Compressing Evil: Representations of Space and the Geo-Political

Imagination in World War II Films

The argument of this paper is that cinematic representations of space – specifically representations of the compression of geographic space – stand as meaningful contributions to what I will call the “geo-political imagination.” By “geo-political imagination,” I mean the construction of grand narratives for twentieth and, by association, twenty-first century geo-politics, or international politics on the global scale. It should be noted that this interest in narrative is not intended to indicate an allegiance to a specific narrative theory, of which there are many. Rather, this paper departs from a recognition of the general tendency in historical theory over the past two or three decades to place narrativity, or story-telling and plot construction, in central positions as concerns historical knowledge.¹ To that extent, this paper simply accepts theses asserting the creation of narratives as central to the historical imagination, and that the historical imagination is then central to the construction of socio-cultural identities.

Now, as concerns the view of socio-cultural identities in this paper, it might be necessary to make certain qualifications. First, the paper recognizes that we construct our imaginations of geo-political history on both individual and collective levels. This happens in conjunction with various media, such as film (emphasized here). However, at the discursive level, such media become conjoined with, among other things, the information disseminated both within and across societies via interpersonal communication and through institutions. Therein, in tact with theses asserting the
increasing deterritorialization of culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this paper views the construction of geo-political narratives as happening asymmetrically on a geographical basis (i.e., they develop differently in different cultural geographies). The construction of geo-political narratives also happens across the borderlines of multiple linguistic, ethnic and political demographies. The view here, then, is that there is no one global geo-political imagination. However, it is also accepted that there are cases to be made for the globalization of particularly powerful and widespread geo-political narratives for the twentieth century, to which the films analyzed here are viewed as contributing.

At the narrative level, the central event in this paper is World War II, and specifically the defeat of Nazism. What I am concerned with here is the generation and reproduction of what might be thought of as a kind of “school book” historical narrative concerning the Second World War, or set of stories told in school teaching history, museums, popular television shows and books (both fiction and non-fiction) and over dinner tables in which World War II and the defeat of Nazism features prominently and are taken as connected to other historical events in the twentieth century, such the victory of liberal democracy and communism and their eventual conflict in the form of the Cold War (and then again that event’s end as giving birth to our current postmodern, asymmetrical [and oft-confusing] geo-political situation). At the narrative level, the assertion here is that the defeat of Nazism at the political level is taken as a tipping point, or conjunctive space, between succeeding and preceding events and trends also involved in larger imaginations of twentieth century geo-political history. Very roughly, that narrative runs as follows. Firstly, Nazism represents an absolute evil whose defeat was a historical necessity, or a victory worth having achieved almost no matter the costs of the war or the questionable
actions and/or values of those regimes victorious over Germany’s particular and powerful brand of fascism in the 1930s and ‘40s. The victory over Nazism took a particular form, however, as it was specifically liberal democracy and communism that were victorious \textit{qua} ideologies and political systems, the eventual clash between which gave the world the Cold War – again, the end of which accounts for our current geo-political complexities, many of which can seem irregular and unpredictable. Of course, also implicit in these themes dating from the late 1940s are further historical thematic which extend back \textit{backwards} in time from the Second World War. The problem of the political ideologies vying for ultimate victory in the Second World War refers back to the rise of various nineteenth century European political ideas (e.g., nationalism, socialism and communism, liberalism and [if it may be considered an ideology] imperialism). These then become coupled with the growth of industry and associated changes in the structures of Western society. This narrative, insofar as it flows \textit{up} again to the Second World War points forward to the rise of international political, military and economic competition, the event of the First World War and the ensuing years of economic boom and bust between the wars. In other words, the suggestion is that many of us have a sense of the idea that, while it may be common for academics to refer to as the “short twentieth century” as having begun with the First World War or the Russian Revolution, it is also common to view the Second World War as the final defeat of certain strains of the worst in nineteenth century European political ideologies and their institutional and cultural embeddedness.\footnote{War II, like World War I and the Cold War, thus serves as a particular narrative high point in our understanding of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; World War II tips us away from the nineteenth century and toward the twenty-first. And, within that “tipping,” and the narratives surrounding it, the destruction of Nazi politics is central.}
Let us now look at the films on which this paper focuses: Tom Hanks’ and Steven Spielberg’s *Band of Brothers* (2001), Joseph Vilsmaier’s *Stalingrad* (1992) and Oliver Hirschbiegel’s *Der Untergang* (2004). The choice of these three films, though admittedly involving a degree of eclecticism, is based on their combination of popularity, genre diversity and socio-cultural context. *Brothers*, for example, is in fact a cinematic mini-series in ten parts originally aired on HBO, serving as something of a sequel to Spielberg’s 1998 *Saving Private Ryan*. Along with *Ryan*, *Brothers* has contributed to what John Bodnar has called the recovery of a new “post-War memory” in the United States. As characterized by Bodnar, this memory is patriotic, yet acknowledges the deep personal trauma of battle. The new American war hero is more than a patriotic macho man of the John Wayne ilk.

*Stalingrad* and *Untergang* have other contexts. As German films, one of the contexts for their production is and has been the continuing struggle of German society to come to terms with its participation in – and indeed, instigation of – the Second World War, including the Holocaust. In the case of *Stalingrad* specifically, production came closely on the heels of the 1989 reunification of that country. This reunification involved (and continues to involve) attempts to examine and renew German national consciousness. While there has been a great deal of speculation about what social issues led to the creation of *Untergang*, it might suffice to say that the fascination with Hitler might never be expunged from modern consciousness, German or otherwise. This might simply be posited as due to the extremity and calculated nature of the crimes perpetrated under Hitler’s rule, traceable, at least in part, to his inhumane and violent socio-political beliefs.
What is common to all the films addressed here is that, with varying degrees of obviousness and subtlety, particular portrayals of movement through geographic space reproduce the kind of geo-political narrative described in the third paragraph of this paper – extending nineteenth century political and ideological trends into the twentieth, the destruction of certain of those trends, and the opening into new geo-political configurations principally embodied in the Cold War and then again post-Cold War global milieu. Again, this is a narrative to which many of us have been exposed, be it via school teaching and textbooks, museums, television documentaries or perhaps casual reading we might have done in either non-fiction or fictional genres: Nazi evil came from a bastardization of European political ideas, was destroyed by a more or less virtuous effort ultimately led by the Americans and Soviets (though British eyes might read the situation differently), the victory of these powers gave us the Cold War and the end of that conflict gave us the global political situation we have today. Herein, we are confronted with particular geographic images organized around the destruction of Nazism and its political, social and cultural life. This image, one might say, involves a kind of grand map of Europe with Allied pincers closing in on Germany in the latter years of the War. Now, as many of know, at the factual level, this movement dates from the late-1942, early-1943 Battle of Stalingrad on the Soviet side – that battle which is the subject of the film *Stalingrad*. From the Anglo-American side, the pincer movement dates from the June, 1944 D-Day invasion, though the 1943 invasion of Italy is not to be discounted.

Again, the point is that many of us, even without university, or perhaps even secondary, educations have some sense of these events, and the geographic motions involved – many of us, I would suggest, can in fact evoke an image of a large map of Europe with arrows moving towards Germany from the east and west, as well as, perhaps, a bit from the
south. Again, involved in this image is a sense of the ending of a particular European past – those strains of thinking that lead to fascism, and gave it a prominent place on the global stage. Similarly, this image is evocative of the start of a new global political future – one that, at the factual level, includes the worlds of the Cold War and the political figurations that emerged (and continue to emerge) in the wake of that global political and ideological confrontation. All of this is contingent, however, upon the compression, destruction and eradication of Nazi evil in the heart of Europe.

Among the films analyzed here, *Brothers* is most explicit in its portrayal of the above-described motion through geographic space and its larger implications. The film’s central characters are parachute infantrymen who prepared the Anglo-American D-Day invasion by dropping behind enemy lines before the famous beach landings which have been the subject of so many other films – most recently *Saving Private Ryan* (but also film’s like *The Longest Day* [1962], *The Big Red One* [1980] and *Where Eagles Dare* [1969]). After securing the ground in Normandy, the soldiers in *Brothers* engage in the westward push toward Germany, participating in such famous events as the Battle of the Bulge, liberating a concentration camp (Kaufering IV) and capturing Hitler’s “Eagle’s Nest” at Berchtesgarten. At the level of characterization, the soldiers portrayed in *Brothers* are in step with Bodnar’s description of the new American post-War memory – they are simultaneously patriots yet pragmatic individuals prone to pain and trauma. In terms of the issue of space and motion, however, and the contribution of portrayals of space and motion to the geo-political imagination, of interest is that the film’s characters explicitly ask questions throughout the series about when they might be able to “jump into Berlin,” who will reach Germany first (the Americans or the Soviets?) and make commentaries about how far they have traveled in a geographic sense. In part, as the series makes clear,
this is because the characters want to end the war and go home; they want to travel back to their point of origin, the “home base” of their movement through geo-political space.

However, as their journey across western Europe illustrates – most poignantly portrayed in their encounter with a concentration camp – the characters’ interest in moving toward Germany is also based at some level on a recognition of the political realities of Nazism and an engagement with the historical necessity in defeating Nazism as an idea that gained a political, social and cultural life. For example, in a pointed scene in one of the series’ later episodes, one of the central characters, standing on the bed of a troop truck as columns of American forces proceed into Germany and columns of surrendered Germans march in the opposite direction, engages in an emotional outburst against the Germans, yelling at them that they are “fascist pigs” who have “drag[ged] [their – the Americans’] asses half way around the world.” “You ignorant, servile scum,” yells the character. “What the fuck are we doing here?” What is indicated by the character’s question is that, indeed, he knows precisely what they, the American troops, are doing there: defeating Nazism and the social and political realities – evils, in their minds – that accompany it.

Beyond a recognition of the evil involved in Nazism, however, there is a recognition of what that defeat will entail, especially at the level of geographical movement. The defeat of Nazism will involve not truce and surrender but, in part due to the kind of politics that ideology represents and the specific manner of the prosecution of the war under its aegis (including the Holocaust), the defeat of Nazism would involve entering the political geographic space of that ideology (Germany) and engaging in a variety of destruction of that political geographic space. At the visual and cinematic levels, reinforcing this idea is one of the effects of viewers following the characters of Brothers travelling from west to
east toward Germany, traversing the relatively long distances of geographical space that they are portrayed as covering.

Vilsmaier’s *Stalingrad* is more subtle about the representation of movement and geographic space and the reproduction of the “textbook” geo-political narrative to which I earlier referred. Nonetheless, it is present, and plays an important role in understanding the film. As does Hirschbiegel in *Untergang*, Vilsmaier looks at the war from the German side, following a small group of engineers through the Battle of Stalingrad to their eventual death as part of the destruction of the German Sixth Army that famously punctuated the fighting on the Volga. In spatial terms, the movements represented in *Stalingrad* are generally small – hence the subtlety; there is no cross-continental journey like that had in *Brothers*, from northern France to southern Germany and eventually Austria. Moreover, many of the scenes in *Stalingrad* involve street fighting inside the city of Stalingrad itself – also a relatively small geographical space. Two scenes specifically, however, play into the geographical construction of the larger geo-political imagination had of events surrounding the end of the war. In one scene, the main characters (again, German engineers) are forced to beat back a Soviet tank advance that was part of Russia’s encirclement and eventual destruction of the German forces. This is the beginning of the Soviet rollback of the German advance in the beginning of 1943 – a roll back that would not end until it reached Germany, and, in fact, Berlin itself. Another scene features the last German plane evacuating injured soldiers and officers before Hitler famously abandoned the Sixth Army, leaving it to be destroyed by the Soviets. This also involves an east to west movement whose ultimate destination is Germany itself – the evacuation plane, or any other plane, for that matter, would not return again to that far eastern outpost in the front line against the Soviets. Unlike *Brothers*, in *Stalingrad*, we do
not visually follow the victorious armies of the Allies (in this case, the Soviets) into Germany. However, we are given a clear sense that this is where the war is heading; in the end, only destruction lay ahead for Germany, and a new global political future was in the making. The war will leave Russian soil and head for the geographic origin (Germany) out of which it sprung.

Lastly, the recent and popular *Der Untergang* represents what might be thought of as a combination of the obviousness of *Brother’s* portrayal of geographic movement – and spatio-geographic compression specifically – with *Stalingrad’s* subtlety. The obvious dimensions of these geographical elements come in relation to the entire film’s slightly claustrophobic feel. Based, among others, on Joachim Fest’s historical work, Hirschbiegel investigates the very last days of the Reich through an intimate picture of Hitler in the last months of the European war. At that point, political and military command of Germany, such as it was in 1945, takes place within a network of underground halls and rooms placed under the Reichschancellory – the famous Führerbunker. This bunker was constructed for precisely such a variety of destruction as is portrayed in the film: Germany’s final and utter destruction, with street fighting in the capital. This itself has significance for what I am terming the geo-political imagination: Hirschbiegel offers a clear portrayal of the nearly exhausted power of the German war machine by illustrating that the once vast empire held by the Nazis had been reduced to the size of an underground office building. This is an irony when compared with what would come next as concerned the allied advances from the east and west. With the victory of those forces, the territories of geo-political conflict would once again expand, covering the vast global terrains encompassed by the Soviet-American – or at least liberal democratic-communist – Cold War.
Perhaps Untergang’s most telling scene in terms of the representation of space and movement, however, comes when one of the film’s characters attempts to collect medical supplies to bring to the Führerbunker. Traveling to the frontlines as they existed at that point in Berlin, the character, a medical officer, is told he cannot get to a hospital due to the proximity of the Soviet advance. Insisting on collecting the supplies anyway, the character is then told that he can pass if he wishes, but that this will be at his own risk. As the medical officer moves forward, a guard calls out to him as he passes the gun barrel of a parked tank. “Do you see that? That’s the end of the Reich. Beyond that, it’s ‘Ruskiland.’” In terms of what I am suggesting is a filmatic reproduction of “school history book” consciousness of the end of World War II, Untergang’s character stands at the point of one of the long arrows extending from east to west that one can find on any number of historical maps outlining the last years of the European war. The Allied advance from the east (that of the Soviets) had reached its utmost extreme, and the compression of Nazi Germany – and hence politically institutionalized and geo-politically meaningful Nazism itself – was, at least in the film, nearly complete.

This paper might be summarized with the following remarks. Along with history teaching, historical novels, television programming, museums and various modes of interpersonal communication, films play an important role in the dissemination and creation of historical consciousness. What I am calling the geo-political imagination – our master narratives of twentieth and, again, by implication, twenty-first century geopolitics – are part of the processes and forces involved in socio-cultural identity formation; plainly put, socio-cultural identities involve the construction of larger narratives about the world in which we find ourselves, the values we find in them and the social and institutional forms we give to those values (politics). An important dimension
of the geo-political narrative of the twentieth century is the spatio-geographic compression of Nazism as a political, social and cultural entity. By “spatial compression,” I mean Nazism’s physical and geographical diminishment and eventual eradication from the larger geo-political stage. That at any kind of larger socio-cultural level, we maintain a sense of and ability to imagine such a narrative, and that we may extend that narrative forward into the historical spaces of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is due in part – in part – to representations of space, and specifically representations of the compression of geographical space, such as those employed in films like Band of Brothers, Stalingrad and Der Untergang.

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