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War and Peace. The Film Iconeme of the Urban Square as Image of Europe in Transition (1944-1948)

Paolo Villa

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Abstract

A central feature of European urban landscapes, the square represents the public space *par excellence*. At the end of WW2 and in the immediate postwar time, the role of cinema in representing and reimagining urban squares was crucial. Through film images, they became the stage and the mirror of a Europe in transition. This contribution, examining Italian, French, German, and Czechoslovak cases, posits the square as an essential iconeme in postwar non-fiction cinema and visual culture, acting as a *fil rouge* to visually retrace the path of Europe from war to peace, and into new forms of political tension.

Résumé

L'un des traits le plus importants du paysage urbain, la place se présente comme espace publique par excellence. À la fin du Second conflit mondial et dans l'immédiat après-guerre, le cinéma a joué un rôle essentiel pour représenter et réimaginer les places urbaines dans une Europe en transition. Cette contribution, en examinant des films italiens, français, allemands et tchécoslovaques, met en évidence l'iconème de la place urbaine dans le cinéma non-fiction et la culture visuelle de l'après-guerre comme un fil rouge précieux pour suivre le parcours de l'Europe de la guerre à la paix, et dans des nouvelles formes de tension politique.

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Placed on either a truck or tank, the camera slowly advances down a shaded road. In trembling images, it approaches a bright exit towards what seems to be an almost indistinguishable, sun-drenched monument. The pavements are filled with weaving people. As the camera proceeds forwards, the view opens to show a large, luminous square crowned by the colossal Vittoriano. It's Piazza Venezia in Rome, the date is June 4, 1944, and the Allies are entering the Eternal City.¹ No more than four years earlier, Benito Mussolini addressed an ecstatic crowd in the same square to declare war on France and the United Kingdom.² Although this took place in the same location, it's completely different: in a few months, the war changed everything.

Unsurprisingly, upon arriving in the city, the military forces targeted the biggest squares, accompanied by a flow of people that tumbled through the streets and *piazze* to welcome the liberators. Nor is it by chance that film, in Rome and elsewhere, systematically recorded the seizure of urban public spaces. As epicenters of political, economic, and religious powers, squares have often been privileged places in the construction, maintenance, and transformation of civic and national identities. In the tumultuous transition period of 1944 to 1948, they played an essential political role. Meanwhile, nonfiction cinema (newsreels, documentaries, military and amateur films) acted as a crucial means of archiving and communication, detailing events that implicated several European nations. While experiencing occupation and liberation, destruction on a vast scale, and the struggles of the post-war period, these countries experienced different circumstances—from war to peace—before falling into new political tensions, as the continent was divided into two opposing influence spheres.

This article aims to highlight how the cinematic representation of European squares reflects the complex dynamics of those four crucial years, considering documentaries and newsreels from a

corpus of approximately six hundred nonfiction films from France, Italy, Germany, and the Czech Republic, cataloged and analyzed with digital tools by the project *ViCTOR-E, Visual Culture of Trauma, Obliteration and Reconstruction in Post WWII Europe*. This three-year endeavor (2019-2022), which involved an international team of researchers from Frankfurt, Paris, Prague, and Udine, investigated how nonfiction cinema depicted and actively shaped European societies in the initial postwar decade (1944-1956). It especially focused on questions of representation and reconstruction of the public space, including urban, architectural, political, economic, social, cultural, symbolic, and memory-related facets.³ The square, the public space *par excellence*, unifies several of these aspects. Its cinematic representation will be analyzed as a recurring visual motif of fundamental importance to explore a crucial historical passage in the last century. Meaningful examples will be pulled from the determined film corpus to do this.

From 1944 to 1948, European squares saw the negotiation and transition of political, military, and counter-powers; battles, liberations, destruction, celebrations of freedom, and spectacles of defeat. They became a stage for the rebirth of national communities; for democratization, demonstrations, strikes, elections, coups, and new-born regimes. The popular will found a stage for representation and expression in European squares, from time to time, in collaboration with or in opposition to the political, military, or economic elites that led this transitional time from the ruling palaces.

Films reflect a two-fold relationship between squares and palaces, between the people's will and the governing classes. While initially public events and celebrations signaled an alliance, increasing demonstrations, protests, and even riots revealed a progressive detachment and a return to the more hierarchical and traditional social dynamic, where the 'palace' rules and the 'square' endures (or rather, largely unsuccessfully, protests).

¹ *Arrivo degli alleati a Roma* (Allies' Arrival in Rome), military footage, 1944, Archivio storico Istituto Luce, Rome. In case of quotations from non-English sources (texts or films), unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

² *10 giugno anno XVIII. La dichiarazione di guerra* (10 June Year XVIII. The Declaration of War), Istituto Luce, 1940, Archivio storico Istituto Luce, Rome.

³ The main output of the project is the online exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction* (<https://www.frames-reconstruction.eu/>), while the entirety of the film corpus has been made available through the portal European Film Gateway (<https://www.europeanfilmgateway.eu/>).

I would argue that film is the main medium through which the essential public role of squares can be retraced, assuming the existence of similarities between different cities, places, and nations. The film icon of the square, or what I will refer to as its iconeme, can therefore be understood as a recurring, widespread visual element that produced a highly valuable, specific iconic system of interconnected representations and memories related to the urban public space. Today, this serves as a means to trace the visual history of that time and reflect on the role of nonfiction cinema as a historical source.⁴

Squares and Film

European culture has been defined as a “culture of the square, a culture of the *piazza*,” marked, on one side, by the vital role of this urban space in the public domain and, on the other side, the porous interrelation between private and collective spheres embodied in what has been called “life in squares.”⁵ As a central component of European urban structures, squares have contributed to the delineation of European societies and histories. In some national or cross-national contexts, like Mediterranean countries or *Mitteleuropean* regions, squares represent the cornerstone of urban landscapes, having deeply shaped the functions, forms, and meanings of public spaces and life: “the square is the place where Europe meets, following its own tradition; a place that has semiotic value, with many meanings: even without knowing all European languages—the European Babel Tower—one can read in the squares a unified message.”⁶

⁴ On nonfiction cinema and particularly newsreels as agents of identity constructions and memory building, as well as historical sources, see Kornelia Imesch, Sigrid Schade, Samuel Sieber, (eds), *Constructions of Cultural Identities in Newsreel Cinema and Television after 1945* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016); Pierre Sorlin, *Ombre passeggera. Cinema e storia* (Venezia: Marsilio 2013); Sylvie Lindeperg, *Clio de 5 à 7. Les actualités filmées de la Libération: archives du futur* (Paris: CNRS, 2000). On the essential role of images in commemorating or actualize the wars of the 20th century, see Christian Delporte, Denis Maréchal, Caroline Moine, Isabelle Veyrat-Masson (eds.), *La guerre après la guerre. Images et construction des imaginaires de guerre dans l'Europe du XX^e siècle* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2010).

⁵ Costantino Dardi, *Elogio della piazza*, in *La piazza storica italiana. Analisi di un sistema complesso*, ed. Laura Barbiana (Venezia: Marsilio, 1992), 35. See also Marco Romano, *La piazza europea* (Marsilio: Venezia 2015).

⁶ Bronisław Geremek, “L'Europa, le piazze, segni di una memoria condivisa”, in *La piazza nella città europea. Luoghi, paradigmi, buone pratiche di progettazione*, ed. Franco Mancuso (Il Poligrafo: Padova, 2012), 21.

Despite being a widespread characteristic of urban environments, each square presents a highly specific identity that reflects and influences the civic, regional, and sometimes national contexts. In their atlas of European squares, Sophie Wolfrum and Alban Janson identify historic features of *conciseness*, that is, “articulated space, a dense atmosphere, complexity of aesthetics, form, and material,” as well as those of *contingency*, meaning “openness, variations in use, shifts of meaning, possibility of appropriation and scope, performative options.”⁷ Historical squares, combining “reality and symbol, [are] by nature polysemic, subject to multiple readings, interpretations, and uses.”⁸ This renders each square both recognizable and changing; not simply a void in the urban texture but rather a place open to multiple reconfigurations. In the words of Mario Isneghi, the square is “an organized emptiness that acquires shape and meaning according to what is built around it, what happens in it, what overlooks it”⁹ and, I would add, according to how arts and media reimagine it. The “urban space, which becomes a cultural space, [. . .] is enhanced by sentiments and ideas coming from the different forms of art, from literary and historic works, and, today, from the media.”¹⁰ Aside from the *architectural* and *social* dimensions of squares,¹¹ the *mediatic* must also be considered. Needless to say, the three are highly interrelated.

While history often takes the spatial form of architecture or monuments, countless ephemeral events—historical as well as ordinary—can mark the cultural memory of a place without leaving any visible permanent trace *in situ*. Paul Zucker rightly stated that squares are the “stone archives of communities,”¹² yet they are often difficult archives to decipher; “a place that maintains in its bowels all its past, offering on the surface traces and scars, relics

⁷ Sophie Wolfrum, Alban Janson, “Square Architecture City”, in *Squares. Urban Spaces in Europe*, ed. Sophie Wolfrum (Birkhäuser: Berna 2015), 18.

⁸ Maurice Aymard, “Storia di piazze, piazze per la storia”, in *La piazza nella città europea*, 27.

⁹ Mario Isneghi, *L'Italia in piazza. I luoghi della vita pubblica dal 1848 ai giorni nostri* (Il Mulino: Bologna 2004), 20.

¹⁰ Polish sociologist Alexander Wallis, quoted in Paweł Kubicki, Lucia Piekarska-Duraj, “Piazze e mutamento dei valori sociali”, in *La piazza nella città europea*, 38.

¹¹ Eamon Canniffe, *The Politics of the Piazza. The History and Meaning of the Italian square* (Ashgate: Burlington, 2008), 3.

¹² Paul Zucker, *Town and Square. From the Agora to the Village Green* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 4.

and witnesses of a more or less distanced past, more or less comprehensible for contemporary culture and thought.”¹³ Historical squares can be understood as urban palimpsests¹⁴ where history, memories, and meanings have accumulated layer upon layer. Films, as well as other forms of documentation, have the power to unfold this peculiar stratigraphy, allowing for a vertical gaze that uncovers the past.

As a theatre for the representation of power, a stage for people and events, a display for monuments, and a device and screen for the collective gaze, squares are deeply tied with the act of seeing and vision. This encourages the investigation of their mediatic representations, their accepted, refused, or reappropriated images, and iconic memories. In other words, this calls for a visual and cultural history of the square iconeme.

In film semiotics, an iconeme indicates a clearly distinguishable unit of images capable of representing a specific situation.¹⁵ Geographer Eugenio Turri articulated the same notion in relation to rural and urban landscapes: iconemes are “those elementary units of perception, those *pictures*” used to build up our collective image of a place, a region, a nation. Culturally determined, they depend on repetition and accumulation to function, according to the principle of “variation through continuity,” which structures all processes of iconic reiteration. Always related “as parts of a system,” they activate “psychological and representational mechanisms tied with our historical, social, geographical, economical (etc.) comprehension and knowledge.”¹⁶ Exceeding the single image, iconemes, in a transmedial way, create and perpetuate iconic configurations through media and cultural contexts. They stand at the center of the “pluri-medial networks” responsible for constructing, modifying, or maintaining cultural memories.¹⁷

¹³ Maria Ananiadou-Tzimopoulou, Alexandra Yerolympos, “Nel cuore della città, nelle trame del paesaggio urbano”, in *La piazza nella città europea*, 34.

¹⁴ Danièle Routaboule, “Mémoire du lieu : de la conservation à la création paysagère”, in *Conservation des squares et parks urbains*, ed. Association des architectes paysagistes du Québec (Montréal: MNH, 1993).

¹⁵ Francesco Casetti, *Teorie del film 1945-1990* (Milano: Bompiani 1993), 146.

¹⁶ Eugenio Turri, *Semiologia del paesaggio italiano* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2014 [1979]), photographic appendix.

¹⁷ Astrid Erll, “Literature, Film and the Mediality of Cultural Memory”, in *Media and Cultural Memory. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 2008).

The iconeme of the square is an example of a multi-media, long-lasting motif of visual culture. Combining historical analysis, film history, visual culture, and collective memory, my ongoing study of squares in film exhorts me to take an interdisciplinary approach and comparatist methodology.¹⁸ Focusing on its European dimension is an attempt to overcome the usually monolithic, non-dialogic national narratives and memories promoted in public discourses (both former and present)¹⁹ as well as a certain “methodological nationalism,”²⁰ while favoring a tentative transnational perspective capable of articulating issues of symbolic and material circulation of images, media, people, goods, and ideas.

Libération!

As filming was strictly regulated under Nazi occupation, images depicting the battles for the liberation of cities and villages are rare. However, as in the case of Paris²¹ or Prague,²² some reporters and amateurs still managed to capture dramatic scenes of barricades and shootings between the occupants and the liberators (Fig. 1), crystallized in images that are traversed by “the tension between the logic of document and that of the monument.”²³

In contrast, the subsequent arrival of Liberation armies (whether British, American, or Soviet) was broadly filmed and photographed. Captured by civilians or soldiers with portable cameras and fortuitous means, these usually silent images show the crowd flowing through the squares, addressing the cameraman directly with smiles and cheers. In Prague,

¹⁸ The iconeme can be examined in *synchronic perspective*, considering the image of several squares at a precise moment or in a short period of time (as it will be the case in this essay), or in *diachronic perspective*, following the multiple images of the same square through time.

¹⁹ Aleida Assman, “From Collective Violence to a Common Future: Four Models for Dealing with a Traumatic Past”, in *Other People's Pain: Narratives of Trauma and the Question of Ethics*, ed. Martin Modlinger and Philip Sontag (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 54.

²⁰ Chiara De Cesari, Ann Rigney, “Introduction”, in *Transnational Memory. Circulation, Articulation, Scales*, ed. Chiara De Cesari, Ann Rigney (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 2014).

²¹ *Le journal de la Résistance* (The Journal of Resistance), “France Libre Actualité,” 1944, Archivio storico Istituto Luce, Rome. A caption specifies that the images were shot illegally in Paris between August 16th and 26th, 1944. Also known as “La Libération de Paris,” the documentary is extensively analysed in Sylvie Lindeperg, *La voie des images. Quatre histoires de tournages au printemps-été 1944* (Paris: Verdier, 2013), 74-101.

²² *Květnová revoluce 1945* (The May Revolution 1945), amateur reels, 1945, Národní filmový archiv, Prague.

²³ Lindeperg, *La voie des images*, 75.



Figure 1. Josef Stehno (?), *Staroměstské náměstí during the Prague Uprising, 8 Mai 1945*, The Prague City Archives, Collection of Photographs, c. n. IV 74/32.

amateur filmmaker Kostecký shot not only the last days of the occupation but also the entrance of Soviet units in *Staroměstské* and *Václavské náměstí*. In Turin, spontaneous parades of partisan groups were recorded in *Piazza Castello*, against the backdrop of ruined monuments.²⁴ In Florence, people run to welcome the incoming British soldiers in *Piazza del Duomo* and *Piazza della Signoria*, applauding, rejoicing, and offering wine.²⁵ In Paris, German prisoners line up in *Place de l'Étoile* while the carrouseis of American troops are celebrated by an exultant crowd. We see a man pinning a poster to the wall that simply says *Libération!*²⁶ It's probable that similar scenes took place in numerous other cities, with the same atmosphere of excitement, happiness, and hysteria.

To document these celebrations, the camera moves among the people *inside* the square. It takes an

internal point of view, lingering on details and close-ups, thus building a very different image to that of the 1930s newsreels, where squares were often framed from above to reveal an anonymous mass obediently responding to the leader (an iconography that was particularly exploited in Italy and Germany). The new and more intimate style of shots articulates a different relationship with the urban space, which was returned to its citizens as a stage for free, spontaneous gatherings that oppose the political rituals or prescribed rallies. This also holds true for cases that never experienced occupation, like London's *Trafalgar Square* or *Piccadilly Circus*,²⁷ where the joyful crowds dance and sing on Victory over Japan Day (August 15, 1945), reaffirming the square as a public space that welcomes freedom and expression—a place to openly celebrate the victory of democracy over authoritarian regimes (Fig. 2).

²⁴ *Parata della Liberazione* (Liberation Parade), amateur reels, Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Torino.

²⁵ *Gli inglesi entrano a Firenze* (The British enter Florence), "Combat Film" RW430, 1945, Archivio storico Istituto Luce, Rome.

²⁶ *Enfin libre* (Finally free), amateur reels, 1944, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA), Paris.

²⁷ *VJ Day*, "British Movietone News," 20th August 1945, AP Archives.



Figure 2. Ministry of Information Photo Division Photographer, *Civilians and service personnel in London's Picadilly Circus celebrate the news of Allied Victory over Japan in August 1945*, 1945, London. © Imperial War Museum.

The apparently “horizontal” more than “vertical” hierarchical relationship between occupants and cities (at least in films) is crystal-clear in a news-reel that unravels in the *Grand-Place* of Brussels, showing Marshall Montgomery announcing the liberation of the capital and an approaching end to the war.²⁸ Standing in the middle of the square at an equal level to the Belgian citizens, he addresses a quiet and attentive crowd. Being inside the square rather than above it, Montgomery and the British forces express their will to act as liberators instead of occupants. Nevertheless, in concrete terms, they were occupants. The filming of the liberated squares reinforces this idea by visually cementing the occupation of the urban space by these new forces.

²⁸ *La guerre à l'Ouest* (War in the West), “Les Actualités françaises,” post September 7th, 1944, INA, Paris.

Squares acted as legitimizing spaces: whoever “had the power occupied the public spaces of major relevance and visibility” to propose or impose a new status quo.²⁹ Filming was never on the sidelines of this process. Images certified the occupation and spread the news to broader region-wide, nationwide, or even international audiences, signaling to the entire country and beyond—especially the enemy—who was in charge of the public and political space (Fig. 3).

Moreover, as well as being spontaneous and joyful, these gatherings surely felt out of the ordinary. Such historical moments had to be immortalized on camera. Filming, notably in amateur productions, often marked a memorable event – a break

²⁹ Isneghi, *L'Italia in piazza*, 43.



Figure 3. Malindine E.G. (Capt.), No 5 Army Film & Photographic Unit, *French 2nd Armour Division in front of Notre Dame, 26 August 1944*, 1944, London. © Imperial War Museum.

from everyday routine and social life. The role of films became ever more relevant with the first organized ceremonies, which encouraged the process of consciously building a cultural memory for posterior generations. Charles de Gaulle had already paid homage to French soldiers and partisans in 1944 in *Place de l'Étoile*,³⁰ but it wasn't until May 1945 that parades and official commemorations started to multiply. Being the primary film source that recorded and reported on such events, newsreels show clear continuities in rhetoric and visuals of the previous decade. Many of these celebrations, presenting a rather strong military character, resembled pre-war authoritarian rallies. Articulating an alternative filmic syntax to express the new political orders or social conditions was unlikely to be among the primary concerns of newsreel agencies, whose use of film language has been prevalently consistent and conservative throughout the decades. Whether it was the British troops marching

through the *Grand-Place* of Brussels³¹ or the USSR's gigantic display of power on the *Red Square* in Moscow where, in Stalin's presence, a parade gathered in honor of the Red Army,³² the square became a grandiose scenography for a political and military statement; a stage for the leader and the ruling apparatus; a choreographed ground totally controlled by the palace. In the martyred Warsaw, parades for the anniversary to mark the end of the war took place in an unrecognizable landscape of ruins. The will to affirm the resistance of Polish people found a place of commemoration even in a city "twice killed, [. . .] a dead city, dead but free!"³³

In Strasbourg, these celebrations coincided with the restitution of Alsace to France.³⁴ In *Place Kléber*,

³⁰ *Enfin libre*.

³¹ *Départ des troupes britanniques* (Departure of British troops), "Les Actualités françaises," 1945, INA, Paris.

³² *Parade militaire sur la Place Rouge* (Military Parade on the Red Square), "Les Actualités françaises," 29th June 1945, INA, Paris.

³³ *Dans Varsovie en ruines* (In ruined Warsaw), "Les Actualités françaises," 21st September 1945, INA, Paris.

³⁴ *Le général Leclerc préside les fêtes de la libération* (General Leclerc presides the celebrations for the Liberation), "Les Actualités françaises," 28th November 1945, INA, Paris.

General Leclerc, surrounded by soldiers and girls in traditional costumes, re-baptizes the square with its French name, as the voice-over insists on Alsatian loyalty to France despite the German occupation. This was a thorny issue at the time due to the forced recruitment of Alsatian soldiers (the so-called *Malgré-nous*) in the Wehrmacht. *Praha v říjnu* (*Prague in October*)³⁵ documents the quick recovery of the city, with people flocking to *Václavské náměstí* and joyfully welcoming President Edvard Beneš in *Rejdiště*, renamed *Náměstí Krasnoarmějců* in honor of the Red Army (today, *náměstí Jana Palacha*). Walking up to Rudolphinum concert hall and being greeted by a crowd of young girls in Bohemian costumes, Beneš seems to seek closer contact with the citizens, in line with his public persona, which promoted a peaceful, democratic Czechoslovakia acting as a bridge between Western and Eastern Europe.

Less political but still extremely relevant for rebuilding civic identities, saved or restored monuments and artworks were celebrated with numerous ceremonies. The repositioning of statues became an occasion for commemoration, and these events were dispersed to a wider audience through newsreels. In Paris, the return of King Edward VII's statue in *Place Édouard Sept* (which was removed before the war) acts as a solemn reaffirmation of the friendship between France and the United Kingdom.³⁶ In Venice's *Piazza San Marco*, the winged lion and the famous bronze horses of the basilica were restored and saluted by Venetians to acknowledge the return of peaceful times.³⁷ In Florence, the people took part in a ceremony to commend the recovery of looted artworks to the Uffizi gallery, which were retrieved by American troops in South Tyrol.³⁸ This reel was shot by an American film unit, arguably for a planned documentary, as it begins with a clapperboard bearing the title *Art Returns*. As the paintings are

transported into *Piazza della Signoria*, a huge crowd has already assembled, with civic authorities giving speeches. The lily, a symbol of the town, is visible all over the square. If the homecoming of artworks is a celebration of civic pride for the people of Florence, the Allies can claim to be the saviors of Western art, who—unlike the Nazis—democratically return the masterpieces, considering them not as war spoils but rather as a universal and shared heritage.

In Search of Atonement

Not all squares were an oasis for joyful postwar celebrations. Feelings of liberation were interwoven with defeat and rage. Squares became improvised courts to exercise justice and revenge against Nazi-Fascist persecutors and collaborators. Photographic and film documentation in France, Italy, and elsewhere shows how retaliations, particularly against women, took place. Shaved, marked, sometimes beaten, and exposed to public judgment, women became the scapegoat to unleash frustration, rage, and collective pain in a savage and uncontrolled way, taking advantage of the intermediary phase when law and order had not yet been restored.³⁹ The most famous of these revenge acts took place in Milan's *Piazzale Loreto*. On August 8, 1944, the Fascist militia had executed and exposed there fifteen partisans. On April 29, 1945, the bodies of Mussolini, his mistress, Claretta Petacci, and other high-ranking Fascist Generals were exposed to an outraged crowd, making headlines around the world (Fig. 4).

As in the case of London's celebrations, Moscow's military parades, and Paris' liberation, questions have been raised about the circulation of these images in Europe and beyond. Although the filming of these events was frequent, being strongly related to their respective local contexts, only some of these films acquired transnational circulation and status. This happened in the case of renowned squares, major events, or a combination of both. Locating the material circulation of reels has proven to be difficult, but it is precisely this circulation that has

³⁵ *Praha v říjnu* (*Prague in October*), documentary, 1945, Národní filmový archiv, Prague.

³⁶ *Remise en place de la statue d'Édouard VII* (*Repositioning of Edward VIII's statue*), "France Libre Actualités," 15th September 1944, INA, Paris.

³⁷ *Venezia: cessata la guerra, vengono di nuovo installati nelle loro sedi originali il leone e i cavalli di bronzo di Piazza San Marco* (*Venice: after the end of the war, the lion and the bronze horses of San Marco Square are reinstalled in their original seats*), "Notiziario Nuova Luce" NL003, 1945, Archivio storico Istituto Luce, Rome.

³⁸ *Le opere d'arte fiorentine ritornano dall'Alto Adige nella loro sede* (*Florentine artworks return from South Tyrol to their location*), "Combat Film" RW009, 22 July 1945, Archivio storico Istituto Luce, Rome.

³⁹ Tony Judt, *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 41-44.



Figure 4. Vincenzo Carrese (?), *The bodies of Benito Mussolini, his mistress Claretta Petacci and other executed fascists, on display in Milan on 29 April 1945, in Piazzale Loreto, 1945.*

allowed some images—as well as the places and squares they depict—to acquire a transnational meaning and relevance, making the iconeme of the square a traveling form of communication and memory. In the case of postwar newsreels, shots were usually filmed by national or local agencies and distributed to others in a reciprocal net of exchange. During and after WWII, the Allied and Soviet military occupation constituted a supranational, geo-political network facilitating the trans-border diffusion of goods, including films. The shots recorded in *Piazzale Loreto* (arguably by American soldiers or Italian operators)⁴⁰ traveled through Allied newsreels⁴¹ and were obtained (despite remaining unused) by French producers.⁴² They

also appear in the documentary *Giorni di gloria*, a collective film chronicling the Italian resistance and the liberation from Nazi-Fascism.⁴³ Each time, the scene is re-contextualized through a new line of commentary and, to a lesser degree, some minor editing changes and omissions. In *Giorni di gloria*, *Piazzale Loreto* represents the climax and conclusion of the partisans' fight to liberate the country. Contrastingly, the American newsreel transforms it into a warning for fascist dictators, thus transcending the specific Italian situation and implicitly claiming the US will watch over any possible repetition of what happened in Italy and Germany.

The images of *Piazzale Loreto* ended the dictator's decade-long dominance over Italian squares as well as the plethora of fascist newsreels depicting

⁴⁰ *Morte di Mussolini 111 ADC 4161* (Mussolini's Death, 111 ADC 4161), "Combat Film RW216," Archivio storico Istituto Luce, Rome.

⁴¹ *The End of Musso*, "Movietone News," post April 29th, 1945, AP Archive.

⁴² *Milan célèbre la fin de Mussolini* (Milan celebrates the end of Mussolini), unused reels for "Le monde libre," INA Paris.

⁴³ *Giorni di gloria* (Days of Glory), documentary, 1945, directed by Luchino Visconti, Giuseppe De Santis, Marcello Pagliero, Mario Serandrei, AAMOD Archivio Audiovisivo del Movimento Operaio e Democratico, Rome.

hailing *piazze*, by violently overturning their visual terms. The man who had exploited his charisma to incite the masses into action fell victim to his own beast, humiliated in the very public space that he had formerly commanded. The corpses are shown in close-up: the gruesome details are clearly visible while the square, shot at eye-level, appears chaotic, uncontrollable, and plunged in carnivalesque acts of subversion. The ‘holy body’ of the Dux is demonized; his all-powerful, virile, imposing presence is offended in a revengeful rally “called by Him [. . .], provoked, even unintentionally, by Him”, where individuals dissolve into “that crowd who exorcised twenty years of life.”⁴⁴ Not unprecedented, the old order was abolished through the tyrant’s public execution – only symbolically, however, as Mussolini and the others had been condemned and shot in Lake Como the day before. By reversing the propaganda images of the regime’s squares, *Piazzale Loreto* (until then just a peripheral roundabout in Milan) suddenly became a symbol of the transition from Fascism to democracy in Italy. Screened in movie theatres across the country, this site was crystallized in Italy’s cultural memory as the square of definitive liberation; the final (problematic) exorcism, asserted and enshrined in film images as “a collective act of atonement and accusation.”⁴⁵

In comparison, other squares suffered entirely different conditions. Germany’s *Plätze* remained empty: in ruins and surrounded by destroyed cities. From the extraordinary, colored images recorded by the US Army for the Special Film Project 186,⁴⁶ we can see their utter devastation becoming a spectacle of annihilation through aerial views and panoramic shots. Ordinary life, embodied by passers-by doing everyday activities, seems incongruous with the ruined landscape where, especially in Berlin, it is almost impossible to recognize the old urban structure. While traveling through the

British Occupation Zone in 1945, Stephen Spender defined these landscapes as “corpse-cities.”⁴⁷ If the cinematic images of *Piazzale Loreto* expose the corpse of Mussolini, here the images lie the corpse of the entire nation bare, following the “urbicides”⁴⁸ that erased its major towns.

Countless traces of the Nazi regime still loomed in the cities. Squares, as central to Nazi propaganda as they were to Fascist, underwent a process of denazification – their reshaping of meaning and appearance in which film, photographs, postcards, and other media played a fundamental role. Ancient monuments were cleaned of the exploitation that the Nazi powers had exerted on them. The new order was visually established and communicated to highlight a rupture from previous years. The emptiness of Munich, Frankfurt, Mainz, and Halle’s squares, not to mention Berlin’s, sharply contrasts with the crowded, militarily controlled Nazi squares of the recent past. However, despite their ruined nature, squares remained the place to exert power, express identities, and relieve the traumas and troubles the war had caused.

After several scenes of US troops marching and bearing the Stars and Stripes flag in Munich’s *Königsplatz*, a Project 186 reel shows an American soldier playing baseball in front of the ruined *Ehrentempel* (Temples of Honor). These buildings were erected in 1936 to commemorate sixteen Nazis killed in the 1923 Putsch. This ordinary scene powerfully visualizes the victory of the United States over the Reich and turns a 19th-century square imbued with German exceptionalism into a baseball camp, thus strongly reconfiguring it. *Königsplatz* is commodified as a ground for leisure activities, overshadowing the celebration of German identity it contains to give way to an American custom, thus Americanizing the setting. While the soldier may seem small in comparison to the domineering *Ehrentempel*, his total indifference combined with the visible damages on the monument reinforce the impression

⁴⁴ Oreste Del Buono, *La debolezza dello scrivere*, quoted in Isneghi, *L’Italia in piazza*, 417.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ In the frame of the First Motion Picture Unit (FMPU) activities, the Special Film Project 186 was intended to document the devastation of German cities, as well as concentration camps and destroyed Nazi military facilities. Shooting took place in American occupied zones from March to July 1945, using 16mm Kodachrome film. The reels are preserved at National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington DC. On the US army’s film production, see Peter Maslowski, *Armed with Cameras. The American Military Photographers of World War II* (Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan, 1998).

⁴⁷ Stephen Spender, *European Witness* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1946), quoted in Stefania Parigi, *Neorealismo. Il nuovo cinema del dopoguerra* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2014), 126.

⁴⁸ Martin Coward, *Urbicide. The Politics of Urban Destruction* (London-New York: Routledge, 2009).

that the latter has completely lost its significance, while the former asserts his dominance by imposing a new use to the square. The Nazi memorial is visually and conceptually relegated to the backdrop. In this way, the shot articulates time through space, exposing in the foreground a new present that ostracizes the past in order to deactivate and dominate it. The two Ehrentempel were later blown up by the US Army in 1947. The German newsreel “Welt im Film,” commissioned by the occupation forces, diligently reported the news, showing the snowy, grey *Platz*, the preparation of the explosive charge, and the collapse of the monuments.⁴⁹ The denazification of the urban space purifies it and leads to “the re-establishment of the original image of the *Königsplatz*.” It’s not difficult to imagine why this short sequence was edited following a long report about the Nuremberg Trials.

In the images of the *Königsplatz*, memories of the Nazi period are ignored, erased, or demolished. In other squares, the legacy of the Third Reich emerges to symbolically seize them. Black-and-white shots in the *Odeonsplatz* (again in Munich) linger on the 19th-century *Feldherrnhalle*, another highly significant monument for Nazi culture, where the aforementioned sixteen Nazi supporters were killed. In 1945, an unknown hand wrote on the pedestal of the Renaissance-like loggia: “K.Z. Dachau – Velden – Buchenwald. Ich schäme mich, daß ich ein Deutsch bin.”⁵⁰ The war guilt is literally inscribed into the square. This acts as a metaphor to represent the indelible mark that these events will leave on Germany as the guilt seeps into their (and Europe’s) national history and culture. For anyone strolling down the *Platz*, the writing superimposes Germany’s glorious heritage with the ghosts that will haunt the nation. The square becomes a place for public self-accusation and collective shaming; for a cry that will be silenced during the so-called *bleierne Zeit*, the Years of Lead comprising much of the 1950s and 60s. The writing was certainly soon

removed, and the monument was restored to its Apollonian beauty. Yet it remains in film and photographic records, and cinema thus reveals how the specter of concentration camps entered Munich’s elegant *Odeonsplatz* and, by extension, Germany’s collective consciousness immediately after the war.

Divide et impera

In the turbulent postwar climate,⁵¹ political tensions and ideological contrasts quickly escalated. Squares were used as pedestals for expressing these contrasts and conflicts. Conquering the square and occupying the public space through rallies, demonstrations, and parades or marking it with posters, leaflets, and signs was essential for political parties, trade unions, or other social groups. It enabled them to gain visibility, legitimization, and a role in the political scene. After years of exile and illegality, Communist parties were able to renew their public activity and restore their presence in the squares of Vienna,⁵² as well as in Italian *piazze*. Between the years of 1946 and 1948, Italy saw the system of ‘contrasting squares’ (*piazza contrapposte*)⁵³ reach its climax.

On June 2, 1946, a referendum was held to determine the constitutional form of postwar Italy. Republicans and monarchists competed in the urban space. In Rome, enormous demonstrations demanded the establishment of the Republic.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, in Naples, excited and faithful crowds supported Italy’s last king, Umberto II.⁵⁵ The election results revealed a clear fracture: Northern and

⁴⁹ The end of WW2 and the passage to postwar time was a more gradual and blurred shift than the canonization of some milestone dates (8th or 9th May, 15th September) let imagine, and it happened with varying conditions and pace in different places and nations. The same is even truer for the emerging of the Cold War climate, a complex process that delineated in the arch of some years until 1948, when some meaningful events (e.g., the Italian political elections, Czechoslovak takeover) and the following foundation of the German republics in 1949 had a continent-wide impact and expressed the setting of a precise status quo. See Judt, *Postwar*, chapters I and V.

⁵⁰ *Die KPÖ in Bildern* (The Austrian Communist Party in picture), amateur reels, 1945, Filmmuseum Wien, Vienna.

⁵¹ Isneghi, *L’Italia in piazza*, 418-437.

⁵² *Manifestation républicaine sur la Place du peuple à Rome* (Republican Demonstration in Piazza del Popolo, Rome), newsreel, 1946, INA, Paris. The film appears to be an Italian-speaking newsreel that reached some French information agency but was never used.

⁵³ *Napoli acclama Re Umberto* (Naples Hails King Umberto), newsreel Produzioni Amoroso, 1946, Archivio storico Istituto Luce, Rome. Similar demonstrations in favour of the king took place in many cities, like in Rome at Piazza del Quirinale, demonstrating how different squares welcomed opposing factions of supporters. See *Roma: manifestazione monarchica davanti al Quirinale e manifestazione repubblicana in piazza del Popolo* (Rome: Monarchist Demonstration at Quirinale and Republican

⁴⁹ “Welt im Film”, 86, 17th January 1947, Filmothek des Bundesarchivs, Berlin.

⁵⁰ “Concentration camps Dachau – Velden – Buchenwald. I feel ashamed to be German.” The image of the writing is rather famous, but apparently any attempt to locate “Velden” has proved unsuccessful until now, as no place with this or a similar name in Germany or Austria was the seat of a concentration camp.

Central Italy were largely in favor of the Republic, while Southern regions and islands were still tied to the monarchy. Newsreels⁵⁶ showing the festive squares of Milan, Rome, Florence, and Turin as the referendum results were officially announced were intended to prove that the political transformation was the fruit of the popular will and that Italians had remained profoundly democratic despite twenty years of Fascism (an idea that more than one winning power was hesitant to accept). The expressions of joy that took place in the squares were fleeting. During the two-year postwar period, harsh demonstrations and even harsher repressions occurred in Italian *piazze*.⁵⁷ Besides worker strikes and parades (often violently contained by the authorities), they became an important stage for the duel between the Conservative and Catholic-inspired Christian Democratic Party, supported by the US and the Church, and the Socialist and Communist parties. In the intense campaign for the 1948 political elections (won by the Christian Democrats), public spaces and *piazze* became battle arenas. In Genoa and Milan, squares are shown to be occupied by Communist gatherings, only to be replaced by Christian Democrats a few days later,⁵⁸ each time with huge crowds, banners, flags, shouts, and applause for the leaders. The images reveal the unreconcilable contraposition between both sides, marking the end of a brief moment of unity after the war.

In fact, between 1947 and 1948, the general atmosphere of mutual political cooperation that several countries had experienced quickly vanished under the pressures of the East/West and capitalist/communist tensions. Similarly, the honeymoon period of 1945 and 1946 that appeased the battle between squares vs. palaces (or popular will vs. governmental institutions) was soon put to an end. The square returned to its traditional role of

providing space and visibility to either political obedience or dissent towards the ruling palaces.

A French newsreel⁵⁹ depicts the February 1948 takeover that established a Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. It first shows the announcement in *Staroměstské náměstí*, where an immense crowd salutes the proclamation while the president signs the list of new ministers in Prague Castle. The square seems to win over the palace, imposing its will. However, the reality was different. The takeover had been planned by Klement Gottwald, Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, to definitively bring the party to power and the country under USSR's influence, with little concern about the popular will. Gottwald is portrayed announcing the new government from the town hall's balcony, looming over the people, in contrast with the previously mentioned images of Beneš walking among the people inside the square. The visual pattern of these two events, the relational 'geometry' tying the people and the leaders, signals a different hierarchy. Squares and films, once again, registered with the accuracy of a seismograph any variation in the political and social balance.

As the dynamics of the Cold War prevailed, dividing Europe into two opposing spheres, squares were also divided, sometimes quite literally, as is the case of *Piazza Montesanto* in Gorizia. When the city was split between Italy and Yugoslavia, *Piazza Montesanto* was cut in half. The barbed wire became the subject of postcards (Fig. 5) and newsreels. The documentary *Confini di dolore*⁶⁰ depicts the absurdity of a border splitting streets, squares, gardens, and even houses. Until 1954, when Trieste was under British-American administration, *Piazza Unità d'Italia* became the site of numerous manifestations which demanded reunification with the motherland. The Trieste issue remained a highly revisited topic in Italian newsreels. The square's demonstrations acted as visual reminders of the city's attachment and loyalty to Italy.

Demonstration in Piazza del Popolo), "Notiziario Nuova Luce" NL012, 1946, Archivio storico Istituto Luce, Rome.

⁵⁶ *2 giugno 1946: risultati del referendum istituzionale* (June 2nd, 1946: Results of the Institutional Referendum), "La settimana Incom", June 15th, 1946, Archivio storico Istituto Luce, Rome.

⁵⁷ *Inquieto dopoguerra: agitazioni in Italia* (Troubled Postwar Time: Agitations in Italy), "La settimana Incom", November 19th, 1947, Archivio storico Istituto Luce, Rome.

⁵⁸ *Verso il 18 aprile: atmosfera elettorale in Italia* (Toward April 18th: Electoral Climate in Italy), "La settimana Incom", April 15th, 1948, Archivio storico Istituto Luce, Rome.

⁵⁹ *Février 1948: le "coup" de Prague* (February 1948 : Prague coup), "Les Actualités Françaises," March 4th, 1948, INA, Paris.

⁶⁰ *Confini di dolore* (Borders of Pain), Incom documentary, 1945-1947, Archivio storico Istituto Luce, Rome.



Figure 5. Postcard with Piazza Montesanto in Gorizia, 1947, Milan. © Archivio Storico Touring Club Italiano.

The highest prize was notoriously paid by Berlin. In 1948,⁶¹ a few weeks into the Berliner Blockade and against the backdrop of the Reichstag ruins, citizens from the Western sectors gathered with their representatives, always depicted in close-ups and surrounded by fellow Berliners, neither detached nor dominating but rather close to the people. They called upon the world and denounced the loss of freedom in East Berlin, demanding support from Western countries. The gigantic crowd occupies a liminal space on the border, a square reduced to a grass field among the ruins. *Pariser Platz* remains visible but unreachable, and *Alexanderplatz* is nostalgically evoked in the speeches. In postwar Berlin, squares were no longer central to the urban space. Instead, they lay on the borders, outside of reach, while an unsurmountable border (later embodied by the Wall) descended over the center of the city and Europe.

⁶¹ *Berlin Calls on The World*, documentary, 1948, NARA, Washington DC.

Conclusion: For a Visual History of Squares and Europe

In only four years, European squares (like Europe itself) went through many defining and often dramatic events. They functioned as stages of constant power negotiations between concurring actors for liberation, victory, defeat, revenge, democratization, imposition, division, and repression. The rapid and epochal transition between two long-lasting political scenarios – the authoritarian Europe of the 1930s and the divided Europe of the Cold War— took visible form in the squares. The same can be said for the relationship between the “square” and “palace,” the people and the ruling elites, which after experiencing an exceptional moment of unity and harmony, reverted back to its previous form, confined to a traditional and vertical hierarchy.

A closer look at the cinematographic images of urban spaces in these four years reveals how crucial it is to consider the iconeme of the European

square(s). This essay has analyzed a group of nonfiction documentaries and newsreels from a strictly visual point of view, bringing to the foreground what is usually considered as the backdrop and highlighting the mutual interplay between the urban public space and the cinematographic representation, both being sites and agents of social, political and ideological change and definition. Without denying how these films are deeply rooted

in local events and national contexts and acknowledging the need for further investigation that can complement the visual analysis (about their production, circulation, and reception, which I only touched upon briefly), I aimed to unearth continuities and connections rather than contrasts and discrepancies from a visual motif and film constellation that has much to reveal about this defining period of European history.