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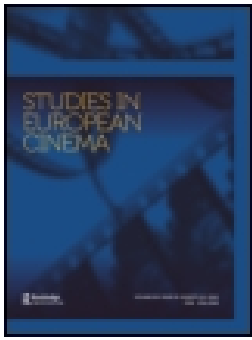
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The 'lost child' as figure of trauma and recovery in early post-war cinema: Fred Zinnemann's *The Search* (1948) and Natan Gross' *Unzere Kinder* (1948)

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the figure of the 'lost child' in feature films of the immediate post-war period. The figure's enormous symbolic value as innocent victim and future generation granted the 'lost child' a key position in post-war discourse, including films which tried to grapple with the moral and physical destruction of the continent after 1945. National film industries, particularly of the perpetrator nations, employed the 'lost child' for genre stories in which the post-war chaos is being mastered and a new, masculine national self is re-built. However, films made by victim groups outside a national context rely on the 'lost child' to broach the destruction of their identity by war and persecution. Analysing two films, Fred Zinnemann's The Search (1948) and Natan Gross's Unzere Kinder (1948), I argue that both use the child figure to deal with traumatization as part of the reconstruction of communal and intergenerational relations. This does not result in stories of masculine mastery but in narratives that incorporate moments of trauma process emerging around destroyed mother–child relations. The films, encoding traumatization in film language, develop a rich cinematic language along questions of identity and form an early instance of post-traumatic cinema.

When World War II ended with Nazi Germany's defeat in 1945, the extent of destruction and death in Europe and the enormity of crimes committed by the Germans and their collaborators had left Europe in a political, social, cultural, and humanitarian crisis. This crisis found a point of discursive and practical management in the figure of the war child.[1] Children's position as the next generation made them a group of particular importance. In one of its propaganda films, the US War Department described them as 'the human raw material of each shattered nation's tomorrow, each nation's preview in flesh and blood of its future' (Miller 1946, 00:01:16). Children received extensive political attention as well as practical help from (local) governments, the Allies, charities and relief organisations (Zahra 2001). As Theodore Andrica concludes in his documentary film *Children of Europe* (1948, 00:22:30), 'In no area of national and international recovery is so much being done by all governments as in organised child-care.' At the same time, children's status as minors and

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therefore neither responsible nor accountable for the crisis, lent itself to symbolic notions of innocence conveniently employed to negotiate shock and disillusion, disorientation and anxieties of the adult world or, more precisely, the parent and grandparent generation (Fisher 2007; Müller, Pinfold,; Wölfel 2016, 417–36). The symbolic value of children was particularly high in the case of so-called 'lost children' (Zahra 2001, 8), i.e. children who had lost their family, community and/or home and had been left without care, protection, and often even identity by war and persecution. The significance of the figure of the 'lost child' can be seen not just from documents and debates that detail these children's situation across Europe and indeed Asia,[2] but also from the number of cultural productions dealing with them. Various film industries took up the figure of the 'lost child' as a lens through which they explored the post-war situation. There are not only the well-known films of Italian Neorealism such as Roberto Rossellini's *Roma, Città Apperta/Rome, Open City* (1945) and *Germania, Anno Zero/Germany, Year Zero* (1948). There is also a good number of films from other industries including the different zones of occupation in Germany with films like *Irgendwo in Berlin/Somewhere in Berlin* (Gerhard Lamprecht 1946), *Und finden dereinst uns wieder/And find each other again one day* (Hans Müller 1947), *1 2 3 Corona* (Hans Müller 1948) or … *und wenn's nur einer wär/...and if it were only one* (Wolfgang Schleif 1949)[3]; the Hungarian production *Valahol Európában/Somewhere in Europe* (Geza von Radvanyi 1947); the British productions *Hue and Cry* (Charles Crichton 1947) and *No Room at the Inn* (Daniel Birt 1948); the Soviet production *U nikh est' Rodina/They have a Motherland* (Aleksandr Fainzimmer 1950); the Swiss production *Marie-Louise* (Leopold Lindtberg 1944); the Swiss-American production *The Search* (Fred Zinnemann 1948); or the Polish production *Unzere Kinder/Our Children* (Natan Gross 1948).[4]

These films share an interest in the 'lost child' as transitional figure that links the (destroyed) past to the (rebuilding of the) future and is therefore central to the community's identity, which either needs to be preserved or re-built, after war and persecution. Curiously, despite the strong historical interest in children's lives during World War II,[5] there exists no comprehensive study to-date which acknowledges the numerous screen depictions of the 'lost child' in immediate post-war Europe.[6] This gap is significant not only in comparison to the extensive historical research but also in relation to Film Studies' interest in the figure of the child, particularly with regard to the figure's role in narratives of trauma. Studies of the child as Other have examined cinematic characteristics of the figure and their effects on the depiction of war. Karen Lury shows how the child as Other 'creates an opportunity for film-makers to articulate the trauma and experience of war' as confusing, dislocating, a-temporal, and visceral. Rather than offering facts of war, the point of view of the child allows the '[powerfully affective] interweaving of history, memory and witness' (Lury 2010, 7). This seems to exclude films from the early post-war era in which the child often represents the national, not an-Other point of view from 'which history or the stories of war are told and re-imagined on screen' (Lury 2010, 6). Lury's examination is therefore based on films from the 1960s onwards, 'based as they are on memories and stories and made, in most instances, many years after the wars they depict' (Lury 2010, 126). It is certainly no coincidence that studies on trauma and film in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust refer to films from the same period as the starting point of post-traumatic cinema.[7] Rather than re-iterating the apparent contrast between the child figure in immediate post-war films and films from the 1960s onwards, I examine two films from

the 1940s as examples of the use of the child figure which, though not exploring the point of view of the Other, are nevertheless employing the figure to grasp experiences difficult to fit into conventional stories of rebuilding a (national) collective. Both Fred Zinnemann's The Search and Natan Gross's Unzere Kinder tell knotty tales of identity trouble rather than restoration arising from their investigation of trauma as legacy of the war. The films have remained at the margins of academic research, but offer striking early examples of the interlocking of the 'lost child' and narratives of loss and disturbance.

At first glance, the extensive use of the figure of the 'lost child' in the immediate post-war period seems to suggest it as a human denominator across national, ethnic, cultural, religious, and political boundaries. However, the figure's function within narratives of identity differs depending on the kind of identity in question – national, communal, or familial – and on the children's belonging to either a perpetrator or a victim group; for a selected number of European films (Wölfel 2016, 2018), I found these identity markers to play out in the narratives' relation to the (immediate) past; their closure vs. openness; their presentation of intergenerational relations; their gender focus; and their approach to cultural heritage and production.

The depiction of intergenerational ties in films of national re-construction like the German ones, the Hungarian film or the Italian examples, focus on male bonds, i.e. the children are invariably boys while the older generation is represented by fathers or grandfathers; in many German films but also in the famous Hungarian example, the parent generation is omitted and discussions of its role in the fascist regimes thus avoided. Agency linked to boys stands in for the Father or masculine self. Accordingly, the national restoration depicted in the films reinforces male authority. Such national epics are classical narratives which tend towards resolution of conflict and narrative closure as male agency proves itself by mastering the catastrophe, an ideal which dramatically affects the temporal structure of the films, too. The films are set in and completely focussed on the present while skirting stylistic means that could represent the past. No residuum of the (immediate) past remains in these films to disturb or unsettle the newly forged notion of the national self and its future, which the young stand in for. These are tales of national resurrection, often supported by references to cultural traditions as additional forces of cohesion.

On the other hand, films with a communal or familial outlook linked to victim groups offer a counter position to that of national strength and restored masculinity. They, too, base identity on the cohesion of intergenerational ties but configure them differently. Rather than being concerned with displaying power and authority, they acknowledge the violent destruction of identity, which also affects narrative formats. The victim narratives I am going to look at include both sexes on the side of the children and the adults; they focus on the child–parent relations, not on the grand-parents; they try to work through rather than avoid the past, and are open rather than closed narratives. Most importantly, their narrative openness is a result of their engagement with the horrors of war and destruction resulting in the cinematic encoding of trauma. Following on from this, I pursue a formal analysis of Zinnemann's The Search and Gross' Unzere Kinder which sketches out the films' grappling with identity after its destruction. Based on studies of posttraumatic cinema, I examine the narrative approaches developed by the films to grasp the situation of the victims of Nazi violence.

I suggest that through the figure of the 'lost child', the films reconstruct identity and agency while at the same time problematizing both concepts, i.e. they offer narratives in which dreams of a restored future 'wholeness' are celebrated while the suffering and loss of the past remain acute and keep invading the present. The relation between the generations does not represent (male national) continuity but the traumatic gap between past and present left by war and persecution.

'What's your name, little boy?' individual trauma and memory in Fred Zinnemann's *The Search* (1948)

Fred Zinnemann's *The Search* was produced outside a national context (Smyth 2011, 81f.).[8] The Austrian-born MGM director took leave from the studio to research the lives of 'lost children' in UNRRA camps (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) in the American Zone of Occupation in Germany; the subsequent film was produced by the Swiss company Praesens. The film employs the figure of the 'lost child' to explore the effects the destruction of identity had on survivors of concentration camps. Zinnemann's narrative links the effort to re-found identity to remembering the persecution, a process marked and problematized in this early film by aspects of trauma. Particularly the figure of the 'lost child' shows signs of traumatization, namely a typical 'representational void and lack of memory' (Elm, Kabalek, and Köhne 2014, 4). My discussion of the role the 'lost child' in *The Search* carves out the film's trauma process and particularly the 'repetition of the traumatizing situation on another level or in a disguised manner' (Ibid.) as complex structuring principle of the film.

Destroyed identity

Zinnemann tells the story of ten-year-old Karel Malik (Ivan Jandl), son of a family of the persecuted Czech intelligentsia and survivor of Auschwitz. Together with other child survivors, Karel is looked after by UNRRA in a DP-camp (displaced persons camp) in Germany, where the staff tries to identify the children and unite them with surviving family members. The suffering in Europe after the war finds an initial expression in the description of the children as 'lost' not only because they are without family, community, and home, but also because they are devoid of 'child-likeness':

> The war is over but want and suffering has not come to an end in Europe. A train load of children dragged into Germany during the war, found wandering, lost, homeless, found in concentration camps – can they really be children? They might be little old men and women: Their spirit is broken; there is nothing left in them but fear (Zinnemann 1948, 00:03:01).

The destruction of the family and community through Nazi war and genocide is symbolized by the broken intergenerational contract as the children are old and have no-one to take care of them. The reconstruction of the generational roles – not necessarily the biological family – is thus from the beginning linked to the regaining of what was perceived as a child- or age-appropriate behaviour. Energy, spirit, and the 'sound of children's voices and children's laughter' (Zinnemann 1948,) are introduced as measuring the degree of peace, social order, and normalisation.[9]

The Search bases the process of re-instating order and child-like behaviour on the attempt to work through traumatic experiences, which in the case of the main character Karel literally block the re-construction of his identity. Zinnemann's narrative intertwines identification and trauma process. The identification of Karel in the film takes place on two levels, the administrative one of UNRRA represented by Mrs Murry (Aline MacMahon) and the familial-individual one of Steve (Montgomery Clift), an American GI, and Mrs Malik, Karel's mother (Jarmila Novotna). On the first level, the film accompanies child-survivors through the administrative process which begins with an interview by UNRRA staff to register the children's name, age, and nationality, and to ask them about their experience of persecution and suffering. These interviews in French, Hungarian, and Polish, are moving not only because of what the children report but because their reports are so unsettlingly matter-of-fact. Zinnemann's research in 1947 in UNRRA camps allowed to base these film scenes on authentic material:

> In fact, these filmed sequences show real DP camp survivors instead of child actors. Most were Jewish children, unwanted in Europe, who Zinnemann arranged to travel to Switzerland for filming. Later UNRRA authorized the use of mostly Jewish children from the Rosenheim children's summer camp and 600 DP children for filming around Nuremberg and Ingolstadt (Smyth 2011, 81).

The administrative identification fails Karel's case and presents him as a 'lost child' in a much more literal sense than the other children as he does not recall his name, age or place of birth; the boy does not even remember his mother tongue. His complete oblivion as to his family, community, and home has led to social dysfunction: Karel does not speak, does not have friends, and finds daily routines such as eating and sleeping confusing. This lack of memory shows the boy as traumatized. The film represents this state of traumatization in motifs of absence, i.e. it 'inverts absence in images of absence which refer to further absences' (Köhne 2012, 9). The only sentence Karel can say is 'Ich weiß nicht' (I don't know), which records the loss of self in the language of the perpetrators. Accordingly, the UNRRA questionnaire remains empty except for the comment 'unknown' which is shown in a close-up. Furthermore, the film uses rivers to signify obliteration, loss of self, and lack of memory. The first image of a river generates this meaning through the superimposition of the empty UNRRA-questionnaire and flowing water, a composition which associates the mythological river Lethe whose waters cause forgetfulness. This connotation becomes acute again when Karel almost drowns in a river later on and is registered by UNRRA as dead.

In the second strand, which runs parallel to UNRRA's efforts, the GI Steve, who picks Karel up after the river accident, as well as Karel's surviving mother, who searches DP camps and their card indexes, try to find/identify the boy. This individual-familial strand uses the river motif, too: when Karel's mother sees the river in which Karel allegedly drowned, she faints; the river here takes on another mythical meaning as the border between life and death. Focussing on the mother's reflection in the flowing water, the camera emphasises her loss of consciousness as loss of Karel/a part of herself. Last but not least, the river as a motif of oblivion returns when Karel learns from Steve about the assumed death of all women, including his mother, in the camp Karel was

liberated from; in this scene Karel and Steve sit on an embankment watching the water flow by, and it seems that Karel will now never know who he is.

In seeming contrast to the signification of oblivion, the river also introduces a flashback in the film. The superimposition of flowing water and the empty UNRRA-form cuts to an image of Charles Bridge in Prague accompanied by some bars from Smetana's *Moldau*, which counters the representational void with a specific river running through a specific city and country. This is the opening to the only flashback in the film which offers the only actual memory, albeit in an authorial manner: the flashback shows the Malik family at their pre-war home sitting together playing music; the idyll is destroyed by the German occupation. A voice from the off explains that the father and sister are being murdered while the mother and Karel initially remain together in a concentration camp. Importantly, the omniscient presentation of the flashback does not lead to the 'backstory wound' of trauma which turns out to be Karel's separation from the mother, not the initial arrest of the family. Instead, the omniscient flashback stresses the scene's disintegration from the surviving child who has lost all access to this past. On the other hand, the child's 'traumatic remembering' is depicted not in flashbacks but as eruptions in the present in the form of repetitions and re-enactment, an emergence of individual images and memory fragments without the narrative rip of the temporal vortex.[10]

Remembering – trauma narrative

The film ends with images of children singing and laughing as well as the reunion of Karel and his mother, thus presenting the re-construction of the intergenerational contract and restoration of 'child-like' behaviour. However, it does not pretend to reach a happy ending. Lawrence Baron points out that 'there is a subtext about death, dislocation, and trauma that tempers the joy of the film's ending' (Baron 2005, 33). Similarly, Smyth states that although the film's conclusion 'creates a nominal sense of narrative completion, Zinnemann deliberately leaves the rest of his narrative unresolved' (Smyth 2011, 88). The narrative openness, i.e. the unresolved residue at the end of the film, which both scholars notice, is the result of the 'traumatic remembering' that is as much part of identity reconstruction as it blocks it.

From the beginning, the film works with visual triggers of the past in the present. When the children arrive by train at the UNRRA camp they do not sit in coaches but lie crammed on the floor of cattle wagons similar to how they would have arrived in concentration camps or at forced-labour placements. External similarities can – despite all actual differences to life under Nazi rule – trigger memories of the immediate past not just for the audience but also for the children themselves. A prominent instance of traumatic re-enactment occurs when the children are being transported in vans of the Red Cross which in the children's perception 'are' the gassing vans of the Nazis. Consequently, the children panic and, terror-stricken, try to escape in a wild chase. Karel hides in the rushes of the river; as his woollen cap floats in the water, UNRRA assume that the boy drowned.

The American GI Steve takes Karel in and tries to discover his identity to unite him with his family. Like UNRRA, Steve fails as he only has the boy's tattooed Auschwitz number to go by – similar to Karel's only sentence 'Ich weiß nicht', a signifier of

destruction, not identity. Steve decides to adopt the boy and take him to the States once there seems no more hope of finding relatives. Just as UNRRA's aid before, the ensuing adoption process triggers images and traumatic memory fragments. At the same time, the film's unusual take on gender and generation becomes clear.

As a representative of the American occupation forces, the sympathetic character of Steve seems to be Zinnemann's tribute to the healing function of the States in Europe after the war. However, the film also subtly questions the image of the 'American saviour'. Firstly, the GI's youth as well as his boyishness show him less as a paternal figure and more as a big-hearted brother. Sharif Gemie and Louise Rees call Steve 'a near-perfect embodiment of the all-American boy', 'folksy and informal' (2011, 456). Within the context of trauma and identity, this characterisation of Steve seems almost a precaution on the film-maker's side in order to present the GI's attempt to impose a new identity on Karel as good-natured simplicity rather than arrogance. In a fairly colonial gesture, Steve christens Karel 'Jim' and teaches him English. 'You've got no idea how useful it's gonna be for you to know English!' he says (Zinnemann 1948, 00:59:58), full of enthusiasm for Karel's new life. At the same time, Steve includes Karel in the American liberal tradition which is, of course, male. Looking at a picture of Abraham Lincoln, Steve offers a line of ancestors: 'That's Abraham Lincoln. He was a great man. He was President of the United States. Lincoln. My name is Steve, your name is Jim, his name is Abraham Lincoln.' (Zinnemann 1948, 01:00:01)

While Steve fails to discover Karel's identity, his care enables the boy to remember that he has forgotten his former life. Only when observing an American family does Karel begin to wonder whether he has a family, particularly a mother, too, and where she is? However, the boy does not remember an image, song, or scene. Rather, Karel becomes aware only of his oblivion. When looking at a photograph of an ostrich in a zoo behind mesh-wire fence, and when doing an 'ecriture automatique' drawing which shows a mesh-wire fence pattern, he subconsciously repeats the moment of separation from his mother, the 'backstory wound'. Finally, Karel re-enacts that moment by standing behind a mesh-wire fence of a factory just as he used to do in the concentration camp, and searching for his mother – who he still does not remember as an individual – among the women who go home from their shift in the post-war factory. Zinnemann's moments of collapsing time and subconscious repetition are not charged with the visual and/or audio intensity of the trauma narratives which scholars identified as the beginnings of post-traumatic cinema such as *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais 1959), *Ivanovo Detstvo/ Ivan's Childhood* (Andrei Tarkovsky 1962) or *The Pawnbroker* (Sidney Lumet 1964). However, Zinnemann's film already explores trauma's complex temporal structure; its rootedness in a past intruding upon the present; its simultaneousness of traumatic time and everyday life; its indelibility in which the horrors of the past re-enter the present through ordinary objects or settings, and in which the loss and suffering are so intense that they can only be 'remembered' by proxy (Morag 2009, 21–25).

In the end, it is the mother who identifies Karel, first by remembering the woollen cap she had made for him, and then by recognising his face among other children's, i.e. by recognising individual features. The film thus works with a generation- and gender-model different from films made within national contexts particularly of the perpetrator nation(s). The father figure is in Zinnemann's film replaced by a sympathetic yet immature brother and consequently loses importance, while the mother, who rarely

even appears in the other films, holds the central position. The power to identify, with which she is invested by Zinnemann, reflects the monstrosity of persecution which separated and murdered mothers and children. Furthermore, the identification of the victims depends on her recognition not just in the case of her biological child but also in the case of symbolic children such as the Jewish orphans Mrs Malik looks after at the UNRRA camp or the boy in another DP camp whose true – namely Jewish – identity she helps to reveal. The mother's power to identify is, however, not the power to master identity and gain control. Despite the restoration of order at the end of the film in terms of the intergenerational contract, the renewed identity remains fragile as the trauma which became visible in Karel is hardly redeemable or easily controllable.

'A Yid bin ikh geweyn and a Yid vel ikh seyn': collective trauma and memory in Natan Gross's *Unzere Kinder* (1948)

While Zinnemann pursued an individual case, Natan Gross's film engages with communal identity and agency and, unlike Zinnemann, who focussed on a Czech non-Jewish boy,[11] *Unzere Kinder* explicitly explores Jewish life after the Holocaust. Set near Łódż, one of the old centres of Jewish life in Poland, working with survivors of the Holocaust in the children's and the adults' parts,[12] and revisiting Yiddish culture and language, the film is concerned with the basis of communal cohesion after the almost complete destruction of that community. *Unzere Kinder* has attracted little academic interest in itself; it has been mentioned in the wider context of Yiddish cinema and, more specifically, Holocaust film (Hoberman 1991; Konigsberg 1998; Langner 1998). As part of the latter, however, it received at times harsh criticism for its notion of a Jewish collective as well as its use of art to reflect the Holocaust. Gabriel Finder chastises the film for appropriating the children's real voices in favour of an idealised notion of the Jewish child as a hero,[13] which served the adult world as the foundation for a positive collective Jewish post-war memory and identity. In line with wider efforts, the film does not, according to Finder, show the children as traumatised and vulnerable but as heroes of survival, representatives of renewal, and masters of self-healing (Finder 2012, 52). On the other hand, discussing the way Gross's film employs art and cultural traditions, Lawrence Langner and Ira Konigsberg are sceptical of the film's strategy to rely on art as a 'therapy' for the traumas of the Holocaust. Konigsberg acknowledges the film as 'a remarkable document because of what it reveals about the limitations of art and the problems of artists coming up against those limitations' when trying to represent the Holocaust. For him, the film questions 'whether art itself can ever encompass not reality per se, but the reality of an event such as the Holocaust' (Konigsberg 1998, 8 and 13). Langner and Konigsberg principally agree that the artistic approach presented in the film fails to face the horrors of the Holocaust and is, indeed, a strategy of avoidance. Both scholars describe the film's use of art as naive and sentimental, and determine, as a seemingly truthful counterpoint to the adults' nostalgic fictional world, the 'lost children's' testimonies. Nevertheless, both also see a remaining tension between the two modes of remembering suggesting that the film 'continues to question its own premises, inviting us to reconstrue its conclusions even as it seems to assert them' (Langner 1998, 159).

I want to put forward the argument that the two sides, the adults and the 'lost children' and their respective representations of the Holocaust, are much more linked with each

other than previously discussed and reflect an early effort to communicate about the traumas rather than 'truthfully' representing them, an undertaking bound to fail due to the very nature of trauma as representational gap. Again relying on cinematic concepts of trauma and trauma process, I will discuss the film's world of art as encoding the horrific experiences of the Holocaust, and the 'lost child' not as an 'authentic' voice but as a major discursive agent of the intergenerational discourse on the past. Similar to Zinnemann's film, Gross' stresses the link between remembering and re-founding of identity. However, given its collective approach, the film is not structured along an individual's attempt to remember but along a collective endeavour which takes the form of theatrical performances, i.e. live exchanges between performers and an audience in a shared and uniting space.

Memories and the theatre of the past

Unzere Kinder was produced by Shaul Goskind and his re-founded production company Kinor which had been a central part of Yiddish cinema in Poland during the interwar years (Hoberman 1991). The whole production seems to have been devoted to the effort to re-found and remember. Thus, Goskind involved pre-war stars of Yiddish theatre and film; for the adult main roles, he engaged Yisroel Shumacher and Shimon Dzigan, two celebrated comedians, who had worked with companies in Łódż and Warsaw before the war (Hoberman 1991, 277). Both had also starred in pre-war films (co)produced by Goskind, namely *Al Khet/For Sins* (1936), *Freylikhe Kaptsonim/The Jolly Paupers* (1937) and *On a Heym/Without a Home* (1939) (Hoberman 1991, 277 and 295). Furthermore, the close look at children had a pre-war forerunner, Aleksander Ford's *Mir Kumen On/Children Must Laugh* (1936), a documentary film about a sanatorium for Jewish children from destitute urban backgrounds. Goskind and Gross had echoed this film more directly in their own post-war documentary *Mir Lebngeblibene/The Jewish People Live* (1947), which looks at Jewish life in post-war Poland and gives most of its space to the suffering and recovery of children. *Unzere Kinder* is thus in conversation with the pre-war years of Jewish life in Poland and also ends this conversation in that it was the last Yiddish feature film made in Poland after the war where it was, however, never shown. It had a short run in Israel in 1951 but was not widely distributed. Konigsberg stresses, that *Unzere Kinder* is 'the first film to confront the issue of whether the Holocaust is a suitable subject for art' (Konigsberg 1998, 13), namely the Yiddish art and folklore of the pre-war years. Rather than examining suitability, I am interested in the fact that Yiddish art and folklore is part of an exchange within the group of survivors testing the group's cohesion and identity; this is structured along performances.

The first set of performances

The film has its first major performance near the beginning with Dzigan and Shumacher staging a skit called 'Singers of the Ghetto' in Łódż's Yiddish theatre. They play two beggars singing and dancing to earn food. The adult audience enjoys the performance, laughs and applauds, but the 'lost children' protest and heckle it, which the two actors take as unwillingness to remember the Holocaust. The children,

however, do not want to suppress memories but find the skit falsifying. Scholars have described the skit as 'sentimental' (Langner 1998, 160) as well as 'naïve and uninformed' (Konigsberg 1998, 13). However, the exchange process which the skit kicks off is neither.

The skit refers to the pre-war tradition on several levels: with Klezmer music and Cossack dancing and the beggars dreaming about 'mames maykholim' (mum's cooking), it is reminiscent of the literature and art about the shtetl; the beggar himself, the 'kaptsonim', is a traditional figure of shtetl representations, one of which was of course Goskind's own film from 1937 with Shumacher and Dzigan as the jolly paupers themselves; and at least their post-war costumes are similar to the outfit they wear in the pre-war film.[14] Doubtlessly, there is nostalgia at work in the skit, but the skit is more productively understood as a means of testing a shtetl paradigm which had been a cornerstone of pre-war identity.[15] Backstage, the children deconstruct the skit with spontaneous brief enactments of their own experiences. Unlike the comedians, the children do not ask for chicken and a whole challah but for a cold potato; they don't sing and dance to traditional music but have a monotonous tired singsong; they beg not to be left starving rather than make (melo)dramatic threats to commit suicide if no help is given. Last but not least, they do not present exhaustion and starvation as the status quo but point to perpetrators when they arrest a grotesquely goose-stepping Nazi (played by the tallest boy of the group). In other words, the children question the literary shtetl as a suitable paradigm for the representation of the ghetto and the Holocaust. At the same time, the deconstruction itself depends on the tradition which prompts the keywords for the children's own scenes. Shumacher ended the skit with the declaration 'A Yid bin ikh geweyn und a Yid vel ikh zayn' (A Jew have I been and a Jew will I be). However, at the end of this first set of theatrical performances, it is up for discussion what 'a Yid' is; indeed, both the skit and the children's brief enactments introduce identity (re) construction after the Holocaust as a process, the product of exchange, critique, and deconstruction.

The second set of performances

The comedians are enthusiastic about the children and want to use them as sources of 'authentic knowledge'. They visit the children's home where the exchange between the children and the (symbolic) fathers and indeed mothers continues with further performances.

The first is a traditional partner dance which the children stage to entertain their guests. Within the symbolic remit of children to 'shoulder fantasies of the past and the future' (Lury 2005, 308), the partner dance is a simple expression of joy and affirmation of the life-cycle in which children figure as the next generation of lovers and parents; it is a very traditional role the children seem to give themselves, clearly motivated by (adult) ideals of communal renewal. This performance is followed by the two comedians' second skit, which is the centre-piece of the film. Despite its length and position in the middle of the film, it has not received close analysis. Instead, like the first skit, it was reproached with being inappropriate.

The second skit is based on a literary shtetl representation, too, namely on Sholem Aljechem's 'Kasrilevke brent vi a likht' (Kasrilevke burns like a candle) and takes up another typical motif of shtetl stories, namely fire and conflagration. According to Dan Miron, many shtetl stories 'send[…] [their inhabitants] out of their beds into a street scene of raging flames, smoke, confusion, and ineffective attempts to extinguish the fire' (Miron 2000, 16), which is exactly what happens in the film's skit as well. Langner rejects the scene because 'the actors' version […] is a source of humour, a tribute to their versatile talents, but who can quell the sinister echoes of those other, less quenchable flames that consumed people?' (Langner 1998, 159). Langner concludes that if the actors would really want to represent the past, 'they must first "unlearn" the literary legacies of a Sholem Aleichem' (Ibid., 162). However, I want to argue that the skit is informed by the children's previous ghetto performances and *does* take a deconstructive approach; it, in fact, presents some 'unlearning'. My reading is based on the formal analysis of the scene and links it to trauma narratives.

The first skit, 'The Singers of the Ghetto', is filmed and edited as a theatre play. An establishing shot shows the arrangement on the stage, the props, actors, and musicians. The camera adopts perspectives which imitate the audience's and actors' view, respectively. Shots of the audience watching, laughing, and applauding, or protesting in the case of the children, are included through reverse-shot editing and reproduce theatre as a live performance characterised by direct communication between stage and auditorium. Both the children's backstage ghetto scenes and their partner dance are shot as theatrical events in that defining sense. 'Kasrilevke brent', however, is not theatrical but quintessentially cinematic.

For this second skit, neither the stage room is visible nor any background setting; the performance takes place in front of a completely black background without any depth or contours. The shtetl characters are all played by the two comedians, which necessitates the most cinematic of all means, the cut and, consequently, frequent and fast-paced editing; in fact, multiple roles are a device of a film rather than a stage. This means that in 'Kasrilevke brent' the various characters enter into communication with each other by reverse-shot editing as well as off-screen sound.[16] The black background gives them the quality of two-dimensional cut-out figures which float free of context and anchorage. The dominance of reverse-shot editing further intensifies this isolation of the characters who never come together in the frame as a group, i.e. a shtetl collective. Despite the tragicomic plot, the whole scene signals disintegration, which also affects the characters themselves as black parts of their costumes and shadows on their faces seem to dissolve them. In terms of mise-en-scène and editing, the skit does not tell the comic tale of a fire which the inhabitants are too unorganised to extinguish, but a tale of excessive destruction. The characters' discussions about whether and how to extinguish the fire seem almost out of place and distracting from the fact that they are being swallowed by a pervasive darkness.

The skit transposes trauma, i.e. it re-inscribes trauma traces in cultural encodings in order to make them 'more easily interpretable and digestible' (Elm, Kabalek, and Köhne 2014, 10); the isolation, fracturing, break-up which the editing and mise-en-scène generate, can be understood as translating trauma, the crisis of representation, into film language. One last aspect which supports this reading, is that in line with the essentially cinematic character of the skit, we do not get a single cut to the audience. We

only see the children applaud once the performance is over. The direct, live communication, the continuous back and forth between actors and audience so characteristic for all the other performances in the film, is missing here. The destruction of the community presented in the skit also reflects, in its cinematic realisation, the problems of forging a post-Holocaust community as the possibility of direct communication about the catastrophe and the reliance on a shared space are denied.

Broken memories

It no doubt seems extremely naïve when the two actors invite the children to hold a competition for the best re-enactment of their experience of a real burning of a ghetto. However, this is not necessarily the film's naivety. The competition does not take place, instead the children and female staff of the children's home withdraw from shared spaces into their bedrooms where, in the dark, they remember their experiences. The groups are separated from each other even though they 'share' the traumatic experience, namely the destruction of the community and particularly the destruction of the mother–child relationship. Alone or in pairs, the women are overcome by memories of their murdered children. Similar to Zinnemann, Gross stresses the traumatic character of the experience when, triggered by a song, *Tsvey Taybelekh* (Two Doves), the scene of loss invades the present aurally and the mother hears her murdered daughter calling through the night.

   The children on the other hand remember the past in small groups sitting in their beds; their memories are presented as short flashbacks. What the children remember are the moments of survival. However, in each of the three memories – two boys and one girl tell their stories – survival is linked to the experience of being at the mercy of others. Rather than presenting survival as a result of a heroic act, the film presents it as chance and the dying of others. The small girl survives because a frightened Polish farmer obeys the cynical order of an SS man and offers money for a child on the truck; the SS man picks the girl randomly and throws her at the farmer's feet. One of the boys survives hidden in a rolled-up carpet while off-screen voices indicate the arrest of the Polish doctor who took the boy in; the other boy survives because his mother persuades him to run away when they are about to be shot; what haunts the boy most is that his mother died not knowing he survived. It is again the voice of the dead which calls through the night, charging the present with the off-screen trauma of the past.

   Unlike Zinnemann, Gross does not show the trauma as representational void but as isolation and loneliness. The children as well as the mothers can indeed remember but they cannot communicate the memories to one another. The brutal destruction of the closest ties does not leave a 'community of victims' but people who are alone with their dead or form victim-generations. This separation is stressed also by the role of the symbolic fathers, the two comedians, who do not take part in the remembering; they tiptoe through the house eavesdropping on the women and children and are overwhelmed by the pain of their experiences. Thus, the isolation that became apparent in the skit 'Kasrilevke brent' is repeated here; the community is not restored in a shared narrative.

The relief of the comedians when they observe the children on the next morning, re-enacting 'Kasrilevke brent' in the orphanage's garden with lots of fun and laughter as well as water putting out their pretend fire, has been challenged by scholars.

> The question that looms largest in the film is whether the tactics used by those who would represent the events of the catastrophe are anything more than a strategy of diversion, whose deepest if unexpressed aim is to avoid more undigestible details (Langner 1998, 161).

The smoothing out of conflict in the end is, however, not necessarily what the film suggests. The various performances of the comedians and the children form an inter-generational conversation in which communal identity is negotiated. Paradigms and traditions are suggested, modified, and re-worked in the process, which recognises the joy of survival and wish for a communal future as much as the collective and individual experience of death and indelible loss rooted in the present by trauma.

Conclusion

Both films are rare examples from the 1940s of an approach to the immediate past which did not rely on epics of strength and male authority for (national) reassurance but allowed for vulnerability and irretrievable loss. The films' different point of view deserves attention as a counter model to notions of heroism, particularly as they still take part in the post-war discourse on the 'lost child'. In both films, the figure of the 'lost child' becomes seminal to the effort to deal with the legacy of extreme violence and genocidal persecution. The children appear first and foremost as victims and symbolise innocent suffering. At the same time, the child's symbolic significance as the future of a family or community seems to provide a safeguard against the danger of being trapped in the horrors of the past. However, rather than treating the child as a national placeholder, its function as next generation necessitates an engagement with persecution to enable a future at all. Thus, the children in Zinnemann's as well as Gross's film are bound in a complex temporality in which they carry indelible trauma as much as the hopes for a future which cannot be derived from the past. The 'lost child' promises continuity while also signifying traumatic discontinuity. Both films realise this tension by transposing trauma into film language and working with temporal duality. Despite the highly symbolic role the 'lost child' is allocated within these narratives of identity re-construction, the acknowledgement of traumatisation and its cinematic encoding prevents the emergence of heroic master narratives and allows for tales of disturbance and incompleteness.

Notwithstanding these similarities, the films also show significant differences in the scripting of the 'lost child' and the attempt to imagine reconstruction after 1945 from the victims' point of view. Thus, it is striking that in Zinnemann's film only the children show signs of traumatization and loss of identity. The adults, on the other hand, while being far from mastering the post-war situation, are not presented as fractured and dissociated from parts of their selves. Here, the figure of the 'lost child' acquires additional meaning based on its status as minor; the loss of identity, control, and agency caused by trauma is relegated to the status of 'immaturity'. Childhood and helplessness thus coincide in a rather traditional manner which leaves the adult world in a position of superiority and shows the intergenerational contract as hierarchical; it

explores trauma through notions of victimhood based on passivity and innocence. In Gross's film, the group of survivors rather than one individual is traumatised; intergenerational exchange is at the centre of attempts to cope with the past and in it children take an active part; they possess a knowledge, which the symbolic fathers lack,[17] and have the right to criticise and question. The 'lost child' is here accepted as victim of and witness to the plight of the destroyed community as well as its active re-creator, a discursive position which is unique within the corpus of post-war films. Victimhood is not defined by passivity or non-agency. Incompleteness of identity arises from the traumatic past but also from the intense process of intergenerational identity negotiation through modes of performance.

Notes

1. This has been documented for Germany in Fisher (2007).
2. The detailed documentation of the situation of children in various media and formats illustrates this. See, for example, Macardle (1949), *The Book of Needs* (*1947 and 1949*), Brosse (1950). Similarly, film and photography were used to convey the children's misery. See Seymour (1943), Bonney (1943), and Andrica (1948).
3. For a discussion of German films see Fisher (2007) and Wölfel (2016).
4. This is by no means an exhaustive list of feature films; the many documentary films on the topic from the same period are not even mentioned yet.
5. See for recent examples Ericsson and Simonsen (2005), Stargard (2005), Parsons (2008), Zahra (2001), Kenkmann, Postert, and Weil (2018).
6. Sorlin (1999) lists productions between 1945 and 1959 together with a number of common themes but does not offer a systematic discussion.
7. Alain Resnais's *Nuit et Brouillard* (1956) and Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (1964) are often discussed as first examples of posttraumatic film (Hirsch 2004; Insdorff 2003).
8. For a discussion of the production within the context of the Cold War see Etheridge (2015). Similarly, Gemie and Rees (2011) put the film in the context of US American post-war politics.
9. Underlying the notion of 'child-like' behaviour in the post-war period is the concept of the Apollonian child (James, Jenks, and Proust 1998, 13).
10. These are standard techniques that transpose trauma into film language (Köhne 2012, 9).
11. It has been noted by various scholars that Zinnemann chose a blond Czech boy for the main role and explicitly Jewish children for all secondary roles. Gemie and Rees (2011) discuss this in the context of post-war de-politicisation and universalization; they also link the choice to the fears of many Jews that attention to their plight might backfire. Smyth (201) suggests as rationale for Zinnemann's choice that he was adamant to avoid focussing on a special group and rather tried to stress the representativeness of the situation for children in Europe more generally. According to her 'he was as suspicious of focusing on one particular nation's experience of the war. In order to make the truly European, multistoried film he wanted, the children had to be diverse. For a discussion of the links between the film and Zinnemann's own biography, see Klages (2015).
12. Gross cast the children from the Jewish children's home Helenowik Kolonie near Łódż.
13. Finder's (2012) critique starts with the fact that most of the children did not actually speak Yiddish but had to learn their text by heart or were dubbed by Yiddish speakers, and it ends with the claim that, contrary to scenes in the film, the child survivors never spoke with each other about their horrific experiences but only when asked by adults.
14. They wear the same kind of beards as well as cap and Hasidic kapote (Shumacher) and bowler hat (Dzigan); this might have been the couple's pre-war standard stage outfit as

suggested by The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe http://www.yivoencyclope dia.org/article.aspx/Dzigan_and_Shumacher (last accessed on 3 August 2018).

15. It should be stressed that nostalgia is a relative term as the world of the shtetl presented in this skit is not idyllic but characterised by hunger and poverty. The critical reflection of the shtetl is a central part of its representations. In line with this, the 1937 film is described as a 'sobering comedy from the shtetl which painted a bleak picture of economic despair', and 'the least sentimental of Yiddish talkies' (Hobermann 1991, 278).
16. Allowing the actors to be visible in one role and audible in another.
17. This constellation of 'knowing' children vs. ignorant fathers is not explained in the film but corresponds with reality in as much as Dzigan and Shumacher survived the Holocaust in the Soviet Union which included the experience of work camps but indeed not the ghetto.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

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