One of the many examples of material culture where materiality and memory are deeply interwoven is a certain tram cemetery in Wrocław (Poland) (fig. 1). That is why I will shortly describe the history of the site, to focus later on interesting problems which confront us, such as heritage sites as tram and/or car cemeteries. I refer also to cinema, where issues often discussed by archaeologists, like ruins, material culture, heritage in becoming, etc. are staged in such a way that is worthy of closer attention.

Figure 1: An overview of a tram cemetery at Legnicka 65 in Wrocław. These trams are from the 1960s and 1970s (photo Dawid Kobiałka).

The tram cemetery is located in a North-western part of Wrocław. It is only 20 minutes by walking from the city centre: a metaphor of the city jungle acquires here a quite literal meaning (fig. 2). The place where the old trams are located now is an old tram depot no. 5. Today the place is visited by many people, both inhabitants of Wrocław and tourists out of the city. The place has become well-known after an article in the local news (Torz 2013) where the author complains that the old trams, and some of them are legally protected heritage, like the old wooden Linke-Hofmann Standard trams going to disappear soon.
The title of Torz’s article seems to speak for itself: “see how heritage has been destroyed” (my translation). Also, local TV was interested in the tram cemetery. Coming inside the tram depot and seeing all these trams in ruin is like a nostalgic time travel (Burström 2009), a trigger of existential questions and finally, entering into a prohibited and lost zone of the past. The motif of ruins, entering a prohibited zone has often been explored by the Hollywood films. A reference to at least one of them perhaps can shed some alternative light on archaeological approaches into modern ruins.  

The Book of Eli (2010) directed by Albert and Allen Hughes touches problems which are close to us in this context. The main hero named Eli (Denzel Washington) is an outcast who travels through America. However, this is not the America that is known by us. This is a world after Armageddon: a world in a total ruins; cities are abandoned, buildings are destroyed; in short, the whole continent has become an archaeological site. The title book of Eli is a secret book possessed by the protagonist which can only give a hope for those who survived the end of world. Other people desire this book too, because, as it is said by one of
the villains, the book gives the power of controlling people. It is not hard to guess that *the book of Eli* is nothing else than the Bible. What is especially worth highlighting from an archaeological perspective is the fact that one sees the world very materialistically, so to speak. Everything is in ruins, there is no place for ‘idealism’ in such a world. But this materialism, a world in ruins calls for existential issues: only the Bible, that is God, can only save us (humanity). Like in the case of a car cemetery at Kyrkö Mosse (Sweden) analysed by Mats Burström (2009): a world in decay (car cemetery) calls for eternal/existential questions (e.g. what is the meaning of human life, etc.).

Things were done much more interestingly by Andrej Tarkovsky in his masterpiece entitled *Stalker* (1979). The plot is about a kind of tourist guide called Stalker who smuggles people into a prohibited zone where the laws of modern physics do not work. The aesthetics of the film is very ambiguous. On the one hand, it seems that Tarkovsky is looking for a meaning of human life in a world abandoned by God. The spectator sees car and tank wrecks; the whole zone is a post-industrial landscape where Nature begins to take back what is her. Tarkovsky shows, of course, an inertia of modern material culture and human life as such. One sees a destroyed world; everything is in ruins in what is mysteriously called “The Zone”. But he also shows that the same inertia is an inherent part of nature itself, which is a metaphor for God, a deeper meaning of human life, finally, existential reflection. Nature in *Stalker* is not our good and benevolent Gaia, a harmonious mother of humans and other beings. This very Nature is under the very same processes that affect humanity. This aspect of *Stalker* was also noticed by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2001, 104). One is tempted to describe this unique Tarkovskian perspective, following Žižek (2001, 103), as a materialist theology:

*The typical stance of the Tarkovskian hero on the threshold of a dream is to be on the lookout for something, with his senses fully focused and alert; then, all of a sudden, as if through a magic transubstantiation, this most intense contact with material reality changes it into a dreamscape. One is thus tempted to claim that Tarkovsky stands for the attempt, perhaps unique in the history of cinema, to develop an attitude of materialist theology, of a deep spiritual stance which draws its strength from its very abandonment of intellect and its immersion into material reality."

To put it simply, *Stalker* stands in clear opposition to *The Book of Eli*. The later film shows how staging ‘materialism’ (modern ruins) has to end up in ‘idealism’ (there is something more than material world). *Stalker* indicates something much more radical. It is rather that materialism has its own immaterial theological dimension. In this regard, what ruins confront us with is not only a problem of the meaning of life. In other words, it is not only that materialism (modern ruins) causes ‘idealism’ (existential reflection) (*The Book of Eli*). On the contrary, what modern ruins often indicate is the ways of human immersion into material reality (*Stalker*). This is why *Stalker* can be considered as a manifesto of an archaeology of the recent times. A closer look at a human immersion into material reality is what links both. In accordance with it, approaching modern ruins does not have to end up in an external intellectual reflection upon our own condition, and humanity as such, condition (as the experiences described by Burström 2009). Modern ruins have their own inherent theological value, as Žižek points out.

Of course people observing the car cemetery at Kyrkö Mosse most probably raise the existential question of the meaning of their life, like Burström himself does. But the first
question here is to ask: who are these troubled people who worry so much about their own existence? Are they not most probably young, well-educated people who travel there in their new Volvos, having in hand new Iphones, fashionable sunglasses (e.g. Prada) and are dressed in expensive clothes (e.g. Gucci)? They are, in a way, like Bill Gates, whose fortune is something around 65 billion dollars, who loves to say that money is nothing for him. In short, one does not worry about money, only when one has it enough. My point is very simple and a Marxist one here: those who worry so much about their own existence are at the same time those who have a safe, quite good life. For the working class, there is no time to worry about the eternal problems, because they have to worry about the very next day. The tram cemetery is an interesting example of it too.

I found many artefacts like beer cans and beer, vodka bottles during the survey of the cemetery. There were also many cigarette butts. This place has most probably been where some poor people (unemployed, the working class) met to drink alcohol together and have a nice time. The trams were used more as a context of day-to-day grey reality than a site of spiritual reflection upon one’s own existence. I documented also many cans that once contained animal food, which suggests that the cemetery has been most probably a natural environment for cats (Fig. 3). Contrary to what the name might suggest, the ‘cemetery’ has been very a landscape very much alive. This interpretation can be backed up by other finds like fragments of fish bones and fodder for cats.

Figure 3: Archaeological garbage (cans, plastic bottles, etc.) inside one of the trams (photo Dawid Kobiałka).
The above observations are even the link to other industrial sites and indeed to the trend towards so-called ‘ruinporn’ by means of which is usually grasped the fascination with the abandoned modern industrial ruins. Ruins presented on pictures appear to be dead and forgotten places. They appear to be intriguing mainly from an aesthetics point of view. What such a perspective overlooks is that the same ruins often also hint at people’s uses of these places and they are not normally formally preserved either. However, from a closer perspective they are often as much living landscapes as they used to be. The tram cemetery is a good example of it. It is a place where people simply meet.

What one also experiences during a visit to the place is something very similar to viewing *Stalker*: one sees culture (e.g. trams) in decay together with nature (e.g. trees) which are deeply interconnected: it is a world (a Tarkovskian zone) in decomposition (fig. 4).

![Figure 4: Cultural heritage in ruins (photo Dawid Kobiałka)](image)

All in all, there is nothing to complain about when one sees the old and newer trams in a total ruins. What one observes when walking around the old trams is a process of how heritage is being born and dying at the same time. That is the reason why a call to “see how heritage has been destroyed” (Torz 2013, my translation) has always to be supplemented by its own opposite: *see how heritage has been emerging*.

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Notes

[i] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5-Aq84D_bY [last accessed 22 May 2013].
[ii] See also http://ruinmemories.org/ [last accessed 22 May 2013].

References

