming home from a concentration camp gradually helps him back to life with gentle and persistent love.)

We owe special thanks to the screenwriter and director Wolfgang Staudte for not retreating into cheap

optimism. Given the necessary seriousness of his task, however, some things are too gloomy. He misses out on the timid glimpses of sunshine, the touchingly tender idylls among the rubble, the brave smiles, children's laughter, the crudely encouraging swear words, the cheerful impudence—all of them signs of the true Berliner.

After the capitulation, Berlin was not dominated by groans and vaudeville music alone. The soundtrack of those days included the exhilarating staccato that rang from every corner and ruin, which persistently lay over the whole city, that undaunted, tireless knocking and hammering and the clanking of shards being moved aside. The film *Murderers Among Us* features none of these bright moments of new beginnings. The residents merely gossip or wait and die while waiting. And the doctor's fist is always clapping a shot glass or a revolver: the only scene where he takes action, placing a piece of gas pipe as a cannula in the throat of a gasping child with a kitchen knife, is merely agonizing, and incidentally also a disturbing and medically questionable emergency intervention.

The film actually leaves us wondering whether this man has truly found his way back to the physician's important duty to help through a woman's beautiful and steadfast love. Unfortunately, the decisive scenes, in which we were supposed to learn that he had opened his own practice, were mangled by cuts. The film thus leaves some questions open. But it does answer one question, the most important one for us, with fine decisiveness: German cinema is justified and in a position to take, claim and expand its peaceful position with promising singlemindedness and high artistic seriousness.

Source of original German text: Werner Fiedler, "Der Weg durch die Trümmer," *Neue Zeit*, no. 244, October 17, 1946, p. 27.

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