12: Goebbels's Fear and Legacy: Babelsberg and Its Berlin Street as Cinematic Memory Place

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In October 2013, excavators entered the backlot of the film studios in Babelsberg near Berlin, at the precise location of one of its most famous movie sets. The so-called Berlin Street, first built for Leander Hausmann's post-GDR comedy *Sonnenallee* (English title, *Sun Alley*, Germany, 1999) had since served as the set for approximately 350 feature and television films, video clips, and commercials.[1] But this time the construction vehicles were serving neither as props for another film nor to prepare the site for a new international production. On the contrary, this time the excavators and welding torches were there to finally pull down the set that had become so integral to the international success of the Babelsberg studios as a globally accepted production ground, one especially suited to hosting historical films and equipping them with period props. In particular, the Berlin Street set had itself become a visual icon in the cinematic reconstruction of the Nazi past, in large part because of how many internationally successful and influential films were shot there. These include *The Pianist* (UK, Germany, Poland, France, 2002, dir. Roman Polanski), *The Reader* (USA, Germany 2008, dir. Steven Daldry), and *Inglourious Basterds* (USA, Germany, 2009, dir. Quentin Tarantino). It was also home to such popular German television movies as *Nacht über Berlin* (Night over Berlin, Germany 2013, dir. Friedemann Fromm) and *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* (English title, *Generation War*, Germany 2013, dir. Philipp Kadelbach). In this essay I investigate the correlations of set design, the specific heritage and legacy of film production in Babelsberg, and the ongoing popularity of historical films concerning the Nazi past that were and still are produced in Babelsberg. In doing so I intend to combine the fields of German history, film production studies, and Holocaust memory studies in order to delineate a new perspective on contemporary German historical films as they are relevant for German, Holocaust, and memory studies.

The Changing Faces of Babelsberg

Film sets have a peculiar nature. As Bergfelder, Harris, and Street say in their book *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination*, on the one hand they "provide a film with its inimitable look, its geographical, historical, social and cultural context"[2] Thus they serve as an intensifying element of the mood and atmosphere as well as for the social and historical background of the story. They "aid in identifying characters, fleshing out and concretizing their psychology" (11). They form and define an image of a particular time and place, of the protagonist and his or her background; and when it comes to the imagination of the past this is particularly crucial, because it stimulates a specific conception of past events. On the other hand, set design has an "indefinable quality and temporary nature" (14). It is fabricated to be invisible precisely because of its purely visual character. The set can only be realized cinematically "in conjunction with the work of the cinematographer, who through framing and lighting devices animates the fragmentary construction and imbues it with an imaginary wholeness" (15). As a concrete place and materialized space it is characterized by temporality and is designed to support the illusionary ability of cinema. Its principle function is to be transformable, to be able to be robbed of its distinctiveness, or else to be torn down. Thus it is "fundamentally hybrid and fluid" (15). Located in between the pre-filmic and the filmic reality, it is a constant shape shifter, "both 'ephemeral' and 'fragmentary'" (14).

As early as 1926, the German-Jewish film critic Siegfried Kracauer reflected on the nature of set design when he traveled from Berlin to a certain small town near Potsdam. Here, in "the middle of the Grunewald is a fenced-in area that one can enter only after going through various checkpoints. It is a desert within an oasis. The natural things outside—trees made out of wood, lakes with water, villas that are inhabitable—have no place within its confines. But the world does reappear there—indeed the entire macrocosm seems to be gathered in this new version of Noah's Ark."[3] This is how Kracauer described the Ufa-City of New-Babelsberg, first created in 1912 to serve the growing German film industry and then expanded during the zenith of Weimar cinema. Facing this city of illusion, the film critic was fascinated and disgusted at the same time: "In order for the world to flicker by on film, it is first cut to pieces" (281). Then, during the shooting, the fragments are reassembled: "On the meadows and hills the inventory organizes itself into patterns. Architectural constructions jut upward as if meant to be inhabited. But they represent only the external aspects of the prototypes, much the way language maintains façades of words whose original meaning has vanished" (282). Later the explorer described how, in the "catacombs" of New-Babelsberg, the "ruins of the universe are stored in warehouses for sets, representative

samples of all periods, peoples, and styles" (282). Every historic period, every mythic world can be created and destroyed, recreated, expanded, and again transferred to the studio stock. Thus the film city and its factories turn into "immense laboratories," in which the "pieces are prepared individually and delivered to their locations, where they remain patiently until they are torn down" (286).

In the 1930s, following the Nazi rise to power, the studio came under the control of Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, and in 1938, "New-Babelsberg" became simply "Babelsberg." That phase ended with the conclusion of the Second World War in 1945, when the compound was occupied by Soviet forces and large parts of the stored film stock were confiscated. But in 1946 filming started again. Under the direction of the newly founded production company DEFA, the Babelsberg studios at first hosted sets made of rubble, which was then still visible in the nearby former capital. Later, it became the home of the official GDR film production company. When DEFA was dissolved after German unification, the film city was taken over by a trust, which privatized the property with no regard for its historical filmic value. For a short while it seemed as though that would be the end of the vivid cinematic laboratories Kracauer once observed, and the studio that once had so successfully adapted to changing regimes threatened to finally and literally transform into those "catacombs" that the critic had described in the 1920s. But after a French company purchased the studio and filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff took over its direction, German as well as international filmmakers began to return. With them came renewed interest in the filmic treatment of the Nazi past. Since 1992 the studio has hosted the production of a vast number of films dealing directly with the Nazi period or including Nazi characters—comprising a veritable "New Nazi wave." Schlöndorff himself restaged the spirit of the Third Reich at the Babelsberg studios for his adaptation of Michel Tournier's novel *Der Unhold* (English title, *The Ogre*, Germany, France, UK, 1996). The mystic atmosphere of the film's re-creation, its playful adaptation of elements from classical German cinema, and the intensity of the reenactment of Nazi force and rule in Schlöndorff's film juxtaposed the studio's past and present and also linked it casually to the West German New Cinema tradition and the director's influential *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*, FRG, France, Poland, Yugoslavia, 1979). Other films, such as Polanski's *The Pianist*, then broke new ground in representing the war and the Holocaust in cinema, focusing on and reconstructing Jewish life and suffering during this period of destruction.

One specific location in Babelsberg would become the anchor and iconic symbol of this historical filmmaking wave—a permanent exterior film set built in 1998 and modeled after a typical Berlin street setting (fig. 12.1). By the time it was torn down in late 2013, the exterior set had
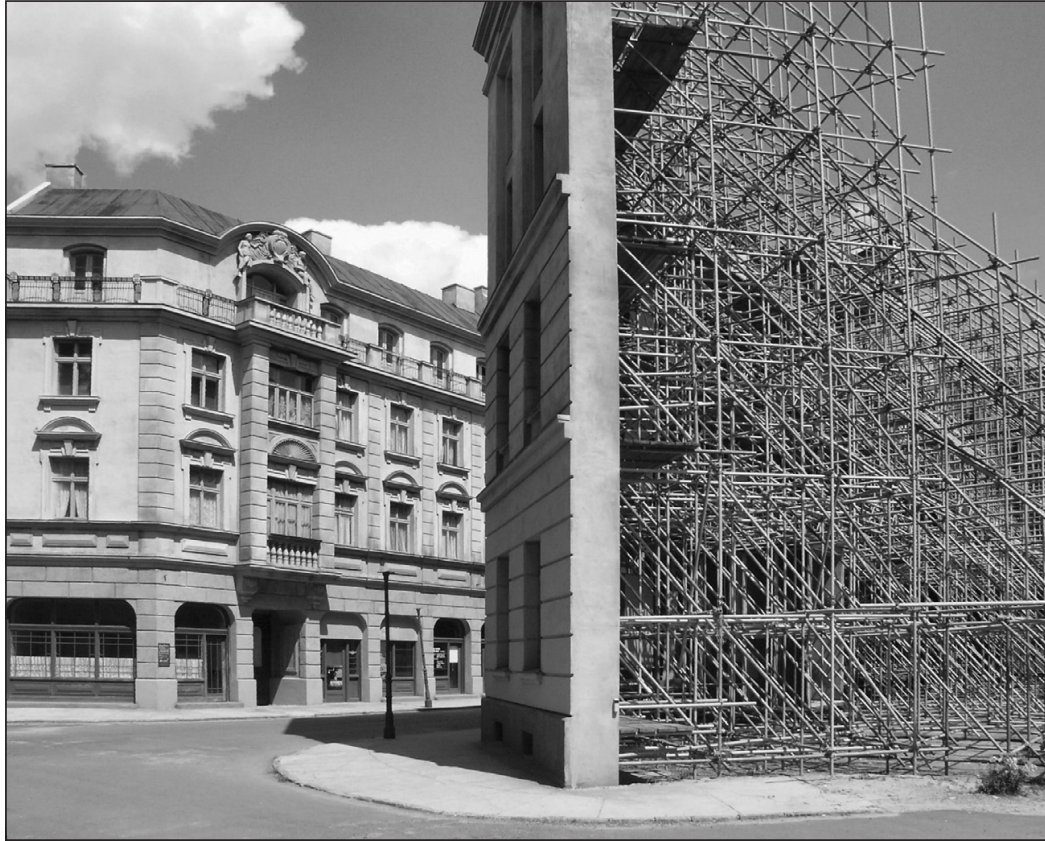
Fig. 12.1. View of the movie set Berlin Street in Babelsberg. © Studio Babelsberg AG. Reproduced with permission of Studio Babelsberg AG.

served as background for a range of historical films set during various époques in German and European history. Encompassing a huge area of 1.7 acres and including twenty-six separate street façades that could be moved and changed individually, this backlot could be readily transformed, mutating into different places in time and space. "Façades can be reconstructed and newly painted, windows lit, stairwells and apartments enabled to be entered, street signs swapped upon request."[4] It even provided "the possibility for film teams to use the street for scenes not even set in Berlin" (42). Thanks to a variety of possible camera positions, the street was able to be shot from different perspectives, changing its appearance almost completely (42). Thus it simultaneously represented Berlin in Margarethe von Trotta's *Rosenstraße* (*Rosenstrasse*, Germany, Netherlands, 2003), Warsaw in *The Pianist*, and Paris in *Inglourious Basterds*. More recently, Babelsberg served as home for Brian Percival's *The Book Thief* (USA, Germany, 2013) as well as George Clooney's production *The Monuments Men* (USA, Germany, 2014). The malleability of the set and its interrelated illusionary power made the Berlin Street lot a perfect cinematic tool to promote Babelsberg as the leading studio for the adaptation of historical subjects. The Nazi past and the Holocaust emerged as the

most popular historical subjects for reenactment against the backdrop of the Berlin Street. In this respect, the set came to represent literally what Kracauer had termed, "the external aspects of the prototypes."[5]

As the background for multiple works presenting stories of the "Third Reich," the Berlin Street set certainly contributed to the creation of specific patterns of visualizing the Nazi past and the Holocaust in contemporary German and international cinema. At the same time, the particular nature of the film set—as a hidden but still present façade that does not so much represent as mimic the past—provides a perfect starting point for reflecting on cinematic history in the making. It constitutes a certain kind of porosity that intertwines time and space, and thus serves as a room-for-play, transforming the set into a virtual cinematic place of memory.

Room-for-Play and Cinematic Memory

In his famous observation of the Italian city of Naples, Walter Benjamin, along with Asja Lacis, once noted a particular architectural spirit emanating from the buildings and streets of the city: "As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definite is avoided. No situation appears indeed forever, no figure asserts its 'thus and not otherwise.'"[6] This description could easily apply also to the Berlin Street exterior set in Babelsberg. The backdrop's material character and the dramatic action "interpenetrate" one another. The architectural devices such as courtyards and stairways, but also windows and (the illusion of) brick walls, provide the films with a particular (historical) mood, but they also establish a certain kind of fluidity and porosity. Similarly, the Berlin Street set transforms literally into a "theater of new, unforeseen constellations." The term "theater" already links it to the staging of a film. But the term in the German original text is even more striking. Benjamin describes it as "Spiel-Raum," which Miriam Hansen translates as "room-for-play." Hansen refers to an earlier version of Benjamin's famous Artwork essay, in which he writes about the consequences of the loss of aura: "What is lost in the withering of semblance, or decay of the aura, in works of art is matched by a huge gain in room-for-play [*Spiel-Raum*]. This space for play is widest in film. In film, the element of semblance has been entirely displaced by the element of play."[7]

While the Naples essay is clearly pointing toward the potential of space to create room for imagination, for the play of mental images and thoughts, the Artwork essay highlights a particular cinematic potential. Both concepts try to access something new und unseen, pretend to make visible what is unknown. Both descriptions also distinguish the concept of room-for-play from other representational strategies. In the Artwork

essay, Benjamin contrasts "semblance" and "room-for-play." In the Naples essay, the opposite of "room-for-play" is constituted through the assertion of the "definite," an appearance of "foreverness."

These antipodes characterize precisely the ambivalent nature of the Berlin Street backlot. Within a particular concept of cinematic reconstruction of the past, the Berlin Street set, with its inherent warrant of authenticity, is supposed to provide the impression of historical realness. Its aim is to produce visual semblance to satisfy the audience's longing for the cinematic representation of history "as it really was" (which is of course just hiding the fact that the historical reconstructions are much more closely linked to the present and its perception of the past than to the past itself). This approach creates concrete images of the past that then can transform into visual icons or monuments.[8]

On the other hand, the fluidity, porosity, and tentativeness of the set can also constitute moments of room-for-play that enable new sights and unforeseen constellations of the past to affect the present. As Michael Wedel has suggested, the Berlin Street set turns in such moments into a transparent cinematic memory place similar to the "lieux de mémoire" described by the French historian Pierre Nora.[9] As Nora asserts, "*lieux de mémoire* are created by a play of memory and history, an interaction of two factors that results in their reciprocal overdetermination."[10] Although artificial, the Berlin Street backlot resembles the concept of "lieux de mémoire" in its "capacity for metamorphosis" (19). Furthermore, it comparably constitutes cyclical memory. The Berlin Street set has absorbed and preserved the appearance of the various places it has performed, at least in the cinematic memories of the audience. Thus it connects different historic places and incidents, linking, for example, the Rosenstraße protest in Berlin to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. It even exceeds temporal boundaries and intertwines different eras in German history, such as the Third Reich, the GDR, and pre-unification West Berlin (for example, in *Herr Lehmann* [*Berlin Blues*, Germany, 2003]). Like the "lieux de mémoire," the Berlin Street set became an "object *mise en abîme*."[11] Thus, though aimed to represent particular historical places distanced in space and time, the Berlin Street set constantly moved toward becoming its own referent. "Contrary to historical objects, however, *lieux de mémoire* have no referent in reality," emphasizes Nora, and continues, "or, rather, they are their own referent: pure, exclusively self-referential signs" (23).

Babelsberg Legacies

As a virtual cinematic memory place, the backlot serves as a room-for-play for historical imagination and thus makes it possible to revive the German past, including the Third Reich. This creates an uncanny resonance

with the cinematic legacy of the place that hosts the movie set. Once the capital of Nazi cinema, which according to the will of Goebbels excluded the visible signifiers of the Nazi movement to a large extent from its films, the place now seems to again be inhabited by "the Nazis," but this time as sets, props, and actors. It almost seems as if the "descendants" of Nazi cinema are today creating the final fantasy of Nazism in a series of movies that exploit this particular chapter of German history again and again.

During his visit to the studios in the 1920s, Kracauer ironically commented on the illusion of cinematic omnipotence that was expressed in the plastic worlds created for the movies: "The director is the foreman. It is also his difficult task to organize the visual material—which is as beautifully unorganized as life itself—into the unity that life owes to art. He locks himself and the strips of film into his private screening room and has them projected over and over. They are sifted, spliced, cut up, and labeled until finally from the huge chaos emerges a little whole: a social drama, a historical event, a woman's fate."[12]

Only a few years later, a man entered the film city of Babelsberg whose desire was to become this kind of foreman of German cinema. He realized the potential of the studio's laboratories to create cinematic worlds that could counteract the real world, replacing it in the political imagination of his people and pioneering a nationalistic fantasy of a resurrected Reich. Even before the Nazi party's rise to power, this man, Joseph Goebbels, was preoccupied with the ideological and psychological potential of cinema. And he was obsessed with replacing what he perceived as the Jewish-dominated cinemas of Weimar and Hollywood. Thus he continued to nationalize and centralize German film production, locating its main center at the film studios in Babelsberg, which became a central element within the National Socialist conglomerate of politics, propaganda, and entertainment. Up until the moment of defeat, Goebbels continued to dream of producing a glorious color film—a film that was to celebrate the German victory in the "total war," a victory in which cinema obviously played a key part. But Goebbels's vision was only "fulfilled" decades later in an ironically reversed fashion, when, at the end of the twentieth century, the Babelsberg studios emerged as a global center for historical film production.

Siegfried Kracauer was prevented from returning to the "desert" of New-Babelsberg that was renamed by the Nazis as simply "Babelsberg" in 1938. He was forced into exile in 1933, when Goebbels, following his famous "Kaiserhof" speech of March 1933 to representatives of the German film industry, began reorganizing Ufa and expelling Jews from filmmaking. In his Kaiserhof speech Goebbels had stated categorically that popular taste in Germany differed from what "ein jüdischer Regisseur" (a Jewish film director) would assume. As the Minister of Propaganda explained, one could not build the proper image of the German people

from a "luftleeren Raum" (vacuum; which in Goebbels's understanding constituted the "Jewish" perspective). In contrast, he declared that only those rooted in German ideology would be able to understand and satisfy the German audience.[13]

Like Kracauer, nearly all of Germany's Jewish filmmakers fled Nazi persecution during the following years. After Kracauer escaped from Europe and emigrated to the United States, he conducted a study about Goebbels's propaganda efforts that was published in 1942 by the Museum of Modern Art Film Library and reprinted in *From Caligari to Hitler*. In this study Kracauer implicitly responded to Goebbels's call to expel all German-Jewish filmmakers in the supposed interest of meeting the desires of the German people when he stated: "Goebbels, an expert at combining journalistic rhetoric and smart cynicism, defined modern political propaganda as a creative art, thereby implying that he considered it an autonomous power rather than a subordinate instrument. Could this propaganda possibly meet the wants of the people?"[14] Kracauer then answered his rhetorical question the following way: "As a 'creative art,' it excelled in instigating or silencing popular wants, and instead of prompting valuable ideas, it opportunistically exploited all ideas in its own interest" (299). Kracauer concludes with some irony that Goebbels's "definition is sufficiently sincere to intimate that a world shaped by the art of propaganda becomes as modeling clay—amorphous material lacking any initiative of its own" (299). In likening Nazi propaganda to modeling clay, Kracauer indirectly refers back to the modeling techniques of the film city in Babelsberg then under the control of Goebbels's Ministry of Propaganda.

Therefore it seems particularly fitting that in one of the most famous contemporary films about the Nazi past shot there during the last decade, Kracauer's imaginary return to Babelsberg is depicted as an act of empowerment. In a key scene in Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, film critic and lieutenant Archie Hicox enters a room in which both a British military strategist and a close-mouthed Winston Churchill await him. Hicox is introduced as an expert on German cinema who has done extensive research on the German director G. W. Pabst. But more important for the secret military mission is his knowledge of German cinema under the Third Reich. It is obvious that Hicox, played by Michael Fassbender, not only references Kracauer and his research on Weimar and Nazi German cinemas, but also—in an echo of the cinematic and historiographic palimpsest structure of the whole film—director Alfred Hitchcock, who during the Second World War produced two films for the British Ministry of Information that were dropped over France to support the resistance.[15]

Goebbels's vision of a successful German cinema that would support the Nazi cause was not one that would simply spread the word about the party and its political actions. On the contrary, neither the

studios in Babelsberg nor Germany's film screens were to be peopled with uniformed party members—at least not in feature films. Thus he declared that the SA should march on the streets and not on the stage or screen.[16] Referring to a certain type of early Nazi cinema—as embodied by a number of works released directly after the takeover in January 1933, including *SA Mann Brand* (*Storm Trooper Brand*) and *Hitlerjunge Quex* (*Hitler Youth Quex*)—Goebbels concluded: "Solcher Nationalsozialismus ist nur äußere Tünche. Die neue Bewegung erschöpft sich nicht in Parademarch und Trompetengeschmetter" (This kind of National Socialism is merely exterior decoration. The new movement means more than parades and the blaring of trumpets.)[17] Thus, following Goebbels's direct order, political symbols such as uniforms, flags, and swastikas were all but eliminated from the screen in favor of indirect references to Nazi politics and ideology. National Socialist cinema should, in Goebbels's vision, remain strongly committed to the artificiality of the studio sphere. As Rentschler notes, "In an attempt to control the articulation of fictional worlds, only a small proportion of films was shot outdoors or on location. . . . Film narratives of the Nazi era generally privileged space over time, composition over editing, design over movement, sets over human shapes."[18]

Accordingly, Goebbels favored a different film genre for spreading the political and ideological ideas of the Nazi movement: the historical film drama. In a March 1937 speech to the Reichsfilmkammer he tried to attract filmmakers and producers to historical subjects. Goebbels suggested that such films would depict historical time periods and known personalities from German history without any direct references to the new National Socialist regime. Then the ideas of National Socialism could appear indirectly within these historical narratives. For this reason he encouraged the German filmmakers not to feel tied to historical facts. "Der Künstler," declared Goebbels in his speech, "ist nicht ausschließlich auf das Quellenmaterial angewiesen. Er hat das Recht . . . intuitiv in geschichtliche Vorgänge einzudringen und sie auf Grund seiner intuitiven Einsicht zu gestalten" (The artist is not solely dependent on sources. He has the right . . . to intuitively delve into historical events and recreate them based on his intuitive understanding).[19]

This reshaping of the sources made historical films the perfect genre for conveying the favored spirit. Goebbels's interest was in films that expressed the National Socialist agenda and character and that took a stance on National Socialism without simply presenting National Socialist symbols (48). Thus as late as 1937 he continued to reject the explicit depiction of Nazism on the screen. He also indicated the reasoning behind this rejection. Although supporting the making of historical films, he demanded that filmmakers avoid presenting National Socialism as a historical phenomenon, citing insufficient distance:

Der Nationalsozialismus hat noch keine endgültige Form angenom-
men, er ist noch ein werdender Prozeß. Er ist auch nicht in dem
Sinne ein historisches Phänomen, als sein Zustand stabilisiert, . . .
sondern in dem Sinne, als er eine Methode fixiert. (47)

[National Socialism has not yet taken on its final form; it is a developing
process. It is also not a historical phenomenon in the sense that its con-
dition is stabilized . . . but in the sense that it is finalizing its methods.]

This statement also sheds light on Goebbels's last speech in April 1945,
in which he called upon the remaining German filmmakers to remain on
course. He stated prophetically:

In hundert Jahren wird man in einem schönen Farbfilm die schreck-
lichen Tage zeigen, die wir durchleben. Möchten Sie nicht in diesem
Film eine Rolle spielen? Halten Sie jetzt durch, damit die Zuschauer
in hundert Jahren nicht johlen und pfeifen, wenn Sie auf der Lein-
wand erscheinen.[20]

[In a hundred years someone will show a nice color film about these
terrible days that we are living through. Don't you want to have a
part in this film? Stay on course now so that the audience in a hun-
dred years will not jeer and boo when you appear on the screen.]

Only a few months later the Soviet Red Army entered the Babelsberg stu-
dios and the film city's afterlife began.

Restaging and Imagining the Nazi Past

Goebbels's remarks reveal his anticipation of a postponed representation
of the Nazi movement in feature films. His fear of diminishing the Nazi
cause through superficial depictions and his idea of anticipating a future
(ultimately never realized) cinematic memorial to the party and its achieve-
ments paradoxically came to fruition in the postwar era, albeit in a very
different way than he had envisioned. Goebbels's fear—marching columns
of uniformed Nazi soldiers with swastika flags—and his legacy—the Third
Reich in color—only became reality *after* the defeat of Nazi Germany and
the collapse of its film industry. This is especially the case today, follow-
ing the resurrection of the Babelsberg studio with its expertise in histori-
cal filmmaking. Ironically, only after the end of its cinema could National
Socialism be presented as a historical phenomenon. Nazi crimes and crime
scenes—once, if at all, often only filmed in secret for records stored in the
state film archive—were reenacted on the Babelsberg studio grounds.[21] In
this way the Babelsberg studios—and in particular, the Berlin Street back-
lot—played a key role in the cinematic afterlife of Nazism.

The "career" of the Berlin Street set as a stand-in for the history of the Holocaust and the Third Reich began early in 2001, when Roman Polanski came to Babelsberg to direct *The Pianist*.[22] There he found the leftovers of a successful German movie that had been produced some years earlier: a huge exterior set that was used to portray the Eastern part of the Berlin street Sonnenallee, and which had served as a playground for Leander Hausmann's eponymous movie. Although the idea to build a set of this kind originated in the GDR, when DEFA had used the Babelsberg studios, it only became possible to build such a unique set with financial support from international investors.[23]

The remains of the *Sonnenallee* set enabled Polanski and his set designer Allan Starski to rebuild the Warsaw Ghetto and restage ghetto life and the ghetto uprising. Thus paradoxically the second and third generations of postwar Germans—craftsmen, painters, set decorators—rebuilt what their ancestors once had proudly destroyed.[24] During the war, German SS commander Jürgen Stroop had responded to the ghetto uprising by ordering its immediate destruction; now the ghetto was resurrected in Babelsberg, and Stoop's trophies, a number of photographs that were taken to prove the success of the SS operation, were used to create an authentic look for the historical film. The backlot in Babelsberg played a crucial role in this recreation of the photographic record. Polanski ordered that the streets be arranged in a T-shape, which would allow him to depict the uprising from the perspective of a protagonist who escapes from the ghetto and hides on the "Aryan" side (fig. 12.2). This perspective was identical with that once enjoyed by invading German troops. In this particular episode, Polanski recreated several photographs from Stroop's original report, including one showing the commander with his adjutants as they observe the ghetto, and another famous image of a Jewish resistance fighter jumping out of the window of a burning house.[25]

In this regard, the Berlin Street set was transformed into a theater stage, a room-for-play in which life in the Warsaw Ghetto reappeared—not in the form of black-and-white Nazi propaganda photographs but as the reconstruction of a historical fantasy that relies on various sources. Like Steven Spielberg's approach in *Schindler's List* (USA, 1993), Polanski reframed historical photographs and films in the ghetto scenes of his film. But in contrast to Spielberg, Polanski was interested in more than creating a sense of authenticity or producing a dramatic effect. He used the setting of the Berlin Street to recreate archival material at two significant turning points of the story—both the establishment of the ghetto and its uprising. Both moments affect the specific witnessing position of the protagonist, the Polish-Jewish pianist Władysław Szpilman, and that witnessing position is supported by two different camera locations within the Berlin Street exterior set: "Although Szpilman is supposed to be looking onto the streets of Warsaw from two different apartments, both places