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# The Making of Holocaust Trauma in German Memory

Some Reflection about Robert Thalheim's Film *And Along Come Tourists*

If one were to inquire in present-day Germany whether the Holocaust constitutes a traumatic event in German history, a majority of the population would most probably answer in the affirmative. What seems self-evident today is, of course, the result of a long and winding road which connects the German past with the present and – it goes without saying – is still under construction. The chapter at hand investigates the notion of trauma which has been established through the course of West and East German history and asks the question – with the help of Robert Thalheim's movie *And Along Comes Tourists (Am Ende kommen Touristen)*<sup>1</sup>: Which historical narrative could be helpful in building trust between non-Jewish Germans and Jews today?

## The Holocaust as a Cultural Trauma in German Memory

The memory of the Holocaust in Germany is not a perpetrator trauma as one could assume. A perpetrator trauma requires that the perpetrators themselves recognize their wrongdoing or, for instance, that soldiers may suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after their military service, as in the case of the Vietnam War, which triggered the development of the medical category PTSD. In the case of Germany after the Second World War, the majority of soldiers, policemen, or prison guards who were involved in murdering European Jews did not seem to have suffered from such symptoms, nor did they ponder or agonize over the morality of their actions.<sup>2</sup> This begs the question: How did the notion of a 'Holocaust trauma in

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1 *And Along Come Tourists (Am Ende kommen Touristen)*, directed by Robert Thalheim, [2007] 2008.

2 The so called "First Auschwitz Trial" in Frankfurt from 1963 to 1965, where 22 members of the extermination camp administration, mainly in low ranking positions, were charged for murder, can serve as an example of this attitude. None of the accused uttered a word of excuse or regret. Confer: <http://www.auschwitz-prozess.de/> (accessed January 10, 2013).

Germany' come into being and what does it imply? I would suggest that the current state of German collective memory is better described as 'a cultural trauma within the society of the perpetrators.'

The concept of cultural trauma is embedded in a social theory, which provides more sophisticated means to understand the recent changes in German collective memory because the concept accentuates the artificial side of the trauma construction in German society.<sup>3</sup> I will not only focus on this well-known process of building a new collective memory – with Auschwitz as its negative core – but also on the challenges of such an identity construction that arise for a third or fourth generation in Germany after the war. Not many films deal with the latter problem in a substantial way. I have chosen Robert Thalheim's film *And Along Come Tourists* because I see it as an attempt to investigate the consequences of acknowledging historical responsibility for these age groups. The film sheds some light on what might come after denial, questioning, rebellion, acknowledgement, memorialization, and routinization in German and European memory politics and culture.

To remember the Holocaust as a traumatic event in Germany is an invented tradition – an invention that is useful and necessary, because it has helped to create and stabilize a much needed mindset in postwar Germany. The very existence of this mindset is an expression of what I will describe later as a new twist in Germany's relation to modernity. In the paragraphs that follow I outline some stages in the development of this cultural trauma with respect to German films. Cinema is not a mirror; rather it provides societies with powerful audio-visual narratives of history, which interfere in and communicate with existing cultural narratives in art and society. Thereby influencing the narrative framework from which people draw their historical and social identities.

## Cinematic Significations of How to Remember What

For a long time the collective memory in Germany was divided between an official, public memory and a private memory that runs through families. This cleavage can be found in both German states (both East and West Germany) despite remarkable differences in other aspects of memory politics. While the acknowledgment of responsibility was part of the official memory in almost every part of West Germany society, the private memory claimed victimhood and suffering for the Germans themselves. In fact, one might understand the development of

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander, *Trauma*, 2012.

German memorial cultural much better, if one starts with the splitting of remembrance into a private and a public memory. These two memories overlap in what I would label a ‘seduction narrative.’ According to this narrative, the Germans were seduced and betrayed by Hitler and his elite. Cinematically this divide found expression in the depiction of the myth of the innocent *Wehrmacht*, which is portrayed in many successful West German productions such as *The Devil’s General (Des Teufels General)*<sup>4</sup>, *Stalingrad: Dogs, Do You Want to Live Forever (Hunde, wollt ihr ewig leben?)*<sup>5</sup>, as well as the comparably critical TV-Production *Am grünen Strand der Spree* (‘On the Green Riverside of the Spree’)<sup>6</sup> until more recent films such as *The Downfall (Der Untergang)*<sup>7</sup>. This constellation allowed being critical of the Nazi regime without blaming a wider German population. As we know, the image of the *Saubere Wehrmacht* (‘Clean Wehrmacht’) was publicly defended until the mid-1990s when the exhibition *Crimes of the Wehrmacht* stirred a heated debate all over Germany. Sonja M. Schulz claims in her recently published study about National Socialism and film that up until today no feature film has chosen the crimes of German Police units or the *Wehrmacht* as a central subject.<sup>8</sup>

A decisive medial step towards acceptance of the Holocaust as a traumatic event in German history was made through the broadcasting of the American television mini-series *Holocaust* in early 1979. The encounter between the German-Jewish Weiss family and the German-Christian Dorf family broke through the filter of public and private memory and allowed for identification with the victims. Millions of Germans watched the melodramatic account which was criticized for its reduction of the Holocaust to the fate of a single Jewish family but also praised for its wide appeal. The mini-series marked the transition from rejection of the historical crime, to a melodramatic understanding of it.<sup>9</sup> Thus,

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4 *The Devil’s General (Des Teufels General)*, directed by Helmut Käutner, [1955] 2009.

5 *Stalingrad: Dogs, Do You Want to Live Forever (Hunde, wollt ihr ewig leben?)*, directed by Frank Wisbar, [1959] 2001.

6 *Am grünen Strand der Spree – Große Geschichten*, directed by Fritz Umgelter, [1960] 2014.

7 *The Downfall (Der Untergang)*, directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel, [2004] 2004.

8 Schulz, *Der Nationalsozialismus im Film*, 2012, p. 504. According to Schulz there were plans by Romuald Karmakar to make a movie about Police Battalion 101. They have not been realized yet only the documentary *Land der Vernichtung* was produced in 2004, originally meant to be a pilot study, Schulz, 2012, p. 316.

9 Reichel, *Erfundene Erinnerung*, 2004, pp. 250–263. Interestingly enough the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (‘Federal Agency for Civic Education’ BpB), a major, state-sponsored educational organization, suggested a different ending of the mini-series. The US-American version closes with the emigration to Israel of the Zionistic son of the Weiss family who joined the partisans during the war. The BpB argued that the Zionistic narrative could be understood in a redemptive manner by a German audience, so the German version was televised *without* this ending, emphasizing the catastrophe and not the way out of it.

the series promoted an understanding of the Holocaust as a traumatic event in German history. Identification with the victims became possible. Obviously other changes were needed to accomplish this shift in German memorial culture. German society underwent quite a few developments, from the payment of reparations in the 1950s by the Adenauer government, to the widespread reception of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem as well as the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt from 1963 to 1965. It experienced the generational rebellion of the students of 1968 and the genuflection of Chancellor Willy Brandt in front of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising monument in December 1970 and many more sociopolitical and sociocultural developments before German society was able to transform its view to the past.<sup>10</sup>

With regard to this transformation process, there is also a reasonable difference between *The Downfall* and the others cinematic productions that were mentioned. *The Downfall* did not have to acknowledge the past, because other movies and the German society-at-large had done that. It could focus on the inner condition of German society at this historical last stage of Nazism and of the history of reception. The film's director Oliver Hirschbiegel stated in an interview that the film was meant as an exploration of the Hitler myth. He wanted to show the human side of Hitler in order to deconstruct his demonic media image. Especially those aspects of his personality which were both attractive for a large part of the former German population and which were not challenged in recent media representations needed to be confronted. Therefore it could be understood as an intervention in what I have termed the 'seduction narrative.' Unfortunately it failed in many respects. One of them was the film's failure to deconstruct the Nazi propaganda image of Hitler himself as a fatherly figure.<sup>11</sup> Other movies – for example, Dani Levy's *My Führer – The Really Truest Truth about Adolf Hitler (Mein Führer – Die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Hitler)*<sup>12</sup> – tried to mock the attitude of historical authenticity which prevailed in *The Downfall* and tried to establish a more ironic narrative and aesthetic style in depicting Hitler as a cinematic character and the artistic decision of the director in *The Downfall* to attempt to 'replicate' the historical milieu down to the physical characteristics and personal mannerisms and speech patterns of Hitler himself in the name of 'historical authenticity'? It is, indeed, rather obvious that the majority of cinematic productions about the Nazi period tend to hide behind a

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**10** For a comprehensive approach of these changes in German memory politics confer: Olick, What Does It Mean to Normalize the Past. In: Olick (ed.), *States of Memory*, 2003; Giesen, *The Trauma of Perpetrators*. In: Alexander (ed.), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, 2004.

**11** For a more in-depth analysis of Hitler's image in cinema confer: Elm, Man, Demon, Icon. In: Machtans / Ruehl (eds.), *Hitler – Films from Germany*, 2012.

**12** *My Führer – The Really Truest Truth about Adolf Hitler (Mein Führer – Die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Hitler)*, directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel, [2007] 2007.

wall of historical facts and an illusionist attitude of unmediated access to historical reality. The strategy to mock such pathetic images of ‘the Führer’ and narrations about the Nazi past is even more visible in Walter Moers Bunker animation or, for instance, in the various spoofs with bogus subtitles on Bruno Ganz’s Hitler performance in *The Downfall* that can be found on the Internet. One of the most popular is about Hitler trying to find a parking space in Tel Aviv.<sup>13</sup> I regard these attempts to ironize historical realism, as an expression of generational discontent with a memorial culture that has become quite static – and not only in Germany. For instance, Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds*<sup>14</sup> can be regarded as a more recent approach in counterfactual history on the matter.<sup>15</sup>

Now, even though we can identify major deficits in the dealing with the past, the main problem of German memorial culture is not to acknowledge historical guilt, because this is what *has* been achieved. The problem is rather to understand the consequences of it. Auschwitz has indeed become an integral part of German identity. Even if a minority of citizens do not want to recognize the importance or even want to reject this part of German history, they have to take it into account. Memorialization and routinization are essential parts of the German collective memory for good reasons. In my understanding, the difficulties to integrate such a monstrous past in one’s own personal identity as a German citizen are still underestimated. Furthermore Auschwitz requires a reflection far beyond personal guilt. Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt, Theodor W. Adorno, and many others have started this ongoing critical project. As a result of it, German identity has been challenged and haunted, driven (theoretically) to the need to take on a post-conventional<sup>16</sup> shape. The post-conventional aspect in German identity formation implies an obligation to reflect one’s own social and cultural origin, to question normality as a convention. In this sense, the understanding of the Holocaust as a cultural trauma triggers a shift in German modernity. Politically this shift found its expression through a different notion of nationality from an ethnic understanding to a more democratic and pluralistic one. The general rift in German identity formation is both a result of and an impetus for memorial culture and not an undisputed reality on the ground in present-day Germany. The

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13 N.N., Holocaust Survivors Protest Hitler Tel-Aviv Parking Parody, [http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=bed\\_1234973320](http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=bed_1234973320) (accessed 25 March, 2015).

14 *Inglourious Basterds*, directed by Quentin Tarantino, [2009] 2009.

15 Hückmann, *Vengeful Fiction*. In: Elm / Kabalek / Köhne (eds.), *The Horrors of Trauma in Cinema*, 2014.

16 The expression is taken from Lawrence Kohlberg’s well-known concept of moral development, where it also signifies the last stage in moral development of an individual. The latter aspect of the concept with its normative implications and hierarchical structure does not apply to the discussion at hand, see: Kohlberg, *Die Psychologie der Moralentwicklung*, 1996.

challenge to integrate a difficult cultural heritage into one's own identity needs to be accompanied by an ongoing public debate, educational programs, and a discourse in political philosophy which are able to maintain the coherence of long-term developments. For instance I would argue that Jürgen Habermas' theory of communication action and discourse ethic is very much the political philosophy of this historical constellation. It represents a social theory (*Gesellschaftstheorie*) which questions the standards of rationality in favor of public debate and moral reasoning. Interestingly enough, the 'everyday life' approach of Robert Thalheim's movie – when it comes to historical responsibility – displays some similarities to Habermas' life world concept as a basic (uncircumventable) realm for normative orientation.<sup>17</sup> Memorial culture should not downplay the artificiality of its origin as an invented tradition nor disregard it as something only negative. The universalistic impetus echoes a tendency in the society of the perpetrators that has to be accompanied by a particularistic one to chronicle the destruction of Jews and Jewish life in Germany and all over Europe.

## And Along Come Tourists

There are a few cinematic productions which reflect the complexity of this memorial culture. One of the more advanced endeavors is Robert Thalheim's *And Along Come Tourists*. This third-generation narrative expresses the difficulties of integrating the German past in one's own identity and everyday life, against the background of a highly routinized memorial culture. The plot tells the story of Sven (Alexander Fehling), who does his civil service at a youth hostel and education center (*Jugendbegegnungsstätte*) near the Auschwitz memorial site. His main assignment is to help a Polish survivor, Stanislaw Krzemiński (Ryszard Ronczewski). The elderly survivor works at a restoration facility and testifies from time to time for visitors of the memorial site. Krzemiński's restoration task is to maintain the suitcases that are part of the exhibition in Auschwitz. Skillfully, Thalheim addresses the generational divide between 'living memory' (Maurice Halbwachs)<sup>18</sup> and the aspiration of institutionalized remembering. At the end of the movie, we will get to know that Krzemiński promised the deported people when they arrived at the ramp of Auschwitz, to take care of their suitcases and return them in good condition. According to the staged mindset of the survivor, they are not just parts of an exhibition but items that should be usable for living persons.

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<sup>17</sup> See: Jürgen Habermas, *Von den Weltbildern zur Lebenswelt*, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 1980.

This attitude clashes with a memorial culture that is depicted throughout the film with a tendency to reify its objects, among them also the survivor himself, for the representation of a painful but somehow mastered past.

The character of Sven is dramaturgically designed to show the tension between these two different approaches to the past. His character serves in the cinematic narration as a mediator between the living memory of the survivor and the institutional efforts of society. In a more general way, he moderates between memory and cultural trauma. We will see that the character undergoes a maturation process from a passive towards an active historical attitude.

The dramaturgical design of Svens character is introduced in the opening sequences when Sven first meets Krzemiński and is welcomed by the director of the youth hostel and education center Klaus Herold (Rainer Sellien). In the first sequence, Sven enters Krzemiński's apartment where he is supposed to live and – because he is exhausted from the journey to Oświęcim – finishes the old man's milk in the refrigerator. Krzemiński is not amused by this behavior and mocks in Polish, whether his apartment has become a youth hostel now. In the second sequence Herold briefly explains to Sven, what his job obligations are in the education center. Herold emphasizes that the facility is not only a hostel but offers 'educational experiences'<sup>19</sup>. We will see that the clash between everyday necessities and the monumental shadow of the past is a reoccurring pattern throughout the movie.



**Fig. 1:** Krzemiński (Ryszard Ronczewski) at his restoration work.  
(Foto: X Verleih AG, Berlin, 23/5 Filmproduktion GmbH)

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<sup>19</sup> And Along Come Tourists, 02:45–05:30.

Along with the conflict of how to remember the past, the movie stages the everyday life experience of the present-day German generation. This everyday life experience is aesthetically captured through the employment of a subjective handheld camera and gets spatially expanded to the Polish town of Oświęcim and its youth who tries to make a living in proximity to the memorial side of Auschwitz. In one of these scenes Sven is entering a rock concert somewhere in the town. Sven is depicted as enjoying the relaxed atmosphere and rebellious tunes of the rock concert. When the singer of the group addresses him as a possible agent of a record company, the conversation soon turns direction, where Sven's presence will be identified with the German past in Auschwitz. The singer mocks Sven's work at the education center as the return of a "German civil army" in Auschwitz.<sup>20</sup> Obviously the Polish and German youngsters are not on good terms. The staging shows a rather restrained reaction by Sven to the rocker's mocking – just disappointedly nursing his beer and shrugging his shoulders. To me this seems quite an accurate depiction of the behavior from an average German middleclass man. The scene illustrates that taking on the blame has become part of a German identity formation for this generation. During the movie we will find some more scenes that identify Sven with the German past. Thus, the second function of Sven's character in the cinematic narration is to represent the situation of being addressed as the heir of historical guilt.



**Fig. 2:** The Oświęcim train station. An 'everyday life perspective'.  
(Foto: X Verleih AG, Berlin, 23/5 Filmproduktion GmbH)

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**20** And Along Come Tourists, 08:37–10:36.



Both ways of encountering the dreadful past are situated outside the former death camp. I consider this is a big advantage for the film.<sup>21</sup> The narration does not get involved into the usual strategies to authenticate the past and can draw all attention to the presence and how the presence is afflicted by a past, which sometimes falls prey to everyday interests itself. The plot also refrains from referring to Sven's family story. Thus, the narration emphasizes the generational gap without disconnecting Sven's identity from his German origin.

The troublesome German-Polish youth encounter is intensified through Sven's relation with Ania Łanuszewska (Barbara Wysocka). Sven gets to know her through his position at the education center. Ania works as a guide on the memorial side of Oświęcim. For dramaturgical reasons, she happens to be the sister of the band's solo vocalist Krzysztof Łanuszewski (Piotr Rogucki), whom Sven encountered during the concert. In a later part of the movie Sven and Ania will start a love affair. Before that – in one of the film's most remarkable sequences – Sven and Ania are making a bicycle trip in the beautiful landscape of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The director manages to catch something of the uncanny atmosphere of this place and the helplessness of two young adults to come to terms with it.



**Fig.3:** Sven and Ania. Their romantic bicycle ride along the fence of the death camp.  
(Foto: X Verleih AG, Berlin, 23/5 Filmproduktion GmbH)

**21** There is one scene, which stages the suitcase exhibition inside the camp. Thalheim stated in an interview that is seemed indispensable for the narration of the movie. Press booklet: Am Ende kommen Touristen, <http://www.x-verleih.de/de/presse/null/dateien/AM-ENDE-KOMMEN-TOURISTEN> (accessed October 20, 2013). Of course it is well known that it is very difficult to get permission to film inside the extermination camps of Auschwitz. Even Steven Spielberg did not get it for Schindler's List.

After cycling through the village of Monowice, which was the site where the IG-Farben concern used forced laborers for the building of a chemical plant, Sven and Ania take a break at a little lake. Sven, who is obviously moved by the presence of the thinly-covered past, tries to start a conversation about it. He asks Ania how she manages to live in such a place, where ‘humanity’s biggest atrocity took place.’ Ania evades a clear answer and stresses the fact that for her Oświęcim is simply the place she grew up in. She returns the challenging question by asking Sven “You are living here now, too. How do you feel about it? You are German.” Sven does not find words to reply to the question and the question is finally thwarted by Ania’s remark that she does not understand its meaning. The youngsters get up and cycle back, but the camera insists on the question. Not only do we see a lengthy scene when they cycle along the fence of the camp, but also the long shot at the lake holds some aesthetical reading possibilities.<sup>22</sup>

We know from Greek mythology, especially from Ovid’s Pan and Syrinx in his *Metamorphoses* that people under pressure might change their shape. Every piece of reed in the lake that fills the background of this scene could be the disguise of a person murdered in Auschwitz. The German and Polish characters in this scene seem to feel their absent presence but do not find a way to include these feeling in their twenty-first century European life.

Another element of the plot is the depiction of an instrumental twist in German memorial culture. A German chemical company which has relocated its operations in Oświęcim uses the Polish survivor for its public image as a historically-sensitive company. Sven is appalled by the behavior of the representatives, which serves as a first turning point in developing a more profound attitude to the past and brings him closer to the Polish survivor Krzemiński in particular. There are two major sequences which stage this instrumental attitude. The first sequence deals with the arrogance of a German engineer, who complains about the bad conditions of the plant as a result of low Polish working standards and a scene in which Krzemiński testifies to the apprentices of the company. The apprentices do not show a deeper interest in his account but want to see the tattooed number on his arm out of morbid curiosity.<sup>23</sup> In the second of these sequences Sven and Ania have already become a couple and are in a good mood on the way to the inauguration of a memorial in Monowice. Both are on duty. Sven is driving the car in his capacity as assistance to Krzemiński and Ania will serve as a translator of Krzemiński’s opening speech for the representatives of the Polish community. During this scene the public relation manager of the company, Andrea Schneider (Lena Stolze) interrupts the speech of the survivor because she

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<sup>22</sup> And Along Come Tourists, 45:03–49:08.

<sup>23</sup> And Along Come Tourists, 25:17–28:20.

thinks that the weather conditions are not suitable for the occasion. Krzemiński is appalled by the rude behavior and refuses to join a photo together with the representatives of the company and the director of the education center Herold.<sup>24</sup>

In this sequence the narration offers some kind of mute socio-economical criticism as well. The allusion to the German chemical plant clearly carries echoes of the former IG-Farben Trust and a continuity of German economical domination. I do not want to pursue this line of the narration, although it certainly serves to portray an ongoing social divide in modern Europe.

The cinematic narration combines four interrelated storylines: Sven and Krzemiński, Sven's relation to Ania and her brother who works at the chemical plant, the works of the education center and the preservation department and finally the German chemical company, which wants to relocate in Oświęcim. All of them are connected through their relation to the past or – to be more precise – through a conflict between everyday life challenges and representations of the past. The Holocaust is acknowledged as cultural trauma but its meaning on the level of everyday life is rather arbitrary. This is the space the movie exposes and explores.



**Fig. 4:** Krzemiński and Sven. The ‘everyday life’ approach.  
(Foto: X Verleih AG, Berlin, 23/5 Filmproduktion GmbH)

After the interrupted inauguration speech, Sven's develops his own interpretation of the “special sensitivity”<sup>25</sup>, which the environment requires. Sven keeps supplying Krzemiński with suitcases from the preservation department although

<sup>24</sup> And Along Come Tourists, 55:54–59:38.

<sup>25</sup> And Along Come Tourists, 1:11:15.

the Polish professionals do not want to accept Krzemiński's outdated restoration methods any more. The conservators inform Herold, and Sven gets scolded by him in front of Krzemiński. For Krzemiński it becomes clear that his restoration skills are no longer wanted. In a rather prosaic scene he tells Sven about the promise to deported people at the ramp of Auschwitz to return the suitcases to them, and requests that Sven leave him alone. This last scene with the Polish survivor seems to suggest that he will follow the advice of his sister to move into her place, a house in the remote and quiet countryside.

Sven's private life also reaches a turning point. Ania decides to leave Oświęcim and in ending the relationship with Sven, she explains to him that the job offer in Brussels she received will be her only chance to leave the town; otherwise she might get stuck there like most of her female friends around her.



**Fig.5:** Ania tells Sven near the train station that they have to separate.  
(Foto: X Verleih AG, Berlin, 23/5 Filmproduktion GmbH)

After being dropped by his lover and frustrated by his work in the education center Sven is resolved to leave Oświęcim for good. The last scene offers an open-ended turning point. Sven is already at the train station of Oświęcim, when a German school class with its teacher arrives. The disoriented group does not know how to get to the memorial site. Again, the narration emphasizes the difficulties of everyday life problems against the background of great educational messages that seem to come from the horrible past. Sven decides to accompany the group and is clipping their tickets while the teacher lectures him about German history and responsibility. The scene displays an inversion of the teacher-pupil relationship, the relations between second- and third-generation Germans, because

Sven is performing a kind of responsibility the teacher is only talking about. The scene stages the difficulty of combining the ‘Never Again’ master narrative of the second generation with the non-heroic everyday life experience of the third or fourth generation in present-day Europe. I read this final scene as an insight into the kind of struggle that is involved in taking on historical responsibility with a non-heroic attitude. Thus, it can be understood as the staging of a generational appropriation of those contents of the public memory that were mentioned earlier in this chapter. I see it as an attempt to give life to an invented cultural trauma in German memory politics. The most iconic Holocaust images such as trains and suitcases take on another layer of meaning. They link the present, not only to the past as we are used to see them in cinematic narratives, but also connect the past to a present-day generation which tries to make sense for themselves. When Sven is on the way with his wheeled suitcases to the train station in Oświęcim it is clear that these iconic objects refer not only to the past but also to the future of the young German, a double-metaphor – for the ‘baggage’ they carry and the opportunities they have. The suitcases in particular are a kind of transitional objects which were repaired by Krzemiński to keep them usable for people who will not return, iconic items for the exhibition in the Auschwitz memorial site, while they serve equally an everyday life purpose today. The present is not suspended by the past, while the past remains an object in its own right.

Of course other readings are possible: As I could observe in my academic teaching at Ben-Gurion University quite a few Israeli students were rather irritated by the narrative of the movie. A young non-Jewish German and a Pole discuss the heritage of Auschwitz without including explicitly a Jewish perspective. The question arises – whether the position of the ‘Jewish other’ has to be addressed in such a narration or not. When I worked at the Fritz Bauer Institute in Frankfurt, we discussed a similar question about the movie. The film-scholar Ronny Loewy argued that a film, which takes place in Auschwitz, has to include a Jewish perspective in his narration and claimed it was missing here. I did not quite agree: Every film that is situated at this location and its vicinity already has Jewish history in its backpack. Thalheim knows this and avoids the redundancy that we usually encounter when we are confronted with the icons of Auschwitz. He chooses to quote them from the everyday life perspective of a third German and Polish generation.<sup>26</sup> Through this narrative strategy the historical perspective is reversed. The past is depicted through the presence of the young adults and through their everyday life problems against the background of a well-established memorial culture. Therefore, the narration does not only *acknowledge*

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<sup>26</sup> Thalheim confirmed to prefer such a cinematic and historic approach in an interview, Gansera, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Mai 17, 2010.

the Holocaust as a cultural trauma in German memorial culture; it *expresses* the challenges in the identity formation of the current German generation, and generations to come. Thalheim's film offers a different approach to encounter the German past. The approach provides some potential for rebuilding trust between non-Jewish Germans and Jews because it dares to take on responsibility for this past, unprotected by a melodramatic inclusion of Jewish otherness. Mutual trust relies very much on the certainty to know where the other side is standing.

Another aspect of Ronny Loewy's criticism was that Oświęcim was not only a concentration and extermination camp, but also a Polish town with a large Jewish population.<sup>27</sup> This aspect is indeed neglected in the film, and here I completely agree with Loewy's criticism. Especially since the director decided to tell his story from everyday life perspective, the everyday life and what is missing in it could have become part of the plot. The emphasis on the German-Polish perspective is – from a narrative point of view – by no means excluding the Jewish experience. Still the barriers between the collective memories remain difficult to overcome.

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<sup>27</sup> For a more detailed account on the history of Oświęcim and its Jewish population see: <http://oshpitzin.pl/between-the-wars/> (accessed June 17, 2014). My thanks for this link go to the English editor of this article, Daniella Ashkenazy.

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