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A slightly revised version of this text was published as:

“Memories of World War II in German Film after 1945”, in: *The Long Aftermath: Cultural Legacies of Europe at War, 1936-2016*, eds. Manuel Braganca and Peter Tame. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015, pp. 200-218. (<http://www.berghahnbooks.com/title.php?rowtag=BragancaLong>)

Memories of World War II in German Film after 1945

Christiane Schönfeld

‘The war will bring out only the worst in us.’
Friedhelm in *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* (2013)¹

Much has been written about the German people’s struggle to come to terms with their past or ‘*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*’, from Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s book on the Germans’ collective inability to mourn – *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (1967) – to Aleida Assmann’s numerous intriguing analyses of memory culture, physical inscriptions of traumatic memory and the inability to express them (Assmann 1999, 2006), to Reinhard Koselleck’s formulation of negative memory (‘negatives Gedächtnis’) that commemorates crimes against humanity committed by Germans as separate or secondary memory, with the aim of triggering memories of personal experience and guilt for the purposes of re-education, humanisation and democratisation (2002: 21–32). These discourses contextualise the focus of this chapter, namely representations and memories of World War II in films produced in Germany during the immediate and the prolonged aftermath of the war. These representations of war and personal war memories on film draw on the culture of collective German memory over the past seven decades.

In her recent book *Spectres of War: Hollywood's Engagement with Military Conflict*, Elisabeth Bronfen refers to the function of cinema in the US American context 'as a privileged site of recollection', where 'traumatic traces of [a] historical past' are renegotiated, 'reconceiving current social and political concerns in the light of previous military conflict' (Bronfen 2012: 4). German cinema after the end of World War II also visualised 'the past according to the needs of the present', as Bronfen puts it, but cinematic contemplations in Germany hinged for many years on the ability and willingness of viewers to remember the past and to look into the graves of the dead and into the grave of an era, as [the](#) renowned writer Ernst Wiechert told young Germans in his famous speech to German youth in November 1945 (Wiechert 1945: 31–32).

However, as [the](#) journalist Ambros Waibel recently reminded readers of the Berlin newspaper *Tageszeitung (TAZ)*, the majority of Germans did not wish to deal with the Nazi regime, war or the Holocaust, and chose to camouflage and cover up their past. Reiterating what Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich and others had been stating from the 1960s onwards, Ambros Waibel maintained [ed](#) that the processing of Germany's history after 1945 consisted mostly of 'waiting, stalling and delaying' (Waibel 2013). While this became indeed a popular strategy among the surviving German population, occupying Allied military forces in Germany declared re-education as one of the primary goals of all four Allied powers at the Potsdam conference in early August 1945, and film became pivotal for the task of remembering the past and defining the nation of the future for defeated Germans during the immediate post-war years. For a short period only, the recent war became an ambivalent symbol of a past no-one had as yet [had](#) the chance to forget and a (negative) memory that needed to be kept alive in order for re-education to take root.

Even before World War II had officially ended, the psychological warfare branches and documentary film units of the occupying Allied military forces produced numerous documentaries for German audiences that engaged with both the past and the future in a principally didactic way, which is also true for many fiction films of that period (Fay 2008; Goldstein 2009; Kappelhoff, [Gross and Ilger](#) 2010). Fiction films screened in post-war cinemas from 1946 onwards were intended to entertain, but, as licensing documentation held at the US National Archive² clearly indicates, they were also meant to encourage the German public to engage with the military aggression of their past, reflect on their identity and value system, and gain hope for the possibility of a (better) future.

Occupying military forces faced numerous challenges in the context of film production during the immediate aftermath of World War II, from a film industry that was largely destroyed (by Nazi ideology as much as bombing raids) to the German people's unwillingness to take collective responsibility for the consequences of Hitler's reign, to countless problems in relation to the basic requirements for life in post-war Germany that were much more pressing than re-education and film production. Even two years after the end of World War II, Fritz Kortner, the former star actor on the stage and screen of the Weimar era, who returned to Germany after fourteen years in exile in order to support [the](#) former UFA producer Erich Pommer in the cultural reconstruction of Germany, called Berlin a 'Hungerhölle' (Kortner 1976: 458), a hellhole of hunger, destruction and despair.³

There was no question, however, about the potential benefit of cinema during this period of grave instability and devastation. According to documents held in the US National Archive and Records Administration, a memo from the Office of War Information in London sent on 27 March 1945 recommended the use of cinema in defeated Germany, as it would serve to 'keep ...

the Germans off the streets'. Furthermore, and perhaps surprisingly, the memo refers to Josef Goebbels, who had understood film as 'a first-rate medium of political guidance and education', and recommends the use of feature films as a way of effectively distributing serious reorientation material: 'feature films will serve also as a form of entertainment which will have the people present when more serious information material is to be given to them' (NARA, RG 260).

The Office of [the Military Government of the United States](#) in Germany ([OMGUS](#)), estimated in May 1945 [that](#) around [nine hundred](#) cinemas in Germany were either still in working condition or could be repaired within less than six months ([NARA, RG 260](#)). Within a few weeks after the end of the war, allied military governments initiated a reorientation and re-education process in accordance with the Joint Chiefs of Staff directive (JCS 1067) that was to encourage Germans to recognise the crimes committed during the Hitler regime and to clarify to German audiences the connection between the destruction caused by Germans during World War II and the destruction of German cities and the hardship faced by Germans during this post-war period.

Film production after World War II began with documentary cinema, both *Aufklärungsfilme* [educational films] and educational documentaries made by the first film-production company in the Soviet zone of occupation, [DEFA \(Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft\)](#), and US American/Bizone re-education films.⁴ The focus of documentary film produced in occupied zones during this early post-war period was not on the (military) conflict itself but on the atrocities that had been committed in concentration camps and on the accountability of the German people. Films such as the OMGUS film *Die Todesmühlen* [Death Mills] (1945, dir. H. Burger/B. Wilder) or the Soviet-licensed, forty-minute DEFA documentary *Todeslager Sachsenhausen* [Death Camp Sachsenhausen] (1946), produced under the direction

of Richard Brandt, however, regularly encountered resistance and members of the audience who closed their eyes or turned their heads away from the screen in order to avoid seeing what some considered mere propaganda. The short DEFA documentary about the Nuremberg trials *Vergeßt es nie – schuld sind sie!* [Don't Forget – They Are the Guilty Ones!] (1946, dir. Richard Brandt) 'stunned' cinema audiences (reaction reports, NARA, RG_260), but the film was also taken by many Germans as a verdict that guilt had now been assigned, separating the perpetrators and the German public by more than the cinema screen.

An attempt to counter the 'process of selective remembering and forgetting' (Cooke and Silberman 2010: 2) was a short feature produced by OMGUS' documentary film unit named *Der bleiche Reiter* [The Pale Horseman] (1947), reminding cinema audiences of World War II and its consequences for the surviving population in Europe and Asia. According to the Information Control Division's report on audience reactions for 1947, the images of the plight of millions, their 'unbearable conditions in the ruins of their destroyed cities' and their suffering from 'numerous infectious diseases' affected audiences as the representation of present suffering was correlated clearly to Germany's military aggression of the recent past: 'As the audience were told that all the misery and sorrows were a result of the last world war initiated by Germans, the spectators became quite aroused and excited.' However, it was not the shock of images of current suffering but resistance to war memory that was reflected in the questionnaires that followed the screenings. A common reaction among audiences at the screening of *The Pale Horseman* was: 'why dig up the past again and again and not see the wants and needs of to-day [sic]? Such anti-German propaganda films are certainly not a bridge for future good will and understanding among nations. By attending movies we wish to ease and relieve ourselves from the daily worries, sorrows and hardships' (NARA, RG 260).

Despite countless re-education efforts (such as exhibitions, debates, film screenings and publications, to name but a few) by the Allied forces, as well as by German intellectuals such as the aforementioned Ernst Wiechert or the psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers (*Die Schuldfrage* [The Question of Guilt], 1946/47) – who encouraged Germans to engage critically with the recent past in an effort to negotiate the disorientation that marked this period (Cooke and Silberman 2010: 2; [Hahn 1997](#)) – public opinion and perceived Cold War requirements soon led to a change in re-education practices. Within twenty-four months after the capitulation of Germany, German audiences were rarely reminded of their responsibility for the suffering and deaths of millions, and documentaries, along with Allied re-education programmes in all sectors, focused instead on practical issues, democracy and successful reconstruction. The memory of the war and the atrocities of the recent past were no longer useful to Allied military governments in the context of the Cold War and the ‘iron curtain’ that had descended on Germany. Silencing the memories of war became a community-sustaining mechanism, both for the individual and the state. Western and Soviet Allies aimed at control and consolidation in each zone of occupation and, when the two German states were created in 1949, both Konrad Adenauer and Walter Ulbricht required stability for the two young German republics to flourish.

Only one more documentary film produced prior to the establishment of the two German states explicitly reminded audiences of the recent war in the context of choices that can and ought to be made. A fifteen-minute documentary entitled *Es liegt an Dir* [It’s Up to You], directed by Wolfgang Kiepenheuer and produced under the supervision of Stuart Schulberg (OMGUS’ documentary film unit) in 1948 was one of the first American-German re-educational collaborations, and juxtaposed clichéd images of Germans as hard-working and peace-loving in idyllic rural landscapes with, in contrast, representations of war, reviving memory of both world

wars of the recent past. The German people's failure to reflect critically on their militarism and nationalism is as much a topic of the short film as the horrific consequences of war for society; the choice was – as the title indicates – theirs. The film's clear-cut logic is reflected in Kiepenheuer and Schulberg's simple but effective editing of material taken from Wilfried Basse's *Deutschland – zwischen gestern und heute* [Germany – between Yesterday and Today, 1932–1934], documentary footage of the 1940s and *Welt im Film* newsreels (1947) which repeatedly contrasted images of war and peace, dictatorship and democracy. Children running towards a shelter during an air raid, for example, are juxtaposed with kids crossing the road in safety on their way to school, all of which makes the choice between destruction and construction, bombings and Sunday dances, ruins and green pastures all too clear. OMGUS' peacetime propaganda effort is openly displayed in this film, which does not conclude with a declaration of collective guilt, but rather with a new chapter of a book on Germany's history that has yet to be written. The pages of this book are still blank; they will have to be filled with the German people's choices, made according to their common vision for the future. Audience reaction reports put together by OMGUS after the screenings of the film indicate that the majority seemed content with the message of the film and felt it to be conveyed effectively, even though 40 per cent rejected re-education films in general, and images of past military heroes were still perceived positively by many, despite the fact that documentary film-makers had unambiguously placed them in a critical context (NARA, RG 260).

Cinematic representations of the war in fiction films of the immediate post-war era were kept to a minimum, in part owing to censorship by the Allied military governments who were not interested in licensing and supporting film projects that focused on controversial aspects regarding the recent war which could potentially cause conflict between occupiers and citizens or

any kind of social unrest. Apart from the symbolic presence of rubble in so-called *Trümmerfilm* [rubble films], the memory of the recent war was only occasionally and briefly represented on German cinema screens, usually by way of flashbacks, such as in Wolfgang Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns* [Murderers among Us] (1946), Helmut Käutner's *In jenen Tagen* [In Those Days/Seven Journeys] (1947) or Wolfgang Liebeneiner's *Liebe 47* [Love 47] (1948/49). Nevertheless, the war experience was the basis and context of film produced by Germans and licensed by the Allied military governments at the time. The focus, however, was on the consequences of the recent war and the crisis of the individual. 'Rubble films' reflect 'a common preoccupation with issues of individual and collective guilt' (Carter 2000: 92), as Erica Carter argues, while nevertheless providing moral guidance and hope for the future.

Otto Lukas (played by Gustav Fröhlich, who also directed the film) in *Wege im Zwielficht* [Paths in Twilight] (1948) refuses to differentiate altogether between individual/collective guilt and innocence. He echoes an attitude shared by the majority of Germans at the time when he asks: 'What would that achieve? ... We need to start afresh. All of us! Those who don't will never move on ...!' (see also Greffrath 1995: 201f.) Forgetting becomes a necessary survival strategy, emphasised by a number of 'rubble films', implying that the task of coming to terms with the horror and guilt of the past is never-ending. Those who are unable to forget the past might perish like Georg in Rolf Meyer's *Zugvögel* [Birds of Passage] (1947), who – deeply traumatised by his experiences during the war – no longer believes in the possibility of love and normality, ending his life in suicide. The former *Wehrmacht* soldiers, Mertens in *Die Mörder sind unter uns* and Beckmann in *Liebe 47*, are equally traumatised and suicidal, but they are saved by loving, nurturing women (Carter 2000: 91–112). War, devastation and death were ever-present in 'rubble films', even though death and destruction are rarely the focus of these films

(Wilms 2008: 27). At the same time, however, destroyed German cities feature as *décor* for cinematic narratives that are usually based on aspects of the physical and psychological destruction caused by World War II. The focus of these films shifts from war and devastation to ‘a new humanism coming from the shared experience of living in the rubble’ (Wilms 2008: 27).⁵ ‘Rubble films’ are indeed ‘exercises in the management of shattered identity’ (Rentschler 2010: 419), and can be read as signifiers of the experience of war, as signs of the grief and suffering experienced or caused. Anke Pinkert rightly emphasises this aspect of ‘rubble films’, which is often overlooked: they are ‘an indispensable cultural archive including a range of mutable, affective and representational responses to historical loss and trauma’ (Pinkert 2008: 74).

A number of scholars have in the recent past distanced themselves from the cliché of the deafening silence of the early post-war era regarding the Germans’ Nazi past, including the devastating war that was set in motion by its ultra-nationalist, anti-Semitic government (Moeller 2001a and 2001b; Olick 2005: 5; Hake 2008: 86f.). There is no doubt that both cultural representations and media discourses of this period and well into the 1950s entailed silences and avoided reminders of a past that was both reprehensible and painful. However, as Robert R. Shandley wrote in 2001, the Third Reich is always, directly or indirectly, part of the storyline of feature films produced and licensed under Allied military control, and World War II is the visible or invisible backdrop to these stories (Shandley 2001: 4). It is in this context that ‘rubble films’ provide insight into post-war German audiences’ mnemonic desires (Smith and Margalit 1997; Assmann and Frevert 1999; Meier 2010) and should be read, as Anke Pinkert suggests, as ‘post-traumatic depictions of an overwhelming numbness’ (2008: 74). It is due to Germans’ ambivalence towards their shameful past that ‘rubble films’ both acknowledge and at the same time conceal the past, giving clear preference to an emotive rather than a re-educational message.

And while ‘rubble films’ were usually rather unpopular at the box_office, they ‘played an important role in the formation of a collective attitude toward the past, one that shaped many public debates in Germany in the decades thereafter’, as Shandley put it (2001: 4). Taking up this point, Anke Pinkert focuses on the challenges faced by filmmakers in the Soviet zone of occupation at a ‘time when death in war suffused the public sphere in postwar Germany, yet no workable articulations and commemorative practices were available to stabilize this experience’. She praises especially early DEFA films such as *Die Mörder sind unter uns* and Gerhard Lamprecht’s *Irgendwo in Berlin* [Somewhere in Berlin] (1946), because they contributed to the German audiences’ ability to associate war experiences and affective responses with traumatic loss, and paved the way for further ‘transformative post-war and increasingly antifascist narratives’ (Pinkert 2008: 64).

Films of the immediate post-war period all use the symbolic capacity of ‘rubble’, which represents the material destruction of German cities and towns, but also reflects the moral self-mutilation and human waste: physically and psychologically scarred and damaged individuals such as Dr Mertens (Wilhelm Borchert) in *Die Mörder sind unter uns* or Georg (Carl Raddatz) in Rolf Meyer’s *Zugvögel* (Studio 45/Berlin [West], 1947) are at the centre of narratives in ‘rubble film’, marking the time’s crisis of masculinity and nationhood. The focus, however, from 1947/48 onwards is on the ‘simple human stories’ (NARA, RG 260) promoted by the Allies especially in the Bizone. These stories centre on renewal and human decency, highlighting the educational politics of the American and British Allied forces. Films such as Käutner’s *In jenen Tagen*, Harald Braun’s *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen* [Between Yesterday and Tomorrow] (1948) and Josef von Baky’s *Und über uns der Himmel* [And above Us the Sky] (1947) and *Der Ruf* [The Last Illusion] (1949) focus clearly on the individual’s choice with regard to moral

behaviour, representing courage and humanitarian deeds in times of crisis and the obligation of the individual towards the other, while conveniently avoiding any clear reference to the real humanitarian disaster, namely the Holocaust (Schönfeld 2013).

Audiences, however, did not react as favourably to ‘rubble films’ as filmmakers and Allied military authorities had hoped, and Helmut Käutner openly criticised his fellow Germans’ resistance to films that attempted to deal with the painful memory of the recent past. Käutner, who directed numerous successful features during the Third Reich and his first ‘rubble film’ in 1947 (*In jenen Tagen*), insists in his essay ‘Demontage der Traumfabrik’ [Dismantling the Dream Factory] that film today must represent and reflect on the ‘German past, the German present and the German future’. Others, however, like Gerhard Grindel in his article entitled ‘Kurbel ohne Antrieb’ in the British-licensed *Der Abend* (Berlin) in 1947, lamented the creative corset put on fiction film production in the American and British sectors owing to its demand for a specific educational (and moral) message. Gustav Zimmermann of the ‘Akademisches Forum’ published a response to Käutner’s ‘Traumfabrik’ essay in the newsletter of the Landesverband Hessischer Filmtheater, in which he stated that the mere fact that they, as survivors of the war, had been living in the rubble of their formerly beautiful cities was sufficiently educational. He writes:

I am convinced that the majority of our people have recognized the horror of war via their own personal experience; the surviving generations will therefore hate war and know who is to blame for it. We therefore don’t need constant reminders of the all-too-obvious facts on cinema screens. ... Films should provide joy – our young people deserve to laugh – and dreams, helping to escape the ruins of the everyday. (NARA, RG 260)

He praises films like *Die Mörder sind unter uns* and *In jenen Tagen*, but encourages contemporary German cinema to provide entertainment and cater for the escapist desires of an audience trying to recover from the war.

By 1948, the majority of Germans had accepted their share of a collective (at least political) responsibility for World War II and its horrific consequences, of which most were reminded daily by the absence of a loved one or of the security of a familiar home. But their acceptance of guilt was a deeply private and usually silent matter, and potential audiences were reluctant to spend time and money on films that reminded them of both their horrific past and [the](#) arduous present. Foreign films or Nazi-produced feature films that the Allies considered sufficiently light-hearted and apolitical were re-released, and were significantly more successful in German cinemas than German features produced during the immediate post-war era.

As scholars such as Bettina Greffrath [\(1995\)](#), Sabine Hake [\(2008\)](#), Peter Reichel [\(2004\)](#), Erica Carter [\(2000\)](#) and others have pointed out, the memory of the war in ‘rubble films’ was respectfully veiled in cinematic narratives that allowed glimpses of war, rubble and Nazi crimes, but focused first and foremost on survival and hope for the future. Images of the war are rare in these early post-war films, and usually the camera–subject distance, i.e. the field size, is quite large, thereby reducing the affective power of each shot. Even though the consequences of war and the Hitler era, such as the individual’s psychological and physical scars, might be at the centre of the narrative, the war itself is never seen close-up. The position of the camera and the camera–subject distance have a significant impact on both the narrative and the emotional involvement of the audience. When the traumatic memory of a main character is presented in long- or medium-shot flashbacks, it might still serve as a trigger for personal memory among the audience, but the impact is deliberately reduced. ‘Rubble films’ here set the tone for cinematic

engagement with World War II memory, and isolated and vague representations of war remained the cinematic convention for the next couple of decades.

In the 1950s, the majority of West Germans were busy experiencing and enjoying the country's economic miracle, and reminders of the horrors of the Nazi past were decidedly unwelcome. Germany had been retreating into idyllic landscapes of wealth and security economically, and, to a significant degree, timeless idyllic imagery culturally. [The year](#) 1950, [with the release of](#) the hugely successful *Schwarzwaldmädel* [Black Forest Girl] (dir. Hans Deppe), signifies the rebirth of the 'Heimat' trope (Silberman 1995: 115), idyllic landscapes and cheerful 'boy meets girl' narratives that entice and reflect the audience's longing for completeness and harmony, a utopia never attained (nor attainable) and seemingly lost forever. The astonishing box-office success of Deppe's film had an impact on many of the strategic decisions being made in post-1950 German mainstream popular film. In literature, authors such as Nelly Sachs, Paul Celan, Anna Seghers, Heinrich Böll, Wolfgang Koeppen, Alfred Andersch, Günter Grass and other members of the Gruppe 47 did their best to write against the art of forgetting practised by so many Germans.⁶ However, the shallow collective oblivion mirrored in German visual art of the 1950s was, as David Lowenthal [describes](#), for the most part 'deliberate, purposeful and regulated'. Of course, the war and the horrors of the Nazi era were not truly forgotten, and therein lies 'the *art* of forgetting – art as opposed to ailment, choice rather than compulsion or obligation' (Lowenthal 1999: xi, [italics in original](#)).

It was arguably the remilitarisation of West Germany, which both the USA and [the](#) German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer considered vital for a stable and capitalist Western Europe and an effective defence parameter against the Communist East, that triggered countless discussions in the public sphere and in turn impacted on the commemoration of World War II in

German cinema. In the early 1950s, an increasing number of US American war films were released in West German cinemas, and in 1954, three German war films were premiered: Alfred Wiedemann's *Canaris*, Helmut Käutner's *Die letzte Brücke* [The Last Bridge] and the first part of Paul May's hugely popular trilogy *08/15*, the story of Private Asch, his military training and experiences during the war, which contains critical undertones but highlights the presence and the ethical possibility of the 'clean' *Wehrmacht* soldier and remains generally light-hearted. Further notable war films of the 1950s are Helmut Käutner's adaptation of Carl Zuckmayer's play *Des Teufels General* [The Devil's General] (1955), G.W. Pabst's and Falk Harnack's Stauffenberg Resistance dramas *Es geschah am 20. Juli* [It Happened on July 20] and *Der 20. Juli* [The Plot to Assassinate Hitler], both released in 1955 (see Clarke 2010: 38ff.), Alfred Wiedemann's *Stern von Afrika* [Star of Africa] (1957), Frank Wisbar's *Haie und kleine Fische* [Sharks and Small Fish] (1958) and Wisbar's Stalingrad drama *Hunde, wollt ihr ewig leben?* [Dogs, Do You Want to Live Forever?] (1959), all reassessing the function of the German soldier (Carter 2007: 195–222; Clarke 2010: 36–55; Kapczynski 2010: 17–35) and reaffirming decency as a moral possibility even during World War II.

Only Bernhard Wicki's *Die Brücke* [The Bridge] (1959),⁷ based on a novel by Manfred Gregor (alias Gregor Dorfmeister), can be considered an anti-war film that unmistakably conveys war as a moral and human tragedy, as insanity, horror and injustice. It is the story of seven boys who are ordered to defend a bridge in a small German town against the approaching American troops during the final days of World War II, and who die, one by one, until only one boy, who is barely sixteen years old, is left. Both the book and the film engage with the subliminal aspect of war, but Wicki's film focuses clearly on the disintegration of children, men and humanity during battle. The last twenty-five minutes of the film are devoted entirely to the

boys' fear and pain, their wounds, their violence and their deaths. By clarifying the structure of the sequentially unfolding film narrative, Wicki creates a radical shift from life to death, from animate to inanimate, from joy and laughter to sheer horror and unbearable screams of pain. Audiences witness close-ups as these boys disintegrate, as they begin to weep and wail, to whimper and to soil themselves. Wicki turns away from the light and rosy future of a booming West Germany to enter the darkness of the past by telling a story of a lost generation of boys struggling for manhood while Germany was crumbling around them. Not surprisingly, this was not a topic in line with the popular culture of the 1950s – it took Manfred Gregor four years to find a publisher for his manuscript, and several directors rejected the idea of using it as a film script, until Bernhard Wicki decided to produce a powerful film narrative of human suffering and destruction, in an attempt to capture a glimpse of the essence of any war experience.

Wicki emphasises the anti-war narrative, devoid of heroism, by signifying privileged moments of suffering and death by way of a pause or suspension of movement, which stands in sharp contrast to both the frantic movement of battle and the hurried retreat from the front line. His work can be seen as *Trauerarbeit* – work of mourning or grieving – a term introduced by Sigmund Freud in his text *Trauer und Melancholie* [Grief and Melancholia] ([1917](#)) and taken up in 1967 by Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich in their aforementioned bestselling study on the German people's inability to mourn the heinous crimes committed in the name of National Socialism. Germany's cinematic retreat into idyllic *Heimat* settings is typical of post-traumatic behaviour as defined by Freud. Grieving is first of all introspective, absorbing the individual's ability to engage with the outside world. However excessive the traumatic experiences of the Nazi era might have been, almost one and a half decades later, Wicki's images involved German audiences emotionally and forced them to look at and acknowledge the damage that the war

caused Germany. His message was clear: this is what happens when anti-Semitic, racist brutes are voted into office. This is what war does.

When Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem was broadcast on German radio and television in 1961, following the earlier, equally highly mediatised *Einsatzgruppenprozess* in Ulm in 1958, the voices of survivors of the Holocaust telling their stories as witnesses during the trial carried the suffering of millions into German kitchens and living rooms, unravelling the forced silence kept in many homes. Discussions of the war and the Holocaust were called for, and questions were being asked, especially by the younger generation, leading to the 'Phase der Vergangenheitsbewältigung', as Norbert Frei called the 1960s and 1970s (Frei 2005: 26): this 'phase of the struggle to come to terms with the past' is only now drawing to a close because the generation of those actively involved in World War II is disappearing. The struggle to find a language with which to commemorate World War II in German cinema and on television screens, however, is ongoing. Despite the development of a critical and discursive memorial culture especially in public spaces, Germans clearly prefer to process this difficult chapter of their history in the comfort and privacy of their living rooms. From 1960 onwards, documentary films became once again the private focus of millions of television viewers in their struggle to come to terms with their nation's past. In 1960/61, a [14-part](#) series critically documenting the twelve years of Hitler's reign in Germany, entitled *Das Dritte Reich* [The Third Reich], was screened on the German public television channel ARD, causing extensive discussions often focusing on the memory of war and reflecting a growing sense of responsibility among the German public for the crimes committed by Germans during the Nazi era. In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the journalist Guido Knopp produced highly successful World War II documentaries for television such as *Die Saat des Krieges – Hitlers Angriff auf Europa* [The

Seed of War – Hitler’s Attack on Europe] (with Harald Schott, 1989) and a six-part series on *Der verdammte Krieg* [The Damned War] (prod. with Harald Schott, Valerij Korsin and Anatolij Nikiforow, 1991), followed by another five parts focusing on the war at Stalingrad (in 1993). While his films would regularly attract three to four million viewers, Knopp’s documentary *Hitler – Eine Bilanz* (1995) and, especially, his two *Hitlers Helfer* films [Hitler’s Helpers] (1996) were screened at primetime and reached almost seven million viewers in Germany and Austria (Knopp 1999). Equally important, and not to be underestimated in terms of its overall impact on German public life and memory culture, was the broadcasting of imported reflection on German wartime crimes such as the screening, on public television, of the US-produced mini-series *Holocaust*, in West Germany in 1979.

This is not to say that German feature films focusing on war memory – from R.W. Fassbinder’s *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* [The Marriage of Maria Braun] (1979), Volker Schlöndorff’s adaptation of Günter Grass’ novel *Die Blechtrommel* [Tin Drum] (1979) or Wolfgang Petersen’s *Das Boot* (1981) to Bernd Eichinger and Oliver Hirschbiegel’s film about the final days of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany *Der Untergang* [Downfall] (2004) or Marc Rothemund’s film *Sophie Scholl – The Final Days* (2005) – were not successful, but they were hardly box-office hits. At the same time, however, Germans became excellent at exporting their struggle to come to terms with the Nazi past (Waibel 2013), and were increasingly rewarded for it: of the numerous nominations for Academy Awards and Golden Globe awards, all but three German films nominated for best foreign film Oscars between 1957 and 2007 dealt with Germany’s Nazi past, the war and the Holocaust.

The depiction of Adolf Hitler in *Der Untergang* caused extensive public debates in the German media in 2004, reflecting Germans’ uneasiness regarding cinematic representations of

the person identified with the horror and destruction of World War II and the Holocaust, especially if seen as a frail and unstable human being. These debates regarding the memory and representation of Germany's Nazi past once again gained momentum, when the three-part television mini-series *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* [lit. Our Mothers, Our Fathers/Generation War] premiered on German public television in March 2013. This time, however, numerous articles in local and national newspapers applauded the series' 'realistic' representation of World War II, its willingness to engage 'truthfully' with the German past, proclaiming it to be a cultural representation of World War II which not only breaks with established German *Gedächtniskultur*, or memory culture, but offers a new language for memory discourses on Germany's most destructive military campaigns of the twentieth century (Fuhr 2013; Schulz 2013, et al.). This was an astonishing response to a television series on World War II, a topic that had been presenting Germans with difficulties regarding its meaning and possible commemoration since Germany's capitulation in May 1945. Choosing clear-cut vocabulary for a topic imbued with ambiguity, the series was advertised by the public television channel ZDF and the series' producer, Nico Hofmann, within the context of Germans' war memory, labelling the production as a response to the pain, guilt and silence of the past sixty-eight years and an active engagement with the collective trauma of World War II in German society and family histories up to the present day. Eckhard Fuhr, in the conservative *Die Welt* newspaper, emphasised the novelty in this particular representation of war, in both the script written by Stefan Kolditz and the direction of Philipp Kadelbach, which in his view dramatically challenged the memory culture regarding World War II in Germany, calling the series an 'epochal' event that offered a radically direct and painfully realistic view of World War II through the eyes of five young Germans. While his assessment of the 'realism' in the series seems exaggerated, the reaction of

Fuhr and millions of German viewers indicates indeed a change in Germans' engagement with war memory, now that the generation that lived through World War II is disappearing. The series generated huge interest with over seven million viewers and an ongoing discussion in the press, with more unfavourable reviews (Hammelehle 2013 and others) following the initial enthusiasm, which criticised the noise and superficiality of a representation of World War II that avoids clear moral judgements and casually inverts the victim-perpetrator dynamic.

The series, which tells the stories of five friends, begins on the day prior to Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 and ends in Berlin after the end of the war. Two of the five young Germans perish in the final sequences of the third and last 90-minute episode; the three survivors are all deeply affected by their war experiences and are changed forever. [It is the inescapable everyday nature of evil and the finality of death that are reiterated over and over again in the series, as well as the dramatic and destructive impact of war on individuals.](#) The *Wehrmacht* officer Wilhelm's intellectual and thoughtful younger brother, Friedhelm (played by Tom Schilling), who prefers to read rather than to fight, nevertheless loses his humanity during the war, and predicts on the friends' last evening in Berlin: 'Der Krieg wird nur das Schlechteste in uns zum Vorschein bringen' [The war will bring out only the worst in us]. This becomes the motto of the mini-series, and is repeated several times as the truth of Friedhelm's prophecy is becoming all too evident (Albers 2013). This prophecy, as well as a photograph of the five friends and the promise to reunite, structure the series and provide constant reminders or allegories of the past. These structuring devices, however, are not only nostalgic measures, but symbolic and melancholic re-enactments of loss. They are historical and repetitive, just like any trauma (Caruth 1995: 7-9). While the title refers to our mothers and our fathers, the series presents individual guilt on a scale that makes it [not only](#) collective, but everyday. But at the

same time, the film emphasises that this past belongs to another Germany, another war and another time, and can therefore not be judged by normal standards, thereby decoupling the events of the war from the present of the surviving narrator and the viewer. This highly problematic ‘othering’ of Germany’s World War II past makes the series’ supposed realism palpable and thus enables non-threatening memory discourses, a common strategy in the context of difficult pasts (Lowenthal 1985).

This recent effort to commemorate World War II illustrates that memory work within Germany regarding the country’s challenging past is ongoing and even increasing since the dawn of the new millennium; at the same time, a subtle, nostalgic longing for a pre-war, peaceful, light and unsoiled past connects virtually all German films that address the subject of World War II. Due to the excess of violence, suffering, guilt and shame, dealing with the war and Germany’s moral collapse during the Hitler era will never be over, as Nico Hofmann stated in an interview with *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Hofmann 2013). In an article in the German weekly *Die Zeit*, [the](#) German journalist and historian Götz Aly responded to the representation of World War II in Hofmann’s mini-series, and praised the depiction of the horror of inhumanity, destruction and moral depravation on an unprecedented scale as witnessed by hundreds of thousands. This was the burden carried by the survivors, a trauma on a massive scale. Aly maintains that the ‘freezing’ of this traumatic war memory was necessary – the Cold War becoming its political form – as, without the silence or selective forgetting, a new beginning would not have been possible (Aly [and Hofmann](#) 2013). An excess of silence in the context of war memory became essential for deeply traumatised Germans in order to rebuild and safeguard the post-war community. Yet Aly criticises the fact that the boundaries between good and evil are blurred in this series, that perpetrators are also victims and vice versa, even though he also recognises both

his own mother and father in the characters portrayed. In this regard, responding not only to the excess of violence and shame, but also to the excess of silence, this latest series has successfully made a passionate argument for ongoing conversations and debates about the experience, memory and representation of World War II in Germany's public and private spheres.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the support provided by Mary Immaculate College (University of Limerick, Ireland), which enabled me to spend most valuable research time in archives in Germany and the USA. Thanks are also due to the staff at the National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland and the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek in Berlin for their assistance.

Christiane Schönfeld is Senior Lecturer and Head of German Studies at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland. She is the author of *Dialektik und Utopie: Die Prostituierte im deutschen Expressionismus* (1996), has edited or co-edited five volumes, the latest one being *Representing the 'Good German' in Literature and Culture after 1945* (with Pól Ó Dochartaigh, 2013), and published widely on German literature and film. She is one of the editors of the critical edition of the works of Ernst Toller (2015).

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Fimography

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Notes

¹ *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* was a mini-series (3 x 90_min.), premiered on German television (ZDF) on 17, 18 and 20 March 2013. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of quotations in this chapter are mine.

² See US National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland; especially record group 260 (Records of United States Occupation Headquarters, World War II), Records of the Information Control Division, Motion Picture Branch. Subsequent references to documents held at the National Archives in Maryland are cited as NARA and RG (record group).

³ UFA is the acronym for Universum Film AG (Aktiengesellschaft – company), the best-known German film studio and a major force in world cinema from 1917 to 1945. Since 1945, it has continued to produce films and television programmes to the present day.

⁴ In 1947, the American and British zones of occupation merged together to create what became known as the Bizone.

⁵ See also Berger (1989), Fehrenbach (1995), Shandley (2001), Pinkert (2008) and Schönfeld / Ó Dochartaigh (2013).

⁶ Gruppe 47, or ‘Group 47’, was an influential literary association in post-war Germany that took its name from the year it was founded (1947).

⁷ For further analysis of this film, see my articles ‘Erfolg und Misserfolg von Verfilmungen’ (2012) and ‘Representing Pain in Literature and Film’ (2008).