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Memory in Pieces: The Symbolism of the Ruin in Warsaw after 1944

Attempting to remember one of the last outposts of resistance at the end of the Warsaw Uprising, the Polish poet Miron Białoszewski in his 1970 *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* (A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising) struggled with his own memories. Addressing his reader directly, he wrote, «Don’t be surprised if I suddenly remember something. That’s how it is. And I make no corrections because I want the difficulty of remembering and of separating events to be apparent.»¹ Even when employing the classical mnemonic technique – plotting that which is to be remembered onto a mental journey through the city² – his memories of the city centre from a quarter of a century earlier still refused to cohere:

And what was there in Íródmieie? Krucza? With intersecting side streets? Or Zlota? Even that’s not so sure.

And the rest?

In ruins.

So?

A couple of streets which were one-half or one-quarter intact, which vaguely resembled streets. That’s how it seemed then. Now they wouldn’t even seem like streets. How could they?³

Broken streets were – for Białoszewski – inadequate containers of memory, yet they have been given major roles in the ways in which Warsaw has remembered its tragic Second World War history. Ruins have – as I will show presently – been promoted as putative monuments, as «holy» relics, and used as the backdrop for grand political gestures. Poignant, strangely expressive and yet literally mute, Warsaw’s ruins have been made to «speak» for different interests. In this paper I set out to explore these acts of ventriloquism by architects, politicians, film-

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makers, artists and writers over a period of more than six decades since the catastrophe of war.

Warsaw is famously known as a city which returned from obliteration. The city’s ruins were produced in three terrifying war-time episodes during the Second World War: during the German invasion in 1939 following the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact; in retaliation for the Ghetto Uprising in 1943; and in revenge for the Warsaw Uprising the following year. Cleared of people (by violence and deportations), the largest part of Warsaw’s streets and buildings were destroyed in 1944 by the Verbrennungskommandos (annihilation detachments) using tanks, flame-throwers and explosives. When the city was liberated in January 1945, the centre of Warsaw was a vast sea of rubble with only a few ‘islands’ formed by standing buildings. Despite (or perhaps because of) its abject condition, «Warsaw» was rapidly turned into an ideal and a symbol of national revival. Within days of its liberation in January 1945, the National Homeland Council (a provisional parliament) resolved that the city would remain the capital of Poland (although the practical business of governance was conducted in Łódź). In late January 1945 the mayor of Warsaw and former architect Marian Spychalski established the first of a number of offices dedicated to the task of rebuilding the city. Early plans coincided with considerable efforts by ordinary citizens returning to the city to make practical arrangements for living. As the Soviet-backed authorities tightened their grip on Polish life in the late 1940s and suppressed their opponents, the task of remaking Warsaw was turned into a demonstration of the power of the command economy, Soviet aesthetics and social «principles». In August 1949 the President and leader of the Polish United Workers’ Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR) Bolesław Bierut announced the «Six-Year Plan for the Reconstruction of Warsaw», a comprehensive plan for all aspects of life in the city.

In the years that followed, Warsaw exchanged faces on a number of occasions. In the early 1950s, fidelity to Moscow required prestige buildings in the monumental, neo-classical idiom of socialist realism. High-rise housing blocks provided bold images of socialist modernity in the 1960s and 1970s. Poland’s decisive rejection of communist rule in 1989 was marked by the construction of a new «down-town» of towering glass spires. In this progressive narrative, war-time ruins have been literally and figuratively overwritten by the activities of bulldozers and cranes, bricklayers and architects as well as the journalists and photographers commissioned to record the revival of the city. Each new face has been a demonstration of power, testifying to the command of the spatial and material resources required to


make it. In a city which has a socialist realist «wedding cake» tower designed and constructed by Soviet architects and builders – the Palace of Culture and Science – at its heart, this is a truism. But if architectural monuments represent clear statements on the part of those who design and commission them, what can ruins – broken and only capable of pointing backwards – signify? What was their role in the People’s Republic of Poland (PRL), a country where the party state broadcasted its commitment to a progressive image of the future and yet, at the same time, was capable of exploiting the past to tap popular patriotism?6 And what role have Warsaw’s war-time ruins played in the two decades since the end of PZPR rule?

1. The Warsaw Uprising: History and Memory
Ruins have long been given allegorical functions. Broken buildings drew the Romantic imagination as evidence of the triumph of nature over culture: cracks and weeds marked the limits of civilisation and pointed to man’s hubris. Many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectuals – a distinguished roster of which famously includes Wordsworth, Piranesi, Diderot, Goethe and Michelet – found a melancholic pleasure in contemplating the ruin as utopia in reverse.7 It is, however, rather more difficult to aestheticise the ruins produced by modern warfare than those produced by time or even by political revolutions (although of course many have tried8). The ruins which result from mechanised violence seem far less innocent or optimistic or, as Georg Simmel would have it, «natural».9 As chronometers, they do not measure the slow passing of time, but rather short and literally explosive events. Moreover, such ruins – when reproduced and turned into signs – tend to function as indexes rather than as allegories. They measure events rather than symbolise the past. Comparing the kinds of artefacts which bear their scars with those that allegorise the past, Susan Stewart writes: «They mark the horrible transformation of meaning into material more than they mark, as other souvenirs do, the transformation of materiality into meaning.»10 The «original» meaning of Warsaw’s war-time ruins was not hard to decipher. They resulted from a Nazi script which demanded the complete disappearance «of the city from the face of the Earth».11 Particular attention was given to the historic fabric, those buildings which most clearly identified Warsaw as Warsaw. Ninety-six per cent of

the buildings classified as historical monuments before the Second World War were fully or partially destroyed, victims of their central location and their symbolic value. As indexes, ruins have the capacity to testify to tragedy. The role of the witness has not been an uncontroversial one in post-war Poland. The poet Białoszewski — with whose words this essay begins — is a case in point. He endured one of the many terrifying experiences of the uprising. Like many of his compatriots fleeing the German forces, he was forced to undertake a journey through the city's network of sewers. He knew the terror and danger of this journey first hand, yet he was later unable or unwilling to separate events from their representation: «This,» he commented of the German assault on Poles hiding in the sewers, «I know from films.» Andrzej Wajda’s brilliant filmic account of the uprising, Kanal, was perhaps the prosthesis for Białoszewski’s memory. Kanal allowed — as I will show below — for an order of (imperfect) public remembrance which was, at the time of the film’s making in 1957, not available to Polish society.

It is perhaps not surprising that Białoszewski discovered his own past in films and not in a book. History writing was placed under tremendous pressure during the communist rule in Poland and was distorted to suit the ideological interests of the authorities. The early historiography of the Warsaw Uprising was, for instance, shaped by the need to manage anti-Soviet sentiment. The inaction of the Red Army on the eastern banks of the Vistula in the face of the destruction of the west-bank city in 1944 and the deep-seated emotional attachment felt by Poles in the fate of the Home Army (Armia Krajowa) – both during the Warsaw Uprising itself and during the Stalin years, when its former members were abused by the Soviet security forces and the courts – meant that this subject was highly inflammatory. PZPR rule, however, oscillated between the poles of repression and concession. The subject of Warsaw’s martyrology was always likely to appear at those times when the state sought to tap or distract public opinion: new books, monuments and memorials to the heroes of the Warsaw Uprising, for instance, appeared at times of great political tension.

The first illustrated popular book on the theme, Jan Grużewski and Stanisław Kopf’s Dni Powstania. Kronika Foto-


13 Białoszewski, Warsaw Uprising, 55.


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For the representation of the Home Army in post-war Poland, see A. Waśkiewicz, «The Polish Home Army and the Politics of Memory», in: East European Politics & Societies 24 (February 2010) 1, 44–58. See also the final chapter in N. Davies, Rising 44: The Battle for Warsaw, Chatham 2003, 579–617.

18 For instance Signum, a samizdat publisher, issued Powstanie warszawska in 1981, a manuscript writ-
instance, been the site of an illegal memorial to the victims murdered at Katyn erected by supporters of the Solidarity Trade Union. Immediately dismantled by the security forces, informal memorials continued to be erected there, creating a site for public commemoration of an event which was occluded from the official record. Memory was frequently activated in such ways to contest the official record of events in the recent past and to indict the actions of an illegitimate power.

The ways in which memories of the recent past have been drawn to the present since the end of the PRL are – somewhat inevitably – rather different. «Memory» has become the instrument of a rather more assertive ego. For instance, the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (Institute of National Remembrance, IPN) began operating in 2000 (after being licensed in a special bill which had passed through the Polish parliament two years earlier). Synthesising the practices of history and memory, the IPN performs the sometimes controversial juridical function of identifying victims, villains, collaborators and eye-witnesses in Poland between 1939 and 1989. Its research of events such as the Jedwabne pogrom and the murders of Poles in Volhynia as well as the activities of public figures during the years of PZPR rule has been the trigger for considerable national self-reflection (as well as attacks from the Right and the Left). However, the IPN is widely – if not entirely – accurately seen as a tool of right-wing government, not least the PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość / Law and Justice Party)-led administration of 2006–07. In fact, PiS has itself been a rather effective manipulator of history. In their march on power in the early years of the twenty-first century, the late President Lech Kaczyński and Jarosław Kaczyński, the prime minister until 2007 – twin brothers who led the Party – presented themselves as defenders of the nation and of historical memory. Writing of the PiS’s memory politics, Maciej Górny has noted that one of the Right’s «popular arguments is that the current re-nationalization of the German historical memory needs to be countered by the united front of the Polish society». In 2007 Jarosław Kaczyński invoked the violence of the Second World War to antagonise Poland’s partners in the European Union, claiming superior voting rights by counting the nation’s war dead. In a parallel move, Lech

22 This essay was under revision when president Lech Kaczyński died with 95 others in an air crash near Smolensk. He was leading a delegation of prominent figures in Polish society to an event marking the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre.
24 K. Tchorek, «Polish voters support leaders’ call», in: The Times (23 June 2007).
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Kaczyński established a commission to determine the economic cost of the oszalalęcej agresji («crazed aggression») by the forces of the Third Reich in Warsaw (a move designed to counter any future German claim for compensation for lost land and property in the territory of Western Poland today). It reported its findings in early 2004, putting the figure at 31.5 billion US dollars at then current values.  

I will return to the values attached to ruins in present-day Poland at the end of this article, but first it is necessary to turn to the immediate post-war period when Warsaw’s ruins presented not only immense practical problems but also ideological ones.

2. Ruins Erased

The Soviet-backed leadership which took power in Poland inevitably confronted the issue of ruins when they announced their plans for the capital. As noted above, President Bierut, who was also the PZPR leader, introduced the «Six-Year Plan for the Reconstruction of Warsaw» in August 1949 at the city’s polytechnic university, which was one of the few surviving buildings in the city. The following year his long sermon was published as a massive illustrated tome. This lavish book – available in Russian, Polish, English and French editions – provided clear evidence, were any needed, of the process of Poland’s Sovietisation underway at the time. The benign figure of Stalin, drawing on his pipe, is featured on the first page to attest to Poland’s new faith in the Georgian god while pre-war images of unrelied poverty and excessive luxury «demonstrated» the social inequalities of capitalism. The reconstruction programme was represented by Stakhanovite workers sweating on the city’s new building sites, and the new socialist realist vision for Warsaw was projected in sketches for new landmarks. Over the years which followed, when these new additions to the city-scape were realised, they too were celebrated in grand honorific ceremonies and published in luxurious tomes.

In these volumes the future was somewhat easier to manage than the past. Bierut’s 1949 speech and the book in which it appeared was a lesson in the principles of «Diamat» (dialectical materialism). The future was already known – the challenge for mankind was to speed its arrival. Inconvenient details of history were overlooked or distorted. The fact that the Red Army had halted its march to the west during the final stage in the Nazi destruction of the city in 1944 – an event which most Poles viewed as a second act of Nazi–Soviet collusion – was obscured in the official record. Instead, the book and speech outlined numerous instances of «fraternal» Soviet aid after 1945: bridges across the Vistula, trains and trolleybuses, prefabricated homes and a radio station.


26 B. Bierut, Szczędzoteln plan odbudowy Warszawy, Warsaw 1950.
A 1955 title, *MDM Marszałkowska 1730–1954*, was probably the boldest book in the genre. Commemorating the construction of a new model district in the centre of Warsaw, MDM, it was a tour de force of different montage techniques (fig. 1). Facsimile articles from the international press, official documents, handwritten instructions from the chief architect and plans were all reprinted alongside documentary photographs. Popular cultural forms like street songs, children’s drawings and cartoons were also combined on its pages. Ostensibly, and in structural terms, this book about the new city centre of Warsaw echoed Alfred Döblin’s famous 1929 novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, which composed a picture of the city from traces and fragments of modern life, including advertisements and chorus-line songs. But the effect of the 1955 title was very different. Here, montage did not produce what Franz Roh in the 1920s had called the «demolishment of form, a chaotic whirl of blown up total appearance». Rather, montage, when practised in the Socialist Bloc after 1945, eschewed the aesthetics of dislocation and shock: it was given a constructive function to stabilise and fix meaning. It often took a kind of rhetorical form that Roland Barthes called a «concatenation» of carefully organised images, usually supplied with anchoring captions, that were combined to deliver unmistakable messages.

In these weighty official publications, montage was often reduced to its most simple and least controvertible form – that of a structured contrast. Both the «Six-Year Plan» and the *MDM* volume made frequent use of the formal contrast between images of the ruined streets, shattered structures and lonely people dwarfed by the yawning desolation and the new vistas and façades being built or reconstructed on the same spots (fig. 2). The distance between then and now was carefully maintained by these visual contrasts. The ravaged state of the city in 1944 and the achievements of the reconstruction programme were, as these images pressed, incontestable. The ruin was not allowed to stand alone, to stand for «itself» or, perhaps paradoxically, even to stand for the past.

This device of coupling stripped each site of its pasts and, invariably, projected its future and, as such, could be contrasted with contemporary monument ruins like Coventry Cathedral or the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin. Despite their modern additions and their ambiguous memorial purposes, in their state of preserved ruination, these «Western» buildings are dedicated to the retrospective tasks of reconciliation and remembrance. By contrast, the tendentious function of the ruin in these Polish publications was to suggest socialist Warsaw’s destiny.

30 It is striking that this practice has been revived by young Polish patriots in recent years. Piotr Margas and Maciej Kościelnik from Oneshot Design have produced contemporary versions of this structured contrast. See J. Majewski, «Warszawa miasto jak Feniks», in: *Gazeta Wyborcza* (29 July 2008).
31 See L. Campbell, *Coventry Cathedral. Art and Architecture in Post-war Britain*, Oxford 1996; and
This is not to say that the image of ruin was stripped of its pathos. It functioned – unmistakably – as an ideological vent through which to draw patriotic sentiment and indict those who had destroyed the city. But the powerfully affective image of the ruin and the memories that it could arouse had to be contained and its force

channelled (quite literally, in the form of voluntary labour to reconstruct parts of the city like the Old Town). In effect, ruins – in the representational cosmos of socialism during the 1950s – were time-locked in 1944, the moment of destruction. The official image of the ruin was strangely – and tellingly – achronic.

These paired images could be characterised as «contra-memorial» representations which suppress the capacity for private memorialisation, for the recalling of places and events experienced before or even during the fall. In Camera Lucida, a book on photography and memory – a logical and intuitive coupling – Roland Barthes accuses photography of a particular kind of inadequacy: «Earlier societies managed so that memory, the substitute for life, was eternal and that at least the thing which spoke Death should itself be immortal: this was the Monument. But by making the (mortal) Photograph into the general and somehow natural witness of «what has been», modern society has renounced the Monument. [T]he Photograph is a certain but fugitive testimony; so that everything, today, prepares our race for impotence: to be no longer able to conceive duration, affectively or symbolically.»

Adopting the photographs of ruins whilst effacing them from cities like Warsaw in the massive reconstruction programme sought to control their capacity to function as memorials either affectively within the realms of individual experience, or symbolically within the ideologically determined context of public space.

3. Forgetting

The question of what a ruin might memorialise was deeply problematic for communist authority, not least because the value of all buildings – whether in ruins or not – was measured above all by ideological criteria. This is perhaps mostly clearly demonstrated by the example of the Royal Castle in the historic centre of the city. During the late 1940s, before the Party had secured its monopoly, this historic building was frequently represented in the press, sometimes in the form of paired images depicting the building in ruins and yet-to-be-destroyed condition in the 1930s. This early coupling broke what were to become the rules of History. Essentially nostalgic and mournful, this retrospective mode was inappropriate for the joyful task of building socialism in Poland.

Although the castle featured in reconstruction plans for the Old Town district in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, the appropriate form and function of this future Zamek Socjalistyczny (Socialist Castle) were not resolved at this time. As Piotr Majewski has recorded, prominent art historians and conservators protested against what they saw as the poor quality designs proposed by architects seeking to reconcile the historic form of the building with the aesthetic «principles» of Soviet

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socialist realism. The castle was still in ruins when in October 1956 a post-Stalinist regime took power in Poland and new priorities were set for architecture and the economy. The reconstruction plans were shelved. In the years that followed, the castle formed an open wound at the heart of the city. Unacceptable as a monarchical symbol (perhaps because it had been adopted as a cause célèbre amongst anti-communist Poles living abroad), this complex of historic buildings, even as rubble, disappeared from the representational order of Polish socialism in the 1960s. Gomułka, the first secretary of PZPR and an uncompromising character, is believed to have personally obstructed plans for its reconstruction. The nature of his objection is unclear and probably manifold: the castle embodied the quasi-democratic traditions of the Polish aristocracy which voted for its kings during the commonwealth of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Like an architectural oxymoron, it was an aristocratic symbol of democracy. Moreover, it had first been turned into a ruin during the *Blitzkrieg* of September 1939 when the Soviet Union and the Germans formed their alliance. It testified to the moment when Stalin embraced Hitler. Both facts meant that, from the Party’s perspective, a rebuilt castle appeared a malignant monument.

Nevertheless, the castle occupied a prominent place in the imagined or remembered city, not least for those who made the pilgrimage to the Old Town, the centrepiece of the reconstruction of the city and a major site of ideological activity. In ruins, the Royal Castle could function indexically as evidence of both the glorious Polish past and the ignominious «Soviet» present. Unencumbered with a purpose or function, it was open to a kind of emotional investment that the Party found threatening. Perhaps cynically, a new party leadership in the 1970s licensed the castle’s reconstruction, renaming the monument «Warsaw Castle». In so doing, they checked any fantastic, democratic or aristocratic hopes which the site in ruins might nourish. Restored, this building belongs to an odd category of things described by Adrian Forty as «counter-iconoclasm» – things that are remade in order to forget what their absence once signified.

4. Remembering

In the People’s Republic of Poland, history (ordered by ideology) had to triumph over memory (a subjective, emotive and perhaps less compliant capacity). This distinction might even be allegorised in the forms favoured by the Party in its representation of the city: history was monumental, sequential and linear (like the endlessly monotonous socialist realist vistas being built in the early 1950s), whereas

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the many ruins were discontinuous, fragmentary and exploded (not unlike the incendiary discharges of memory). Incomplete, the ruin required conscious acts of recall to be restored.

Such acts of recall are difficult to find, particularly during the early years of the People’s Republic when the policing of culture was most vigilant. One rare example of the public exercise of memory in the post-war years is a series of combination photograph-drawings by artist Bronisław Wojciech Linke between 1946 and 1956. Linke was an exceptional artist in the post-war Polish context in a number of ways. His art had Weimar roots: he employed grotesque imagery like that favoured by Otto Dix to comment on the brutality and injustice of life as well as techniques of exaggeration and distortion developed by photomontage artists like John Heartfield and Raoul Hausmann. He was also a committed socialist who refused to bow to the official creed of socialist realism. His pre-war record as an activist was valuable to the regime which required endorsement from public intellectuals, yet his idiosyncratic and largely pessimistic vision of humanity was at odds with official dogma. During the first post-war decade, he worked on a series of drawings entitled «Stones That Cry» (Kamienie krzyczą) which were only published during the liberalising Thaw of the mid 1950s. Their anguish, their explicit Christian symbolism and underlying surrealism made these works politically unacceptable according to the banal and bathetic tenets of socialist realism, a world populated with grinning peasants and proletarians happily building the future.

These montages acknowledged the fragmented character of the city devastated by war. They combine drawings and photographs – recorded with his own camera – with other documents and ephemera. Linke’s ruins were less a meditation on History (whether in a Marxist-Leninist mode or not) than an exercise in what might be called «mnemography». «Stones that Cry» was in the first instance an expression of Linke’s own grief in the aftermath of the war. This perhaps explains the heavy-handed sentimentality of some of the images in the series. In one drawing entitled «Misterium» (1947) a brick woman gives birth to a child with a crane acting like mechanical forceps (fig. 3). Three architectural figures crowned with barbed wire accompany this event on violins. Their bodies/walls are marked with bullet holes which leak blood. The drawing appears to be stamped with the words «Unchecked for mines», the message chalked on Warsaw’s buildings when the Poles started to reoccupy the city. In the foreground, a newspaper with the headline «Ruiny W(arszawy)» (Ruins of W(arsaw)) accompanied by a pre-war image of the Royal Castle and advertisements for prosthetic limbs forms another anthropomorphic figure. Bodies and buildings fuse in this image. In this way, Linke revived

38 B. Linke, Kamienie Krzyczą, Warsaw 1958.
and modified the traditional conception of the ruin as *memento mori*. And in giving the ruin an anthropomorphised form – animating the inanimate and representing the death of the living – Linke presented an uncanny vision of Warsaw. The city of «new enlightenment» was populated with ghosts and repressed anxieties.

In the birth of a child, «Misterium» contains a symbol of present hopes for the future while other images in the series raise questions about the meanings attached to the past. A 1956 drawing entitled «Prayer for the Dead» (*El mole rachamim*) depicts a ruined building as a praying Jew. It offers reflection on the absences in Polish society which were not only overlooked but were being erased in the rush to remake the city. At the same moment as this image was being produced, the chief city architect in Warsaw, making the case for new roads, could report that the 5400 tombstones in the oldest part of the Jewish cemetery had «no memorial value». Viewed in this context, Linke’s ruins point to the erasure of memory by History. Appearing during a moment of relative liberalisation, Linke’s images mark an early shot in what in the 1970s became a battle between the opposition and the state over the meanings which could be allocated to the past.

5. Shadows

If ruins sheltered ghosts from the past, then they also stood for an uncontrolled (and perhaps even uncontrollable) present. In Warsaw, ruins were the setting for social practices which the state refused to acknowledge during the Stalinist years of the early 1950s. Prostitution, squatting, alcoholism and black-market trade were all to be found in the wastelands of the city. In 1950s slang, prostitutes in Warsaw were known as *gruzinki* (Georgian girls) because they conducted their trade in the ruins (*gruzy*). In official ideology such social problems were characterised as symptoms of capitalism. The fact that they thrived in socialist Poland could hardly be countenanced. But during the Thaw of the mid-1950s, immediately after Stalin’s death, it became briefly possible to vent criticism of the failures of the regime. With considerable anti-communist feeling in Poland and elsewhere in the Eastern Bloc spreading into street protests and the tragedy of the repression of the Hungarian Uprising, the authorities tried to manage disaffection by relaxing censorship. (This was the period when Grużewski and Kopf’s *Dni Powstania* appeared.) It is not surprising, then, that the ruin was widely adopted as the defining Warsaw setting for artists, novelists and above all film-makers during these years. For example, Aleksander Ford, a party member and prominent film-maker, adapted Marek Hlasko’s bitter novel, *Eighth Day of the Week*, for the screen in 1957. The film tells the story of a couple’s despondent search for a private space in which to make love. They are, in an existential sense, homeless. Piotr, an architect who designs showy modernist towers in the state architectural office, lives in a ruined tenement which constantly threatens to give up its walls and floors, whilst philosophy student Agnieszka shares a tiny apartment with her family and a lodger. In the overcrowded city, only the filthy and rubble-strewn ruins seem to offer the space for them to satisfy their desire. Yet even the most derelict location turns out to be populated with a gang of drunks who abuse the lovers. Hemmed in by their environment and the narrow choices facing them, their relationship falls apart.

The film itself – a co-production with CCC-Film GmBH, a West German film company – was shot during a moment of relative liberalisation but was completed when the Party was pulling in its reins. At a private screening for Władysław Gomułka, the then First Secretary of the PZPR is reported to have stormed out screaming «świństwo, świństwo, świństwo» (swininess, swininess, swininess), subsequently banning the film for 25 years, a record in the history of Polish communist censorship.40 By contrast, another Thaw film which made use of Warsaw’s ruins not only as a backdrop but as a metaphor enjoyed far greater success. Andrzej Wajda’s *Kanal* (1957) narrates the fate of a small troop of soldiers during

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The Warsaw Uprising in the summer of 1944 (fig. 4). The film is divided in two parts, the first of which depicts the soldiers’ final hours in the ruins of the city (smoking, singing, making love and occasionally fighting), while the second presents a hellish journey through the sewers to engage the Germans in a final battle. Lacking the heroism favoured by Soviet films, the protagonists in Kanal all die in futile circumstances; their bodies crumpled and broken end up like the city-scape itself. Although the film offers no criticism of the Soviet Union, it was evident to many Polish viewers that they were victims of both Hitler and Stalin. The Kremlin had halted the progress of the Red Army on the eastern banks of the Vistula in 1944 whilst the Germans decimated the insurgents fighting in the ranks of the Home Army and then destroyed the city. Stalin preferred to enter an empty city rather than one in the hands of patriotic and belligerent Poles. In fact, the Kremlin and the Polish communists treated members of the Home Army as dangerous rivals long after the conclusion of the war. PZPR ideologues claimed that the insurgents («reactionaries») were as much to blame for the destruction of the city as Hitler (a view which has been sustained, for different reasons, by some historians who see the call to arms made by the Polish government in exile in London as reckless). Made during the Thaw, Wajda’s film effectively constituted the first memorial to the actions of the Home Army in Poland. And, unlike the later monuments erected to those who fought for the city – notably Marian Konieczny’s sword-wielding Memorial to the Heroes of Warsaw (1961) – it captured the flaws and frailties of Warsaw’s defenders.

42 Borodziej’s Warsaw Uprising of 1944 represents a recent example of what is sometimes called the «realist» position in the historiography of the Warsaw Uprising.
6. The Last Ruin?

Shot on and below the streets of Warsaw, *Kanal* did not demand elaborate sets. More than ten years after the end of the war, the city was still able to provide an ample supply of ruined sites. Over the years that followed, however, the ruins of the Second World War were slowly erased from the city. In 2003, one of the last war-time ruins in central Warsaw – the modest Divine Mercy and Saint Faustyna Church on Żytnia Street dating from 1872 – was finally restored to good architectural health. Curiously, restoration caused a minor outcry. Architects and conservators – figures who might otherwise have had an interest in restoration (or even demolition) – argued for the preservation of the church in its derelict state. The building, they argued, should be put under a bell jar (not unlike Norman Foster’s treatment of the Reichstag in Berlin), echoing calls for what Charles Merewether has dubbed a «negative monument», which «makes a place for the ruins that remain; it allows them to become an anguished site of cultural patrimony».

The case for this kind of preservation lay in the building’s history. It had been badly damaged during the Warsaw Uprising when young fighters from the *Parasol* battalion of the Home Army fought the *Wehrmacht*. Tomasz Urzykowski, a prominent historian and journalist, describing his experience of the decayed space sixty years later, noted: «Entering the church one felt the atmosphere of a blighted Warsaw as well as the tragedy of the city. One also feels its power (after all, the church, though blasted, burned out, still stands).» This was not the only moment in which the building had played a «historic» role. After the imposition of Martial Law (December 1981–July 1983) when the state suppressed the Solidarity Trade Union with troops, curfews and draconian censorship, the Catholic Church became a channel for a wide range of protests by believers and non-believers alike. At a time when artists and audiences boycotted official institutions, church buildings became temporary exhibition spaces and meeting centres.

The church on Żytnia Street provided a suitably melancholic setting for meetings of the anti-communist cultural elite as well as a number of exhibitions and theatrical performances by banned avant-garde companies like Teatr Ósmego Dnia (*Theatre of the Eighth Day*) from Poznań and anti-communist intellectuals like Wajda (who mounted an «Easter Vigil» there in 1985). The Theatre of the Eighth Day performed their production of *Report from a Besieged City*, based on Zbigniew Herbert’s celebrated poem, there in 1984. The words of this emotive and provocative poem booming out of loudspeakers, the company’s actors presented – in their trade-mark grotesque manner – scenes of victorious armies entering in the city and public executions of those who had fought defending its streets. The dilap-

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Das Erstellen und Weitergeben von Kopien dieses PDFs ist nicht zulässig.
idated state of the building – with its exposed and charred timber beams supporting a leaky roof, unrendered walls and broken columns, often lit with flickering candles – added to the conspiratorial atmosphere of these events, suggestively linking them to the long cycle of insurrection and punishment which runs through Polish history.

Twenty years later, the conservative opinion on the state of the church on Żytnia Street was that «the idea of leaving [it] as a permanent ruin reflected a desire to commemorate not so much the Warsaw Uprising as the activities of the social groups which gathered around the church in the 1980s.» Preservation would, it was argued, be a kind of self-aggrandisement, a monument to the «independent culture» of the 1980s. The more zealous voices in the Church (not least those clerics speaking through the megaphone of the reactionary Roman Catholic broadcaster Radio Maryja) insisted that no such garland should be bestowed on the liberal intelligentsia because it had forsaken its role as a moral force. The «last ruin» was, in effect, disputed property in a slow and angry divorce between the liberal intelligentsia and the Church.

7. And today?

Ruins of course remain in the city. Many are to be found in its unloved districts; others are the ruins of socialism, whilst some have been conscripted into post-communist mnemography. Consider the Warsaw Uprising Museum which opened its doors to the public in July 2004. Almost the first things the visitor sees on entering the museum is a ruin, or more precisely a casually arranged pile of broken cornices and stonework from the Royal Castle (which stands remade only a few kilometres away) (fig. 5). They are a museological prelude to the many ruins which form the main swathe of exhibits in the Museum. Precious Home Army relics and facsimiles are used to narrate the story of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. In fact, the Museum is itself a kind of industrial ruin, a former tramway power plant which dates from the early years of the twentieth century. These fragments and the building which contains them belong to the pervasive cult of authenticity which marks much of the pre-war material fabric of the city. So complete was the destruction during the war that all such «authentic» objects have a kind of exaggerated or exceptional value. Periodically, for instance, when some major or minor part of the pre-war city is threatened with destruction – as in the case of an early twentieth-century tenement on the corner of Marszalkowska and Mokotowska Street in 2002 – the city’s preservation lobby steps in to save these fragments of a once destroyed city from further destruction.49

As minor fragments from the catastrophe of war, the rubble in the Uprising Museum seems to produce what Roland Barthes famously called the «effect of the real» – the power of a minor action or superfluous detail to persuade by not persuading. But their arrangement in the gallery is not quite as casual as it might seem. They stand before a large backlit colour photograph of a street scene in the city from the 1930s thus reversing the temporal order of the kind of structured contrast much used before 1989 to chart progress towards the communist nirvana. The past represents a kind of lost utopia. Moreover, the museum uses the full panoply of affective, immersive and interactive techniques developed by Holocaust museums in the United States and elsewhere in the world, which in Landsberg’s words can produce «prosthetic memory», i.e. «memories of a past through which they did not live».50 Visitors live through a spectacular and supercharged experience of Warsaw in the grip of war. The route through the museum is presented as a vertiginous free fall through history through which one enters the cosmos of martyrs and saints – the men and women who fought in 1944 to save the city. Amplified sounds of beating hearts, marching boots and gun-fire ring through galleries; visitors can pass through a 25-metre-long sewer, like an insurgent during the uprising (or an actor in Wajda’s film). Here, the affective temper of memory – located in the body as well as in the mind – is generated for

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those too young to remember. New media are also used to produce the impression of an eye-witness. In 2010, to mark the sixty-sixth anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, the museum installed a five-minute CGI colour film, Miasto Ruin (City of Ruins), recreating the vertiginous perspectives of a «Liberator» airplane over the ruined and largely abandoned city in early 1945. The director of the museum, Jan Oldakowski, announced «If you have not seen it with your own eyes, individual photos from the time of the war will not convey it. It is only the film that truly reveals what Warsaw looked like just after the war had ended and from what kind of ruins it was raised.»

Like the IPN, the Museum has maintained strong connections to the conservatives in Polish politics since the early years of the new century. The late Lech Kaczyński, when mayor of Warsaw in the early 2000s, was the driving force behind the museum. A writer in Rzeczpospolita described it as a «bridge-head» for its founders – members of PiS – for stepping into public offices. In this context, it is hard not to see the fragments of the castle standing on the artificial cobbles before a brightly illuminated street scene of the pre-war city as political instruments. For all their facticity and presentness, the meaning of these exhibits is highly emotional and somewhat displaced, pointing, of course, to the violence done to the city by Poland’s neighbours.

Despite their connection with tragedy, these fragments from Warsaw’s past are deeply desired. In fact the desire for ruins in some parts of public culture in Poland today might be interpreted in Freudian terms as a kind of masochism – a neurosis manifesting displaced or distorted aggression. No one in the political elites operating in Poland today needs reminding that power implies the existence of inequality, humiliation or pain: this was one of the lessons of being in the anti-communist opposition. What is striking about the ways in which such experiences are narrated today is the evident pleasure which accompanies them.

As a provocative postscript to this sixty-year cycle which has seen the slow replacement of ruins by their images, it is, perhaps, appropriate to reflect on the desire for ruins which seems to have run through this paper. In 2005, the artist Zbigniew Libera and the writer Dariusz Foks published a small booklet entitled Co robi łączniczka (What a Courier Does) (fig. 6). Prompted by an overlooked theme in Wajda’s Kanal – that of sex in the ruins – they embraced the figure of the łączniczka, the female Home Army courier who travelled between barricades and through the sewers to carry messages to the ragged battalions fighting in Warsaw

52 See the interview with Paweł Kowal, PiS member and former secretary of state in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, entitled «Nie rzucać kamieniami w Muzeum Powstania», in: Rzeczpospolita (28 July 2009).
in the summer of 1944. In Wajda’s 1957 film, the courier «connects» emotionally and sexually with the fighting men (as well as with the «normal» world of black-market goods). She embodies the flight from conventional morality which occurs in war and perhaps, as Hlasko suggested, in the heterotopic space of the ruin. This historical experience has been forgotten or even suppressed in the sanctification of the Home Army underway in conservative Poland today. The łączniczka is a latter-day saint – illuminated by the light of her own aureole – in the Warsaw Uprising Museum and credited with the grace of the Madonna in the popular media.

In Foks and Libera’s project – a series of texts, which read like strange instructions for conduct in war, and manipulated photographs – the appeal of the łączniczka is restored. The ruins of Warsaw form the back-drop for portraits of film actresses from the 1960s and 1970s in the enticing poses of movie publicity shots. All but one are international stars: Catherine Deneuve is shown, for instance, in her role as a prostitute in Luis Buñuel’s movie Belle de Jour (1967). Libera’s technique is familiar: mass media has a way of blending fact and fiction in ways that make the two hard to distinguish. After all, the Museum of the Warsaw Rising has been shaped as much by Wajda’s Kanal as it has by the hundreds of oral testimonies which its curators have gathered over the years. («This» we «know from films».) But perhaps, in the Polish context at least, there is something else at work here. The background zooms forward. It reminds the viewer of the melancholic glamour attached to ruins and their images in contemporary Poland.
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Memory in Pieces:
The Symbolism of the Ruin in Warsaw after 1944

In this essay I explore the political symbolism of the ruin in the Polish capital from 1944 to the present. The question of what a war ruin might represent was deeply problematic for the communist authorities, not least because fragments of buildings and streets could be used to remember prohibited and unsanctioned aspects of Warsaw's history. Viewed in this light, the reconstruction of the historic fabric of the city, most notably in the case of the Royal Castle in the 1970s, can be interpreted as an attempt to fix and ultimately to narrow the meanings attached to places in the popular imagination. Reconstruction could be a kind of forgetting. At much the same time, the anti-communist opposition was drawn to the ruin as a powerful symbol of conflict with illegitimate authority. Today, ruins feature highly in the veins of retrospection which run through political culture in Poland. The Left and Right enter into conflict over the fate of the few lingering ruins in the city, symbolic conflicts over ownership of the past. Ruins, it seems, are deeply desired, even acquiring a kind of perverse glamour.

Erinnerungsstücke:
Die Symbolik der Warschauer Ruinen nach 1944


La mémoire en morceaux:
La dimension symbolique des ruines de Varsovie après 1944

Cet article examine la symbolique politique des ruines de la capitale polonaise de 1944 à nos jours. Pour les autorités communistes, la question de savoir ce qu’une ruine de guerre pourrait représenter fut profondément problématique. Particulièrement, car à partir de fragments de bâtiments et de rues, l’on pouvait se souvénir d’aspects interdits et impunis de l’histoire de Varsovie. Vu sous cet angle, la reconstruction des bâtiments historiques de la ville – en particulier le château...
royal dans les années 1970 – peut être interprétée comme tentative de fixer et finalement de restreindre les significations attachées à certains lieux dans l’imaginaire populaire. Dans ce contexte, la reconstruction est une sorte d’oubli. Parallèlement, l’opposition anti-communiste faisait des ruines un symbole puissant du conflit avec le pouvoir illégitime. Encore aujourd’hui, les ruines jouent un rôle important dans la culture de la mémoire politique polonaise. La gauche et la droite sont en désaccord quant au sort des quelques dernières ruines restantes dans la ville: ce sont des conflits symboliques posant la question de savoir à qui appartient le passé. L’on pourrait même dire qu’il existe un désir profond de ruines acquérant même une sorte de glamour pervers.

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