

# GFL



*German as a foreign language*

## ***The Good German - a 'neo-rubble film'?***

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## ***The Good German* - a 'neo-rubble film'?**

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This study investigates to what extent *The Good German* (2006) by Steven Soderbergh is reminiscent of a visual and narrative level of German post-war rubble films. I will outline how typical elements of rubble films, such as Romantic motifs, documentary shots of ruins, and visual and narrative references to film noir, reappear in *The Good German* and I will analyse their narrative functions. Finally, this study will explore if we can consider *The Good German* as 'neo-rubble film' and, if so, why Soderbergh produced a rubble film genre revival in 2006.

### **1. *The Good German* - a 'neo-rubble film'?**

*The Good German* by Steven Soderbergh was released in 2006. The film's story is based on the eponymous novel (2001) by American spy fiction writer Joseph Kanon. Set in Berlin following the victory of the Allied forces over the National Socialist regime, the film's plot appears to begin as a kind of film noir murder mystery and finally leads the audience to consider a more serious post-war topic: the American employment of National Socialist rocket scientists in Operation Paperclip.<sup>1</sup>

The following analysis asks to what extent the film is indebted on a visual and narrative level to German post-war rubble films. After a short outline of the film's plot, I will demonstrate how typical elements of rubble films reappear in *The Good German* and analyse their narrative functions. Finally, I will shortly explore the reasons why Soderbergh produced a rubble film genre revival in 2006 and whether or not we can consider *The Good German* as a 'neo-rubble film'.

The film tells the story of Jacob Geismar (called Jake, and played by George Clooney), an American war correspondent who works for the *New Republic*. Geismar returns to Berlin shortly after the end of World War II. His stay is set during the short period

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<sup>1</sup> Operation Paperclip was a programme run by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). This programme brought over 1,500 scientists, technicians, and engineers from National Socialist Germany and other foreign countries to the United States for employment in the aftermath of World War II. See for further information: <http://www.archives.gov/iwg/decclassified-records/rg-330-defense-secretary/> (retrieved on 26 June 2014).

between the negotiations among the Allied forces in Potsdam in May 1945 and the end of hostilities in Asia in August of the same year. When Geismar arrives in Berlin, a cross-cut shows us the black market activities of his driver, a corrupt American soldier named Tully (Tobey Maguire). Tully's German-Jewish girlfriend Lena Brandt (Cate Blanchett) is of particular interest to both the Western Allied powers and the Soviets. Trying to get some money out of this situation, Tully ends up dead: his body is fished out of the river close to the Potsdam conference grounds. Accidentally, Geismar witnesses the discovery of Tully's body and of the 50,000 German Reichsmark the dead man had been carrying. Tully's fatal destiny introduces the audience to the corrupt reality of the wasteland that is post-war Berlin. Divided in four zones ruled by the occupation forces (the Soviet Union, France, Britain, and the USA), Berlin and its demoralised inhabitants are depicted as a kind of lawless playground in terms of black market activities and corruption.

Just like the murdered Tully, Geismar is also driven by a hidden agenda. His goal in returning to Berlin is to find Lena, who had been his lover before the war. Step by step Geismar discovers that Lena's life is in danger because both the American and Soviet occupation forces are searching for her husband Emil Brandt (Christian Oliver). Brandt is a former SS officer who had been the secretary of Franz Bettmann,<sup>2</sup> chief production engineer of the V-2 rocket at the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp. Both the American and Soviet forces are interested in Bettmann's knowledge as a scientist. A detainee in an American safe house in Berlin, Bettmann waits for his departure to the United States and wishes to bring along his former secretary. Yet Brandt, who hides in a bombed-out subway tunnel (a visual reference to *The Third Man*), wants to reveal the truth about Bettmann's activities during National Socialism. His urge to bring to light the National Socialist crimes is what makes Brandt the title character - the good German. As I will show later, by employing the antagonists Bettmann and Brandt the film shows a typical combination of Romantic motifs, which appeared also in many German rubble films.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In the film, Bettmann is only a minor character who appears to be based on the real Arthur Rudolph. As a rocket engineer, Rudolph played a key role in the development of the V-2. He was given sanctuary by the US government following World War II, although being a former high-level Nazi. After his immigration to the United States, he became a pioneer of the American space programme. He worked for the US Army and NASA where he oversaw the development of several important systems including the Pershing missile and the Saturn V moon rocket.

<sup>3</sup> See: Moeller (2013: 64, 65).

Geismar finally finds Lena, though she does not seem especially pleased to see him again. Lena is much more engaged in hiding and helping her husband Brandt. Geismar however appears unable to stop following her and gets more involved in Lena's mysterious story. Eventually, Lena agrees to accept Geismar's help in order for the couple to leave Germany; but when they try to hand Brandt over to the American prosecutor charged with handling war crimes cases, they are hindered by the American authorities who want to protect Bettmann, and Brandt is murdered. Thus it becomes evident that the Americans know all about Bettmann's role at the concentration camp and in the V-2 programme, but prefer to cover up his involvement; Brandt has to die because the Americans could not lawfully employ Bettmann as a publicly known war criminal.

Geismar still has Brandt's notebooks on the Mittelbau-Dora camp, which Lena had entrusted to him earlier. He now trades the notes to the war crimes investigators of the U.S. Army (who want to destroy the evidence in order to whitewash Bettmann) in exchange for a denazification document (*Persilschein*) and a visa for Lena, allowing her to leave Germany. At the end, Lena and Geismar appear in a remake of the famous final scene of *Casablanca* in front of an aeroplane. Lena reveals to Geismar her secret of complicity and guilt: She only survived the Holocaust because she agreed to trace down twelve Jews who had been hiding in Berlin for the National Socialist regime.

In terms of visual style and narration, the film shows references to important films noirs of the 1940s and later, particularly to *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) and *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949). These noir aspects are an element *The Good German* shares with many rubble films (e.g. *The Murderers Are Among Us*, Wolfgang Staudte, 1946; *The Lost*, Peter Lorre, 1951, and others). In post-war rubble films, the noir-like elements mainly function to visualise the unstable condition in the war and post-war era by opposing them to the harmonising effects of classical cinema style.

In their study on classical style in Hollywood cinema, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson demonstrate how these film noir elements function in a way 'non-conforming'<sup>4</sup> to the classical style. The most important aspect of their non-conforming function is that film noir narratives represent an 'assault on psychological causality.'<sup>5</sup> The heroes often

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<sup>4</sup> Bordwell / Staiger / Thompson (1985: 75).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

suffer 'internal conflicts with an existential awareness of his or her situation.'<sup>6</sup> The 'classical conventions of logical action, defined characters, and psychological stable hero' are challenged because they 'are subverted by film noir's attractive killers, repellent cops, confused actions, gratuitous violence, and weary or disorientated heroes.'<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, film noir tends to break with the requisite happy ending so popular in the classical style. In opposition to the open ending in many films noirs, the happy ending in the classical style serves to reconcile the audience with problems presented earlier in the film's story.<sup>8</sup>

In this respect, film noir 'functioned not to define a coherent genre or style but to locate in several American films a challenge to dominant values'<sup>9</sup>: The uncanny chiaroscuro style of film noir evoked the 'uncertain fear, violence, and agonizing hardship of everyday life in wartime America, coinciding with rationing of basic daily items, war related shortages and non-material deprivations.'<sup>10</sup>

In *The Good German* these effects are achieved not only by the use of typical film noir settings and visual conventions, but also by creating an atmosphere of ambiguity and doubt concerning what or who is right and wrong. Similar to some rubble films,<sup>11</sup> the visual expression of this socio-political context of crisis in *The Good German* intends not to reaffirm or to comfort the audiences, but generates the sinister, tense, and fearful atmosphere of wartime and post-wartime reality.

Beyond film noir references there are other visual devices in *The Good German*, which are reminiscent of rubble films. The film's beginning appears as a visual reference to Billy Wilder's rubble film *A Foreign Affair* (1948). Wilder's film begins with a series of documentary aerial shots showing the real extent of ruin and destruction the war and the National Socialist regime had left behind. Soderbergh also employs documentary archive material of the ruined city of Berlin (though no aerial shots). Archival sequences

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Moeller (2013: 43-44).

<sup>9</sup> Bordwell / Staiger / Thompson (1985: 75).

<sup>10</sup> Biesen (2005: 59).

<sup>11</sup> Moeller (2013: 45).

are inserted into the film on several occasions and provide an effect of reality (*l'effet de réel*)<sup>12</sup> by introducing the authentic setting of bombed-out post-war Berlin.

The film researcher and critic David Bordwell investigated *The Good German's* major visual similarities to films of the 1940s in an article he published on his internet blog in 2006. Bordwell shows how the film returns to the film style of the 1940s on a formal level: the whole film was shot in black-and-white and the DVD release presents in 1.33:1 aspect ratio format that declined in use around the early 1950s. The visual references indicate not only a particular closeness to film noir, but also to late West-German rubble films of the period from 1948 to 1951. Bordwell does not mention German rubble films as a reference for these visual similarities; yet he refers to two films made by non-German directors in the post-war setting of the destroyed German cities: In *The Good German*, the steep low angles and over-the-shoulder framings echo *The Third Man* more than, say, Jacques Tourneur's *Berlin Express*.<sup>13</sup> The visual styles of these two films are evidently inspired by recurrent visual patterns in rubble films (e.g. the Dutch angles and the rubble settings in Staudte's first rubble film). Finally Bordwell concludes: '*The Good German* is set in the late 1940s, and Soderbergh has plugged into a general trend of filmmaking of that time.'<sup>14</sup>

There are also narrative patterns in *The Good German* that are reminiscent of rubble films (in particular the later ones after 1948) In particular, the film focuses on the typical rubble film subject of past guilt and secrets (concerning the National Socialist period) and how this past still impinges on the post-war era. The film's beginning presents this focus by shifting twice from the wasteland of ruins to archival close-up shots of Berliners. These close-ups investigate the state of mind of these people as if to find out about their past experiences. Introduced through these opening shots, the issue of past guilt and secrets concerns all main characters.

Also, the film's title, *The Good German*, refers to the question of guilt and of what could have been a 'good German' under the circumstances of the Fascist regime. Finally, just

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<sup>12</sup> The effect of reality is a concept introduced by Roland Barthes. It describes textual devices that serve no other purpose than to establish the concept of reality in literary texts. Roland Barthes, 'L'Effet de réel', *Communications*, no 11, 1968, p. 84-89, <[http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescriptif/article/comm\\_0588-8018\\_1968\\_num\\_11\\_1\\_1158](http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescriptif/article/comm_0588-8018_1968_num_11_1_1158)> (retrieved on 15 April 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Bordwell, David (2006): *Not back to the future, but ahead to the past*. <<http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2006/11/12/not-back-to-the-future-but-ahead-to-the-past/>> (retrieved on 12 November 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

as in many rubble films, the shots of bombed-out streets and distressed people serve the purpose of bringing to life the moral condition of the German population at the time:

The ruins and rubble in German rubble films (*Trümmerfilme*) set in the aftermath of World War II represent a collective symbol of defeat. The landscape of destroyed cities, still recalling the recent battles, renders this defeat an inescapable aspect of everyday life for the German population. This image of destruction provoked feelings of shame, sorrow, guilt, anger, and opposition against the prior regime of National Socialism and the victorious occupation forces of USA, England, France and the Soviet Union. (...) The post-war ruins represent a reality of painful, traumatic, and catastrophic contextual events and the necessity to reconstruct a new life upon these experiences of crisis.<sup>15</sup>

These references to the German population's moral condition, the experience of post-war crisis and past guilt represent important common narrative elements between *The Good German* and German rubble films.

Yet not all German rubble films would discuss the question of guilt in the same way. Robert Shandley argues that many rubble films address the idea of past guilt in an apologetic manner. According to Shandley, these films reaffirm the spectator's image of him or herself as 'good Germans' during 'bad times.'<sup>16</sup> In this respect, the notion of 'a good German' describes an escapist attitude in dealing with the past and present period in the aftermath of war and Nazism. And indeed, some rubble films like *In Those Days* (*In jenen Tagen*, Helmut Käutner, 1947) or *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (*Zwischen gestern und morgen*, Harald Braun, 1948) focus on the good behaviour of Germans (e.g. helping Jews and other persecuted persons) in order to suggest that not everything and everyone in the past era was altogether bad. This perspective invited a positive identification and reinforced the will to rebuild Germany. But this apologetic approach mostly characterises early rubble films until 1948 and does not correspond to how the issue is discussed in Soderbergh's film.

As I have shown in *Rubble, Ruins and Romanticism* (2013), especially in many late German rubble films these questions are discussed in a more controversial way. The directors employed visual and narrative elements from German Romanticism in order to ask questions about the past and its effect on the post-war period. Lotte H. Eisner argued in her pioneering study *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German*

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<sup>15</sup> See: Moeller (2013: 13).

<sup>16</sup> Shandley (2001: 62).

*Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt* (1952)<sup>17</sup> that Weimar cinema largely reverts to narrative and visual themes and motifs borrowed from the literature and art of German Romanticism (such as representations of alienation and fatalism, uncanny atmospheres, mysterious landscapes, and motifs such as *doppelgängers* (doubles)). Although Eisner briefly discusses German post-war cinema at the end of her book, she did not venture to assert that the above-mentioned elements of Romanticism also occur in many rubble films. In my own study of German rubble cinema,<sup>18</sup> I draw upon Eisner's research while arguing that some rubble film directors revive this tradition of motif continuity; and I further develop Eisner's approach in order to show how a revival of Romantic literary motifs, themes, and aesthetics takes place in German cinema well beyond the Second World War. In addition, I show how artistic devices from German Romanticism first appear in the first German post-war film *The Murderers Are Among Us* (*Die Mörder sind unter uns*, East Germany, 1946),<sup>19</sup> which subsequently marked many later rubble films and therefore, can be considered as a trendsetter.<sup>20</sup>

Typical Romantic patterns in rubble films are: *doppelgängers*, doomed wanderers, demonic citizens<sup>21</sup> and antiheroes as well as iconic representations of landscapes and ruins. These motifs are often combined with other Romantic aspects such as uncanny atmospheres and open-end narration.<sup>22</sup>

By accentuating problematic and usually repressed or tabooed aspects of life experiences of the time, these Romantic elements stimulate reflection and controversy regarding German national identity and society in the post-war era. The most important films of this critical post-war tradition are: *The Murderers Are Among Us* by Wolfgang Staudte; *Film Without a Name* (*Film ohne Titel*, West Germany, 1947) by Rudolph Jugert, the former assistant of rubble film director Helmut Käutner, who wrote the

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<sup>17</sup> Eisner (1997). Eisner's book was first published in France in 1952 with the title *L'Écran démoniaque*. In 1969, the English language version was published under the title *The Haunted Screen*.

<sup>18</sup> Moeller (2013).

<sup>19</sup> Eisner (1997: 11-13).

<sup>20</sup> Moeller (2013: 119).

<sup>21</sup> I will use the term 'demonic citizen' in relation to Lotte H. Eisner's definition of a 'demonic bourgeois' in *The Haunted Screen* (1956: 106). I further develop her concept by employing the term of demonic citizen, because many Rubble film characters represent a variation of the motif. This motif embodies first of all human characteristics of cold-blooded behaviour and a complete lack of emphasis towards others. In this respect, the motif is not necessarily linked to a social class. The motif rather works in relation to the motif of the *doppelgänger* and brings to the fore two different attitudes towards the National Socialist past.

<sup>22</sup> Moeller (2013: 15-16).

screenplay; *The Blum Affair* (*Affaire Blum*, East Germany, 1948) by Erich Engel; *Second Hand Destiny* (*Schicksal aus zweiter Hand*, West Germany, 1949) by Wolfgang Staudte; *The Last Illusion* (*Der Ruf*, West Germany, 1949) by Josef von Báky: Fritz Kortner wrote the screenplay and appears as the main actor; and *The Lost* (*Der Verlorene*, West Germany, 1951) by Peter Lorre, who also wrote and starred in the film.

In these films, Romantic themes and motifs bring into focus ambiguity concerning our preconceived ideas on what was, is and could be 'good', moral behaviour during and after the National Socialist regime. Ambiguity mainly refers to the question of guilt concerning the National Socialist past (in particular the awareness of and complicity in atrocities). These questions usually focus on male characters having difficulties in dealing with their past (war) experience and fitting into the new post-war society.

In Soderbergh's film, however, the question of past guilt goes much further than interrogating the male German characters, Bettmann and Brandt. The film also discusses the choices made by Lena, the German-Jewish female character, and the role and behaviour of members of the occupation forces (in particular Americans) in post-war Berlin.

Especially Lena appears as a challenging and controversial character. Her being a German Jew who is married to a member of the SS is already an ambiguous constellation. Moreover, although she managed for a long time to remain in safety thanks to her marriage, she finally appears to have been forced to compromise herself by collaborating with the regime. Her character raises the issue of whether a person's past actions are justified by the fact that the National Socialist regime threatened their life. Yet the character of Lena is not the only element creating ambiguity by questioning our notions of what is ethically right and wrong.

By revealing the United States' double game of saving and employing the war criminal Bettmann, the film also questions the role and mission of the American occupation forces in Germany. Just as Lena, the members of the American occupation force all have a hidden secret or agenda. These hidden elements are represented in the film through variations of the motif of the *doppelgänger*. Andrew Webber characterises this Romantic motif in his book *The Doppelgänger: double vision in German literature* (1996) as having the function to bring to the surface the kind of havoc and elements that 'are usually hidden or repressed by culture or society': the 'destructive potential of desire, the prevalence of the unknowable, and the corruptible conditions of subjective

identity.<sup>23</sup> By focusing on the usually repressed and unwanted depths of individual experience through the *doppelgänger* motif, Soderbergh's film has the same goal as many rubble films. Both employ Romantic patterns in order to challenge and question the definition of man as a subject that acts ethically thanks to the progress of mankind through education and cultural refinement.<sup>24</sup>

This challenge is created by making visible hidden and secret sides or past acts of a person. In the same vein, the narrative structure in Soderbergh's film reveals step by step past events and hidden secrets of all main characters; therefore each character represents a variation of the *doppelgänger* motif, which functions to reveal their hidden sides or past before or during National Socialism: All characters were different persons in the past and this past identity renders them a kind of split-identity in the post-war period. Thus, the past reappears as an alter ego, or more precisely, as a repressed or hidden earlier identity.

Furthermore, their own past or someone's past is the element that motivates their acts in the post-war period. Some want to get rid of their past because of having been involved in the regime's atrocities; others, just as Geismar, are still emotionally attached to a past period. Thus we may conclude that *The Good German* revisits and develops typical rubble film issues such as the investigation of the effects of the National Socialist past on the post-war era by questioning the German post-war male. Yet Soderbergh's film broadens the discussion of past guilt by including the female character Lena and by turning a critical eye on the occupation force. In comparison to this approach, German directors of the post-war years had no possibility of criticizing the occupation forces because of the censorship exercised by the Allied administration.

In German rubble films the *doppelgänger* motif frequently appears together with another Romantic motif:<sup>25</sup> the demonic citizen. In combination, both motifs represent the return of past guilt and two different attitudes in dealing with this guilt. As I will show in the following section, this combination also reappears in *The Good German* for the same narrative ends.

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<sup>23</sup> Webber (1996: 148).

<sup>24</sup> Scheunemann (2003: 131).

<sup>25</sup> E.g. in *The Murderers Are Among Us* (1946), *The Lost* (1951), and *Second Hand Destiny* (1949), these Romantic motifs represent the return of the repressed past and guilt in the context of a discussion of German mentality in the post-war period.

The Austrian psychoanalyst and scholar Otto Rank writes in 1925 about the motif of the *Doppelgänger* (double):

The main idea [of the double motif] shall be that the past of a human being is attached to her or him in an inescapable way: when he tries to get rid of the past, it becomes his fate [my translation].<sup>26</sup>

Concerning the character of Lena, the aspect of an inescapable past becomes evident when we see her visiting her hiding husband in the subway tunnel for the first time. In a voice-over monologue she explains why she supports her husband. Lena is afraid that her past will follow her if she does not draw a line under it now, once and for all. Her own past is attached to her husband's involvement in the war crimes of the National Socialist regime. Therefore, by helping her husband to expose these crimes, Lena intends to do something 'good' and to get rid of her own past. In this respect, the motif of the double indicates the return of Lena's past guilt and raises the issue of how a person could or should deal with past guilt. The return of a past (secret) is a main aspect of the motif of the double and it characterises, as above-mentioned, all *doppelgänger* characters in the film.

Concerning these aspects of the *doppelgänger* motif and the narrative effects they fulfil, the character of Lena is reminiscent of many male characters in rubble films with their troubled identities (such as Mertens in *The Murderers Are Among Us* or Rothe in *The Lost*). After returning from the war or having survived the National Socialist period, these men cannot go on with their lives in a normal way because of their past experiences and guilt, which still impinge on the post-war period. In this respect, these characters are also split-identities whose returning past is an alter ego, which they wish to repress; just as Lena conceals her past and hopes to escape its consequences by helping her husband.

As Lena climbs down into the abandoned subway system, her voice-over comment raises the issue of whether helping her husband is a noble thing to do and whether her act corresponds to how a wife should act towards her husband. These reflections lead us to critically interrogate what reliable values could exist in the post-war era against the background of the National Socialist period during which all former key values had been turned upside down. Thus the characters of Lena and her husband embody the lack

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<sup>26</sup> 'Die "Grundidee" soll die sein, das die Vergangenheit eines Menschen ihm unentrinnbar anhaftet und ihm zum Verhängnis wird, sobald er versucht, sich ihrer zu entledigen.' Rank (1925:10).

of values and the necessity of renegotiating them in German society. Yet the harsh reality of the early post-war period did not provide space for such a philosophical approach of negotiating reliable values through interrogating past and present ambiguities:

Black market, prostitution, double moral standards, and the lack of morale marked the widespread feelings of crisis and the everyday fight for survival. [...] The Protestant and Catholic Churches seemed to be the last institutions of faith at this time of despair. They represented security, safety, and transcendental sublimity, and were left apparently untouched by the catastrophic conditions of crisis. When cultural institutions re-opened, high culture—such as the classical works of art, literature and theatre—also offered comfort because of its timelessly accepted and indestructible values of humanism. [...] This return to the timeless classical ideals of humanism allowed people to fill the space left by the lack of reliable values and it nourished hopes for a future of reconciliation and tolerance. Many people experienced hunger, renunciation, and despair as a great humiliation. Only transcendental moments of high, pure classical culture and of religious salvation provided a brief escape from the depressing, distressing everyday life.<sup>27</sup>

Just as Lena, her husband Brandt is also troubled by past guilt. As a former SS member, his involvement in war crimes is evident. Brandt worked as Bettmann's secretary at the Mittelbau-Dora camp. He documented the work and was responsible for working out the nutrition plan for the concentration camp workers, allowing them on average to survive only for about three months, when they would be replaced by others.

Interestingly, Brandt's past guilt is not a subject discussed in the film; and as mentioned above, although he has been involved in war crimes, Brandt is the title character: 'the good German'. Thus Brandt seems not to be judged according to how he acted in the past under the pressure of the dictatorial regime of the National Socialists, but by how he chooses to act in the post-war period. The fact that he deliberately tries to do something that potentially endangers his life in order to serve justice concerning the crimes that were committed at the camp distinguishes Brandt, in the same way as Lena and also Geismar, from the other main characters (e.g. Bettmann and Tully).

Another aspect that distinguishes Brandt are his post-war regrets about his past acts, which he discusses with Lena in his hiding place. Brandt wishes to deal with his past guilt by seeking justice through exposing Bettmann's and his own guilt. This narrative structure in *The Good German* turns Brandt into a fictitious character without any historical predecessors. As far as I know, no member of the SS openly regretted their involvement in the National Socialist crimes and offered to hand over important

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<sup>27</sup> Moeller (2013: 95-96); see also for additional information: Damus (1995: 70-71).

information to the occupation forces only in order to help re-establish justice. The function of this plot element is to refocus the film's attention on the moral problems and corruption of US occupation policies. An ex-member of the SS who behaves in an honourable way in the post-war period and is killed by the US occupation force precisely because of his just intentions throws into stark relief the problematic agenda of the occupation force: Instead of using the historical chance of rebuilding post-war Germany as agents of ethical and moral values, the Americans' role in post-war Germany and their mission appear in *The Good German* as corrupted and guided by (political) self-interest.

An intertextual reference to a French film of the 1980s also seems to support this hypothesis. Although Lena's husband is an important character concerning the film's narrative structure, we only see him on a few occasions. In his subterranean hideout, he remains largely invisible, but his secret presence is the film's centre of gravity around which all other characters revolve. This configuration could be interpreted as an allusion to and inversion of a similar situation at the heart of François Truffaut's classic WW II film *The Last Metro* (1980). In Truffaut's film, just as in Soderbergh's, a central but hardly seen German character is kept in an underground hideout by his wife in order to protect him from his persecutors. In both cases, the character is actually played by a German actor (Heinz Bennent for Truffaut, Christian Oliver for Soderbergh). And in both films, the respective wives would at first sight appear to be characters beyond reproach: a Jewish survivor of Nazism and a French anti-Fascist (Catherine Deneuve); but both women turn out to be compromised, Lena through her Nazi collaboration and Truffaut's Marion Steiner through sleeping with a young, attractive actor from her husband's theatre troupe.

Yet in spite of these obvious parallels, the two films' roles are almost comically inverted: In *The Last Metro*, Bennent plays a German Jew hidden by his French wife from the Nazis during the German occupation of Paris. Oliver, however, plays a former Nazi who during the US occupation of Berlin is protected by his German-Jewish wife from his American persecutors who finally manage to kill him as he stands in the way of their own hidden post-war agenda. If the assumption is correct that the couple Lena/Brandt is a parody of Truffaut's couple Marion/Lucas Steiner, this inversion would be another argument in favour of reading the film as a thinly veiled indictment of

American post-war policies: Soderbergh uses configurations of rubble films and WW II dramas, but repositions them in order to formulate a critique of US politics.

Bettmann, however, appears as an opposite player to Brandt. Just as the corrupt members of the occupation force, Bettmann's behaviour as a person who was in charge of Nazi atrocities is rooted in criminal corruption. He wants to escape his collaboration with the National Socialist regime without considering his own guilt and cold-blooded acts. In this respect, Bettmann is reminiscent of the Romantic motif of the demonic citizen.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, the film's narration combines motifs of the double and the demonic citizen as an alter ego configuration. Brandt and Bettmann embody this configuration: Bettmann is the alter ego of Brandt and vice versa: Bettmann represents Brandt's past guilt, its return and the necessity to deal with it, whilst Brandt embodies the return of Bettmann's past guilt and endangers his escape to the USA. In relation to this alter ego configuration, the *doppelgänger* motif fulfils the narrative function of representing two different attitudes in the German population towards the National Socialist period (just as e.g. Mertens and Brückner in *The Murderers Are Among Us*): Brandt suffers from his guilt and wants to deal with it by revealing the truth about the past; whereas Bettmann appears to represses the past and avoids gaining insight into his guilt. A similar configuration appears in many rubble films, whereas the latter attitude is often represented by the Romantic motif of the demonic citizen (such as Brückner in *The Murderers Are Among Us* as well as Hoesch in *The Lost*).<sup>29</sup>

In a similar way, Geismar and Tully are juxtaposed. At the film's beginning Tully explains his point of view on the post-war situation in Germany in a voice-over comment. As an American soldier and army driver, he sees himself in a position of power he feels entitled to use in order to increase his income (e.g. by dealing alcohol to the Soviet occupation force). Even his relationship with Lena is marked by power and

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<sup>28</sup> The demonic citizen does not recognize his guilt and corruption. He seems emotionally and morally untouched by current and past events. Wealth and personal gain are the only aspects that matter to him. Just as in the Wilhelm Hauff's classic Romantic novella *The Cold Heart* (*Das kalte Herz*, 1827), these greedy characters appear to have no empathy for others. This lack of empathy is embodied by the metaphor of a heart of stone. Thanks to a pact with a kind of demon, they exchange their hearts for a stone. The demonic aspect of these characters is the lack of empathy, which is presented as an inhuman, demonic character trait. In rubble films, this demonic trait indirectly refers to the characters' adaptation to the ideology of the National Socialist regime or to comparable ideas. Moeller (2013: 117).

subjection. While Tully explains that one can only develop one's true character if provided with the necessary money, we see him having sex with Lena in a way that clearly indicates he is the only one getting any pleasure out of the experience.

Although Tully seems to be willing to help her leave Germany, he nevertheless offers Lena like a pimp to Geismar for an hour and beats her up several times at the film's beginning. Tully's actions are solely guided by self-interest and materialist greed. He appears as a ruthless character lacking any moral consciousness and empathy towards others. These characteristics of Tully are also reminiscent of the Romantic motif of a demonic citizen.

In opposition to Tully's behaviour, Geismar shows real interest and feelings for Lena. Although she is not in love with him, he supports her and her husband's project of revealing the truth. And finally, Lena is only able to leave Germany thanks to Geismar's help. As a variation of the motif of the double, Geismar has also a past secret that returns. It is the love story with Lena they experienced before the war. The love for Lena is the reason why he returns to post-war Germany. Just as Brandt and Lena, Geismar confronts his past instead of repressing it and endangers his life in order to reveal the truth. Thus the American and German characters in the film correspond all to one of the two attitudes concerning the past, just as represented by male characters in post-war rubble films. This narrative strategy puts them on the same level.

The fact that the motif of a demonic citizen is represented by an American soldier (Tully), whereas in post-war rubble films the motif was usually employed to discuss the dubious moral condition of the German population, represents a shift in discussing and representing the post-war era. It is no longer only the German population whose past and present actions needed serious consideration. The focus is also set on the role of the (American) occupation forces. To portray the US occupation force in terms of criminal behaviour is to question the myth of their univocally positive role in post-war Germany. This portrayal brings to the surface the hidden and repressed interests at play: the double game.

The above-mentioned focus on moral corruption and self-interested behaviour is a common subject of post-war German rubble films. We have seen in this article how in particular the motifs of the double and the demonic citizen were employed in order to embody these aspects of post-war mentality in the German population. Yet Soderbergh turns away from discussing the Germans and takes a closer look at the role of the

occupants. The city of Berlin and its four zones appear in his film as a kind of playground for the members of the occupation forces. We might ask why such a discussion of the American mission in Europe suddenly appears in an early 21<sup>st</sup> century Hollywood movie. It could be argued that Soderbergh refers to the post-war era in Germany in order to indirectly discuss a more recent period of US history. The film was released in 2006, in the aftermath of the invasion and following occupation of Iraq, which began in March 2003. Through an investigation of the occupation period in post-war Germany, the film can be seen to indirectly permit and encourage a discussion of such military interventions and their consequences.

We have seen that *The Good German* employs significant patterns reminiscent of post-war German rubble films. Just as in many German rubble films, visual and narrative elements of film noir are present in *The Good German*. In both cases, they serve to challenge dominant values in a post-war society and to encourage a discussion of the question of what was and is right and wrong behaviour under socio-political duress.

In addition, we have seen how the Romantic motifs of the double and the demonic citizen serve in both classic rubble films and in *The Good German* to investigate how the German population (especially the German post-war male) reacted and survived under the pressure of the dictatorship as well as how people dealt with the past in the aftermath of the war. Yet Soderbergh broadens this discussion in his film. He also casts a critical eye on the German-Jewish character Lena and the members of the US occupation forces. Finally, it can be argued that Soderbergh might have chosen the subject of the post-war occupation era in Germany in order to indirectly question the occupation activities of the US American forces in Iraq at the time when the film was developed, made, and released.

In an interview with the German film critic Katja Nicodemus, Soderbergh confirms that he had chosen the story of Kanon's book as a model for his film because it unsettles and questions our preconceived ideas on the post-war era, and in particular on the role and function of the American occupation force.<sup>30</sup> He mentions later in the same interview

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<sup>30</sup> 'Die Zeit: Was hat Sie daran gereizt, die amerikanischen Weltkriegssieger als Egoisten, Schwarzhändler und Strategen ohne Moral zu zeigen? Soderbergh: An Joseph Kanons Buch gefiel mir, dass es all die Vorstellungen, die wir vom Zweiten Weltkrieg und der Zeit danach haben, über den Haufen wirft. Die Amerikaner haben tatsächlich Naziwissenschaftler, die ihnen wichtig erschienen, in die Staaten ausreisen lassen und ihre unliebsame Vergangenheit ignoriert oder ausradiert'. *DIE ZEIT*, 01.03.2007, No. 10; < <http://www.zeit.de/2007/10/Soderbergh-Interview>> (retrieved on 15 April 2014).

that is was a big challenge to dismantle the image of the glorious American victors of WW II against the background of the war in Iraq. He explicitly describes his goal under these circumstances: to question moral and ethical standards in a post-war period: 'Only because one is a victor, one must not be good person.'<sup>31</sup> This statement recalls the film's title *The Good German* and underlines once more Soderbergh's aim of questioning current values against the background of war, National Socialism and occupation. This is exactly what many rubble film directors wished to do with their films, revisiting as they did so Romantic motifs and themes. As outlined in this article, these Romantic patterns are typical of many rubble films and revive a prewar tradition in German cinema. The Romantic patterns bring to the fore a discussion of values concerning the post-war period and the atrocities preceding it. Soderbergh revives the genre of rubble film and further develops its main visual and narrative patterns; he aims also at unsettling his audiences in order to ask major questions concerning values, ethics and morality. Thus, the film refers to the past, but it also intends to open a discussion of contemporary issues of a current American war and occupation.

Finally, Soderbergh's own comments are illuminating as to the kind of concept he had in mind for the film's overall form.

It began when I saw archive film material of the post-war period in Berlin in order to see how the city appeared. These images were so impressive that I wanted to use them in my film. Thus *The Good German* had to be made in black and white in order to avoid fractures between the new and old material. This led to the idea to treat the film on a technical level as if it would have been made in 1945. For me, this is rather an aesthetic guideline, even if you may conceive this as an imitation.<sup>32</sup>

Although he does not clearly mention the genre of rubble films, I argue on the basis of the findings in this article that Soderbergh intended to create a revival of a post war-rubble film; and I suggest, therefore, to label the film as a 'neo-rubble film': a film not made in the aftermath of WW II, but which revives and further develops some of the most distinctive narrative and visual patterns of the rubble films, with the technical

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<sup>31</sup> 'Es ist natürlich eine Herausforderung, das Bild des glorreichen amerikanischen Weltkriegssiegers vor dem Hintergrund des Irakkrieges zu demontieren. Nur weil man ein Sieger ist, muss man kein guter Mensch sein'. Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> 'Es begann damit, dass ich mir Archivaufnahmen des Nachkriegsberlins ansah, um zu sehen, wie die Stadt damals wirkte. Diese Bilder haben mich so beeindruckt, dass ich sie in meinem Film verwenden wollte. Also musste *The Good German* in Schwarz-Weiß gedreht werden, damit es keinen Bruch zwischen altem und neuem Material gibt. Daraus entstand dann wiederum die Idee, den Film technisch insgesamt so zu behandeln, als drehte man ihn 1945. Das ist für mich eine eher ästhetische Vorgabe, auch wenn Sie das als Imitation ansehen'. Ibid.

possibilities of a modern Hollywood studio, not least in order to hint at a possible discussion of current issues of American wars and occupation.

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Dr Martina Moeller worked from 2003 to 2006 as a lecturer in Film Studies at the International Summer School of the University of Kassel (Germany) and from 2006 to 2010 as a lecturer in German at the University of Provence (Aix-Marseille I, France). In December 2010, she completed her PhD on German rubble films at Anglia Ruskin University. She has published articles on visual style, narration, religious aesthetics and Romantic discourse in rubble films and German speaking film staff in France and England. Moeller has also coorganised three international conferences in France, Germany and Morocco: *Interkulturelle Kommunikation in Texten und Diskursen* (with Ulrike Dorfmueller published in 2010 by Peter Lang Verlag, Frankfurt), *Kunst und Stacheldraht* with Cécile Bonnet, OFLAG VI A in Soest 2009, and *Interkulturalität in Theorie und Praxis* in May 2013 in Rabat. Since September 2011, Moeller works as DAAD lecturer at the Université Mohammed V in Rabat, Morocco. Her PhD was published under the title *Rubble, Ruins and Romanticism: Visual Style, Narration and Identity in German Post-War Cinema* by Transcript Verlag (Germany) in 2013.

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