The Center for German Studies
European Forum at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

The Infantilization of Evil:

*The Tin Drum* and the Intergenerational Dynamics of

Remembrance of the Second World War in West Germany

Avraham Rot
Work on this paper was supported by the Center for German Studies, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The author is grateful to Christian Kohlross for his guidance and supervision, as well as to Michal Goren and Yekutiel Rot for their stimulating inputs, criticism and support and Esther Cohen for her valuable comments on an earlier draft of this essay.
Contents

Introduction 4

I. The Development of Postwar Consciousness and Culture 8

II. Why Did Oskar Stop Growing? 21

III. Why Did Oskar Really Stop Growing? 26

Conclusions 33

Bibliography 38

Filmography 42
Introduction

Our chronological position in relation to the last two world wars brings the issue of the social function of memory to the forefront of public and academic attention. When applied at the level of the individual, the concept of memory essentially designates the unity and continuity of the self.1 Similarly, when attributed to the collective, ‘memory’ designates the capacity of society to possess a shared historical consciousness and to act as a unity. Both for human individuals and for human societies, as for any other entity, memory is also a precondition for any process of learning.2

However, whereas the individual’s memory is founded on subjective experience, the memory of the collective is constructed, shaped and maintained to accord with evolving social values and changing political climates—while only being backed up by the remembrance of individuals. As the eyewitnesses of the world wars are about to be gone, we are left with a weakening anchor of subjectivity and, thus, we turn to investigate the validity of purely mediated memory in order to strengthen society’s capacity to learn. The increasing interest in social memory, as well as the motivation behind the current investigation, is largely due to the atrocities of the twentieth century and to the imperative to learn from history and prevent their reoccurrence.

Émile Durkheim developed the concept of collective consciousness as fundamentally distinct from individual consciousness to argue that psychic-like faculties are attributable to the collective without being reducible to its constituent individuals.3 In a similar vein, Maurice Halbwachs introduced the concept of collective memory as an irreducible social fact.4 What are the methodological implications of this distinction? How can such facts be studied? According to German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, ‘social systems…are not self-conscious units like human individuals’ since ‘societies have no collective spirit that

---

1 This theme has been extensively discussed since the early modern period. For an overview, see John F. Kihlstrom, Jennifer S. Beer and Stanley Klein, ‘Self and Identity as Memory’, in Mark R. Leary, Geoff MacDonald and June Price Tangney (eds.), Handbook of Self and Identity (Guilford Press, 2005), 68-91.
has access to itself by introspection’. Consequently, Luhmann claims, ‘self observation on the level of social systems has to use social communication’.\(^5\)

Following these assumptions, this paper aims at delineating some characteristic features of the dynamics of the German consciousness of the Second World War through an observation of its manifestations in the communication media of West Germany. In this study, the primary focus is on popular culture, which can arguably be treated as a manifestation of the rather ambiguous entity called ‘collective consciousness’. The main primary sources used here are Günter Grass’s novel *The Tin Drum* (1959)\(^6\) and Volker Schlöndorff’s film adaptation of the novel, *The Tin Drum* (1979)\(^7\).

The paper consists of two main parts. The first one presents the historical background against which these two cultural products were created. The historical background discussed is that of the evolution of the consciousness of the war in West Germany and of other developments that occurred in parallel and furnished the relevant socio-cultural context. Highly relevant are also the autobiographical details of the artists Grass and Schlöndorff, for not only do their works represent the attitudes and dilemmas of their respective generations but also their life stories concretely and characteristically demonstrate the personal background of the individuals of whom these generations consist. For these reasons, such details are woven into the general historical background.

The second part (chapters 2 and 3) consists of a comparative analysis of the novel and the film. On the basis of this analysis, the intergenerational dynamics of the remembrance of the war are discussed. This part starts with a ‘dry reading’ of the film—that is, a reading which does not take into account the transformations of the collective consciousness of the war. This initial reading reveals the basic ostensible similarities between the film and the novel with regard to the way they represent the war and the social criticism they perform.

Additional reading, however, shows that a deeper and more contextualized analysis, which takes into account the aesthetic differences between the novel and the film and the historical modifications of the social consciousness of war, reveals fundamental

---


\(^7\) Franz Seitz and Anatole Dauman (producers) and Volker Schlöndorff (director) (1979), *The Tin Drum: The Criterion Collection* [film]. FRG and France: Artemis Film & Argos Films.
differences between the two works. Whereas the book offers a social criticism which basically belongs to the 1950s and to a generation which was mature during the war, the film expresses the consciousness of the late 1970s, which is influenced by the attitudes of the rebellious 1960s generation towards the war and the normalization aspiration of the 1970s.

The conclusion stemming from this analysis can be summarized as follows: both the novel and the film are products of popular culture which deal with the war and, therefore, offer a glimpse into the process of the work of memory in West Germany. The distinction between the two, it is suggested, is an outcome of a generation gap with regard to the consciousness of the war. Whereas Grass’s novel deals directly with the problem of remembering the ‘unmasterable past’ and articulates the deadlock condition of the 1950s, Schlöndorff’s film represents the different perspective of the 1970s. Due to the time interval, this latter perspective can be detached from the dramatic, historical events to a certain extent and, therefore, allows for a more generalized interpretation of the war—an interpretation that, in this case, was directed against the bourgeois society and the elder generation.

This interpretation leads to a more general conclusion about the significance of intergenerational dynamics in the history of the social consciousness and politics of memory in postwar Germany. Following Karl Mannheim’s account of ‘the problem of generations’, the importance of the generational factor for the understanding of historical developments and the implications of such an understanding for our very perception of the pace of historical time are acknowledged here. Mannheim argues that ‘[w]e must…consider the degree to which forms of social intercourse show stratification according to generations’. I argue that this degree is very high in the case of the German consciousness of the war.

In itself, this claim may not be greatly surprising considering the extremity of the event that one generation experienced as adult and the other as child or not at all; however, historical accounts tend to avoid the complexity of generations and cling to the conventional yardstick of linear time. In this paper, it is shown not only that the

9 Ibid., 319, italics in the original, omitted here.
phenomenon of generations, along with the chronological pace of time, is to be considered as a central explanatory factor in understanding the historical development of the German consciousness of the war, but also how the theme of biological immaturity, which designates normal intergenerational relations within the family and society, was used as a metaphor in the postwar German social context in order to reflect over the war, represent the German society which went through it, expose and criticize this society and, later on, demarcate its limits and disconnect from it in a process of generational differentiation.
I. The Development of Postwar Consciousness and Culture

Historian Gilad Margalit argues that the occupation with the moral responsibility for the crimes of Nazism and the formation of a consciousness of guilt in Germany took place already during the war itself. According to him, this occupation has been intensified since the Nazis’ defeat and the diffusion of information about the events of the war, and it is an outcome of processes which occurred within German society rather than of the ‘re-education’ and denazification policies imposed on it by the Allies (although these definitely facilitated the dissemination of information about the war). Despite the fading of the occupation with guilt since the deterioration towards the Cold War at the end of the 1940s, the consciousness of guilt has been sustained and reshaped throughout the period of the Federal Republic and still persists in the 2000s.10

In an article which forms part of what came to be labeled the Historikerstreit (the Historians’ Dispute) of the years 1986-1989, Wolfgang Mommsen states that during the first years which followed the Nazis’ defeat, the German public tended not to discuss the Nazi past or to confront it only partially. During this period, according to him, the historical, public consciousness skipped over the years of Nazi rule to the years of the Weimar Republic and the late German Empire. Mommsen locates the end of this period at the end of the 1950s, when, he maintains, a double process of orientation to the democratic West on the one hand, and decline of the occupation with the German national consciousness on the other, had begun.11

Similarly, according to the periodization suggested by the sociologist and collective-memory researcher Jeffery Olick, the end of the 1950s is also the end of a distinct period which began in 1949, at the time the Federal Republic was established.12 Olick describes

---


Olick and Levy state that there are many proofs for their argument regarding the denial of the 1950s. In a footnote (ibid., n. 14), they refer to a public survey in 1951 which found that only 32% of the population thought Germany was blameworthy for the war, while 53% and 62% thought so in 1962 and 1967 respectively. It is interesting to note that Margalit, who, as we saw above, argues that there was a
the ‘legitimation profile’ of West Germany in this period as ‘the reliable nation’, thereby emphasizing his argument that the confrontation with the Nazi past was done then almost solely within the realms of the institutional and political level under the command of Adenauer.

With regard to the wider public, according to Olick and Daniel Levy, the 1950s were a period of denial and avoidance of confrontation with the past. The majority of the public rejected the idea of collective guilt (and, therefore, Adenauer, too, was forced to do so), and many Germans were mainly occupied with themselves as victims of the war. Olick and Levy also state that this argument, despite the fact that some reject it, is the one most accepted in the literature.\(^{13}\)

The popular cinema of the 1950s, with the rising genre of *Heimatfilm* (homeland-film), strengthens this argument. The simple stories about happy villagers against the background of the natural landscapes of the Alps represented clear-cut dichotomies between good and evil, and their protagonists were usually the simple man, with whom everyone could identify. If a reference to history was made, then the protagonist was shown as the one who is trampled under the great historical events, whereas the Nazis were represented as the demonic ‘other’.\(^{14}\) One can see this cinema as a symbol of the apathy, or escapism, of the 1950s and perhaps even as an entertainment device which lessened the tension of the people as they perseveringly worked on the realization of the ‘economic miracle’ (*das Wirtschaftswunder*).

Despite this general trend, towards the end of the 1950s one could find German films which contained social criticism. Such a film is Kurt Hoffmann’s 1958 satire *Wir*


A noteworthy counter-view, in addition to Margalit’s, is that of Helmut Dubiel, who considers the same obsessive denial of the notion of ‘collective guilt’ by the Germans as a proof for the existence of a deep feeling of guilt (Margalit, 2005, 203).

The movie follows the stories of two men, Hans Bökel and Bruno Tiches, who go through the years of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi regime up until the mid-1950s, coincidently encountering each other in different phases of their lives. Whereas the former chooses not to take part in society during the years of Nazism, the latter builds up his career exactly at this time while exploiting the opportunities brought about with the new regime. After the war, Bruno’s businesses are damaged, but they re-flourish during the 1950s. Now working as a journalist, Hans investigates the case of Bruno with an eye to exposing his opportunistic background. Bruno, however, suddenly dies and is left to be commemorated as a distinguished and honorable man. According to Colin Young, Hoffmann’s film attempts, on the whole successfully, to dramatise the German nation’s facility for attaching itself to the wrong leadership, losing in war, recovering its strength both economically and politically, and learning nothing in this process.16

A year later, in 1959, Theodor Adorno delivered a lecture which, as Olick explains, refers both through its title and its content to Kant’s famous essay on the Enlightenment. Kant’s essay is entitled ‘Beantwortung die Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?’ (‘An Answer to the Question: “What Is Enlightenment?”’), and begins with the words: ‘Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity’.17 Adorno’s lecture is entitled ‘Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit’ (‘What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?’), and thereby evokes the analogy between the words ‘Aufarbeitung’ (‘coming to terms’, ‘working through’ or ‘reprocessing’) and ‘Aufklärung’ (Enlightenment).18

15 Kurt Hoffmann (director), Wir Wunderkinder [film], script: Heinz Pauck and Gunther Neumann (Film Alliance Corp., 1958).
16 Colin Young [untitled review], Film Quarterly 13, 3 (1960): 51.
18 Olick, 1998, 547-548.

Olick also notes that when Adorno uses the term Vergangenheitsbewältigung (‘coming to terms with the past’), he means the opposite of Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit. The former expression was used by neoconservatives in the 1970s and 1980s to criticize the New Left’s over-occupation with the past and the self-flagellation practices it performed; therefore, it came to denote the evading of the confrontation with the past and its silencing. The latter expression, in contrast, is used by Adorno to denote the sincere confrontation with the past (ibid., pp. 548-549). In this context, it should also be noted that Adorno’s use of the word Aufarbeitung may also refer to the term Durcharbeiten (‘work through’), which was first used by Freud in his 1914 paper ‘Weitere Ratschläge zur Technik der Psychoanalyse: Erinnern, Wiederholen und
In his lecture, Adorno harshly criticizes the Federal Republic, which, he claims, tried at that time to repress the memory of the Nazi past at the official, social and individual levels. Throughout the lecture, Adorno refers to the process of confronting the past as analogous to the process of becoming an enlightened society. He blames the West German society for its ‘denial’, ‘diminished faculty of memory’, ‘political immaturity’ (*Unmündigkeit*) and for making ‘an ideology of [this] immaturity’. He urges the people of the Federal Republic to waken their ‘lazy consciousness’ and to begin with the real ‘work of reprocessing the past’ (‘Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit’) instead of the ‘empty, cold forgetting’ this work had come to be.¹⁹

Much is contained in these severe expressions (though it should be noted that Adorno softens his tone towards the end of the lecture). While Hoffmann uses satire in order to criticize the over-adaptability of German society to the variety of regimes which successively dominated it throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Adorno goes back to Kant and draws from there the theme of immaturity in order to levy similar criticism. For Adorno, ‘coming to terms with the past’, or rather, ‘re-processing’ it, means growing up to become a conscious democratic society. The work of memory, therefore, is directly connected to the process of learning and maturing. In order to understand its situation and reflect over its condition, the society is offered the familiar model taken from the life cycle of the individual. Society can perform self-reflection, contain the evil and still remain a unity, and this can be done through remembrance and with the notion of immaturity in its mind.

Tellingly also in 1959, the writer Günter Grass published the first novel of his ‘Danzig Trilogy’, *Die Blechtrommel (The Tin Drum)*. Grass was a member of ‘*Gruppe 47*’, which had undertaken the task of encouraging the writing of critical literature that would address and confront the problems of that day (*die Nachkriegsliteratur*). He was

born in 1927 in Danzig (today’s Gdansk) and raised there. After 1933, he joined the Hitlerjugend, and later on he served as a soldier in the World War II, after which he emigrated to West Germany. In an interview to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in August 2006, just before he published his autobiography Beim Haeten der Zwiebel (Peeling the Onion), Grass confessed that during the last year of the war he had served in the Waffen-SS, the combat unit of the SS.

This confession, as Historian Moshe Zimmermann explains, shocked everybody because of the fact that Grass, who is one of the most important writers of the twentieth century and who even received the Nobel Prize in 1999, symbolizes, for Germany, the confrontation [with the memory of the period of the Third Reich], a confrontation which does not evade the Nazi past and observes it at the eye level…. The Tin Drum is considered as the most direct account of this past, without any attempt at repressing or covering it up…. The severity of the criticism of Grass’ confession stems from the feeling of his readership that it was deceived, because Grass, who built himself as a critic of Nazism, did not talk about it before.20

Because of its harsh criticism of the German society of the Nazi epoch, The Tin Drum encountered severe opposition when published. Furious literary critic called Grass ‘a Kashubian-turnip-gluttonizing pig’, 21 and the controversy over the book even led to protest demonstrations of Catholic and right-wing groups.22

The protagonist of Grass’s novel, Oskar Matzerath, is also born in Danzig, but three years earlier than Grass, in 1924. He spends the war years there and emigrates to West Germany when the war is over. The story in this book, which abounds with autobiographical details, is narrated by Oskar himself, who writes his life story in 1954 when he is thirty years old and hospitalized in a psychiatric institute. In contrast to the story of the Enlightenment according to Kant, Oskar’s story is one of a boy who willfully decides to remain immature, stops growing at the age of three—that is, in 1927, when Grass was born—and remains there until the end of the war.

With the rise of a new generation which was not mature during the years of the war and the end of Adenauer’s rule, the historical indifference and evasiveness and material purposefulness of the 1950s made way for the social fermentation and the growing interest in the recent past of the 1960s. Olick and Levy explain that the rise of the new generation, which chose to rebel against the whole set of values of the former generation and to dissociate itself from it by morally and politically objecting to it, is what allowed for the opening of the public discourse regarding the confrontation with the past and for the willingness to draw from this discourse radical conclusions against the generation of the parents.23

Throughout Germany, students protested against the conservative approach of the academic and state institutions, which, as they argued, were still staffed with people who had collaborated with the Nazi regime despite the alleged process of denazification. The weakening of the opposition as a result of the establishment of a national unity government in 1966 and the attempts of the government at restricting the activity of the students by various means (e.g. emergency orders, university reforms and public propaganda) exacerbated the unrest and the protest, which, at times, were expressed in a violent manner.

The occupation of the New Left with the fascist past in this period was part of the young generation’s wider struggle against the existing institutions and of their demand for a more democratic society. But this occupation with the past was essentially different from that of the elder generation of leftists, such as Grass. The New Left was influenced by the universalistic approach of the Marxist doctrine and, at times, it overlooked the particularities and the idiosyncrasies of the historical past it evoked.24

The social agitation of the 1960s generation was also expressed in the cinema. In 1962, during the eighth West German Festival for Short Films, twenty-six young filmmakers published a manifesto declaring that the state of German cinema, which did not provide quality films, was catastrophic and announcing that the old cinema had died;

23 Olick and Levy, 1997, 929; Olick, 1998, 551. In this case, the arguments of Olick and Levy are similar to that of W. J. Mommsen (1994, 203).
we believe in the new cinema’. This document has come to be known as the ‘Oberhausen Manifesto’, and, despite the fact that only few of its publishers turned out to be prominent filmmakers, it heralds the beginning of a new cinematic wave, which became known as ‘the new German cinema’. Among the famous filmmakers of this movement are Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders and Völker Schlöndorff. These artists have produced complex and critical cinema which dealt with issues that motivated the protest movements and which began to acquire international recognition as quality cinema.

In 1966, after a sojourn of ten years in France in an attempt to forget his German identity, Schlöndorff returned to Germany in order to rediscover this identity and to publish his first film, Young Törless. This movie is an adaptation of Robert Musil’s novel The Confusions of Young Törless (1906), and it tells the story of the student Törless, who studies in a military boarding school in Austro-Hungarian Moravia at the beginning of the twentieth century. When two of his best friends, Reiting and Beinberg, humiliate and abuse another classmate of Jewish descent, Basini, Törless shows moral indifference towards the injustice done and finds mainly intellectual interest in the systematic insults. Törless passively becomes a partner to the abuse, takes an observer’s stance towards it and does not help Basini even when the latter begs for it; however, when the abuse is made extreme and collective, Törless arrives at his conclusions and eventually decides to leave the institute.

---

26 In Schlöndorff’s words: ‘My main goal, apart from the cinema, was to forget that I was German’, Hughes, 1981, 3.
27 Hughes, 1981, 2, 4.
28 Franz Achter and Franz Seitz (producers) and Volker Schlöndorff (director) (1966), Young Törless [film]. FRG and France: Seitz and Nouvelles Editions de Film.
Although the novel was published in 1906, Schlöndorff, in 1966, manages to perform through it a clear criticism of the social dynamics which leads to fascism. Beinberg demonstrates the authoritarian character, and the whole society (the students of the institute) easily becomes a cruel and persecuting society. In a 2001 interview, Schlöndorff explained that the wider social framework of Austria-Hungary, which is at the background of the movie, is also represented according to the fascist principle, which divides society into Übermensch and Untermensch, and, in this manner, the movie exposes the foundations of fascist society. The film was successful both nationally and internationally and, in the Cannes Festival, it was awarded the International Federation of Film Critics prize.

Four years after Young Törless was released and two years after the rebellions of 1968, Werner Herzog’s film Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen (Even Dwarfs Started Small) was released. This highly experimental film follows the conduct of a micro-society which inhabits a detached and deserted, peripheral area (the film was shot in one of the Canary Islands) and revolts against some vague authority for unclear reasons. The movie consists mainly of relatively long scenes in which the bizarre and chaotic uprising

31 Werner Herzog (director and producer), Even Dwarfs Started Small (Werner Herzog Film Produktion, 1970).
is depicted: the dwarfs get drunk together and have a food-fight between them; they run in circles after a driving car with no driver inside; crucify a monkey; kill a pig; break and smash various objects; lay siege to the leader’s house and break into it; have a lengthy and fervent dialogue with a piece of crooked timber; and laugh endlessly at a kneeling camel.

Figure 2 Even Dwarfs Started Small

The movie was filmed in 1968, only several months after the actual student uprisings in Germany took place. Despite Herzog’s explicit denial that this movie was meant to deal directly with these events, it is clear that his final product turns them into a laughingstock. And, indeed, Herzog did not avoid expressing his disapproval of the students’ revolts and his skepticism about their effectiveness. In his words: ‘I knew the revolution would not succeed because it was rooted in such an inadequate analysis of what was really going on, so I did not participate’.

On the one hand, the perspective of the dwarfs allows Herzog to criticize through it the consumption culture of the capitalist society. Entering into a normal house, the dwarfs examine its interior furniture and try to use the house’s facilities. The discordant disproportion in the picture of the dwarfs using these objects creates a dissonance effect due to the uncanniness (die Unheimlichkeit) of the domestic commodities. In this way, Herzog uses the change of perspective as a device for exposing the grotesqueness of these commodities.

On the other hand, however, this theme is not the central one of the film. Most of the pictures of the film are long shots in the outdoors without direct contact with or direct contrast to the familiar surroundings of the culture of consumption. Rather, the perspective taken shows the ridiculousness and the cruelty of the dwarfs’ community against the background of a lonesome nature. The disturbing recurring-motif of a crippled chicken shown pecked by other chickens clearly posits the entire deformed brutality in relation to nature and even as part of it.\textsuperscript{34} The physical non-development of the dwarfs indeed amplifies the effect of Herzog’s criticism but it also eternizes the deformity and the pathological cruelty of man and nature.

After experimenting with the abuse of Basini and observing ‘the wave’ which swept his fellow students towards the herdic persecution of Basini, Törless decides to withdraw from this immature micro-society and leave them to torture each other—maybe until they grow up. Herzog’s community of dwarfs, in contrast, is not in a confused stage of life, of gaining experience and maturing. Withdrawal is not a realistic possibility in this community, since the characteristic ‘dwarf’ is neither willingly acquired nor easily abandoned. Thus, it can be seen how the different uses of the theme of maturing and non-maturing, in the mental and in the physical sense, lead to essentially different conclusions regarding the implications of these uses for the wider society.

The third period in Olick’s periodization begins in the mid-1970s, after the oil crisis of 1973, an economic regression and the rise of a neoconservative ideology. Olick argues that, during this period, West German leaders wanted to present their country as a normal Western one which has achievements and difficulties, without any essential difference from other countries. The dealing with the past through its normalization proceeded well into the 1980s as demonstrated by the occurrence of the \textit{Historikerstreit} (1986-1989), which highlighted the question of the extent of the distinctiveness of the Third Reich era from the course of German history.\textsuperscript{35} Against this background—between consent and rebelliousness, acceptance and rejection, escapism and confrontation—the representation

\textsuperscript{34} Benjamin Noys, ‘\textit{Antiphusis}: Werner Herzog’s \textit{Grizzly Man}’, \textit{Film-Philosophy} 11:3 (2007): 38.
\textsuperscript{35} Olick, 1998, 551-552.
of the dark German past and the criticism thereof in the film *The Tin Drum* gains weighty significance.

After creating several films which deal with the central issues of the protest of the New Left, Schlöndorff decided to comply with the implorations of Franz Seitz—who was the producer of *Young Törless*—and to adapt the novel *The Tin Drum* into a film. At that time, Schlöndorff was already known for his affiliation to the New Left. This was evident, for instance, when the amnesty of Andreas Baader, the Red Army Faction leader, was rejected and Schlöndorff protested against this rejection. Schlöndorff was even suspected by the authorities of supporting terror. In 1977, with this political background, Schlöndorff decided to adapt the impossible story of Oskar, which had already been translated into twenty languages, to the medium of the motion picture. The film turned out to be one of the most successful of the German cinema, received the Palme d’Or award in the 1979 Cannes Festival (together with Francis Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*) and, a year later, won the Oscar in the category of the best foreign language film.

*The Tin Drum* is not the only audiovisual production dealing with the Nazi past that was displayed on the screens of West Germany at that time. In 1979, the American television miniseries *Holocaust* was released and widely debated in West Germany; this also fueled the debate over the prescription law (*die Verjährungsdebatte*). This debate took place in the same year and focused on the legal issue of whether it should be possible to continue to investigate and try war criminals despite the elapsed time.

That same year, Fassbinder’s film *The Marriage of Maria Brown* was released. The protagonist, Maria Brown, represents German society in the years of the ‘economic miracle’, which is diligently obsessed with protecting individual interests while justifying any means towards this goal, irrespective of any basic moral obligations. This film also represents the continuity between the periods of the Third Reich and the Federal Republic—as evident from the presentation of Hitler’s picture at the beginning of the

---

36 E.g.: *Michael Kohlaas: Der Rebell*, which deals with the protest movements of 1968 and *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*, which Schlöndorff made with Truta and became famous due to the expression of feminist views.
38 Herf, 1997, 349.
movie and photographic, negative portraits of chancellors from the Federal Republic period at its end—and it expresses grave pessimism towards the manner in which Germany deals with its past and its attempts at ‘becoming something again’.  

The preceding year (1978) saw the release of Hans Syberberg’s film Hitler: Ein Film aus Deutschland (or in its more provocative name: Our Hitler). Similarly to The Tin Drum and despite its complexity, abstractness, length (442 minutes), and lesser popularity, Our Hitler severely criticizes postwar German social identity by linking modern materialism with the indelible influence of Hitler on German society. However, Syberberg’s artistic approach stands in contrast to the representation mode chosen by Schlöndorff. Contrasting Syberberg to Grass, Schlöndorff says:

Syberberg is completely mythic and abstract…. Grass starts from precise childhood memories of a small town in the Baltic, of a family of shopkeepers. He shows how everything that happened had roots in the way these people lived. While Syberberg places the responsibility on Machiavellian, demonic minds which abused an innocent population, Grass shows Nazism deriving from the banality of middle-class life aspiring to become something else…. Grass’ novel…is diametrically opposed to the diabolical cosmos of Syberberg.…

In contrast to Herzog, Fassbinder and Syberberg, Schlöndorff’s films are usually more communicative towards the wider audience and not restricted to a culturally-elitist, cinematic language. One may say that Schlöndorff’s films are more ‘Hollywoodian’ in a sense, as evident from the continuation of his career, which is certainly so. The wide and favorable reception of The Tin Drum and the unique characteristics of the cinematic work of art, which is usually a collaborative product of many artists and numerous personnel, justify viewing the film as a historical document which manifests the consciousness of the wider public, regardless of whether one chooses to stress the influence of the public consciousness over the content of the film or emphasize the primacy of the film in determining the public opinion (as suggested above, the view here is that both sides

39 Michael Fengler (producer) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder (director) (1978), The Marriage of Maria Braun [film]. FRG: Albatros/ Trio/WDR.
41 Hughes, 1981, 3, 5.
mutually nourish each other). The attitude reflected in the movie is therefore, at least to some extent, the attitude of West German society in that period. What is now left is to analyze what the characteristics of this attitude are.

42 For an elaborate discussion of the film as historical document, see: Shlomo Zand, *Film as History: Imagining and Screening the Twentieth Century* (Tel Aviv, 2002) (Hebrew).
II. Why Did Oskar Stop Growing?

It was important for Schlöndorff to base the film *The Tin Drum* on the novel authentically. This concern brought him to collaborate with Grass in the writing of the script and to have Grass presence during the shooting of the movie.\(^{43}\) And indeed, at first glance, the film appears to convey Grass’s social criticism with high fidelity. According to Donna Reed’s literary analysis of the novel, one can understand Oskar as an artistic device designed to expose society.\(^{44}\) Like Herzog, Schlöndorff lowers the camera to the level of a child’s eye, whence it observes the events and the objects presented in the movie, and uses Oskar’s voiceover and close-ups extensively in order to emphasize his perspective and amplify the grotesque of the adult world. The childish view of Oskar reveals to the audience that which the adults try to avoid. In this manner, he observes the illegitimate relationship between his mother Agnes and her cousin Jan, the adults’ bourgeois culture, the demonstrations, parades and rallies of the Nazi party and the war.

The contrast created through the childish perspective is a recurring motif in the film. Joyful children who give Jan the Nazi salute and greet him with a cheerful ‘Heil Hitler’ instead of the usual ‘guten Morgen’;\(^{45}\) a child on his father’s shoulders who laughs in an awkward timing during Löbsack’s speech;\(^{46}\) the toy-like Nazi flag which passes along from the face of the newly-born Kurt, the son of Maria and Alfred (or, possibly, Maria and Oskar), over to a geopolitical map which shows the expansion of the Reich’s forces\(^{47}\) —in all of these pictures and in many others the contrast is clearly shown.

Perhaps above all, this contrast is expressed in the scene of the Nazi party’s parade, in which Oskar peeps underneath the tribunes. The formality, the seriousness and the festivity of the parade’s participants and audience are contrasted with Oskar’s sneaking from the backstage—where a little girl urinates and some junk is scattered—while accidentally stepping on dog feces. The shots of the parade *à la* Leni Riefenstahl in the *Triumph of the Will*, with the many angles and directions and with the symmetric

\(^{43}\) Schlöndorff has described his collaboration with Grass in these words: ‘The collaboration was that I would ask questions and he would answer them. What would they have had for lunch? How did the baker look? What would the mother say here? We never discussed the meaning of the metaphor…. He ended up more as a co-editor than a scriptwriter’. Nicholas Wapshott, *The Times*, May 10, 1980, 10.

\(^{44}\) Donna K. Reed, *The Novel and the Nazi Past* (Peter Lang, 1985), 68.

\(^{45}\) Schlöndorff, 1979, 49:37.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 53:30.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 1:54:26; ibid., 52:00-57:10.
perspectives, which intensify and underline the greatness of the event, are contrasted with the intimate close-ups of Oskar and with the shots that imitate his look, which is confined, like the camera, to the round frame of the peephole. The drama in the disharmony starts with Oskar and the children of the choir, and then it spreads over to the adult audience. Thus, through visual and vocal techniques, Oskar’s opposition to the manipulative, Nazi aesthetics is represented. 

Nevertheless, Oskar’s success in interfering with the Nazi march and submitting it to his cheerful jazz-like drumbeat is cut off by a sudden rain: the elements are stronger than his drum, and, *deus-ex-machina*, echo his intervention.

Grass’s harsh criticism, which represents the middle class as the central pillar of the fascist rule is evident in the film. The novel’s detailed descriptions of objects and commodities are translated into the visual language through the camera, which continuously dwells upon them, thereby exposing the ludicrousness of the adults’ appreciation of them. This can be seen, for instance, when the Jewish toy merchant Sigismund Markus tries to win Agnes’s heart by giving her silk pantyhose, and when Alfred makes Agnes sincerely happy by bringing a new radio device into their house. The historical events are enveloped in the family story. The petit bourgeois, domestic architecture serves as the background and framework for the great historical events; for example, the rise of Hitler in Germany is symbolized through the fixing of his portrait on the wall (instead of Beethoven’s portrait), and his downfall through its removal.

The family story of the Matzeraths, the shopkeepers, is encircled with a plentitude of merchandise and consumption products. One cannot overlook, for instance, the large, neatly organized piles of wooden boxes carrying the brand name of the washing powder ‘Persil’ which are placed by the cellar. The wooden boxes carrying the logo of this detergent appear several times throughout the movie and have salient significance.

The Persil washing powder was developed by the Düsseldorf-based chemicals company ‘Henkel’, distributed for the first time in 1908, and, since then, heavily advertised in almost every possible way known at that time (including day and night skywriting). The advertisement for Persil continued even after the beginning of World

---

48 Reed, 1985, 70.
49 Schlöndorff, 1979, 35:25.
50 Ibid., 49:40.
War II, despite a government’s decree which forbade the production of this kind of washing powder and the consequential withdrawal of the product from the market.51

The detergent Persil was originally named after its ingredients: perborate and silicate; over the years, however, and due to the constant advertisements and the success of the product both domestically and internationally, the word had become synonymous with ‘cleanliness’. After the war, the U.S. military government issued a certificate which officially declared that the person holding that document had not been a Nazi and that, accordingly, he was entitled to several benefits, such as having the right to work, rent an apartment and other essentialities.52 This was one of the essential instruments of the denazification era and the rebuilding of Germany in the postwar years. This document came to be known as ‘Persilschein’ (Persil-certificate) connoting the cleansing effect of the famous washing powder and, perhaps, also expressing the longing for the popular product, which was unavailable for purchase until the early 1950s.

Towards the end of the film, Alfred dies from swallowing a small swastika brooch, very much because of Oskar as the latter deliberately tries to draw the attention of the Russian and Mongolian soldiers, who have just broken into the basement, to the incriminating item. Later on, Alfred is buried by his few relatives in a pitiful funeral. The impoverished family has no means or time to afford a decent funeral similar to the one Agnes was honored with. They do not even have money for a proper coffin and, therefore, Alfred is buried in an improvised coffin made of empty Persil boxes, by no less than a Jewish Holocaust survivor who is also about to take over Alfred’s shop. Alfred, who will not have the chance to enjoy the cleansing capacities of Persil, dies when he tries to make guilt disappear by consuming it, and is eventually buried within the leftovers of his petit-bourgeois world. In this rather-too-intense use of symbols, Schlöndorff reiterates Grass’s occupation with guilt and criticism of materialism.53

Throughout the movie, the bourgeois ceremonies and atmosphere reveal their repugnant side through the low and penetrating gaze of Oskar (and the camera) while being interlaced with the dramatic political events. One such ceremony is Kurt’s birthday

53 Michal Goren, oral communication, 2008.
party, in which the gaiety around the table and the occupation with the objects and the food interweave with the ebullient and proud tone of the conversation about the situation at the front.\textsuperscript{54} Another such ceremony is Oskar’s third birthday party—the event which seems to be the main reason for his decision to stop his growing.

The decision not to continue growing echoes throughout the entire novel and the film, and it constitutes the main motif of both works. Through this motif, both works criticize the world of the adults and raise the issue of the occupation with responsibility and guilt. The criticism is largely Oskar’s criticism, and, because of it, he decides not to take part in the world of adulthood. However, the criticism is also represented through the repulsiveness of Oskar’s own behavior, his infantility representing the infantility of the German war generation.

Oskar’s egoism and indifference towards the suffering of others reflects the fascist spirit which spread all over the society. In the same manner, Oskar’s avoidance of taking responsibility also mirrors the adults’ conduct. In the film, this theme is explicitly treated when Oskar first meets the circus dwarf Bebra and rejects his proposal to join him and the circus, saying he prefers ‘being part of the audience’. Bebra urges Oskar to be active and says it is the obligation of people ‘of their kind [i.e. midgets]…to be in the front of the stage and to run the show’. ‘Otherwise’, Bebra continues, ‘it is the others that will run us, and the others are coming. They will take over the fairgrounds. They will stage torchlight parades. They will build platforms and fill them, and from those platforms preach our destruction’.\textsuperscript{55}

The next scene is that of the children who amuse themselves with a small swastika flag on the doorsill of the Matzerath family and greet Jan with a ‘Heil Hitler’. Inside the house, Alfred surprises Agnes with the new radio and replaces Beethoven’s portrait with that of Hitler. After Jan steps into the house, Alfred proudly tells him that he is on his way to the Nazi party’s parade and declares that ‘These are historic days. A man can’t stand aside. Gotta join in!’.\textsuperscript{56} Meanwhile, the exchange of words between Alfred and Agnes shows their concern with the high prices of boots and with food. Alfred leaves the apartment, so it seems, only to provide Agnes and Jan with privacy for their affair. As he

\textsuperscript{54} Schlöndorff, 1979, 1:54:30-1:46:44.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 48:20.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 51:00.
departs to the Nazi rally, Alfred is perturbed about his appearance and complains about the lack of matching boots to complete his uniform; and almost in the same breath with his proclamation of the ‘historic days’, he inquires with great concern: ‘How do I look?’

The juxtaposition of these two scenes and the fact that Bebra prophesies exactly the parades of the kind Alfred is going to sharpen the connection between Bebra’s implorations and Alfred’s declarations. The motivation for taking responsibility in the two cases, however, is clearly different: In the case of Bebra, it is a prophecy of the coming catastrophe which spurs him to act; Alfred, in contrast, is represented with complete derisiveness in the following scene as he departs from his family on his way to the parade and declares: ‘Duty is duty and schnapps is schnapps’ and finishes with a confused ‘Heil Hitler’. But the viewer understands that Alfred speaks the truth. His duty is duty as long as he can have his glass of schnapps after it.

57 Ibid., 51:30.
58 Ibid., 51:33.
III. Why Did Oskar Really Stop Growing?

In the following paragraphs, I would like to establish the argument that if we take into account the generation gaps and the differences between the novel and the film, we may find that despite the above-presented similarities regarding their social criticism and treatment of the theme of confrontation with the past, there still exists a major and essential difference between their statements, a difference which reflects the fundamental disparities between the attitudes of each generation towards these issues.

With regard to the plot, there are two major differences between the novel and the film: (1) The framework story of the novel is that of Oskar, who relates his life experience at the age of thirty, when he is consigned to a psychiatric hospital. Grass’s Oskar writes his autobiography in the institute in the mid-1950s, more or less at the same time when Grass had written the actual novel and not too long before it was first read by the German public. Grass’s novel begins and ends in the hospitalization room, and, throughout the story, he returns there repeatedly. Schlöndorff, too, brings Oskar to play the narrator’s role, and he does so by using the voiceover technique with the childish voice of Oskar; however, Schlöndorff omits the perspective of the matured age, the temporal distance and the hospitalization room. The voice of Schlöndorff’s Oskar accompanies the viewer along the chronological succession of the movie’s events, and, hence, the temporal duality of the novel fails to transpose over to the film. (2) The novel ends (and begins) in 1954, when Oskar, who celebrates his thirtieth birthday, wonders what he will do when he is released from the hospital. The movie, on the other hand, ends in 1945, close to the end of the war, when Oskar and his relatives emigrate to the west of Germany after he had decided to renew his growing

In a comparative study of the film and the novel, Sharon Rooks explains that whereas the viewer of the film has to confront two questions, namely: (a) why Oskar has stopped growing and (b) whether the plot should be understood as imaginary or real, the reader of the novel also has to confront the information given in the first line of the book: ‘Granted:
I [Oskar] am an inmate of a mental hospital’.\(^5^9\) In this manner, the reliability of the autobiographical story of Oskar, the mental patient, is rendered uncertain, and the reader is left to reevaluate the entire story, as well as each description and scene therein, by herself.\(^6^0\)

One can think of several answers to the viewer’s question why Oskar chooses to stop growing. From a psychological standpoint, for instance, one may underline Oskar’s birth trauma, which he tries to overcome by replacing the sounds of his mother’s heartbeats with the beating sounds of his drum. Oskar seeks maternal protection. He looks for it under the four skirts of his grandmother and, when he is deported out of this cozy shelter, he decides to remain a child and forces his mother, and everybody else, to continue protecting him. Still from a psychological standpoint, one can also understand Oskar’s Oedipal complex—which is clearly represented in the film—as explaining his unwillingness to become part of the mature, sexual world, which entails taking on responsibility. However, when purely considering the cinematic language of the film, the most natural place to look for answers is in the second scene in which Oskar appears, which is located directly after the birth scene: Oskar’s third birthday party.

Differently from the novel, where the birthday event is just an excuse for Oskar to carry out his already-consolidated decision to stop growing without any disturbances, in the movie, the decision itself is made during the birthday party. The succession of events preceding this decision is thus crucial for understanding the movie’s interpretation of the motivation behind the decision.

Schlöndorff chooses to expand a paragraph of the book\(^6^1\) to a complete scene, in which the party is depicted from Oskar’s perspective, with a strong emphasis on the sexual tension between Agnes and Jan and, mainly, on the pathetic behavior of the party-participants. Oskar, discontentedly observing the vacant debauchery of the adults, tries to find shelter under his grandmother’s skirts and, when he encounters her refusal, he steps out of the room and his voiceover utters what he has in mind: ‘Reflecting on the grown-up world and my own future, I decided to call a halt—to stop growing at once...and

\(^{5^9}\) Grass, 1965, 9.
\(^{6^0}\) Rooks, 1982, 225.
\(^{6^1}\) Grass, 1965, 55.
remain a three-year-old, a gnome, once and for all’.\textsuperscript{62} Outside the drawing room, one can see the large piles of wooden boxes carrying the logo ‘Persil’ placed by the cellar’s open door. Oskar carefully lays his drum on the basement floor, climbs back up and then performs his successful tumble from the cellar staircase.

At first glance, Oskar seems to be a Peter Pan, who despises the adult world and, therefore, decides to remain out of it and innocent. The viewer can interpret Oskar’s resistance as an objection to the bourgeois materialism, and, perhaps, even to Nazism as its outcome; however, it quickly emerges that the same Oskar also resists, with no less determination, whoever tries to take his precious drum from him and is furious to find out about his mother’s and Jan’s love affair. Even when the Polish post office is bombed, Oskar remains solely interested in his drum while entirely ignoring the traumatic event everybody around him experiences. The opposition to the adult world as such becomes the main theme of the movie, while the ambivalence that the viewer feels towards this opposition is what formulates its statement.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure3.jpg}
\caption{Oskar insists on keeping his drum and discovers his glass-breaking voice.\textsuperscript{63}}
\end{figure}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{62} Schlöndorff, 1979, 17:56.
\textsuperscript{63} Picture taken from: Hughes, 1981, 5.
\end{footnotesize}
Whereas the film’s plot extends from 1899 to 1945, the chronological framework of the novel is confined to the mid-1950s. In the novel, the story is solely the story of Oskar, who tries to perform a memory work. The decision to stop the growing of Oskar the child is, in fact, the decision of Oskar, the thirty-year-old mental patient, who tries to relate his life story. Oskar is unable to remember unless he cuts off his growing into a morally responsible adult. The cutoff is thus made at the time when the memory work is being done. Grass clearly raises thereby the issue of dealing with the memory of the war. Through Oskar, he presents to the audience the image of avoidance of confrontation, the infantility in this avoidance, the impotency it causes and, especially, its impossibility.

Whereas Grass, like Adorno, criticizes the indifference, egoism and solipsism of the 1950s and implores his generation to confront its past, Schlöndorff also mixes in his work the rebelliousness of the 1960s towards the morality and set of values of their parents’ generation. Schlöndorff emphasizes the bourgeois materialism of the parents’ generation as the reason for Oskar’s rebellion, which he thereby identifies with the protest of the 1960s.

As with the framework story, the choice of the ending in the two works is also crucial for understanding the statement each makes. Through the connection of the two chronological frameworks—that of the plot and that of the framework story—to a single location in place and time at the end of the novel, Grass emphasizes the actuality of the conflict Oskar experiences at the end of the book. Oskar does not know what he will do with his life, now that he is thirty and about to be released from the hospital: ‘Marry? Stay single? Emigrate? Model? Buy a stone quarry? Gather disciples? Found a sect?’ Grass, 1965, 570 He says he will turn to the ‘Black Witch’ (die schwarze Köchin) and ask her what kind of life he is going to live, and goes on depicting his deepest fears and worries, which pop up from every corner of his life. Oskar asks the reader not to ask him who the Black Witch is, because he lacks the words to answer this question, but he says: ‘Always somewhere behind me, the Black Witch’. Reed explains that the Black Witch is guilt and that, 65 Ibid., 572
therefore, the last words of the book, ‘Is the Black Witch here? Yes-Yes-Yes!’, leave the reader with the unpleasant thought: Should we plead guilty? Yes-Yes-Yes!

In contrast, the movie ends with Oskar’s departure by train, together with Maria, his stepmother, and Kurt. Oskar’s separation from his grandmother is indeed a painful one and he expresses this pain with bitter cries; however, the viewer knows that Oskar has just started growing again and his crying reminds her of that of a newborn baby, which brings up connotations of a new beginning and a new life. The last shot of the film is that of the Kashubian potato field with the smoking bonfire and the black-dressed woman who cultivates the land while Oskar’s train passes from the one side of the frame towards the horizon. This shot gives the feeling of continuity and circularity. The potato field, the woman and the bonfire close a circle with the first shot of the film and present a picture of a stable world that remains as it is, while the train, which disappears in the horizon, with Oskar in it, represents a new beginning and a move towards the unknown.

In an interview conducted two years after the film was released, Schlöndorff chose to explain why he considered Grass’s novel important and decided to adapt it into a film:

I also remember, at around eight or ten [1948-1950], a kind of mass guilt tendency—we were all accusing our fathers and asking them how the Hitler thing could have happened, what they were doing during the war, etc. And of course none of them admitted any responsibility. It was always somebody else who had been the evil one. The schools added to this confusion by teaching us about the war in a dry statistical manner. All you had to know was that a nasty Santa Claus, Hitler, had seduced everyone into doing horrible things. The emphasis was on rebuilding the country, for which moral scrutiny was definitely not a necessity. That was the spirit of the fifties. So that is why the view of Nazism as a sinister populist phenomenon in the Grass novel seemed to me an important theme.

On top of the personal testimony which confirms the argument that the years after the war were years of moral escapism and material restoration, Schlöndorff seems to declare

I decided here to translate directly from the German since Ralph Manheim, whose translation I use throughout the paper, for some reason translated the sentence: ‘Ist die schwarze Köchin da? Ja-Ja-Ja!’ to: ‘Where’s the Witch, black as pitch? Here’s the black, wicked Witch. Ha! ha! ha!’ (Grass, 1965, 572) and thereby he misses the point, as I see it.
67 Reed, 1985, 147.
68 Schlöndorff, 1979, 02:18:00.
69 Hughes, 1981, 3.
here that Grass and he had a similar motivation, namely to stress the importance of confronting the past. Schlöndorff, however, can maintain a distance between himself and the guilt due to the generation gap—a thing which Grass cannot do, and, indeed, does not do in his book. In the same interview, Schlöndorff also explains his decision to waive the Black Witch at the end of the film and to place, in her stead, the Kashubian woman, who symbolizes for him the eternal truth of circularity and, at the same time, of uncertainty:

"For me this grandmother is a total life principle. That’s why I removed the ‘Black Witch’ reference at the end of the novel. Grass thinks this was because I’m Protestant and he is Catholic, but it’s more than that. I cannot follow Grass in his fear of the Black Witch. The grandmother was a woman I can love more than fear."

Schlöndorff, who suggests a way of confrontation through the detachment from the past and from the generation of the war, cannot identify with Grass, who expresses the conflict between the necessity and the impossibility of confronting the guilt of the war generation. As Schlöndorff himself explains, it is important for Grass to show that there was never a Stunde Null (‘Zero Hour’) and that, despite the transformations of the sociopolitical frameworks, the population remained the same and maintained the continuity between the years of Nazism and of the ‘economic miracle’. Grass’s Oskar continues to carry his hunch after the war. Schlöndorff, on the other hand, ends the movie at the ‘Zero Hour’, thereby creating an essential dichotomy between the generations.

This argument should be qualified since the decision where to end the movie was also taken in the light of the adaptation from novel to film and the medium-based alterations and technical considerations it involved. As Schlöndorff explains,

The novel is about how the same people adapted very smoothly to the Nazis, then to the Americans, then to liberal democracy. But the film is a film and it has its own laws. One is that you cannot change your character mid-film, when Oskar starts growing again. No audience would take that. It just wouldn’t work.

---

70 Ibid., 6, italics added.
71 Ibid., Disc 2, ‘Original Scripted Ending’, ch. 1, 00:00-02:00.
72 The Times, May 10, 1980, 6
Schlöndorff further explains that the film’s length was also a consideration with regard to ending it in the year 1945; however, the significance of this decision is too weighty to be assigned to technical considerations. The whole novel is basically inadaptable, and Schlöndorff found creative ways to translate the imaginary-psychological plot into cinematic language. He did not avoid, for instance, showing Oskar in his mother’s womb and as a newborn baby. Moreover, there are many films showing the same persons at different stages of their lifetime simply by using several actors. Alternatively, the story could have been ended prior to the end of the war. And, finally, even if there was no choice but to conclude the film with the end of the war, Schlöndorff could have done so differently, without suggesting such a clear-cut dichotomy. In this light, Schlöndorff’s many attempts at explaining this problematic decision also prove the meaningfulness of the end of the film. All this notwithstanding, Schlöndorff’s intentions are secondary to the final product which came under his hands. What is important for the purpose of this study is the meaning of the images and sounds perceived by the German audience, less than the process which brought them about, since this paper treats the film as a direct expression of the consciousness of the masses, and, in this sense, Schlöndorff is just a tool by which the public’s consciousness manifested itself. Thus, his decision should largely be seen as imposed by the audience that was about to watch the film.

The distress and the helplessness of the end of the novel turn, in the film, into momentum and expectation. The claustrophobia of the hospitalization room is replaced with a shot of a landscape with a wide-open horizon. The guilt, in the shape of the Black Witch, is replaced with the ‘total life principle’ which the woman in the potato field represents. The particular wound which Grass exposes is healed with Schlöndorff’s universal truisms. The woman and the potato field allow for the normalization of the past and for its delimitation within clichés and simplistic statements: Wars were always and they will forever be; the Kashubians will always remain Kashubians and they will always be hit on their heads ‘because [they’re] not Polish enough or German enough’.73 If Oskar’s grandmother, who says these words towards the very end of the movie, accepts her bitter fate, surely we can do the same, and go on.

73 Schlöndorff, 1979, Disc 1, 02:17:00.
Conclusion

Positing the film against its relevant historical and interpretational background reveals an aspect of the development of the West German consciousness of the Third Reich era. The fact that the film is an adaptation of the novel supplies a comparative basis that facilitates the characterization of the film and the consciousness it reflects. The conclusion of this paper is that the consciousness reflected in the film is that of a generation which matured only after the Second World War and that this generation’s confrontation with the past is, to a certain extent, linked to its rebellion against its parents’ generation and to its ability to put the unrepresentable past-events into general frameworks, thereby rendering the past communicable even through the mass, popular media. At the same time, one must not overlook the similarities and the common motives of the two works—such as criticism of the culture of consumption and of the ethos of the German petit bourgeois.

This argument should be qualified on several grounds. First and foremost, the fact that the film is essentially a more popular work of art than the novel is important in the context of this study. The popular reception of the film justifies the consideration of it as a manifestation of wide-enough attitudes, so that it is possible to characterize, by its means, at least some of the features of the collective consciousness of the West German society at that time. Fassbinder’s *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, for instance, is a much more critical and pessimistic work, which can, to a larger extent, be associated with Grass’s criticism of West Germany in the 1950s. Likewise, Syberberg’s *Our Hitler* is definitely not a palliative representation of the relations between German society and Hitler; however, the very fact that the films of Fassbinder and Syberberg are more disturbing and targeted to the ‘higher intellectual’ audience reduces their usefulness for social-historical research of the type conducted here (as opposed to cultural-critical research).

The problematic disparity between ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures raises a fundamental question about the possibility of performing true and harsh, communicable social criticism through the mass media. If ‘popular’ roughly means ‘Hollywoodian’ and Hollywood necessarily dictates ‘happy endings’, the mere possibility of dealing with grave themes, such as guilt, without ‘othering’ the ones to be blamed seems to be

---

74 Rooks, 1982, 27.
nonexistent. Self-criticism and moral reflection are thus ipso facto barred from being meaningfully communicated via the mass media. In the light of this, Luhmann’s above-cited observations that ‘social systems...are not self-conscious units like human individuals’ and that ‘societies have no collective spirit that has access to itself by introspection’ become clearer. Taking these arguments one step further, it thus can be said that the popular frameworks necessarily demarcate meaningful communication as to exclude self-reflection: the differentiation of society according to the ‘high culture versus low culture’ dichotomy is, therefore, a precondition for the performance of social criticism.

The high sensitivity to representations of Nazism in popular culture is understandable. The objection to such representations is a theme upon which Saul Friedländer, among many others, has extensively elaborated—notably in his Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death. Under this umbrella, a variety of films, television series and other art products which are targeted at the wider audience and contain representations of Nazism and the Holocaust have drawn different degrees of criticism. Notable examples are the abovementioned American television series Holocaust (1979), which was concurrently watched with The Tin Drum in West Germany; Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1993), which has drawn criticism as being part of a process of the ‘Americanization of the Holocaust’, and Roberto Benigni’s tragic-comedic Life Is Beautiful (La vita è bella, 1997).

While an evaluation of this type with regard to the Tin Drum is surely performed in this paper, it should be underlined that this is not the core of the argument here. Neither Grass’s The Tin Drum nor Schlöndorff’s adaptation should be considered a direct account or representation of the Second World War and certainly not of the Holocaust; these only

75 Luhmann, 1990, 184.
constitute the background of a section of Oskar’s story, which stretches, in both cases, beyond the period of the war. Rather, the main insight that this investigation suggests is more methodological in character and is demonstrated through the case of The Tin Drum. The uniqueness of this case study is that it supplies a stable ground for a discussion and characterization of the intergenerational dynamics which shaped the consciousness and memory of West German society regarding the World War II in the time span during which the both-successive-and-overlapping rises of Grass’s and Schlöndorff’s generations had occurred (c. 1950-1980).

The fact that, as Annette Insdorf puts it, ‘The Tin Drum’s focus on a willful child constitutes [only] flirtation with the demonic’,78 and not direct confrontation with it, is not a disadvantage for the argument of this paper; on the contrary, as Marc Bloch claims, ‘the historian’s task’ is, precisely, to infer historical knowledge from unintentional sources.79 Thus, the differentiation of attitudes exposed through the comparative analysis of the two historical sources suggests not only that this reflects wider trends in the history of the consciousness of the war in Germany but also that such a history should be investigated and narrated while taking into account the complex and non-linear intra-generational transitions and intergenerational transmission of past knowledge, on top of the conventional, yet transcendental, category of linear time.

Society does not have a single Zeitgeist, a collective spirit or entelechy that has access to itself through a process of reflection. Nor can society be attributed other psychic faculties or properties, such as ‘memory’, ‘consciousness’ or ‘guilt’, in the singular, since these are all historically determined and society does not share a single time during which history is commonly experienced by it, simply because it is composed of different generations.80 However, one can speak of a complex of intertwining, intermingling and conflicting social spirits which are historically shaped along different durations of time. Therefore, when the paradigm of the individual is elevated to the level of the social, this complexity has to be taken into account. When concepts which were developed within

78 Insdorf, 1983, 182.
79 Marc Bloch, The Historian’s Craft, translated by Peter Putnam (Vintage Books, 1953). That is not, of course, to say that references to and representations of the Second World War in The Tin Drum (novel and film) are unintentional, but only that the fact that they are not the ‘official’ focus of these works makes it easier to analyze them as historical sources.
80 Mannheim, 1972, 283-285. In these pages, Mannheim explains Pinder’s approach to the problem of generations.
the framework of individual psychology—from Aristotle through Hume to Freud—are used to address social issues, they need to be considered as metaphors rather than as mere multiplied versions of the case of the individual.

Such a metaphor is used by Kant when he attempts to elucidate what Enlightenment is: it is the ‘self-imposed immaturity’ (Unmündigkeit) that the enlightened man emerges from, an immaturity that one can be blamed for—as opposed to the immaturity of a child, who is exempt from moral responsibility. Kant clearly describes a wide societal change and refers to the whole of the public (das Publikum) through his description of the transformation of the individual person and the conditions required for the occurrence of such a transformation. Grass uses a similar metaphor, in the shape of the willful immaturity of Oskar, in order to represent the story of his generation—a story that exposes and criticizes German society and ends with the admission of guilt.

Likewise, when Adorno performs social criticism in his lecture of the late 1950s, he paraphrases Kant’s essay and blames his contemporaries for ‘political immaturity’ and for ‘making ideology’ of it. Like Grass, Adorno describes this immaturity in terms of the grotesque. In the same lecture, Adorno underlines the social need for knowledge of Freudian theory because of the self-reflection praxis that psychoanalysis consists of. Since this praxis, which was developed for the individual, could not be carried out by the entire population for practical reasons, Adorno says that psychoanalysis should be institutionalized and thereby influence at least the intellectual climate of Germany. In the 1940s, it should also be recalled here, during and after the war, when Adorno and his colleagues from Berkeley tried to reveal the roots of fascist society, they also turned to the paradigm of the individual and investigated the ‘authoritarian personality’ of the individuals who en masse constitute the society with the fascist potential.

Society does not have a collective consciousness that has access to itself in a process of self-reflection, but it does use social communication in order to observe itself. Metaphorically, then, one can consider the representations of society in the mass media as self-reflective. When Schlöndorff brings us back to the theme of immaturity through

81 Kant, 1991, 54.
84 Luhmann, 1990, 184.
the story of Oskar, he evokes again Grass’s and Adorno’s criticism of the German society of the Nazi epoch. He does so, however, only up to a point. Using the metaphor of the individual’s immaturity, Schlöndorff’s final product mixes this self-reflective social-criticism with another process, namely of generational differentiation. Immaturity as an instrument for recollecting and representing the past becomes a device for demarcating and differentiating from it: identity becomes difference; the social consciousness is modified and the collective memory is revised to the effect of allowing the second generation to articulate itself.
Bibliography


Henkel Konzern (firm name), *Time Line 130 Years of ‘Henkel’.* Available at: http://www.cleanox.com/com/content_data/Timeline_130_Years_of_Henkel_EN.pdf.


Young, Colin. [untitled review]. *Film Quarterly* 13, 3 (1960): 51.

Zand, Shlomo. *Film as History: Imagining and Screening the Twentieth Century*. Tel Aviv, 2002.
Filmography


