

# *Not just death and ruins: the young and new beginnings in German 'rubble films'*

Article

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NOT JUST DEATH AND RUINS:

THE YOUNG AND NEW BEGINNINGS IN GERMAN 'RUBBLE FILM'

ABSTRACT

The article looks at 'Trümmerfilme' from different zones of occupation and discusses the roles which the young were allocated on German post-war screens. While in all films under-age characters are central to negotiating the severe national crisis following the end of World War II and the defeat of the Nazi dictatorship, the analysis highlights emerging differences in the depiction of the young between films from the Soviet zone and the Western zones of occupation. Despite the general use of the young as figures of distraction from the adults' involvement in Nazi crimes, children in films from the Soviet zone help to articulate a new national ideal based on collective, public productivity, while the young in films from the Western zones help to formulate the dangers inherited from the immediate past. These differences are reflected in the opposing depictions of the young as innocent in the East and feral in the West, as well as in the intergenerational relations resulting from this. While the children's potential in the East replaces the parent generation, which is implicitly marked as guilty, the dangers posed by the young in the West strengthen the authority of the parents and the nuclear family model.

Der Aufsatz untersucht Trümmerfilme aus den verschiedenen Besatzungszonen und diskutiert die Rollen, die Kindern und Jugendlichen auf den deutschen Kinoleinwänden zwischen 1945 und 1949 gegeben wurden. Während Minderjährige in allen Filmen eine wichtige Rolle spielen bei der Aufarbeitung der nationalen Krise

nach dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs und der Niederlage der NS Diktatur, stellt die Analyse auch Unterschiede heraus, die sich in der Darstellung von Kindern und Jugendlichen zwischen den Filmen der SBZ und der westlichen Zonen bereits abzeichnen. Ungeachtet der allgemeinen Verwendung von Kindern als Figuren der Ablenkung von der Einbindung der Erwachsenenwelt in die Verbrechen des Nationalsozialismus, helfen Kinderfiguren in Filmen aus dem Osten ein neues Ideal zu formulieren, das auf öffentlicher, kollektiver Produktivität beruht, wogegen Jugendliche in Filmen der westlichen Zonen die gefährliche Hinterlassenschaft der unmittelbaren Vergangenheit verkörpern. Diese Unterschiede schlagen sich nieder in der entgegengesetzten Darstellung von Kindern als unschuldig im Osten und gefährlich im Westen, sowie in dem daraus resultierenden Generationenverhältnis: Während das Potential der Kinderfiguren im Osten eine implizit schuldige Elterngeneration ersetzt, werden im Westen die Elterngeneration und das Kleinfamilienmodell durch die Gefährdung, die von den Jugendlichen ausgeht, gestärkt.

## INTRODUCTION

The first German post-war film, *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (Wolfgang Staudte, 1946), opens with a man staggering through Berlin's rubble-scape towards the viewer and thus introduces a stock character of the period, the apathetic and disorientated war veteran. What tends to go unnoticed is the simultaneous introduction of another typical figure, the agile and active child, as moments later a group of such youngsters comes running up behind the man and briskly overtakes him. Although not the main characters in the film, children are already of particular significance.<sup>1</sup> The film presents their lives as equally affected by the war as those of the adults with whom

the children share the experience of violence and death as well as the destitution among the rubble of post-war Berlin. In a later scene Dr Mertens, the traumatised war veteran and main character, saves a girl living in the ruins from death, which stresses the danger that the post-war destitution poses for the new generation. The key role that children play is further highlighted by a flashback revealing Mertens' traumatic experience, the shooting of Soviet civilians during the war: the one member of the village still alive after everybody has been murdered is a girl whom we witness being shot last. Thus the death and suffering of children is a crucial motivation in the development of the main character. Just as the murder of the young epitomises the horrors of the war, so their rescue is the precondition for Mertens' own healing and integration into the rebuilding of the post-war order.

This very first post-war film marks the beginning of the negotiation of intergenerational relations as a central feature of the way Germany was redefined on the silver screen. Staudte's depiction of childhood suffering endorses the notion of children as passive victims in need of active adult protection. However, in films that made the young their main characters the intergenerational relations are presented as much more contested. My discussion of feature films from different zones of occupation (1945-49) looks at examples of the contest between adults and the young over the past/future of the nation. The high number of films centring on intergenerational relations suggests the centrality of the topic for the re-conception of the national self-image. My analysis pursues an overview of the roles and functions the young are assigned as well as a discussion of political differences as distinctive narrative patterns emerge in the two post-war Germanies.

Stephen Brockmann's statement that 'the films of the immediate postwar period, the Zero Hour, remain underexplored', is particularly true of the films

concerned with the young.<sup>2</sup> This is a significant omission given that the young form a central part of the re-negotiation of national identity. Karen Lury explains this function with the ‘popular myths and ideological structures’ that the figure of the child invokes in particular: ‘the “family”, the “life-cycle”, childhood as “universal”, and the child as emblematic figure who [...] shoulders society’s fantasies of the “past and future” and with this the anthropocentric view of history.’<sup>3</sup> Films of the post-war era deserve our special attention as ‘[a]lthough the Zero Hour was a relatively short period in the history of the German film, it set the stage for later directions in both East German and West German film’<sup>4</sup> and, I want to add, the national fantasies which the respective film industries encapsulated in the notions of the next generation.

The films chosen for this article display a relatively high permeability of the Iron Curtain with regard to film crews and casts.<sup>5</sup> A number of critics agree that even ‘filmic content in the various sectors did not significantly differentiate itself in the first years of the occupation’.<sup>6</sup> However, despite similarities between the films, I want to argue that even before 1949 East and West constructed distinct concepts of the young and, consequently, of national renewal. The central element in the diverging developments is the treatment of age and, linked to it, notions of innocence/guilt. As age differences within the vague group of the young have so far been ignored in critical discussions of the films, particularities in the narrative layout have also remained unnoted.

The films belong to the genre of ‘Trümmerfilm’, and were produced in both the western and the eastern zones of occupation. ‘Rubble films’ only rarely brought the actual war onto the screen and instead were preoccupied with the German defeat, i.e. they focus on its consequences for daily life – the destroyed cities, families, and bodies, as well as the ensuing crisis of identity. In both East and West, the roles that

the young are given in rubble films evolve out of this crisis and its narrative transformation into a new national beginning. In his study of the youth discourse after World War II, Jaimey Fisher shows how after 1945 ‘youth played a central role in Germany’s coming to terms with the past’ in that ‘discourse about youth and reeducation became an essential means by which (adult) Germany narrated its transition from its own, abruptly dubious history’.<sup>7</sup> According to Fisher, young people became discursive prime targets with ‘prominent authors, intellectuals, and filmmakers cast[ing] young people as the most convinced Nazis, to whom guilt could then be ascribed’<sup>8</sup> while at the same time presenting them as victims and redeemable precisely because of their youth:

By focusing on the young as convinced but redeemable Nazis, discussions of the past shift the site of postwar contestation from difficult questions of guilt to manageable challenges of generational discipline, a discipline that would then also serve as a cornerstone for postwar national identity.<sup>9</sup>

Taking Fisher’s hypothesis as a starting point, my argument looks more closely at the make-up of the generational challenges in East and West. For both East and West Fisher’s overall claim is undoubtedly true:

Youth and particularly youth crises served as discursive sites onto which to displace, and with which to distract from, the wider challenges of coming to terms with Germany’s burdensome past.<sup>10</sup>

However, the kind of displacement and distraction differed, I maintain, in East and West, which is reflected in the treatment of age: While in the East notions of childhood dominated, the older teenager or young adult prevailed in the West. This had implications with regard to the respective young people’s war experience and therefore their role within discussions of guilt and rebuilding; but it also affected the

narratives of transformation and their topoi, and functioned as a cornerstone for emerging concepts of self.

#### FILMS FROM THE SOVIET ZONE / DEFA

DEFA not only cast children in supporting roles but at the same time produced a number of feature films with children as main characters. Its third film, Gerhard Lamprecht's *Irgendwo in Berlin* (1946), has a group of boys in Berlin's rubble fields at the centre. Lamprecht's film was followed by Hans Müller's *1 2 3 Corona* (1947/48), Wolfgang Schleif's *Und wenn's nur einer wär* (1948/49), and Hans Deppe's *Die Kuckucks* (1948/49), all focusing on the fate of the roughly 9 to 17 year-olds.<sup>11</sup> The films vary greatly with regard to their production teams and traditions<sup>12</sup> and yet they share narrative elements, which allows them to be grouped together and read as one important pillar of East German cinema.

The typical DEFA war child is an 'unaccompanied' or 'lost child', i.e. a child separated from its family. As a result of persecution, flight, evacuation and war destruction, millions of children all over Europe had lost their parents, with Germany 'boast[ing] the largest number'.<sup>13</sup> Yet from this historically diverse group, early DEFA presented only those children belonging to the German majority of 'Mitläufer'; not a single child has another nationality, or belongs to an ethnic or political victim group.<sup>14</sup> At times the children are German refugees (*Irgendwo in Berlin*; *Die Kuckucks*), but even this particular status remains unreflected in the films, which instead focus on the life of the young in the 'here and now' of the ruins of the city/Berlin. Tara Zahra points out that '[a]lthough they represented only a small fraction of millions of displaced persons in postwar Europe, so-called lost children held a special grip on the postwar imagination' because linked to them and their re-integration there

emerged 'ideals of human rights, the family, democracy, child welfare, and the reconstruction of European civilisation at large'.<sup>15</sup> This historical role plays out in the early DEFA films, in which the war children are representatives of a new beginning. In the (East) German context the so-called 'lost child' not only, therefore, helps to deal with the immediate past by offering, as Fisher suggested, 'deliberate displacements and diversions' for the demands of the immediate past.<sup>16</sup> The lost child also helps to formulate new ideals and offers a focal point through which to visualise the new nation.

All the films show groups of young boys such as the 9 to 12 year-old boys in *Irgendwo in Berlin* who play in the ruins, the two gangs of 9 to 17 year-olds in *1 2 3 Corona* who, orphaned by the war, fend for themselves as black marketeers, the little robbers and thieves in *Und wenn's nur einer wär* who try to get by on their own, or the five war-orphaned siblings in *Die Kuckucks* who try to find a stable and permanent home for themselves. Despite age differences within the respective groups, the films stress similarities between the various members: irrespective of their age they all equally enjoy and join in activities (from street fights to playing theatre or organising a circus), and within the group they are given the same rights and responsibilities, for example in the self-administration of their camp (*Und wenn's nur einer wär*). As the children are not differentiated ethnically, politically or socially, their representative quality is stressed and the events are transported onto the level of generation. [IMAGE 1: *1 2 3 Corona* ©DEFA-Stiftung/Robert Baberske]

The groups of youngsters live in the ruins or temporary homes in Berlin; they live with foster parents, on their own or with one parent, and to varying degrees partake in illegal activities, mainly trading on the black market, theft, squatting, and physical violence against others. These historically lost children are presented by the



films as an ‘antisocial youth community’,<sup>17</sup> i.e. groups of youngsters that reflect the wider crisis of disintegration and the dangers linked to such a state of (national) disorder. Fisher’s argument suggests that they might even be described as feral children. He sees them as ‘out-of-the-house and out-of-control’, as ‘menacing’<sup>18</sup> and undermining the attempts of the adult world to rebuild order. For Fisher, the typical rubble film narrative displaces the guilt for the national crisis onto the young and revolves around efforts to dismantle ‘the youth community that has caused a crisis’.<sup>19</sup> The disciplining of the young, namely their submission to a paternal agency and to the private house is, according to him, presented by the narratives as the socially productive solution.<sup>20</sup>

However, the intergenerational hierarchy in DEFA films deserves more attention. In contrast to Fisher, I maintain that the children in early films from the Soviet Occupied Zone are not presented as the cause of the social crisis and that their disciplining by a paternal agent is not the central element within the effort to redefine the nation. Instead, the children function as innocent counterparts to a severely destabilised and demoralised adult world from which only individual members are redeemable.<sup>21</sup>

The lack of socio-political background makes the children prone to become universal symbols, which in the case of DEFA films rely widely on the pre-sociological concept of the ‘innocent’ or ‘Apollonian child’:

Children, then, have a natural goodness and clarity of vision. Redolent with the reason that will form the society of tomorrow, their natural characteristics are those we can all learn from; they represent a condition lost or forgotten and thus one worthy of defence (and susceptible to sentimentalization).<sup>22</sup>

Despite the DEFA children's involvement with antisocial or even criminal activities, most of them can tell right from wrong when necessary and are honest and show solidarity with each other. Thus Lamprecht's lost child, the war-orphan and refugee Willi, steals quite unscrupulously, yet he does it not for personal gain but to share with the other boys and particularly to help his best friend Gustav and Gustav's (a)pathetic POW father. Similarly, the youth gangs in *1 2 3 Corona* steal and trade on the black market, but they immediately recognise that the war-orphaned girl Corona is exploited and abused by her foster father, the circus director Grandini. The inner moral compass is also intact among the young inmates of the re-education camp in *Und wenn's nur einer wär*, who steal for the group but punish those who steal for personal profit; there is a Robin-Hood-esque element in their activities, as they steal from other criminals but not from ordinary people. Last but not least, the siblings of the Kuckert family might disregard property law, but this never detracts from their attempts to rebuild a dwelling. The children in the films do not abide by the law but have a keen sense of justice and solidarity; the conflict between good intentions and wrong means is characteristic for them. Particularly in *1 2 3 Corona*, *Und wenn's nur einer wär* and *Die Kuckucks* the use of wrong means has serious consequences including the injuring of others. However, these moments of violence never call into question the 'intrinsic values'<sup>23</sup> of the children.

The children's state of non-corruption signals the child's ideological purity, which reflects official policy in the Soviet zone. With the political emphasis on reintegrating the Hitler Youth generation and making the young the 'catalyst in achieving "unity of the people"',<sup>24</sup> their blamelessness for the crimes of the Nazi regime was part of the official rhetoric of the period. Michael Buddrus quotes a

representative speech by Otto Grotewohl in which the latter ‘rejected the idea of “holding youth responsible for things for which they can hold no responsibility”’.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, most of the adults presented in the early DEFA films are corrupt and/or abusive and the intergenerational relationships, particularly where parent figures are concerned, are marked by neglect or exploitation. This is amply illustrated by Herr Birke, Willi’s foster father of sorts (*Irgendwo in Berlin*), Frau Schmidtchen, the black marketeer, and the abusive circus director Grandini (*1 2 3 Corona*), the authoritarian teachers Osterheld and Fräulein Schmidt, as well as the thieving caretaker of the camp and all the abusive parents (*Und wenn’s nur einer wär’*) and hostile landlords and -ladies (*Die Kuckucks*).

Another intergenerational difference stressed in the films is the children’s mentality. They are energetic, enthusiastic, and playful, whereas adults, if they are not abusive, appear numb, traumatised, weak, and disillusioned. This generationally distinct feature is also rooted in the child’s ostensible innocence, highlighting another aspect of this concept: not only are the children too young to be held accountable for the national crisis, but they are also presented as too young to be fully affected by its horrors. The child’s pre-discursive position is re-invested by the films as a position of psychological intactness. The adults’ numbness, disillusionment and weakness, which are translated into brooding, staring, and gestures of shiftlessness and indecision,<sup>26</sup> are countered by the children’s constant, joyful and purposeful activity. Signs of traumatisation or serious distress, such as those Fred Zinnemann revealed in the lost children of his post-war Holocaust drama *The Search* (1948), were absent from early post-war German screens.<sup>27</sup>

This portrayal of the child figure as an emotional and moral counterpoint to the adult world is facilitated by genre conventions. Elements of adventure and

detective plot fuse in all four examples, increasing the entertainment value of the films and with it the smooth identification of the audience with the dynamic and inventive youngsters.<sup>28</sup> The most appealing aspect of the adventures presented is the independence with which the children go about them, something that Christiane Mückenberger has summed up with reference to *1 2 3 Corona*:

Der Film, der heute noch sein Publikum findet, traf die Wunschträume von Kindern, ohne Unterstützung von Erwachsenen etwas Imponierendes zu leisten, und wenn es so etwas Abenteuerliches war, wie ein Zirkus, [...] konnte es dem Publikum nur recht sein.<sup>29</sup>

The lost children function as a source of regeneration for the nation. It is their undiminished energy and enthusiasm as well as their essential moral integrity that promises change and new ideals. These become visible once the ‘antisocial youths’ have a chance to employ the right means. Instead of reaching a socially productive conclusion by dismantling the youth community, the films show it evolving into a democratic, broadly self-reliant, productive, self-governing unit:<sup>30</sup> a grassroots democratic re-settlement camp in *Und wenn’s nur einer wär*, a circus organised by the children themselves in *1 2 3 Corona*, a rubble-kids unit in *Irgendwo in Berlin*, and a building company of their own making in *Die Kuckucks*. Only in *Irgendwo in Berlin* is the restoration of the nuclear family part of the national renewal; but even in Lamprecht’s film family restoration is not the only solution. Instead, the children remain also members of a youth community which takes on responsibilities in and for the public. As none of the other three films provides redeemable parent figures, there is no possibility of restoring the family idyll.

A solution that foregoes the nuclear family as the basis of national revival echoes socialist ideology and political practices. Yet these screen ‘collectives’ still

existed without open ideological guidance, a fact that explains the changeable licensing of the films later on.<sup>31</sup> However, more than political anticipation, the focus on youth collectives reflects wider debates and conflicts arising around child welfare after World War II. All over Europe, the efforts to help and reintegrate the young were linked ‘to the reconstruction of European democracy and the repudiation of fascist values’.<sup>32</sup> Yet as Zahra strikingly demonstrates, stark differences between Eastern and Western Europe ‘about what democratization entailed, and about the precise relationships between democracy, the state, and the family’<sup>33</sup> showed early on:

In the West, particularly in the United States, Austria, Germany, and Great Britain, liberal democrats, Christian leaders, and anti-Communists tended to define the evils of totalitarianism specifically in terms of its alleged destruction of the family.<sup>34</sup>

According to Zahra, ‘the separation of families came to represent the quintessential Nazi transgression, an unparalleled source of social disarray’,<sup>35</sup> and was seen as the core of the humanitarian crisis. However, Western ideals of child wellbeing based on the nuclear family

were vigorously contested [...] by continental pedagogues – and even by refugees – who often sought to rehabilitate Europe’s lost children in collective settings, or flatly rejected family reunification for personal, social, or political reasons.<sup>36</sup>

Thus Zahra perceives an ‘ideological opposition between the individualist ideals of Western humanitarian workers and the collectivist vision of East European and Jewish refugees and policymakers’.<sup>37</sup> In practice, an international aid organisation such as UNESCO had to negotiate both approaches and despite ideological differences did support youth communities as educational projects with democratic

potential.<sup>38</sup> In a UNESCO report from October 1949 titled *Problems of Child Vagabondage in Germany*, Elisabeth Rotten stated:

Youth Self-Help Projects: There are many institutions for homeless youth built up on the traditional patterns of public or private welfare work, with youth as more or less passive object of relief and guidance. But the most interesting movement, and indeed a promising one, is that which arose from the initiative of young people themselves and of their friends in the older generation who believe in the constructive forces of youth. It started and grew strongest in Bavaria, and was inspired [...] by what was heard about the Pestalozzi Children's Village for European war orphans at Trogen, Switzerland, but the movement soon spread and found different forms in all four Zones of Germany.<sup>39</sup>

Innocence as linked to the figure of the child is a powerful concept in DEFA's early films. Its potential unfolds in the productivity of the children, i.e. the collective creations which the films reserve for them. The child is not so much a figure of conversion as Silberman suggests,<sup>40</sup> but a figure of realisation or fulfilment. Rather than reflecting the process of re-education, the child marks a productive potential to be realised. The films' topographical focus on one clearly defined space – the destroyed garages, an empty yard, a deserted villa, and a re-education camp – suggests the respective space as a metaphor of children's potential. Whether the space is a void or a rubble mountain, it always functions as a site to be reclaimed and revived by the young.

The child offers a focal point of national hope for a democratic future. At the same time, it displaces guilt but not so much by posing a generational conflict instead of engagement with the past, but paradoxically by becoming a 'hero'.<sup>41</sup> The enormous

self-reliance of the war children in the films not only marginalises the historical situation of disintegrated families and homelessness, but allows the narrative to omit the parent generation altogether. The death or absence of the parents (in *1 2 3 Corona* and *Die Kuckucks*) or their corruption (in *Irgendwo in Berlin* and *Und wenn's nur einer wär*) renders them essentially irrelevant to the narratives' happy endings. Like the pre-discursive position of children, their loss of family is re-invested as an opportunity for a new beginning unburdened by the National Socialist past. This results in the suppression of any need to engage with the parents' guilt. With the exception of Lamprecht's film, there is virtually no representative of the parent generation with a lasting role in the life of the young. Instead, it is the generations of those who have just come of age, the 21-year olds such as the head of the re-education camp in *Und wenn's nur einer wär* or the journalist neighbour in *Die Kuckucks*, and the generation of grandparents, the 60-year olds such as the doctor in *1 2 3 Corona* or the school inspector in *Und wenn's nur einer wär*, that are admitted to the rebuilding as supporters and advisors; these are the generations which had their professional prime during the Weimar Republic or were only just about to start their career after 1945, whereas, as illustrated in the figure of Herr Osterheld (*Und wenn's nur einer wär*), the parents' prime would have coincided with the Third Reich.

#### FILMS FROM THE WESTERN ZONES

The young formed part of the post-war screen fantasies in the western zones, too, but develop these along a distinction absent from DEFA productions in that they contrast adolescents and children with the latter appearing exclusively as minor characters; in *Und über uns der Himmel* (Josef von Baky, 1947; American licence), *Zwischen gestern und morgen* (Harald Braun, 1947; American licence) or *Morituri* (Eugen

York, 1948; French licence) they function as emotional intensifiers. The new generation is much more present in the figure of the older teenager or young adult, often already a returning soldier. While adolescents frequently appear as vulnerable individuals – the girl Kat in *Zwischen gestern und morgen*; Mizzi, Walter and Werner in *Und über uns der Himmel* –, two productions from the British Zone of Occupation portray groups and also explore the motif of the ‘antisocial youth gang’: *Wege im Zwielicht* (Gustav Fröhlich, 1947/48) depicts a group of young demobilised soldiers who cannot find a new start in post-war life, while *Und finden dereinst uns wieder* (Hans Müller, 1947) introduces the evacuated school class into the cinematic post-war discourse.<sup>42</sup> My focus on the motif of the ‘antisocial youth group’ rather than the individual youth is due to the different function it fulfils as a source of danger and destruction. At the same time, differences between East and West can be more clearly exemplified when comparing their approaches to groups of young people.

As in the films from the Soviet Occupied Zone, the groups are male but their age-heterogeneity is organised differently. Instead of DEFA’s relatively large groups of children of often unspecified ages, the groups are now clearly divided into adolescents on the one hand and a small boy on the other. Within this constellation, the focus is on the adolescents while the figure of the child retains only supporting status. The marked age-separation is based on the different relations of the young to the immediate past; adolescents are distinct from boys by their experience of the war and/or commitment to National Socialism. This links the adolescents to the wider socio-political changes which are offset against the child’s lack of experience and its limitation to the emotional world of the family; in both films the young boy associated with the respective group of adolescents is motivated by love for his



parents: Erwin Putzke (*Wege im Zwielicht*) wants to help his war invalid father, and Ulli (*Und finden dereinst uns wieder*) is driven by homesickness for his mother.

Because of their continuing faith in the Nazi war or because of the depression following its defeat, the adolescents are presented as corrupt and dangerous. Unlike the youth in DEFA films whose innocence is stressed by their good intentions, the adolescents in Western productions reveal destructive tendencies such as the resolution to join the battle of Berlin (*Und finden dereinst uns wieder*) or their refusal to re-integrate into a civilian life which is scarcely welcoming (*Wege im Zwielicht*). This places them in opposition to the adult majority's wish for peace and order; they represent Fisher's 'out-of-the-house and out-of-control' youths.<sup>43</sup>

The danger that emanates from the adolescents contrasts with the naïveté and emotional purity of the child, which consequently is presented as endangered; in both films this is underlined by the pairing of the young boy with an (innocent) animal, namely a small dog.<sup>44</sup> However, the figure of the child does not just mark the counter position to that of the adolescent. In both films the little boy trusts the group of adolescents and particularly their respective leaders Wolfgang Osthoff (*Und finden dereinst uns wieder*) and Stefan Kolb (*Wege im Zwielicht*), and this serves as an indication of the possible redemption of the erring and destructive adolescents. The groups' ability to include someone innocent acts as a gateway back into the world of the normal, i.e. family life. Thus the innocent boy represents a moral and social potential in the adolescents which however unfolds only in the moment of destruction. Both *Wege im Zwielicht* and *Und finden dereinst uns wieder* make the death of the little boy, caused by the irresponsibility of the adolescents, the precondition of their sudden understanding of their errors. The moment of recognition is staged over the little boys' dead bodies: 'Er [Hitler, U.W.] ist das, was alle von ihm sagen: Er ist ein

Mörder,' [01:18:13 – 24] says Wolfgang Osthoff at Ulli's grave in *Und finden dereinst uns wieder*, while at the grave of Erwin, Stefan Kolb realises that he cannot evade his responsibilities any longer.

Within this approach, the war child stops being the initiators of national renewal. In DEFA films, innocence had a great potential for action, in the Western productions innocence is passive and vulnerable and serves to negotiate a fraught relationship between fathers and misguided older sons, the aggression of which leaves the most vulnerable exposed to dangers. While in DEFA films the parent generation remains widely invalidated, it is the father figures in the films from the British Zone who derive symbolic capital from this generational conflict: a teacher, a soldier father (*Und finden dereinst uns wieder*), and a mayor (*Wege im Zwielficht*). These paternal figures of authority are, although damaged, endowed with a moral compass and mature understanding that enable them to see the criminal nature of the Nazi war and/or the necessity of selfless devotion to the task of rebuilding after the catastrophe. While not unblemished, they retain a muted authority which is offered as a deposit of hope: they will make way for the young, but only after they have disciplined them and helped them reintegrate into civilian society, for example by re-activating their energy, as the mayor does in *Wege im Zwielficht* when he offers the vagabonds the meaningful task of rebuilding a bridge, or by teaching them the futility of war, as the soldier/deserter does in *Und finden dereinst uns wieder*.

The ultimate cinematic means to promote the fathers' guiding function is the off-screen narrator in *Und finden dereinst uns wieder*. Right at the beginning, a warm, paternal voice introduces the story to come:

Dies ist die Geschichte einer Heimkehr, Erlebnisse einer Gruppe von Jungen,  
die in den letzten Kriegswochen versuchten sich von einem im Westen

evakuierten Schullager nach ihrer Heimatstadt Berlin durchzuschlagen. Eine wahre Begebenheit liegt ihr zugrunde. Wir beginnen unsere Erzählung in einem der Täler Westfalens, wohin die Schulgruppe nach vielen Irrfahrten, immer vor dem raschen Vorstößen alliierter Truppen zurückweichend, gekommen ist [00:02 – 00:27].

The narrator mounts a safety net that provides security with regard to unexpected turns and twists; the repetition of ‘Heim’ clearly points to the destination of the story. In the course of the film, the narrator’s particular task is to comment on the learning process of Wolfgang Osthoff:

Eine andere Station. Und nun sieh dich um hier, Wolfgang Osthoff, denn du willst doch der Wahrheit ins Gesicht sehen! [...] Willst du nicht sehen, was du siehst, wie du auch nicht hören wolltest, was du hörtest? Beides wirst du lernen müssen. Augen auf, mein Junge, und vergiß nicht, was sie alle trieb, ist Gewalt, und die Menschenseele nimmt Schaden dabei. [34:55 – 36:00]

The narrator’s position of knowledge and authority from which he can demand that the teenager wake up and see the truth, is shared by all adults with the exception of one Nazi. This makes the adolescents outsiders: several adults state that they fear the young as informers. Wolfgang’s mother confirms: ‘Ich hatte ja schon Angst vor ihm, vor meinem eignen Kind.’ [41:30-33] The countermeasure of the adult world is deactivation and privatisation of the youth. In this context it is telling that one of the teachers reads Matthias Claudius’ *Abendlied*, the ultimate pacifier, to the boys.

The different approaches to age, innocence and intergenerational relations result in different narrative strategies. While the DEFA films present stories of realisation or fulfilment, the Western productions offer stories of conversion, i.e. the adolescents have to understand their errors and change. In line with the conversion

tale, the narrative is not based on a confined city space but on a journey; the realisation of the potential of both the space and the children is replaced by the confrontations and encounters the adolescents have with the defeated nation. Typical stops on these journeys are the destroyed city, the station overcrowded with exhausted people, destroyed villages, wrecked war machinery, treks, wary or hostile adults. While this journey can include the renovation of a specific place such as the bridge in *Wege im Zwielficht*, the purpose of the journey is not the rebuilding of the country but the transformation of the self that eventually arrives in the one institution that is presented as durable – the nuclear family.

The re-integration into the nuclear-family model and thereby individualisation is indeed celebrated as a socially productive solution. Wolfgang Osthoff (*Und finden dereinst uns wieder*), the indoctrinated 15-year old fanatic who was ready to denounce his war-loathing mother, is purged by what he sees on his journey and can be safely reunited with her; Stefan Kolbe, the disillusioned 27-year old ex-POW without education, job or family, can move on to finish his studies and marry thus starting a family himself.

## CONCLUSION

On both sides of the Iron Curtain, the war child was paramount for the adult world's re-negotiation of national identity although this historical figure generated different approaches to the National Socialist past and the new beginning in East and West. Favouring groups of lost children, DEFA developed a collective concept of rebuilding which seemed to rest on the next generation, endowing it with enormous hope and responsibility. Tied to the depiction of the war child as 'next generation', was the notion of the post-war period as an innocent, new beginning. At the expense of an

engagement with the immediate past, the war child appears as privileged mobiliser of the nation's reconstruction energies, enthusing the older generations, while at the same time side-lining a deeply compromised parent generation. Only this act of omission admits *ex negativo* the guilt of the German adult world. In the films from the British Zone, the war child is a more differentiated figure split into children and adolescents, the latter serving as a screen for fears and feelings of humiliation, allowing the adult world to position itself vis-à-vis an apparently guilty youth. In this opposition adults appear mature and morally aware even though they are shown as implied in the disorder. The adult world profits from this constellation as the displacement of the responsibility for the Nazi war onto the shoulders of the war child has an exonerating effect, a considerable part of which rests on the presentation of (Nazi) aggression as inner-German father-son conflict which causes the death – not of millions of Europeans but of an innocent German child.<sup>45</sup>

Despite these major differences between the two emerging political sides there are, however, revealing similarities that extend beyond the use of the war child as a means of national reconstruction on screen. In both contexts the war child emerged as a relational figure essentially defined by its status as not-parent which limited the figure to a symbolic function: its status excluded a more differentiated and historically substantial view of the war child as well as the possibility of children articulating their own experiences and concerns. As not-parent they still serve an adult purpose, namely not just displacing guilt and conflict, but at the same time reinstating German agency which had been lost in the atrocities of the war and the ensuing defeat. The children are represented almost throughout as male, which reinstates the broken link between masculinity and agency. For the figure of the war child this means that it is symbolically a place holder in the case of the Eastern productions where it is soon

substituted by the figure of the communist, while in West German productions of the 1950s the war child gradually turns into the feral youth rebel who takes on the reinstated post-war fathers.

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1 Renate Ullrich, 'Kinder- und Kindheitsbilder in DEFA-Spielfilmen', in Renate Ullrich, Eva Kaufmann, Ursula Schröter, *Kinderbilder in der DDR: Nachträgliche Entdeckungen in ausgewählten bildungspolitischen Dokumenten, literarischen Werken und DEFA-Filmen für Erwachsene*, Berlin 2015, pp. 175-287: [http://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/images/publikationen/Manuskripte/Manuskripte\\_13\\_web.pdf](http://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/images/publikationen/Manuskripte/Manuskripte_13_web.pdf) (accessed 27 June 2015).

2 The only extensive study of representations of the young in post-war cultural discourse is Jaimey Fisher's *Disciplining Germany: Youth, Reeducation, and Reconstruction after the Second World War*, Detroit 2007.

3 Karen Lury, 'The Child in Film and Television: Introduction', *Screen* 46/3 (Autumn 2005), pp. 307-14 (308).

4 Stephen Brockmann, *A Critical History of German Film*, Rochester N.Y; Woodbridge Suffolk 2010, p. 195.

5 Lutz Moik is the boy-lead in several of the films from East and West such as *Und wenn's nur einer wär* (Soviet Zone, 1949), *Und finden dereinst uns wieder* (British Zone, 1947), and *1 2 3 Corona* (Soviet Zone, 1947); the two latter films were directed by Hans Müller; similarly, the boy actors Hans Neie and Horst Gentzen star in both films with Hans Neie also appearing in *Die Kuckucks* (Soviet Zone, 1949).

6 Jaimey Fisher, 'Who's watching the Rubble-Kids? Youth, Pedagogy, and Politics in Early DEFA Films', *New German Critique*, 82, East German Film (Winter 2001), 91-

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125 (93). Robert Shandley also treats the films as ‘German’ rather than differentiated along forming political lines. See Shandley, *Rubble Films: German Cinema in the Shadow of the Third Reich* (Philadelphia 2001).

7 Fisher, *Disciplining Germany*, p. 4.

8 *Ibid*, p. 14.

9 *Ibid*.

10 *Ibid*, p. 2.

11 Wolfgang Staudte’s third film for DEFA, *Rotation* (1948/49), completes this list. However, as Staudte’s film follows a slightly different paradigm, it will not be part of the main discussion. Unlike the other films, *Rotation* focuses on a family story beginning in the Weimar Republic and ending after 1945. Thus the film presents a development or diachronic view whereas all the other films have a synchronic approach. Within the history of Staudte’s Behnke family, the figure of the father holds a central position: his failures of moral principle in the face of rising National Socialism are reflected in his son’s growing Nazi allegiance. This generational causality is similar to that of the other DEFA films, so that Staudte’s *Rotation* reflects the general DEFA approach.

12 As has often been pointed out, Lamprecht takes up elements from his pre-war youth film *Emil und die Detektive* (1931) such as the adventure/ detective plot; adventure conventions are also used in *Die Kuckucks* and *1 2 3 Corona*, the latter of which otherwise continues the tradition of the circus film. According to Marc Silberman, these were ‘genre conventions that were already familiar in the cinema of the Third Reich’ (Mark Silberman, ‘What’s New? Allegorical Representations of Renewal in DEFA’s Youth Films, 1946-1949’, in *German Postwar Films: Life and*

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*Love in the Ruins*, ed. Wilfried Wilms and William Rasch, New York 2008, pp. 93-108 (94)).

13 Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families after World War II*, Cambridge, MA 2011, p. 3.

14 This is also true for the adult figures in the films.

15 Tara Zahra, 'Lost Children: Displacement, Family, and Nation in Postwar Europe', *The Journal of Modern History*, 81 (March 2009), 45-86 (45).

16 Fisher, *Disciplining Germany*, p. 11.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

18 *Ibid.* p. 181.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

21 Silberman pointed this out, too, describing the role of these kids as 'child as hero' ('What's New?', p. 97).

22 Allison James, Chris Jenks, Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1998, p. 13.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Michael Buddrus, 'A Generation twice betrayed: Youth Policy in the transition from the Third Reich to the Soviet Zone of Occupation (1945-1946)', in *Generations in Conflict: Youth Revolt and Generation Formation in Germany 1770 – 1968*, ed. Mark Roseman, Cambridge 1995, pp. 247-68 (263)

25 *Ibid.*, p. 257.

26 See Anke Pinkert, *Film and Memory in East Germany*, Bloomington 2008.

27 This is also true because Zinnemann's 1948 film was never screened in East Germany and not released in West Germany until 1961.



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28 Silberman, 'What's New?', p. 94.

29 Christiane Mückenberger and Günter Jordan, *Sie sehen selbst, Sie hören selbst... Eine Geschichte der DEFA von ihren Anfängen bis 1949*, Marburg 1994, p. 135.

30 The enormous extent of self-mobilisation is one of the central differences from National Socialist youth films such as *Jungens* (Robert A. Stemmler, 1941), *Jakko* (Fritz Peter Buch, 1941), or *Junge Adler* (Alfred Weidenmann, 1944), in which purposeful mobilisation of the young depends entirely on a male, authoritarian and institutionalized framework.

31 In 1959 *1 2 3 Corona* had its licence withdrawn for exactly that reason. See Zusatzprotokoll zum Protokoll Nr. 261/65 from 4 August 1959, Bundesarchiv – Film Berlin (BArch), BArch, DR1-Z/686 1 2 3 Corona.

32 Zahar, *The Lost Children*, p. 17.

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

37 *Ibid.*

38 One of the lasting influential collective initiatives that began at the end of the war was the Pestalozzi Children's Village initiated and supported by the Swiss foundation 'Kinderdorf Pestalozzi', the first of which was founded in Trogen in 1945. In his appeal for support of such an initiative, the Swiss writer Walter Robert Corti depicts the children as providing the foundation of a better world and bases this notion on exactly the concept of the Apollonian child: <http://retro.seals.ch/cntmng?pid=dkm-001:1944:4::1180> (accessed 12 April 2015).

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39 Elisabeth Rotten, *Problems of Child Vagabondage in Germany*. Preliminary Report at the UNESCO Conference of Experts and Directors of Children's Communities 10-11 October 1949, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001443/144329eb.pdf> (accessed 12 April 2015).

40 Silberman, 'What's New?', p.98.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

42 The school class at the front refers back to Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1928) made into a film of the same title by Lewis Milestone in 1930.

The youths portrayed in both films are of different ages with roughly 15 year-old teenagers in *Und finden dereinst uns wieder* and approximately 25 year-old young adults in *Wege im Zwielficht*; Stefan Kolb, the leader of the gang in *Zwielficht*, mentions that he is 27 years old. Despite the more than 10 years difference between the film gangs, I group them together as 'adolescents' thus stressing that the problem of the latter gang is precisely their stunted maturation. As a result of the war they were not able to complete any vocational training, start a job or found a family and thus remained in the position of adolescents. Their leader Kolb sums this up in the term 'Kind mit Stoppelbart'.

43 Fisher, *Disciplining Germany*, p. 181.

44 This is also the case in *1 2 3 Corona* in which the vulnerability of the girl Corona is stressed by her affection for a little dog.

45 It should be noted that the two films from the British Zone were not received well. They were criticized for being hardly credible and sentimental. See Anon., *Jungens schlagen sich durch*, *Der Spiegel*, 49, 1947. Another reviewer asked: 'Ein Film der Jugend? Daß Gott erbarm! Es ist schwer vorstellbar, daß wirkliche Jugend auch nur

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fünf Minuten diese Papierphrasenorgie erträgt [...] Der gönnerhafte und verzeihende Ton ihr gegenüber ist einfach ekelhaft; man sollte jedermann, der ihn anschlägt und mit “guten Ratschlägen” verbindet, unbesehen unter die “Belasteten” einreihen. Ein widerlicheres Pharisäertum ist gar nicht denkbar. ’ Anon., Jugend in der Phrasenmühle, 1947, *BArch, FILMSC 1/17583*. The verdict that no young person would want to listen to such condescending tones proved true when *Wege im Zwielficht* had its premier. Criticizing it for unctuousness and sentimentality, *Der Spiegel* went on to report: ‘Am Mittwoch gab es Skandal. Es waren junge Leute, Primaner hannoverscher Schulen, die riefen und pffiffen. [...] Sie lehnten das Drehbuch ab, erklärten die jungen Leute, die Verquickung eines ernsten Themas mit “sentimentalem Blödsinn”. Und sie hätten keine andere Möglichkeit, ihren Unwillen zum Ausdruck zu bringen. ’ Anon., Stromlinie mit Stuck, *Der Spiegel*, 16, 1948.