

Jakub Majmurek: Our Living Ruins

Czech translation: Izabela Szulc
English translation: Christopher Smith

In a scene from Werner Herzog's *Heart of Glass* (1976), set in 18th-century Bavaria, a baron gripped by madness asks his secretary whether someday factories will become the same symbols of yesteryear as castles, former mediaeval fortresses, are then—symbols of a feudal reality slipping into the past. The question betrays the distance dividing Herzog's film from the present we know. For us the answer is obvious. For us, for many years already, factories and other constructions of industrial civilization have been symbols of a reality that began sinking into the past several decades ago. Factory buildings, worker housing, disused mineshafts: if they are not converted into shopping malls, lofts, recreational spaces or modern housing, they fall into ruin, much as defunct medieval castles, gnawed away by time, began to turn into ruins once upon a time.

But there is one fundamental difference. When romantic authors from the times when Herzog's film was set gazed in melancholy rapture at the ruins of mediaeval abbeys in England laid waste during the reign of the Tudors, they looked at a past that had departed, had long abandoned the present, and alluded to times to which there was no return. Such a ruin could easily become the object of pure, aesthetic contemplation. But when we look at ruins we wrestle with a past that doesn't want to end, but continues to throb in the present like a wound.

Cinema and ruins

By its very nature, cinema seems to be a medium particularly predestined to display the process of formation of such a "living ruin," sinking into the past but still painfully lingering in the here and now. This is because the fundamental tense of film is the past imperfect. Photography captures an

image of a single point in time, while cinema captures the flow of time, a present that is becoming, but cannot ultimately become, the past.

Cinema has explored the living ruins from the Second World War. This theme was pursued in particular by Italian neorealism. The basic theme of this movement was an image of Italian society as a ruin devastated by the war, incapable of pulling itself together and starting life anew. Ruins in the most literal sense appear as a motif in a film regarded as one of the masterpieces of this genre, *Germany, Year Zero* (1948) by Roberto Rossellini. In the film, war-demolished Berlin—tenement houses reduced to mounds of rubble, ramshackle buildings, hulls of structures without roofs or windows—becomes the background for a tragic story of a German boy driven to murder and suicide by the reality of occupation.

In Rossellini's work, the ruins of Berlin are not a boundary dividing the new German reality from the Nazi past, but telling proof of the endurance of the past, continually poisoning the present, just as the mind of the protagonist is poisoned by a former teacher faithful to Nazi ideals.

Gilles Deleuze saw in neorealism a ground-breaking trend in the history of film, in which the idiom of classic American cinema (the “movement-image”), founded on action, a protagonist striving for a goal, breaks down. In its stead, neorealism offers an image of immobility, a present that cannot escape the past, protagonists wandering aimlessly through a space that is ruined—actually or metaphorically.

The long endurance of Polish ruins

Ruins are also the natural landscape for Polish post-war cinema. The capital, Warsaw, was almost entirely destroyed during the war and two uprisings, first the Ghetto Uprising in the spring of 1943 and then the Warsaw Uprising starting in August 1944. The ruins of Warsaw are the background for some of the first Polish films after the war. The finale of *Border Street* (1948) by Aleksander Ford shows the extermination of the Warsaw Ghetto during the 1943 uprising. *Treasure* (1948) by Leonard Buczkowski, the first post-war Polish comedy, is set in a tenement building rescued from the conflagration, where due to the overcrowding in the ruined city a group of strangers are squeezed into one apartment, and caught up in an intrigue involving the titular treasure, hidden among the ruins and rubble.

But it would not be until a decade later that the ruins left by the war would speak with full force, in the films of the Polish School, a movement that thanks to destalinization could throw off the straitjacket of social realism and attempt to settle the score with the war-time history. *Sewer* (1957) by Andrzej Wajda presents Warsaw during the 1944 uprising as a huge ruin, a post-apocalyptic landscape. In the title sequence we witness ravines of rubble, German soldiers torching tenement houses, and collapsing buildings. In the next scene we observe a squad of insurgents moving through the ruined city. In the rubble they find a demolished piano, in this landscape resembling a surrealist art installation. The ruins of the city are also the ruins of culture and civilization.

The partisans descend into the city's sewer system. It is the relatively safest method to get around in the city increasingly controlled by the German army. For Wajda, the sewer is also an ultimate location, stripping away the heroes' masks and forcing them to face the narrowest existential choices, where biological survival is at stake.

Also in Wajda's next film, *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958), ruins constitute meaningful scenery. In one of the key scenes, Maciek Chel̓micki, a partisan of the anti-communist underground who has been ordered by his commanding officer to assassinate Szczuka, the head of the local communist party cell, has a talk in a ruined church with a girl, Krystyna, he met in a hotel bar. A memorable shot presents in the foreground the drooping head of Christ, behind which we see the young couple chatting among the ruins.

The girl represents a chance for another life for Maciek: abandoning the doomed battle with the communists, a chance for love, stability, emerging from the underground. But Maciek ultimately rejects that possibility. He executes the command and kills Szczuka, who is presented to viewers as an earnest, idealistic communist, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War. For carrying out the command, Maciek pays with his own life. He dies on a garbage dump, on the ash heap of history.

But the past symbolized by the ruins cannot become the past in the cinema of the Polish School. It continues to cast a deadly spell over the protagonists of these films, forces them to fight for a lost cause. Just as Maciek Chel̓micki chooses death on a garbage dump over the possibility of happiness in love, so the leader of the insurgent squad in *Sewer* returns to the city's bowels in the last scene of the film, to look for his soldiers, spurning the opportunity of a safe escape.

Ruins that refuse to become the past haunt Polish cinema to this day.

The image of Warsaw destroyed by the 1944 uprising returns in *Warsaw 44* (2014) by Jan Komasa. The film depicts young people, teenagers, practically still children, who decide to join the uprising, spurred on by patriotic enthusiasm and a sense of humiliation gathering over the years of German occupation. But war proves far from what they imagined. The under-armed, poorly trained insurgents run up against a solid wall. The German forces slaughter them, and then reduce Warsaw to ruins.

In the final scene we see the picture of contemporary Warsaw: a city of skyscrapers illuminated at night, a contemporary metropolis rising in the place of the former ruin and site of megadeath. This image can be interpreted in two keys. The major key, in the spirit of the historical policy imposed by the right wing, as a confirmation of the meaningfulness of the uprising: maybe the insurgents lost to the Germans in 1944, and the city was demolished, but their “sacrifice” paved the way to the contemporary free, democratic, wealthy Poland. Or the minor key, in which the image of the contemporary city, crowning the festival of destruction staged so adroitly by Komasa, can be read as an allegory for how the wartime past cannot become the past for 21st-century Poland. How the ruins of Warsaw from the 1940s, long ago swept away and rebuilt, persist in the Polish imagination like an unhealed wound. How the failure to critically process the megadeath of the uprising generates a string of infantile fantasies accompanying the memory of the uprising, along the lines of *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*.

Perhaps the most persuasive image in Polish cinema of a ruin suspended between past and future was created by Andrzej Żuławski in *The Devil* (1972). The film may be read allegorically as a depiction, dressed in historical costume, of the student protests and anti-Semitic campaign of 1968. It is set in 1793, during the course of the second partition of Poland, in the region of Wielkopolska just occupied at that time by the Prussian army. A mysterious stranger releases the unsuccessful regicide Jakub from a monastery. He delivers a cutthroat razor to Jakub along with a list of traitors blamed for causing the nation’s downfall.

The entire film is comprised of Jakub’s somnambulistic, hallucinogenic journey, attempting to carry out the mission entrusted to him. On his travels the young man reaches his family home. It is a typical Polish manor house, the most Polish form in architecture, a symbol of Polishness, or at least of the hegemonic culture of the Polish noble class, the *szlachta*. When we first see the

manor house, in the first shots, showing the façade of the building, it seems like a solid structure, a family seat ensuring a sense of security, rootedness and status. But up close, the house proves to be a ruin. It was recently consumed by fire. The interior is scorched walls. Part of the structure was entirely destroyed, some rooms are bereft of walls, and the domestic space opens to the surrounding landscape, rain, wind and cold. The structure offers no shelter, as it is apparent that the fire has triggered a process of rot.

In a few scenes in the burn-out manor house, Żuławski creates a visually fascinating allegorical image of the hegemonic, post-*szlachta* Polish culture—capable of surviving the fall of the noble First Republic, the partitions and modernization forced by them, the experiment of inter-war Poland with parliamentary democracy and a modern dictatorship, the war, and communism. Persisting as a ruin, refusing to sink into the past, also engrafted into our present.

The Zone, or the past that will not die

But the image providing the template for contemporary cinematic depictions of ruins come not from neorealism or Polish film. It is provided by Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). The film is set in the Zone, a terrain arising at a site where an alien craft has crashed. The normal laws of physics and chemistry are suspended there, and life evolves along bizarre, seemingly unearthly paths. The Zone is an area of contact with the incredible, what evades rational human understanding, the sphere once described by religions.

The Zone also resembles a great post-industrial ruin—an area which, after the withdrawal of industry and all the social structure built up around it, is sinking into civilizational decay. Tarkovsky shot *Stalker* in just such a space, along the Jägala River near Tallinn, including power plants demolished during the war, a defunct refinery, and a paper mill continually discharging waste into the river. Tarkovsky conveys the breakdown of industrial civilization, in the face of which he seeks rescue in religion, spiritual experience, represented here by the Stalker from the title.

It was also in 1979 that Margaret Thatcher won election in the UK. Thus symbolically ends the Keynesian era of consensus between labour and capital in Western countries, and the process of deregulation begins in developed economies, opening of borders, financialization—which entails the twilight of industry and the entire form of socialization founded on it.

In Ben Wheatley's film *High-Rise* (2015), this Keynesian modernity is represented by the eponymous building. The designer intended it to provide the residents with all the modern conveniences, rationally, in accordance with the needs and principles of social justice guaranteeing everyone a home in a utopian, egalitarian space. But the old social hierarchies, lurking deep in feudalism, quickly re-emerge in the high-rise, and the utopia is blasted apart by mounting conflicts and violence. Finally, uncontrolled riots turn the modern structure into a ruin. In the last scene of the film, the image of the ruin is accompanied by a radio address by Mrs. Thatcher, heralding the neoliberal revolution of the 1980s.

But these ruins of Keynesian modernity refuse to subside into the past. They linger in the present like a wound, a reproach, a reminder of the promise of a different future that never materialized. No future giving cause for optimism could emerge from such ruins. The city on which cinematic representations of this problem are most clearly based is Detroit. Once the heart of the American automotive industry, it could maintain a broad middle class thanks to stable, well-paid, unionized jobs. Now the city has teetered on the brink of insolvency for years, hit first by deindustrialization, then by the flight of wealthier residents to the suburbs, and finally by the financial crisis of 2008, which placed a special curse on the Detroit real estate market. In other words, an ideal setting for socially conscious cinema. Or horror movies.

In one of the films in this genre, *Don't Breathe* (2016) by Fede Álvarez, we see the city without a future and without prospects, where a group of young people make ends meet by stealing valuables from houses. One day the trio are hired to conduct a break-in that could keep them flush for a long time. They are supposed to rob the home of an old veteran who lost his sight in Iraq. The man is rumoured to keep cash at home from the substantial settlement he received after his daughter's death in a car accident. The veteran lives in a neighbourhood scourged by all of Detroit's crises. Most of the residents have moved out, houses stand in ruin, there's not a living soul around, and the veteran's house seems the only habitable structure for blocks around. To the young criminals it looks like easy pickings, but as often happens in horror flicks, it proves to be a death trap.

In one of the more notorious horror films of the last decade, *It Follows* (2014) by David Robert Mitchell, Detroit is the background for the terror experienced by a group of young people tormented by a mysterious monster or perhaps a ghost. This being "transmits" itself sexually. A person haunted by the spectre can be released from its grip by passing it on to the next person they

have sex with. But you have to hurry, because if the spectre catches you physically, you will die.

The plot of the film launches in the ruins of the Packard plant, which once produced perhaps the most luxurious cars in Detroit. The heroine, Jay, wakes up tied to a chair after spending the night with her new boyfriend. The boy explains to her that she will now be pursued by a being visible only to her, assuming the appearance of a person she knows. The ruined Detroit and vicinity, a city that seems to have no future, completes the picture in Mitchell's film of the young protagonists who cannot escape their own past, terrorized by a spectre embodying their traumas, emotional wounds, betrayals and hurts.

Finally, Detroit is the home of a pair of vampires in the comedy horror *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) by Jim Jarmusch. They gaze at the industrial ruins of the city much as the aesthete from the 18th century gazed at the ruined castles. They live in their own world, filled with icons of 20th-century pop culture, former figures of rebellion and transgression. But all of these texts of 20th-century culture are lifeless, suggesting figures in a museum, part of a culture of exhaustion, eternal sampling and remixing—the only culture that can thrive amid the ruins, where no future can be born.

Under a cracking dome

In the most memorable scene from the first *Planet of the Apes* (1968) by Franklin J. Schaffner, the astronaut Taylor, played by Charlton Heston, discovers the terrifying truth about the eponymous planet. When he escapes the simian society and sets off into the unknown, he beholds the Statue of Liberty buried in sand up to her waist. Taylor grasps the secret that the apes tried to hide from him: he is not on a distant planet, but on the future Earth, where humanity has gone extinct, replaced by apes.

This image is just as important for the contemporary understanding of ruins in film as the Zone from *Stalker*. If contemporary culture can conceive any image of the future, in the main it is post-apocalyptic, presenting the utter extermination of the world as we know it. In the last decade the film industry has brought us a whole range of depictions of the extermination of humanity—due to invasion by aliens, natural disasters, nuclear catastrophe, or society's collapse into barbarism. The prospect of climate catastrophe injects a particular urgency into even the least artistically and intellectually inspiring of these films.

The Polish film *O-Bi, O-Ba: The End of Civilization* (1984) by Piotr Szulkin perhaps best conveys the situation of a palpable, approaching apocalypse that will leave in its wake only the ruins of human civilization as we know it. It plays out in a world destroyed by a long-lasting nuclear war. The surface of the planet is uninhabitable due to radiation. The survivors huddle in an underground shelter, not knowing whether there are others like them left on Earth. Authoritarian leaders attempt to govern the underground society, but incompetently, and the society eludes their control. The black market blossoms, along with zones of hedonism, and a religion prophesying the coming of the Ark to rescue all the people crowded underground and carry them to a place free from radiation and the other consequences of the war. But they all know it is not really the Ark that is coming, but the end: the dome of the bunker is gradually cracking, and soon the deadly radiation will reach their underground world.

Like Szulkin's characters, we sense today that what is most daunting is the ruin that is only now approaching: the slow cracking of the familiar, secure world, under the stress of climate change and other crises. Just as the cinema arising out of neorealism depicted ruins as a symbol of the past continually weighing on the present, so contemporary, post-apocalyptic films evoke future catastrophes and future ruins, which we sense have already arrived, but so far we are unable to perceive them. Is it possible to escape from the image of ruins, towards new, utopian images? The entire culture, not just cinema, seems deeply in need of such a new opening, but on this issue our collective imagination seems paralysed.

Jakub Majmurek (born 1982) is a Polish film critic, essayist and journalist. In addition to film he also specializes in art and literature. His articles have appeared in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Oko.press*, *Aspen Review*, *Kino* and *Filmweb*. His most recent book is *Cinema-Art. A Turning Point in Contemporary Polish Art* (*Kino-sztuka. Zwrot kinematograficzny w polskiej sztuce współczesnej*, published by *Krytyka Polityczna* and *Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie* 2015; editor, together with Łukasz Ronduda). He is part of the Polish circle *Krytyka Polityczna*.

