

Re-viewing the margins: Peripheral memory and remnants of war in the East German DEFA film, *Carbide and Sorrel* (Frank Beyer, 1963)

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ABSTRACT

Based on a close reading of Frank Beyer's *Carbide and Sorrel* (1963), this essay explores cinematic peripheries as sites where the cultural memory of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath was negotiated in East German DEFA films of the 1960s. Rather than construing the sonic, narrative and visual margins as incessantly haunted by traumatic losses related to the war, Beyer's film foregrounds the spectator's participatory engagement in the production of memory. As the film draws the viewer's attention to residues of catastrophic experiences in the limits of cinematic space, the periphery also enables an affective and perceptual reframing of the past that underscores the reparative and life-affirming force of selective remembering, if not forgetting.

Introduction

Carbide and Sorrel is the first in a series of DEFA films produced in the 1960s that returned to the historical moment of real and symbolic collapse at the end of the Second World War. Offering more plausible small-scale stories than the heroic anti-fascist films in the previous decade were able to supply, a new generation of directors searched for a representational language that would be capable of steering the audience towards a more authentic sense of 1945 as a time of both catastrophe and new beginning. Although scholars have praised these films, including Konrad Wolf's *I was 19* (1968) and Heiner Carow's *The Russians are Coming* (1966), for their precise social observations and realist techniques (Byg, 1999:34), the increasing

historical distance from the war generated a new retrospective paradigm (Assmann, 1999; Weigel, 2002) which tells us more about the present of the German Democratic Republic (hereafter GDR) present than the early postwar past. The deliberate shift into a more explicit mode of retrospective temporality, noticed also by reviewers at the time as *Rück Erinnerung* (-ler, 1964),¹ created the space for multiple historical imaginaries of “1945” that both formed and were shaped by a more heterogeneous memory culture, which emerged after the building of the Berlin Wall during a brief period of political thaw.

Even if DEFA films about the fascist era and the immediate postwar years were always part of larger ideological efforts to mold the past from a present perspective, only the new “war films” of the 1960s, starting with Gerhard Klein’s *Gleiwitz Case* (1961), exposed this presentist approach to recent German history by drawing attention to the self-conscious dimension of cinematic representations. This kind of narrative and visual self-reflexivity concerned with filmic mediation has always been perceived as the trademark of the critical New German cinema that emerged in West Germany during the late 1960s and 1970s. However, the new anti-fascist productions in the GDR already provide powerful cinematic models that begin to address the imaginary and discursive role played by film in creating a collective historical memory. As I have discussed elsewhere in more detail (Pinkert, 2008), this turn to greater contingency allowed the new wave of East German anti-fascist films to explore more open-ended practices of post-melancholic mourning that undermined the self-mythologizing of the state. In contrast to the GDR’s central memory of anti-fascist resistance, manifested in the monument park at the former concentration camp Buchenwald built in 1958, the “war films” of the 1960s reduce the propensity of the master narrative to fix the fascist past in a particular heroic image. Favoring a dramaturgy that is aware of the viewer’s participation in the production of a historical imaginary, the films by Frank Beyer, Konrad Wolf and Heiner Carow engage more tenuous and fragmentary visions of the collapse of the Third Reich and its aftermath.

More deliberately than any of the early DEFA films of the 1940s and 1950s, this provisional approach to “1945” as an incongruous moment of “defeat–victory” (Schivelbusch, 2003) harnesses the mnemonic capacities of fleeting moments to render the residues of historical trauma in the margins of the visual field. These traces tend to be associated with the physical destruction and mass death experienced by the Germans themselves, even if—albeit to a lesser extent—DEFA films, including Beyer’s own *Jacob the Liar* (1974), also addressed anti-Semitic persecution and the vanishing of the Jews in the Holocaust (Pinkert, 2012). Whenever the films of the 1960s represent the postwar German subject through a discourse of survival, they ameliorate the official notion of anti-fascist victory that DEFA films generally privileged. This softened approach should not be mistaken for the nostalgic revisionism that characterized West

German movies of the 1950s. Even as the new DEFA films reimagine “1945” as moment of historical rupture, they sustain, if to varying degrees, an identification with the anti-fascist teleology favored by the GDR’s cultural politics. Yet, instead of creating a totalizing narrative that spans from heroic Communist resistance to the liberation of Germans by Soviet troops, the postwar films of the 1960s cast the collapse of Nazi Germany through the perspective of “what remains?” Notably, this offers a double take on German war loss. One version directly illustrates the fractured psychic and social landscape of the 1940s through more relatable characters in order to elicit the interest, if not sympathies of a contemporary, presumably younger audience in the 1960s. Konrad Wolf’s semi-autobiographical film *I was 19*, for example, chronicles the journey of an inexperienced German Red Army officer who enters defeated Nazi Germany with the Russian troops. The other version unconsciously renders, or, in some cases, exposes and reanimates the mnemonic gaps concerning the experiences of war loss, defeat and depression in the periphery of DEFA’s collective memory production.

Embedding these elisions within the marginal spaces of a cinematic comedy, Frank Beyer’s *Carbide and Sorrel* incites the spectator to perform the reparative work that shifts between remembering and future-oriented forgetting. The film moves beyond a post-traumatic cinema where the specters of past losses linger in the liminal (sonic, narrative, visual) spaces of the representational realm. Rather than being passively exposed to the presumably inexorable impact of unsignifiable losses located on the cusp between transparency and occlusion (a moving upward from past to present that the film and the audience presumably share), Beyer’s film puts pressure on the cinematic periphery as a more distinctly spatial and synchronic site where the past can be reordered in the present through an active practice of recognition. As Silverman reminds us, we do not ever look once and for all:

Although we cannot control what happens to a perception before we become aware of it, we can retroactively revise the value which it assumes for us on a conscious level. We can look at an object a second time through different representational parameters and painstakingly reverse the process [through which we have attributed meaning] (1996:4).

Notably, such a re-viewing itself takes place in time; it can only have a limited efficacy, and must be repeated with each new visual perception that emerges in the constantly shifting margins of unconscious and politically regulated representations of the past (Silverman, 1996:4), in the *Grenzgebiet des Erlaubten*—the border zone of the permissible, as Beyer put it (2001:121).

At least to a certain extent, then, this participatory approach to the production of cultural memory, arising in the epistemological and perceptual limits of cinematic

space, reintroduces the possibility for spectatorial agency.² As reviewers of Beyer's film put it (with a nod towards both the state's regulation of cultural output and the audience's own experience of dislocation and hardship in 1945), "The filmgoing public has decided." Choices can be made (variably on the part of the actor, director or film, but also the spectator or critic) about what is remembered and what is forgotten in the aftermath of the "grosse Sterben," as a newspaper review of *Carbide and Sorrel* in Potsdam called it (Hofmann, 1963), or what alternatively will reside, settle and sediment as a "peripheral memory" that is neither normative nor incessantly haunting.

"Symptoms of genuine comedy" (*Märkische Volksstimme*)

From the outset, by choosing the genre of comedy and, more specifically, the softer and more light-hearted form of the *Lustspiel* for a cinematic return to 1945, Frank Beyer and the screen-writer Hans Oliva challenged the GDR's monumentalizing engagement with the anti-fascist past, while also tempering the historical hardships Germans had experienced through a retrospective, humorous tone. In his memoir, Beyer (1932–2006) recalls that he had been instantly intrigued by Oliva's comedic script for a "road movie set in the last days of World War II," as it was a hybrid, a marginal genre DEFA had never done before (2001:120). The film tells the story of the worker Karl Blücher, a non-smoker and vegetarian, who sets off from Dresden immediately after the war in search of supplies to rebuild a cigarette factory. Encountering every possible mishap, the protagonist braves a journey by road and water, dodging dogs, mines, crafty Red Army soldiers, a conniving US Army officer and the attention of a lustful countess, in order to return with his precious cargo. As Feinstein points out, this circuitous, picaresque comedy subtly undermined official accounts of the GDR's history that emphasized the Soviet Union's and the Party's deliberate shaping of the new society (2002:178). Although an increasing number of film productions in the 1960s indicated that it was not uncommon for DEFA to treat serious topics within the generic conventions of popular comedy, the screening of the first cut of Beyer's film for cultural officials was reportedly met with dead silence (Beyer, 2001:123). For the most part, the unspoken anxiety among cultural officials resulted from the film's conscious de-idealization of the Russians. In contrast to DEFA's Soviet co-production *Fünf Tage—Fünf Nächte* (*Five Days—Five Nights*; Leo Arnstam, Heinz Thiel and Anatoli Golowanow, 1961), also set in Dresden right after the end of the war, *Carbide and Sorrel* did not shy away from alluding to moral corruption among the Soviet occupying forces. The response by party officials was echoed in several local and national newspapers, where reviewers initially expressed concern that the film's humor could minimize the sacrifices made by the "anti-fascists of the first hour." In addition, some critical voices feared that the film's popular genre

would diminish Germany's devastation in "the year zero."³ However, for Beyer, it was precisely the tonality of "humor at the edge of catastrophe," as he called it, the employment of comedic distance as a psychological response to danger, as well as a coping mechanism and means of resistance, that fascinated him (2001:122; see also Gilman, 2000:283, n. 14).

Once approved by the Soviets and released in December of 1963, *Carbide and Sorrel* became an instant success; in only three months, one million viewers saw the film, leaving many of the theaters without copies of the program booklets that generally accompanied DEFA screenings (Lücke, 1964). After initial hesitations, perhaps even fear of repercussion, a kind of liberating laughter appeared to have echoed throughout the cinemas across East Germany, while critics in the West found that the film's stilted humor was too closely related to revisionist genre productions (I.K., 1964), including the *Heimatlustspiel*, abundantly available in their own movie theaters (Ponkie, 1969). In the East, on the other hand, even Communist officials, such as the SED party secretary of the Film Factory Wolfen, Leni Bienin, felt compelled to express their appreciation of the film's humor during informal conversations following the public screenings. Bienin commented that, not only because we have overcome this terrible era, but also thanks to the relatable characters in the film, who go beyond the template of the positive hero, "we can laugh about [these early times] today" (Mennerich, 1964).

Notably, this kind of affective reframing of the past, resulting in an emotional release presumably widely shared by an audience of different ages,⁴ relied on the vernacular comedy and its playful use of wit and irony as a deterritorializing, minor form that would be able to foreclose the totalizing effects of a hegemonic narrative. With a temporal distance of almost two decades, many viewers of the film still had recourse to the past in order to remember the immediate postwar years as lived experience. While the reviewers of the film strike a more somber tone, centering their own recollections on experiences of physical and mental hardship, the actor Erwin Geschonneck, who plays Blücher, recalled that even under the worst conditions of devastation, people persistently told jokes (Beyer, 2001:121). Be that as it may, by the early 1960s enough time had passed for a new postwar generation to evolve that would be susceptible to an ongoing mediation, if not transformation, of Germany's history of destruction and defeat through a more anecdotal, even comic access to the past. *Carbide and Sorrel* neither delves into the realistic authenticity deployed by Konrad Wolf in his autobiographical film, *I was 19*, also set at the end of the war, nor does Beyer's film rely on the socialist realist idealization of the anti-fascist hero, exemplified by Maetzig's biopic on the Communist leader Thälmann in the 1950s. Instead, oriented towards the marginal, Beyer uses the mid-level genre of the *Lustspiel*, situated in between the documentary record and ideological myth, in order to focus

on the adventures of a modern Simplicissimus and his accidental encounters on the road (Funke, 1964; -ler, 1964). Already in the rubble films of the 1940s (*Berliner Ballade* [*Berlin Ballad*], Robert A. Stemmle, 1948), followed by movie productions in West Germany (*Wir Wunderkinder* [*Aren't we Wonderful?*], Kurt Hoffmann, 1958), filmmakers had deployed elements of comedy, cabaret, satire and irony in order to convert a historical experience imbued with suffering and pain into more livable narratives on the screen. Walking a fine line between building on the popular appeal of genre movies in the Third Reich and a more productive, critical reorganization of these conventions, in the tradition of Brecht, films such as these provided an important trajectory for Beyer's efforts to both address and transform postwar memory (and its various cinematic mediations) of the early transition period.

Specifically, the elements of the road movie, building on a longer tradition of traveling Schwejk figures in Brecht's plays, allowed for greater attention to borders and margins. Following the conventions of the genre, also deployed at the time in other DEFA films, such as Gerhard Klein's *Sonntagsfahrer* (*Sunday Driver*; 1963) and Hermann Zschoches' *Weite Strassen* (*Wide Roads*; 1969), the means of transportation in *Carbide and Sorrel* continue to fail or fall through, leading the traveler to perpetually search for new opportunities to move forward precisely because the limits of an unhindered mobility can never be quite forgotten. As in other DEFA road movies, those sub-tales of intermittent failure can only be transcended through comedy and slapstick humor (Böttcher, 2013:338). Focused on the travails of a wandering anti-hero, Beyer creates an episodic, heterogeneous narrative structure of vignettes—or, as film critics called them in the tradition of modern theater dramaturgy, "Stationen" (Funke, 1964)—that undermines the homogenous linear time associated with the historical telos of anti-fascist mythologies favored by the State. In that sense, even on the level of genre, the film approaches cultural memory production from the periphery, emphasizing the small scale, the deterritorializing dimension and minor forms of the popular. Much of the film's mainstream appeal was due to the comic talent and moral capital of the actor Erwin Geschonneck, who himself said he was drawn to Blücher because the character was not a class-conscious worker, but someone with the right instinct or conscience to know what needs to be done for his class and people (Hofmann, 1963).

The film's life-affirming comic relief (Beyer, cited in *Der Abend*, 1978) enabled a new point of view grounded in historical distance and artistic mediation (one moviegoer called this the "*verfremdende Zeitabstand*," i.e., "estranging temporal distance"; Funke, 1964). As Freud pointed out, "humor is not resigned, it is rebellious" (1990:429). Reviewers linked the success of the film's optimism, to which the audience responded favorably, to the skillful camera work of Günter Marczinkowsky (-ler, 1964). They noted how the straight on, "clear and open *Blick—gaze*, look, view—of the camera" renders the *faces* of the protagonist and minor figures in ways that

portray those characters who are pleasant without overlooking their flaws and those with darker sides as relatable and realistic. These commentators attest to the notion that close attention to the human face, whose vulnerability demands our recognition and response, can draw the spectator into the film and into the perception of another being (Balász, 1970:44; Levinas, 1990:9). The critics concluded that this new *Blick*, oriented at kindness and sympathy, was able to shed a different light on the “tragic hardship” experienced by the Germans at the end of the war (Funke, 1964).⁵ In their view, contemporary spectators in East Germany of the 1960s were doing nothing less now than “learn[ing] how to see [the past] in a new way.” One viewer explained this affective and perceptual reframing like this: “One goes on to a discovery in the realm of cheerfulness. One smiles under tears, one begins to appreciate the power of genuine humanity that can overcome all adversity” (Funke, 1964).

Admittedly, the rendering of this viewing experience may verge on sentimentality; yet, it is precisely this peculiar affective blend of despondency and light-hearted laughter that underscores the viewers’ capacities to recognize in this vernacular comedy mnemonic residues of the traumatic historical past muffled or shut out from the central master narrative of anti-fascist rebuilding. The film’s comic structure, satirized characters and unexpected turning points, supported by the episodic practices of the road movie, marginalize the key elements of East Germans’ memory of the transition period from the Third Reich to the new socialist order. Thus, issues such as German victimhood, fallen soldiers and resettlement are constantly alluded to, but have marginal impact—if at all—on the story. On the other hand, this meandering, accidental narration allows the reintroduction of topics that have become semi-taboo in the national memory discourse of the postwar period, including most notably the trope of sexual violence. Yet, the film still does not veer towards a classic tragic comedy. Instead, as elements of *Lustspiel*, romance and satire fluidly interact, the film offers a range of newly conceivable (*denkbare*) plotlines, enabled by the episodic narrative structures of the road movie.

What, then, happens when these generic archetypes of subject matter that can be narrated (*Erzählbares*) encounter that which is difficult or even impossible to represent? Drawing on Hanno Loewy’s insight into the relationship between genre and historical representation, we may observe that the generic conventions are by no means relinquished. Instead, it is precisely through the mixing and entangling of generic structures that films are capable of approaching these ambiguous realities of historical violence in new and potentially more “realistic” ways (2003:43, 52). In Beyer’s film, this breakthrough towards greater authenticity, beyond the confines of rigid formal types, draws the spectator’s attention to the periphery. This orientation is guided by the film’s narrative arrangements that, based in a mid-level genre mix, shape the selective representation of historical realities. In turn, this mediation

reverberates in liminal cinematic spaces, more broadly conceived, including minor plotlines, comments by moviegoers and unanchored diegetic sound. It is through the film's self-reflexive attention to the peripheral spheres of the visual field, then, that the memory of these traumatic experiences is most effectively negotiated, ordered and arranged, enabling further deviations from the GDR's memory of anti-fascist reconstruction. By favoring a visual dramaturgy of the periphery, the film exposes and thus recirculates its own narrative tempering of sorrow (and more ambivalent feelings of shame and possibly guilt). This allows the audience to experience a sense of reparative care and renewal.

Politics of looking...and looking again!

The efficacy of peripheral memory in Beyer's postwar film is intimately linked to consciously marked perceptual operations in the field of vision. Emphasizing the complex relation between seeing and knowledge from the very start, *Carbide and Sorrel* amplifies the role played by the periphery in the shaping of cultural memory where, in a flexible field of appearance, new contexts are continuously delimited and formed (Butler, 2009:9). Rather than invoking the dominant iconography of anti-fascist heroism, prevalent in Beyer's previous work *Naked among Wolves* (1963), this humorous postwar film opens over an establishing shot of a heap of rubble, positioned slightly off center and surrounded by the remnants of a bombed-out building whose empty window frames expose the façade of another house situated in the recess of the visual field.

Of course, we could simply pass off these empty frames as visual cues for a naturalistic mise-en-scène of Germany in ruins rather than self-reflexive signs of perception (Burnett, 1995:5), if it were not for the way in which the main protagonist is introduced in the film, calling viewers' attention to the act of looking/seeing itself. Suddenly, as if cued by an invisible force, Kalle Blücher emerges behind the heap of rubble in the stage-like set, while the upbeat, punctuated music score underlines the comic absurdity of his unharmed appearance seemingly out of nowhere. Half covered by bricks, with a slight smirk on his face, Kalle looks around, taking stock; a moment later, the camera tracks out fast, taking the larger site of destruction into view, including the displaced scrap of a cigarette advertisement that presumably belongs to the factory in ruins. As the intertitle "in this distant year 1945" is imposed onto this scene, the viewer understands that the historical moment of the end of the war, the victory–defeat, cannot be grasped in real time and space; it can only be resymbolized through retrospective mediation. Unlike the emotional accounts of those who had witnessed Dresden's devastation by Allied bombs, in which 25,000 people were killed,⁶ we see Blücher on top of the rubble, dressed in the prototypical working-class

outfit reminiscent of the 1920s, hands casually in his pockets, surveying the landscape of ruins somewhat indecisively and then simply responding with an expletive to the disaster. Resonating with efforts in earlier DEFA films, including Kurt Maetzig's 1952 film, *Young Couple*, to consign the air raids—and here most notably the destruction of Dresden—to a prehistoric space, the film resists the legibility of a larger set of questions regarding Germans' culpability and guilt and the impact of those concerns in the aftermath of the war.

On the other hand, the preliminary dramaturgy of the opening scene refuses to tap into the ubiquitous appropriation of destroyed German cities as a symbol of the regenerative powers of the new anti-fascist and later socialist order. Richard Groschopp's monumental 1946 documentary *Dresden*, for example, cast the rebuilding of the city right after the war through representations of male strength and physical intactness. As one reviewer wrote, in Groschopp's film "one sees tanned, muscular construction workers in all areas doing their difficult day's work, which is a symbol of the progress that has been made so far" (Mückenberger and Jordan, 1994:253). Linger in a brief and much more ambiguous moment of defeat–victory in "1945," the opening scene in Beyer's film not only rejects the monumentalizing trope of anti-fascist victory, supported in the commemorative discourse of the GDR by efforts to mark the beginning of history in 1945 with the arrival of Soviet troops in Dresden; it also repudiates the State's official cold war discourse that worked against personal recollection by enshrining the bombing victims of Dresden within a newly emerging politics of anti-imperialism (Spencer, 1997). Instead of suspending the image of ruin in a hegemonic narrative, the film takes a more provisional approach, inviting the viewers, in observing Kalle, to apprehend the historical situation for themselves. As Blücher is taking stock of the rubble in this brief opening scene, a worker walks up to him to ask what he is doing there, to which Blücher replies flippantly, "Foolish question—looking (*gucken*)!"

Notably, the film's self-reflexive focus on visual/perceptual agency has far-reaching implications for the shaping of cultural memory: the mode of free-ranging observing associated with the main character as a "witness" to history suggests that the exploration and the insecurities of watching have not been shifted into a fixed gaze. There is room for understanding, interpretation, for making sense. This is important across the protagonist's diegetic realm of the 1940s and the viewer's past recall in the 1960s. The visual archive of early DEFA films of the 1940s contained traumatized war returnees whose inability to reintegrate into postwar society was marked by their permanent immobile stare. Although Blücher is not, strictly speaking, coded as a returnee (but rather anchored in the proletarian tradition of the ethos of Weimar cinema in the 1920s),⁷ it is striking that the film's attention to scopic capacities in the opening scene succeeds in undoing the notion of an impaired postwar masculinity.

Moreover, shuttling across time and space, a number of key elements—including the surveying gaze of Kalle when he emerges from behind the rubble, the verbal emphasis on “just looking,” the tracking shots and the circular pans of the group of workers telling Kalle about their plan to get carbide—bestow this opening scene with a kind of visual elasticity that undermines the rigor of the imagination in the anti-fascist present of the early 1960s. As Silverman points out, the look, regulated by social and psychic forces, is under constant cultural pressure to apprehend the world from a pre-assigned viewing position (1996:5).

With its emphasis on an ocularcentric paradigm, focused on the eye as the organ of perception, Beyer’s film lines up with cinematic practices and theories of the 1960s and 1970s in the West that, echoing film conceptualizations of the 1920s, privileged the act of seeing over other modes of affective response (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010:109). Of course, this orientation towards vision should not be mistaken with the cinematic space as a phenomenological totality that can be made sense of from a single point of view. Visual operations have their own contradictions and specular regimes and, ultimately, they do not have a single location or viewing attached. Further, Beyer is quite aware that seeing and feeling are not separate, and that the visual and other senses (e.g., sonic, haptic) interplay in the viewer’s perception of the cinematic spectacle as an embodied experience (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010:110). But, ultimately, it is the centrality of the visual sense—orchestrations of scanning, seeing and recognizing—that orient the viewer of *Carbide and Sorrel* to the peripheral in the visual field, where fleeting images and details reside in the threshold of the visible (Silverman, 1996). When Blücher explains to the worker that he is only there to observe and look, the eyes of the two men in the brief exchange of the opening scene do not meet. Instead, Blücher’s gaze is directed at the margins of the cinematic space, the distance outside the frame. In other words, it appears there might be more to see than meets the eye.

Butler suggests,

The frame never quite determine[s] precisely what it is we see, think, recognize and apprehend. Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things (2009:9).

In this process of making sense of the past’s recall, the spectator becomes both an observer of and participant in the spectacle, working their own memories with and against the film’s peripheral visions.

Once this dramaturgy of the periphery is set up in the fast-paced opening scene, and once, on a narrative level, the group of workers has decided that Kalle will need to get the carbide necessary to weld together the broken metal beams in order to reconstruct

the cigarette factory, Blücher's odyssey begins (Beyer, 2001:121). Just as the story meanders and minor protagonists emerge who cannot always, as one reviewer noted, be related to the plot (Funke, 1964), the viewers—also sort of by chance—are taken more closely towards the periphery, towards the margins within an already minor popular genre of a comedic road movie, where cinematic memory, including glimpses into the experience of resettlement, war, death and rape, is reconfigured.

German war losses

Without further ado, then, the film cuts from the opening scene to the road, where we see Kalle Blücher walking with strong strides and optimistic whistling as he embarks on his adventurous mission. While the film's credits are running, a subsequent close up of the protagonist's steps, synchronized with a dynamic music score, produces metonymic meanings regarding the massive movements that occurred in the postwar era across various geographical and social landscapes, ranging from Silesia in the east to America in the west. This emerging discourse of mobility is made explicit in the next brief scene, where we see people moving in a long shuffling line on the side of the road. As Blücher briskly walks towards the camera, the group of men, women and children, who pull handcarts with their belongings and carry bundles on their backs, moves quietly and orderly in the opposite direction. While, as Von Moltke (2005) points out, the mere presence of mobility does not tell us much about its particular function, the contemporary audience would have understood the historical specificity of the universal "wandering" depicted in such a scene and associated the moving crowd with the plight of the expellees from the East who faced the task of relocating. Images of people trudging on the side of the road had been recurring in the German landscape, in newsreels, as well as in stories and memoirs that circulated after the war (Von Moltke, 2005:120, 136–138).

The brevity with which the film introduces the trope of relocation, immediately following the opening scene, is in itself revealing. Although by 1950 four million Germans from the East had relocated to East Germany, the themes of expulsion and flight, which were intimately tied up with notions of complicity, could only partially surface in the cultural imagination of the GDR (Niven, 2013). In the West, however, the memory of expulsion had become constitutive of national postwar identity, supported by the widely popular genre of the *Heimatfilm*, which, indulging the loss of the homeland, turned German suffering into a generic convention. However, Beyer's brief shots of the evacuees in the margins of the visual field work against spectatorial identifications with victimhood. The camera shows the displaced people already in motion, capturing an anonymous group rather than singling out individual faces, which may have elicited an emotional response similar to the image of an evacuated

mother holding a child that dominated the universalized pictorial representations of resettlement in the West. Instead, the refugees are only shown from behind, their heads slightly tilted down, as if hanging in shame. As Kalle moves by, he appears to slightly look over and glance at the people, but then the non-diegetic music quickly absorbs his indecisiveness and picks up a marching rhythm, as if to propel the protagonist forward. In this brief, almost imperceptible moment of looking and looking away, the film creates an ambivalent space, where the protagonist seems unsure how to relate to the resettlers from the East coming through and the viewers, incited into these visual and affective operations, are asked to make up their own minds. When suddenly Kalle turns around and we expect his gaze to be matched with an image of the resettlers he had just passed, we only see an empty road, where, underscored by fast-paced *Kalinka* music and in line with the film's satirical/humorous tone, Russian trucks are all too quickly approaching, as if the cinematic residues of massive turmoil and relocation were not quite committed to memory.

The second time the trope of resettlement occurs in the film's visual margins is in a comical scene in which Kalle has lost control of a cart that carries the barrels of carbide he by now has acquired. With the protagonist sitting on top, the wagon is moving downhill. Through quick cuts between Kalle trying to desperately hold on, shaky point-of-view shots that emulate the physical feeling of being in motion, and over-the-shoulder shots from Kalle's perspective, the dislocated people are captured as they are being pushed to the side of the road. A nascent discourse of German loss and suffering is once more registered in the margins of the visual and discursive field of postwar memory production. This time the protagonist maneuvers just long enough through the anonymous crowd for the camera to record some faces, but the perception is still too short to stabilize these fleeting images into a historical narrative about the role of expulsion and resettlement in the postwar imaginary. A reviewer in *Der Morgen* only noted the scene's comic rhythm, reminiscent of the time lapse in silent film, and referenced Chaplin movies (Funke, 1964). In this brief moment of speeding up the images, the camera reaches into the group of resettlers, and their faces turn into transient dream-like images belonging to a space between the fictional world of the film and the imaginary realm inhabited by the viewer. What we see here, as these boundaries remain vague, is that distinctions of internal and external, thought and vision, are more often than not tools of interpretation (Burnett, 1995:10). As Kalle shouts for comic effect "*Bahn frei*" and "*Weg da*"—"Out of my way!"—the film quickly moves through this scene and, mimicked by hand-held camera work, the protagonist ends up toppling over and is tossed quite literally to the side of the road, into a dumping ground for waste. The prominently displayed sign "*Müll abladen verboten*"—"No Dumping Allowed"—may insinuate self-reflexively that, although no experience should be disposed at the waste side of history, the remnants of the

past are deposited there regardless. A new and potentially more hopeful life in future prosperity has little room for the impact of past sufferings, let alone complicities and guilt.

A similar mode of exposing and containing the experience of loss is structured into the love plot of the comedic travel film. Soon after Kalle has acquired the barrels of carbide he is supposed to bring to Dresden, he is picked up on the road by Karla, who appears out of nowhere on a horse-drawn carriage. She is one of several “love-lusting women,” as one reviewer put it (Lücke, 1964), who appear throughout the film, offering support to the protagonist who needs to overcome numerous obstacles as he moves across the country. Following the fast-paced episodic structure of the film, we soon see Kalle in the house of his new-found friend who, by her own account, lives with her grandfather and her mother. A moment later we shift to the interior space of her bedroom. Captured in a mirror enlarged to fill the frame, we see Kalle and Karla in the background of the bedroom sharing a moment of intimacy. As the protagonists themselves do not look at their own reflections in the mirror, it is notably the spectator of the film who is positioned as a witness looking in. Mirroring effects are conventional cinematic strategies that draw attention to the sliding movement of significations, involving endlessly circumscribed interpretations of subjectivity and the act of cinematic mediation itself (Burnett, 1995:28–31). What appears to be highlighted here, however, in this moment attuned to mediation and projection, is the agency of the viewing subject to choose in the mirror reflection what is important to make sense of in the scene. Set quite literally in an in-between space, a blurred photograph of a male head-shoulder shot attached to the mirror intervenes into the visual field, creating a kind of triologue that operates through a relay of relations between the viewer looking in, the couple being looked at, and the enigmatic photographic image of a man, possibly dressed in a military uniform.

Deaths of Wehrmacht soldiers who fought in Hitler’s war are elusive in this cinematic comedy about the immediate postwar year. While five million German men lost their lives in the Second World War, in Beyer’s film husbands die of heart attacks, brothers are simply not mentioned and fathers succumb to old age. Precisely because Karla never indicates her marital status and the absence of a male partner does not reach a discursive status, it is up to the spectator to endow the faint image, that appears for just a moment, with meaning or to let it slip away. Situated at the vanishing point of vision—not quite in focus, not quite gone—the body of this absent, possible missing or dead other appears “to float in an ethereal universe,” to draw on Burnett’s formulation (1995:29), just out of grasp and thus outside the time-bound configuration of the present it inhabits. At the same time, the contours of the uniform make it appear as if the diffuse image in the liminal surface space of the mirror holds some sort of clue to the spectator’s subjective experience of re-viewing the relations

between the pre-45 past and post-45 present constructed in this scene. This process is open-ended. From the perspective of the 1960s, and the GDR's collective/official mnemonic framework centered on anti-fascist resistance, the viewer twenty years after the end of the war needed to draw from modes of personal, communicative or familial remembering in order to imagine the experiences across a historical rupture presented from within the periphery in the visual field.

But, then, do memories in the present overlay the viewer's vision, or do particular perceptions enable memories of the past? And what is the role played by unnamable, partially shared historical experience in this process of resignification? The last vignette in Beyer's film I would like to discuss here in an effort to outline a conception of peripheral memory—as a space in the narrative and visual margins where remains of the past are reanimated and offered to the spectator—addresses these questions with regard to the sexual abuse of German woman by Russian soldiers at the end of the war. Midway into his journey, Blücher encounters a young girl, who, like most of the displaced characters in the film, appears suddenly on the scene, coming out of a forest and onto the road quite literally from the margins. With her braids, flushed cheeks and a small suitcase in hand, this minor character resembles the archetypal child in a Grimm's fairy tale or a spunky rascal more than a girl who, by her own account, just lost her mother in an air raid of Berlin and whose father died in battle. The scene overwrites any potential feelings of pain and grief related to these war losses with a snappy exchange between Kalle and the girl:

Where are you coming from?

From Berlin.

And where are you going?

To America!

Well to America, it's okay until Magdeburg, but then it stretches.

Underscored by a quick cut between Kalle and the girl, a Russian soldier who offers her food, and a corpulent operetta singer returning from war, whose desiring face could be directed at the girl or the food she is offered, the scene reworks the historical experience of women feeling fearful and vulnerable during the early weeks of Soviet occupation into a comfortable gender tableau.

The subsequent shots, however, begin to gravitate towards incongruent meanings and rifts in this encasement. Following through with the narrative motivations of mishaps and obstacles characteristic of both the comedic genre and the road movie, the three characters—Blücher, the operetta singer/returnee and the girl—get stranded overnight and decide to stay in an abandoned boathouse. What we see next (or, more importantly, do not see) tells us as much about the ways in which the postwar crisis of gender relations was reimagined in the cultural memory of

the 1960s as it signals how precarious these symbolizations really were. Especially when brought into the vicinity of pressures coming from the visual and discursive periphery of normative representations, these fictionalized meanings begin to slide. The gendered codes around which the war orphan is constructed shift between child, precocious girl and young woman. This modulation does not only depend on the respectively different ways in which Kalle and the returnee perceive the girl—Kalle treats her like a child, puts her on the truck like a little girl, covers her with a blanket, whereas the returnee joins her in the boat where she nestles in for the night—the slippery sexualized identifications of the girl also rely on imagined modes of female agency. With much dismay Blücher says to the returnee: “Hey, don’t even think about it,” to which he replies sheepishly: “Pfui, how can you think that way, she is only a child.” But then when we zoom into the intimate interior of the boat, the girl offers herself in a seemingly uncomplicated and light-hearted way as a sexual mate to the feisty returnee: “I’m already seventeen, I only look that young.” Since, at this point, the returnee had already agreed to take her along to the West, the girl’s pass appears to be an expression of her own sexual curiosity rather than a calculated bribe needed for survival. The rest is left to our imagination, but most likely the viewer will conjure up an image of consensual sex between strangers, as it is the main trope around which the film’s historical imaginary stabilizes the postwar gender crisis.

However, just when the associative semantic chain of comfort created by the girl’s casual proposition, the feisty grin of the opera singer and the soundly sleeping Blücher begin to lull the spectator into a fantasy of postwar sexual vitality and ease, the image fades to black and reopens over Kalle, who is awakened by a piercing sound that comes from the off-screen diegetic realm of the film. A female voice shouts “Heeellp!” with such tormented, desperate force that it breaks the comic light-hearted register of the film for just this moment. As we hear the voice but do not see the character, the scream appears to roam free (Chion, 1999:129–131), wavering over the image of Kalle’s startled face. Unlike the other peripheral details I have discussed here so far, the panicked voice of the girl appears powerful enough to retrospectively throw the discourse of “gender bonds” into doubt, even expose it as illusion within that splinter of a second. From Kalle the camera cuts to the lake, where we see the girl struggling for her life and almost drowning. As the shots over the water underscore permeable meanings associated with flow and fluidity, the girl’s scream continues to traverse the unbound visual field. Yet, this scene also anchors the meaning of the scream within the inner diegesis of the film, when it turns out the returnee and the girl had tried to escape in the morning, wanting to leave Kalle Blücher and the cumbersome carbide barrels behind. Precisely for that brief moment, however, when, following the fade to black, the girl’s horrified voice

from outside the frame had not been secured in a knowable narrative structure or visual image, the scene was punctured and associative meanings of sexual violence, fear and death seeped into DEFA's postwar memory production.

What, then, does it mean for us (and the viewer at the time) to listen to this voice coming from the periphery of the film's imaginary and the margins of the cinematic space, here more largely conceived as a space that is both discursive and physical, one where film and spectator, cinema and body encounter one another (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010:4)? The reviews are silent on this. If the blurred photograph in the mirror scene, discussed earlier, "can see forever" (Burnett, 1995:28), then what are the meanings transported by this scream into the present? Up to this point in the story, the viewer could still make sense of it as an unconscious slippage, a persistent residue of historical trauma shooting through the optimistic, albeit more provisional and small-scale, recall of 1945 as a new beginning. But the sequence at the lake, where the girl is in danger of drowning, is followed by a carefully arranged scene that appears to deliberately enable and enact lingering suspicions about the girl's sexual abuse through a space of indeterminacy in the visual periphery. When, following the incident at the lake, Kalle Blücher and the girl spend the night in a bombed-out ruin of a bridge, their platonic relation is secured through the moral integrity and paternalistic attitude of the main protagonist. However, when Blücher, positioned close to her, offers his jacket for her to sleep on, the girl sees something there (underscored by the punctuated music as a moment of *Schreck*) and the spectatorial gaze is directed, for a splinter of a second, towards a gap in the fabric, as the girl's facial expression changes from contentment to fear. She decides to lie down, but in the subsequent shot we see her run away the next morning.

In the context of the film's overall emphasis on the scopic field, we might acknowledge that the scene's representational work lodges a "mnemic implant" or sign into a temporal continuum (Silverman, 1996:4), a sign that is "lit up" when it is perceived and brought into the vicinity of meanings related to sexual abuse in the earlier lake sequence. Similar to the other instances of peripheral "memory" in the film, the space of open-ended meaning cannot be totalized as historical narrative; there is something in the affective response of the girl that eludes the viewer, no matter how often we repeat the re-viewing of the margins in the field of vision. Further out on the edges of perception than the other examples, the sign of sexual anxiety/violence risks being drained of value. However, it is precisely here in this (still noticeable) slippage, I suggest, that a kind of participatory union between the seer and the seen is retrospectively enacted, enabling, if not demanding, the viewer's engagement in the reformulation of memory from the periphery. As Silverman explains, esthetic texts abound with visual and rhetorical images, which even before being psychically worked over, have the properties of highly charged unconscious memories. At the

same time, they are available to conscious scrutiny and interrogation. Implicit here is the possibility for each of us to have

psychic access to what does not “belong” to us—of “remembering” other people’s memories. And through these borrowed memories, we can accede psychically to pains, pleasures and struggles which are far removed not only from our own, but from what normative representation validates, as well (Silverman, 1996:4).

We cannot know for sure if contemporary viewers of the 1960s, from the perspective of their various contingent positions and subjectivities, would have recognized the historical specificity of the girl’s anxious gaze performed in this scene. And if they did, would they have related this charged sign associating a woman’s sexual anxiety with postwar devastation to the memory of another, to their own memory, or, in some way, to the echo of collective experiences transmitted through communicative remembering of story telling, but not legible in official discourse? Moreover, would the audience have been struck by the various substitutions taking place in this sequence, where an underlying anxiety of sexual abuse was notably dissociated from any complicity of the Russian occupying forces who play a central, albeit not entirely normative, role in the film?

Representational traces in the cultural archive of East Germany show that the experiences of impaired sexual relations between men and women in the immediate postwar years, as well as allusions to the mass rape committed by Russian soldiers at the end of the war, were passed on (Heineman, 1999; Naimark, 1995), if incompletely, in the literary and cinematic imagination, including Konrad Wolf’s *I was 19* (1965) and Christa Wolf’s novel *Patterns of Childhood* (1976:518). In her discussion of the suppressed cultural discourse on rape of German women by Russian soldiers, Birgit Dahlke suggests that this silencing (*Tabuisierung*) was not only because such discourse would not correspond to the official image of the brother country, but also due to the lingering existence of disgust in regard to the violated female body, which signified the injury and defeat of men (2000:293). If the early DEFA film *Street Acquaintances* (Peter Pewas, 1948) in the 1940s acknowledged the female body suffering from venereal disease, in the film of the 1960s it is a disembodied voice heard only for a second through which the traumatic echoes of sexual violations break through in the margins of the visual field. This shift troubles the postwar imagination in the present, raising questions about vision and knowledge in the production of memory itself, and inciting the daring viewer and listener to take up and perpetually reformulate this resonant perception.

Beyer’s comedic road movie itself opts for an ending with more closure, albeit one that still resists the more politicized narrative of anti-fascist reconstruction. Following the reconciliatory impulse of comedy (Loewy, 2003:42) and the conventions of travel narratives as a search for home (Böttcher, 2013:337), Blücher returns with his

minimal cargo of carbide to the starting point of his journey, the factory in Dresden. In a move that undermines the official trope of the exemplary anti-fascist male citizen jump-starting postwar society one more time, Blücher decides to leave the factory and instead joins Karla, the woman he had met on the road and who is now pregnant, in order to build a new family life.

Conclusion

War-related losses and the mass death of Germans, let alone the destruction of the European Jews, are mostly absent in this light-hearted satirical rendition of the “year 1945.” This is not surprising in itself, given the ambivalent place of German deaths in the official anti-fascist memory discourse (Margalit, 2010) and the generic conventions that frame the cultural memory produced in this film as a site of enjoyment and popular entertainment. But comedy, of course, can and has been deployed for serious subject matters, including tropes of historical violence. We have been able to observe the relative flexibility of the generic form in the peripheral spaces of both the narrative structure and particularly the field of vision in Beyer’s film. Rather than applying a normative approach to East German DEFA productions, the traces and echoes of losses in the margins show how the public medium of film, even under the conditions of circumscribed cultural politics, participated in reshaping a contingent cultural postwar memory. Here the film’s dramaturgy of the periphery—as an animation of past experience through a self-reflexive focus on operations of seeing/gazing—lets us apprehend most effectively how cultural memory constitutes itself in the continual interplay of fiction, elision and recall. More importantly, we may also learn to appreciate that the erosion of loss itself might be necessary in order to start over (Augé, 2004:viii–ix).

The attempt to grant a film an apprehending eye, ear or even a motivated silence can become an opportunity to re-dream narrative and structural potentialities. Since people are uniquely capable of initiatives that may interrupt a chain of events set in motion, new beginnings cannot be ruled out even when society seems locked in stagnation or set on a seemingly inexorable course (Arendt, 1998:vii). Media spectacles do not freeze viewers in positions that they cannot control or change. In fact, Burnett reminds us:

[N]otions of spectator and spectacle need to be recast as instances of oscillation between the control implicit in acts of seeing and the parallel loss of control in every act of watching. This simultaneity of power and loss creates the possibility of openings for the imaginary (1995:6).

For the shaping of cinematic, cultural memory, what is perceived to be on screen is as important as what is left out or only hovering at the perimeter. Beyer insists on the

capacity of cinema to mobilize the periphery as a site where spectatorial participation in the workings of memory itself allows for a re-beginning. The film self-reflexively comments on this selective strategy or is at least aware of it and, in an act of giving, passes it on to the viewers' attention.

Since the comedic film interprets the immediate postwar past through a decidedly presentist lens, the visual scaffolding of each episode in Blücher's journey, selected for an analysis of peripheral perception here, reminds the spectator that, as Astrid Erll puts it,

[M]emories are small islands in a sea of forgetting. In processing our experience of reality, forgetting is the rule and remembering the exception. Indeed, the functions of forgetting within cognitive and social systems are at least as important as those of remembering.... However, in the end, the phenomenon of forgetting is every bit as unobservable as is memory. As an object of research it only comes into view via the observation of remembering—by considering its peculiarities, mistakes and changes... (2011:9).

Rather than focusing on what has been repressed in official memory or what traumatically haunts (and could thus be revealed through symptomatic readings), Beyer's postwar comedy at the "edge of catastrophe" shows that thinking through conceptions of the periphery in memory work also allows insights into the role of forgetting as a protective, even productive and reparative force. Beyer's comic film reminds us memory and oblivion stand together; both are necessary for the full use of time. The film pleads against "the haughty melancholy of positions stopped in their tracks, and for the active engagement of the mind," encouraging those "who intend to struggle against the hardening of the imagination (it threatens all of us) to not forget to forget in order to lose neither memory nor curiosity. Oblivion brings us back to the present..." (Augé, 2004:89). Seen in this light, peripheral memory holds open the space for the spectator to re-view and decide what should drift away and what needs to be pulled in more fully into the present consciousness in order to envision the past as a vantage point for a more livable future.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Renate Göthe at the Pressedokumentations of the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen Konrad Wolf, Potsdam-Babelsberg, for her assistance in obtaining the review articles of the film.
- 2 I'm following Elsaesser's and Wedel's conception of films, presupposing a cinematic

space that is both physical and discursive, one where film and spectator, cinema and body encounter one another. This includes the architectural arrangement of the spectatorial space, a temporal ordering of performances, a specific social framing of the visit to the movie theater, the sensory envelope of sound and other perceptual stimuli, the imaginary construction of filmic space through *mis-en-scène*, montage and narration, as well as the communication of bodies, settings and objects within the film with each other and with the spectator (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010:4).

- 3 When, for fear of trivializing, cultural critics at the time reminded Beyer that a comedy with tragic accents might have been the more appropriate choice for a story set in Germany at year zero, Beyer replied that he viewed the separation between comedy and the supposedly more shallow genre of the *Lustspiel*, or even *Volksstueck*, with its orientation to broader audience appeal, to be untenable (Richter, 1994:174–175).
- 4 According to “Jugendscheid” No. 33 662 of March 17, 1965, in the West, the film was released for viewers aged 12 and up.
- 5 James Chandler defines sympathy as a component “which connects one sensorium with another by enabling us to face one another, adopt one another’s point of view” (2013: xvii).
- 6 The writer Gerhart Hauptmann, for example, wrote after the air raid of Dresden on February 17–18, 1945: “Wer das Weinen verlernt hat, der lernt es wieder beim Untergang von Dresden” [“He who has forgotten how to cry learns it again at the ruin of Dresden”] (Naumann, 1998:43).
- 7 Geschonneck himself was imprisoned during the Third Reich. He played a working-class Communist associated with Weimar in Konrad Wolf’s *Sun Seeker* (1958) and a Communist leading the anti-fascist resistance in Buchenwald in Beyer’s *Naked among Wolves* (1963).

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