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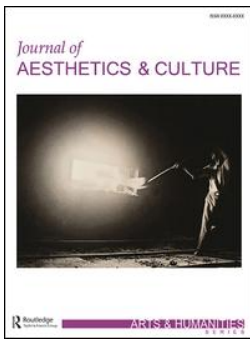
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## Post memory and cinematic affect in *The Midwife*

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### ABSTRACT

The Second World War has proved a rich source of inspiration for fiction films worldwide. The Finnish fiction film *The Midwife* (*Kättilö*, Antti J. Jokinen, 2015) is aimed at an international audience with a story that takes place in the context of the Lapland War in Finland in 1944. The film tells of a romantic relationship between a local woman and a member of the German army, in a highly affective manner. This article argues that the film downplays elements that might have interested the national, or local, audience, and that it privileges affect over knowledge. To bring out the film's transnational character, the article begins by analysing it in the context of national, or local, and global influences and argues that the film's decontextualised, deterritorialised, and denationalised nature can be a result of its desire to appeal to a wide audience; yet a set of tensions and paradoxes are identified that bring out the complexities of the local-global nexus. The article goes on to ask whether the affectivity emphasised in *The Midwife* could have been a means to produce a story that communicates across borders. The article also explores whether affectivity can be a way to create a meaningful connection to the past in the current era of post memory (Aleida Assmann). Analysis of the film's aesthetic and narrative devices is combined with cultural analysis of the contemporary memory and media culture and its global flows.

### KEYWORDS



*The Midwife*; Finnish cinema; affect; post memory; Second World War; Lapland War; local; global

Cinema has played a major role in the cultural production of the memory of the Second World War (WWII). Ever since the end of WWII, film-makers in both Europe and Hollywood have contributed to the emergence of this mediated and remediated memory. Yet although the cultural memory of WWII has been characterised by its transnational and transcultural nature from the start, many critics have pointed to the recent intensification of these tendencies. For instance, Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad observe that as a result of globalising processes, "both the spaces of memory and the composition of memory communities have been redefined".<sup>1</sup>

The contemporary modes of cultural production of memory are often embedded in decontextualisation, deterritorialisation, and denationalisation. Decontextualised memories are mediated and remediated as they circulate from one media environment to another across borders. Deterritorialisation of memory means that memory constructs are uprooted from a particular

territory and adopted in another. Furthermore, as an implication of denationalisation, the cultural production of memory and memory debates are not always centred around the nation. At the same time, the generations that experienced WWII themselves are vanishing. We have moved to what Aleida Assmann has termed an era of post memory,<sup>2</sup> of the third and fourth generations after the war, and are witnessing an emotive investment in new imaginings of WWII.<sup>3</sup>

The Finnish fiction film *The Midwife* (*Kättilö*, Antti J. Jokinen, 2015), which is based on a novel by Katja Kettu (*Kättilö*, 2011), is a particularly intriguing example of these recent developments. The film tells the story of a Finnish woman, Helena, who falls in love with a German-Finnish officer and war photographer, Johannes Angelhurst, during the so-called Continuation War and Lapland War of 1944–1945. The film is loaded with strong affective force and it is a veritable audiovisual spectacle. It is a historical film,

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<sup>1</sup>Assmann and Conrad, "Introduction," 1. See also Hoskins, "Digital Network Memory," 91–108; Hirsch, "Surviving Images," 5–37; Silverman, *PalimpsesticMemory*.

<sup>2</sup>The notion of post memory adopted from Aleida Assmann (2015) describes not only the way in which contemporary historic films are embedded in the transnational production, consumption, and circulation of cultural memory, but more precisely the memory of WWII held by the third and fourth generations after the war. For these generations, the visual culture of the memory of WWII has long ago been formed in the circulation of images and narratives in various media. In developing her notion of post memory, Aleida Assmann critically distances her notion from the influential term "postmemory", introduced by Marianne Hirsch (1997; 2012), which refers to the memory of the second generation after the war and foregrounds family lineages in the transmission of cultural memory. See Assmann, "Frames of Transmission and Mediation," 23–40; Hirsch, *Family Frames*; Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*.

<sup>3</sup>Assmann, "Frames of Transmission and Mediation," 23–40.

but also a genre hybrid that combines elements of war film,<sup>4</sup> melodrama, and romance.

In spite of the historically and nationally specific origins of the story, the cinematic adaptation has been made to appeal to an international audience, and therefore specific concerns that may have aroused interest in Finland have been downplayed in the narrative, the centre of which is the love story. Instead of explaining the idiosyncrasies of this particular war, such as the nature of the coexistence between civilians and German soldiers, the film pays more attention to a globally understandable story of love in the midst of war. Such thematic preferences have led to the decontextualising of the film: the film has become detached from its local, national, and historical contexts. In a way, then, *The Midwife* can be seen to privilege affect over knowledge and thus exemplify the recent foregrounding of emotions in representations of history that is known as a turn to affective historiography.<sup>5</sup> Alison Landsberg views this shift as a cultural dominant, which emphasises intimacy and closeness and “a personal, felt connection to past”.<sup>6</sup> The experiential or the affective modes of historical engagement of this sort have become appealing, and it is exactly the kinds of historic representations like the film *The Midwife* that have contributed to this development.

In her discussion of contemporary modes of cultural production and the transmission of the memory of WWII, Aleida Assmann links the potential of mass-communicated, globally circulated imageries to keep the Holocaust memory alive with their ability to generate empathy and affectivity; to create a living connection to the past.<sup>7</sup> If an affective link between a spectator and a media image is needed in order to generate responsiveness in the era of post memory, the discussion on contemporary cultural memory would gain from an analysis of filmic language in relation to emotiveness and affectivity.

In this article we therefore analyse the formation of affectivity in the film *The Midwife*. We suggest that in the case of *The Midwife*, an excess of affectivity can be seen as a cinematic means designed to generate a meaningful connection with the past for a global audience. In other words, emphasising affectivity can be a means to produce a story that communicates across borders. To illustrate the recent trajectory from the national to the transnational in historical films about war, we first situate *The Midwife* in the context of

Finnish films that deal with WWII and ask what kinds of novel perspectives on the war this film opens. Then we analyse the film’s dual nature: how the film’s attempt to find a balance between a national and a global perspective shows in its narrative and choices, such as where the film directs its attention and what it chooses not to show. This leads us to ask in the next section how the film’s affectivity works.

We situate our discussion in the framework of studies on the transnationality of cinema and also on studies on contemporary memory practices that have focused on the emergence of a global audience for historical films, characterised by similar expectations and frames of interpretation and reference.<sup>8</sup> In general, in our discussion we combine an analysis of the film’s aesthetic and narrative devices with a cultural analysis of contemporary memory and media culture and its global flows.

### A film about the Lapland War or an international love story?

The story of *The Midwife* is set against the events of WWII in the north of Finland. In this war, Finland fought first against the Soviet Union in the Winter War (1939–1940), managing to maintain the country’s independence but suffering territorial losses. In the Continuation War (1941–1944), Finland and Germany fought as brothers-in-arms against the Soviet Union to regain the lost territories. After the armistice between Finland and the Soviet Union, in 1944–1945, in the war known as the Lapland War, Finnish forces fought against the Germans. In retreating to Norway, the Germans destroyed large areas of Lapland using scorched earth tactics.

*The Midwife*, situated in the context of the Continuation War and the Lapland War, revolves around the love story of the Finnish Helena and a member of the German army, Johannes Angelhurst. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist, Helena, hopes to escape her life of misery as a peripatetic midwife in a remote region of eastern Lapland. She first meets Johannes about two months before the signing of the armistice between Finland and the Soviet Union and the outbreak of the Lapland War.

Helena leaves her hard and unrewarding work to follow Johannes to a German war camp where, as part of her new job as a nurse, she has to participate

<sup>4</sup>Because *The Midwife* lacks actual fighting scenes, it is not a proper war film according to Stephen Neale’s definition of the genre. See Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 17.

<sup>5</sup>von Moltke, “Sympathy for the Devil,” 17–43; 42; Agnew, “History’s Affective Turn,” 299–312.

<sup>6</sup>Landsberg, *Engaging the Past*.

<sup>7</sup>Assmann, “Frames of Transmission and Mediation,” 30.

<sup>8</sup>Assmann and Conrad, “Introduction,” 4–5; see also Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*; Martin-Jones, “Transnational Allegory/Transnational History,” 179–195.

in tests conducted by the Nazis on female prisoners of war. Amid the atrocities of the war, she has to put up with the advances of the intimidating leader of the camp, Herman Gödel. The audience gradually finds out that Gödel and Johannes had previously taken part in the genocide at Babi Yar. Helena and Johannes manage to steal a few moments to themselves and their love is ignited. When news arrives of the armistice between Finland and the Soviet Union, the couple is separated. Helena manages to flee from the camp and, with difficulty, makes her way to a cabin situated at an unspecified site on the Arctic Ocean, where they have agreed to meet. There, now pregnant, she waits for Johannes. When Johannes finally arrives, he finds Helena starving and only just alive. The final text informs the audience that the couple settled in a village in north-west Finland.

As a depiction of WWII within Finnish memory culture, *The Midwife* can be seen as both a continuation and a break with traditional forms of presentation. Before the film *The Midwife*, WWII had been the topic of a great number of literary works and films in Finland. Edvin Laine's *The Unknown Soldier* (*Tuntematon sotilas*, 1955), the first actual Finnish war film, set the pattern for other cinematic treatments of WWII with its naturalistic style and emphasis on the resilience of the Finnish soldiers.<sup>9</sup> Later films have rewritten the war narrative, directing attention to women's wartime duties, specific battles, or love in the midst of war.<sup>10</sup> Olli Saarela's *Ambush* (*Rukajärven tie*, 1999) marks a watershed in Finnish cinematic depictions of war. This stylised account of one soldier's experience is almost as much a love story as it is a war film.

The boom in Finnish cinema at the turn of the millennium produced several historical films that had patriotic tendencies and aspired to strengthen national identity at a time when the nation was facing challenges such as its membership of the European Union (1997).<sup>11</sup> While pre-*Ambush* war films were evaluated in relation to reality, *The Midwife* calls for discussion less in terms of Finnish reality than in terms of belonging to a global flow of images and genre conventions.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the Finnish cinematic representations of WWII, like *The Unknown Soldier*, have emphasised Finland as a small, heroic country fighting against the Soviet Union; they have thus focused on the war effort.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, juxtaposed against the neo-patriotic tendencies that characterised especially the genre of historical films in 1990s' Finland, *The Midwife* can be seen to present a novel approach to what are controversial issues in Finnish history, namely the contested aspects of the Continuation War and the cooperation with Germany.<sup>14</sup>

The choice of subject matter reminds contemporary audiences of the Finnish involvement with Nazi Germany by highlighting the fact that during the Continuation War Finnish civilians lived side by side with members of the German army, which occasionally led to romantic relationships. The question of sexual relations between Finnish women and members of the German army was dealt with first by novelists and only later by historians Westerlund (2011).<sup>15</sup> The topic was taken up in the cinema by director Mikko Niskanen in 1962 in his film *Boys* (*Pojat*), which appears to be the only previous fiction film that deals openly with the issue.<sup>16</sup>

*The Midwife* is part of a new-found interest in this issue and of a wave of literary depictions of it in Finland.<sup>17</sup> These works have, at least implicitly, been involved in the debate on the memory of the Finnish involvement with Nazi Germany. As such, they exemplify what Aleida Assmann has described as a shift from self-congratulatory to self-critical perspectives and constructions of self-conscious national memory where, for example, integration of the memory of the Holocaust into national self-understanding has acted as proof of moral maturity.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, there is certain ambivalence in the particular mode of historical commentary that *The Midwife* makes, since its ambition does not lie in reassessing history. It seems that the main point is not to discuss touchy issues of Finnish war memory within the nation's boundaries. This may be because the sexual relationships between the Germans and Finnish women is a more or less worn-out topic in

<sup>9</sup>See Liukkonen, "Yksilö sodassa," 60–71; Sedergren, "Elokuva, sota ja etnisyyt," 26–34. In the 1980s, Rauni Mollberg's remake of *The Unknown Soldier* (1985) and Pekka Parikka's *Winter War* (*Talvisota*, 1989) were clear-cut war films.

<sup>10</sup>Such films include *Little Sister* (*Pikkusisar*, Taru Mäkelä, 1999), *Abandoned Houses*, *Empty Homes* (*Hylätyt talot, autiot pihat*, Lauri Törhönen, 2000), and *Promise* (*Lupaus*, Ilkka Vanne, 2005).

<sup>11</sup>Laine, "Sibelius and the Re-emergence," 21–32; Toiviainen, *Levottomat sukupolvet*, 279.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Liukkonen, "Yksilö sodassa," 68.

<sup>13</sup>See Sundholm, "The Unknown Soldier," 111–142.

<sup>14</sup>Jokisipilä and Kinnunen, "Shifting Images of 'Our Wars'," 435–482.

<sup>15</sup>Westerlund, *Ulkomaala[is]sten sotilaiden lapset Suomessa 1940–48*.

<sup>16</sup>The romances between Finnish women and German soldiers were examined later in the documentary film *Auf Wiedersehen Finnland* (Virpi Suutari, 2010).

<sup>17</sup>Sääskilähti "Women as Sites for the Contestation of the Northern Memories of War," 279–297.

<sup>18</sup>Assmann, "The Holocaust—A Global Memory?," 97–118, 108–109; Assmann, "Frames of Transmission and Mediation," 28.

Finland. However, the following text appears on the screen at the end of the film:

The Lapland War ended with the withdrawal of the last German troops from Northwest-Finland on 27.4.1945. Most of the women accompanying the German soldiers were abandoned in Norway—only a fraction of them reached Germany. The new Finnish social order did not recognize the status of the approximately 700 children born out of the relationships between the Germans and the Finnish women.

These neutral closing remarks feel somewhat disconnected from the rest of the film, because the narrative has concentrated on the romantic relationship and has paid little attention to the consequences of the war.

Obviously, the film's aim is not to provide the spectator with new or detailed information about the Lapland War or cooperation with Nazi Germany. The film's vague treatment of the historical situation suggests that it was made to serve the interests of an audience that knows very little about the subject. The events take place in a closed cinematic world that functions according to the principles of melodrama, where emotions and motivations are heightened. The events in the film take place mainly at the two locations mentioned above, the war camp and the abandoned cabin somewhere by the Arctic Ocean. This world is closed in two senses. It is closed by generic conventions and by the framing of images, which results in a spatial narrowing down of the fictional world.<sup>19</sup> This closed form has further implications. The remote locations are isolated from the social context and the civilian population. The protagonists' survival and the tense relationship between Helena and Gödel are given more attention than the fact that Helena and Johannes end up on opposite sides when Finland signs the armistice with the Soviet Union. The question of the social stigma and pressures that such a relationship would have put on ordinary Finnish women is barely hinted at.

Because the film does not offer a new interpretation of the past, it comes as no surprise that in Finland the film did not give rise to debate about the historical events or how the past is remembered. The director of *The Midwife*, Antti J. Jokinen, is also known for his adaptation of another popular Finnish novel, *Purge* (Sofi Oksanen, 2008), into a film of the same title in 2012. *Purge* was concerned with the touchstones of poignant national histories and female suffering in Soviet-occupied Estonia. Before that, he had directed the

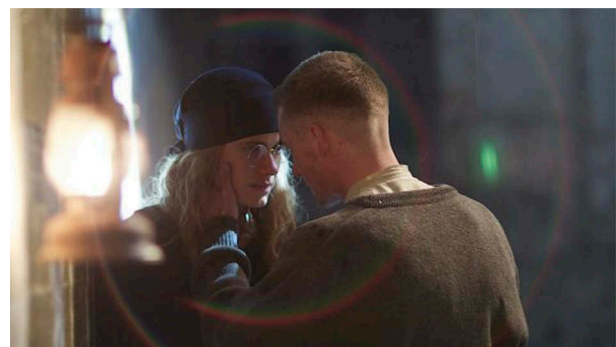
mainstream thriller *Resident* (2011) in the United States and several music videos. Jokinen is profiled as a producer of visually imposing films rather than as a political film-maker, and for this reason there was perhaps no expectation of any profound exploration of a historical topic in this film.

Jokinen has commented that with *The Midwife* he wanted to produce an entertaining film that would appeal to a wide audience.<sup>20</sup> The director does not mention an interest in historical truth or in giving a different interpretation of the events of WWII in Finnish Lapland. Instead, it seems that he considered these events, which were first of all taken up by Katja Kettu in her popular novel, compelling material for an emotionally engaging and spectacular film about love in the midst of war. In fact, in an interview Jokinen admits that he was drawn first and foremost to the emotional potential of the story.<sup>21</sup>

In this sense, *The Midwife* is not so different from a Hollywood-style spectacle that relies on the spectator's assumptions about how certain topics, such as war, are narrated and that invests more in emotional manipulation and character engagement than in any deeper exploration of the issues, such as the relations between German soldiers and Finnish civilians.<sup>22</sup> The fact that *The Midwife* leaves the larger context of the Lapland War unexamined as it focuses on the relationship between Helena and Johannes lends support to such an interpretation (Figure 1).<sup>23</sup>

### Global storytelling and local idiosyncrasies

In terms of the treatment of the topic in Finnish cinema culture, *The Midwife* represents a shift in focus from the national to the global. The clearest



**Figure 1.** The main characters in *The Midwife*, Helena and Johannes. The film focuses on their relationship, often blurring the surrounding reality. (Reproduced with permission from Solarfilms.)

<sup>19</sup>Brady, *The World in a Frame*.

<sup>20</sup>Kunnas, "Natsien keskitysleiri Lapissa nousi Liettuan metsiin."

<sup>21</sup>Jokinen, "Kättilö-elokuvan ohjaajan haastattelu."

<sup>22</sup>McDonald, "War-Image as Affect," 236–249.

<sup>23</sup>*The Midwife* resembles those war romances, such as *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (John Madden, 2001) and *Pearl Harbor* (Michael Bay, 2001), that tell a love story with war in the background.

indicator of this is that it refrains from situating the events it tells in the context of national or local history. The film makes no references to the causes, events, or outcomes of the Lapland War. For example, the film bypasses completely the suffering of civilians who were affected by the war. On the other hand, by not dealing with heroism, sacrifice, or national unity, *The Midwife* does not repeat some of the most persistent national myths reiterated in Finnish films about WWII. The film's aim is not to debate the constructs of national memory but rather to put a local story in a global framework.

In this sense, the film can be said to exemplify the recent trajectory of denationalisation which, according to Mette Hjort, means that there has been a shift in focus from an epiphanic to a transnational culture; that is to say, from a culture that focuses on the narratives of certain nations to the circulation of audiovisual works, people, and monies, and the emphasising of cultural commonalities.<sup>24</sup> This is not a one-directional development, and films with a clear national emphasis continue to be made. Many critics have argued that such a process of denationalisation has led to the increased homogenisation of film culture and, thus, in the case of European cinema, to Hollywoodisation or Americanisation.<sup>25</sup> In the case of WWII, cultural production, and the resultant circulation of imagery, has been rich also within Europe, with the result that a certain homogenisation can occur also within Europe.<sup>26</sup> Simplifying and homogenising historical events occurs inevitably in *The Midwife*, because the film attempts to meet the needs of a diverse audience by focusing on a love story. At the same time, there persists among small film cultures the desire to include "unique" national traits in films, and *The Midwife* provides clear evidence of this, as we will show below.<sup>27</sup>

As many critics have argued, such notions as national/transnational and local/global are not best understood as oppositional terms.<sup>28</sup> *The Midwife* is situated at the crossroads of local, national, transnational, and global flows, symptomatic of which is its transfixion by certain imageries. First of all, the film retells a story that has circulated in Finland in various

media of memory (oral history, literature, and cinema) from the war years onwards. Despite the national origins of the story, there are elements that make it also a global configuration of memory, or "palimpsestic memory". The latter term, formulated by Max Silverman, refers to the understanding of cultural memory as a dynamic process of transfer that is not restricted to a single community or event.<sup>29</sup>

As an example of this dynamics of cultural memory, the female figure consorting with a German soldier in *The Midwife* is also a global site of memory, familiar especially from Alan Resnais's film *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), but also from other more recent, less well-known films.<sup>30</sup> Another familiar figure is Herman Gödel, who bears a resemblance to many cinematic Nazi characters. Most of the time, the film circulates visual imageries related to WWII on a general level, rather than referring self-consciously to particular films. Such imagery includes the shooting of prisoners, the heaps of corpses, piles of clothes and other personal effects, women's shaved heads, and the burning of any material that would serve as testimony to the Nazi atrocities (Figure 2). Despite its circulation of familiar imagery, the film does not convey a self-conscious use of these



Figure 2. Helena is punished: her hair is being cut. The scene is a reference not only to Holocaust films, but also to actual events. This action was used to stigmatise the brides of the German soldiers after the war. (Reproduced with permission from Solarfilms.)

<sup>24</sup>Hjort, "From Epiphanic Culture to Circulation," 191–218.

<sup>25</sup>Bondebjerg, "The Danish Way," 131–132. See also Lukinbeal and Zimmermann, "Film Geography," 315–325.

<sup>26</sup>In Europe, Jean-Luc Godard has criticised the way that American film-makers distort and detextualise European history in favour of amorphous entertainment in films such as *Schindler's List* (1993). Godard has lamented the Americans' inability to create anything new, or even to combine old material in new ways. As a result, various war stories, for example, are reduced to Hollywood-style melodrama. See Mazierska, *European Cinema and Intertextuality*, 37–38.

<sup>27</sup>Gustafsson and Käätä, "Introduction: Nordic Genre Film and Institutional History," 1–17.

<sup>28</sup>Cowen, *Creative Destruction*; Frassinelli, Frenkel and Watson, "Traversing Transnationalism," 1–28; Gustafsson and Käätä, "Introduction: Nordic Genre Film and Institutional History".

<sup>29</sup>Silverman, *PalimpsesticMemory*. In the field of film studies, the term palimpsestic has been used previously, e.g. by Sobchack, "The Insistent Fringe," 4–20. Sobchack uses the word palimpsestic to describe how we gain our knowledge of the past from various sources, both academic and popular.

<sup>30</sup>For example, Damian Lee's *Poet* (2007) and Saul Dibb's *Suite Francaise* (2014).

elements in a way that would signal awareness of previous representations of the war either in Finland or internationally.

One curious aspect of the local/global nexus in the film *The Midwife* is that in addition to global imageries, the film has elements that are meant to mark the local. Some of these elements stand out as exotic details and may actually work against the film's understandability among foreign viewers and those not familiar with Katja Kettu's novel. It is therefore worth considering how the "local" is produced and how it works in tandem with more global imagery.

The sense of local is produced mainly through two strategies: "authentic" characters and the views of the landscape that are emphasised during the first 20 minutes of the film, when Helena's situation is being established. These strategies serve to anchor the events to a place that the spectator recognises as Lapland, or simply as the north. At the beginning of the film, the pictures of the landscape, the stony roads along which Helena cycles and the modest wooden houses, have the realistic function of introducing the setting of the story. As the film progresses, there continue to be views of open mountain vistas between various scenes, but they no longer function as realistic aspects of the setting, but rather as projections of emotional states. In other words, they become affectively charged.

The local people are presented as primitive. They are dirty, they laugh madly, they spit, and drown unwelcome babies born of interracial relationships. An odd Sami character and references to shamanistic rituals are also included. The northern accent of the Finnish-speaking characters proved difficult for some Finnish viewers to follow. This kind of interpretation of the local is familiar to Finnish audiences from earlier films set in Lapland. There is something exotic and primitive about Helena, too, that is attractive to a man who comes from elsewhere. She is called Wildeye and she has secret knowledge about herbs. She is determined and does not submit to the will of men. There is a long history of such strong, mysterious, and sexually active female characters who epitomise the untamed north in Finnish films: *The White Reindeer* (*Valkoinen peura*, Erik Blomberg, 1952), *The Earth Is a Sinful Song* (*Maa on syntinen laulu*, Rauni Mollberg, 1973), *Umur* (Kai Lehtinen, 2002), and *Things We Do for Love* (*Kaikella rakkaudella*, Matti Ijäs, 2013).<sup>31</sup>

Above, we have identified a set of tensions and paradoxes that have to do with denationalisation, deterritorialisation, and decontextualisation. While the film aims at understandability across national borders and circulates globally recognisable images of war and

suffering, a certain "something" of the local has remained: local idiosyncrasies and intermedial links to other national cultural products. As far as the theme of the nation is concerned, *The Midwife* cannot be said to participate in the construction of the nation in any significant way. It can be said that the film does not thematise the nation. The setting is only vaguely recognisable as Finnish, language being the clearest indicator of its Finnishness. Only a minimal amount of information about the historical situation is provided at the beginning and end of the film, in written form. Hjort calls such treatment of the nation "banal aboutness" in a reference to Michael Billig's notion of banal nationalism, to distinguish it from actual thematisation, which requires consistent foregrounding of the nation at the level of iconography, narrative, or dialogue, for example.<sup>32</sup> All in all, *The Midwife* is situated vaguely among local, national, and global planes, offering its different audiences a little bit of everything.

One of the most influential theorists who have considered the potential of historical films for the mediation of memories globally is Alison Landsberg. Landsberg observed that today people identify not only with certain geographically determined groups but also transculturally and translocally. Central in her theory of films as a form of prosthetic memory is the idea that in cinema memories are not acquired through personal contacts with other people, but rather, "Memory remains a sensuous phenomenon experienced by the body, and it continues to derive much of its power through affect".<sup>33</sup> Given the number of elements that work against the understandability of the film on the global level, one is led to wonder whether the film *The Midwife* might function as a prosthetic memory in the way described by Landsberg. The question, however, remains, whether affectivity and a bodily memory acquired in the cinema can help to construct a meaningful connection to past events through which one has not lived.

Historical films do not necessarily rely very much on a sense of identification between the viewers and historical characters. In our view, *The Midwife* attempts to engage the spectator through its affective treatment of the topic, that is to say, affectivity conceived as a property of the film as a whole. In turning next to analyse the formation of affectivity in the film, we ask to what extent its affectivity comes from the way the film as a whole awakens affects, and whether such affectivity can help us to connect with history.

### Forms of affective engagement

*The Midwife* focuses the narrative through the emotional experience of a handful of characters. Affective

<sup>31</sup>Hiltunen (2014), "Sukupuoli ja kansallinen maisema *Umurissa*," 59–91.

<sup>32</sup>Hjort, "Themes of Nation," 103–117.

<sup>33</sup>Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 8.



engagement with Helena and Johannes is encouraged by a focus on their personal relationship and the challenges of being in love during a war; the focus is on their reactions and, at a later stage in the narrative, on their survival. This is achieved by detaching the characters from the wider events of the war, the social context, and a collective view.<sup>34</sup> The foregrounding of emotions makes *The Midwife* a prime example of the tendency described by Johannes von Moltke as the return of emotions in historical representations.<sup>35</sup>

As we have noted, the film creates a closed cinematic world, the effect of which is enhanced by a closure that is meant to be rewarding. This closure discourages the audience from thinking further about the issues that the narrative has dealt with, leaving the impression that all the problems have been resolved with the couple's reunion.<sup>36</sup> The closure conforms to a Hollywood convention in which the couple get each other and start a family, and it reveals that the film's primary interest lies in the love story—in stark contrast, in fact, to the novel on which it is based, which ends with the murder of the lovers by a member of the Norwegian resistance movement. The concluding text draws attention to the situation of the women and especially the children born out of the relationships. Even though this reference was added to the end, the emphasis remains on the emotional contents of the story. As evidence of this, the critics saw the film mainly as a love story.<sup>37</sup>

*The Midwife* strives to engage the spectator with the protagonists' fate, and in the last third of the film the main tension concerns whether Johannes and Helena will be reunited at the cabin, and whether he will arrive in time for her to be still alive. Here, the film follows the temporal structure of melodrama, in which the question of whether something will happen "too late" is crucial.<sup>38</sup> The highly mobile and fragmentary narrative is unable at times to maintain an intimate connection to the characters, but can sometimes feel detached. As if to compensate for this, the affective charge is transferred elsewhere, to the aesthetic aspects of the film.

Affect in cinema comprises more than the spectator's engagement with the personal feelings of a fictional character. It includes also the formal

characteristics of the work, as Rachel Greenwald Smith has pointed out. Smith refers to Sianne Ngai, who talks about a work's "global or organising affect, its general disposition or orientation toward its audience and the world" that she locates in the formal characteristic of tone.<sup>39</sup> This view comes close to Carl Plantinga's distinction between "human mood" and "art mood" and his analysis of the role of art mood as part of the emotional impact of film. Plantinga defines art mood as "the affective character of the complex of images, sounds, and fictional events and beings that allows for the unique experience the film offers".<sup>40</sup> Among those who argue that there is an important affective aspect in a spectator's relationship with a film is Johannes von Moltke, who emphasises that "our emotional engagement [is located] precisely in the constitutive tension between text and context, between a film with formal properties of character construction and spectator engagement, on the one hand, and the historical reference points ... on the other hand."<sup>41</sup>

Several film theorists have drawn attention to the way in which films address the audience not only through the two dominating senses of sight and hearing, but also through touch, smell, and visceral senses. Such touching is not literal, but effective nevertheless.<sup>42</sup> The makers of *The Midwife* seek to engage the audience through multiple sensory channels, in the process reducing the distance between the audience and the film and perhaps creating something that resembles what Laura U. Marks has called haptic visuality.<sup>43</sup>

Formal properties, and their effect on the film experience, cannot be ignored when analysing a film as heavily stylised as *The Midwife*. As a (melo)drama, a romance, and a film about war, *The Midwife* is characterised by stylistic and emotional excess.<sup>44</sup> It focuses intensely on the struggle of the two characters to get each other under extreme circumstances and in doing so puts great emphasis on emotion. For Linda Williams, melodrama is an example of what she calls the body genre, not only because of its emotional excess, but also because it is not so orthodox in its reliance on the

<sup>34</sup>In his analysis of *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), Robert Burgoyne argues that an emotional engagement with the past is made possible by the isolation of the character and by "his detachment from any collective responsibility, his removal, in a sense, from history". See Burgoyne, "Generational Memory and Affect," 349–364.

<sup>35</sup>von Moltke, "Sympathy for the Devil," 17–18.

<sup>36</sup>Stadler, *Pulling Focus*, 124.

<sup>37</sup>Rissanen, "Sotaa, seksiä ja komeita maisemia"; Bergman, "Sodassa ja rakkaudessa"; Poussu, "Kättilö."

<sup>38</sup>Williams, "Film Bodies," 602–616.

<sup>39</sup>Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature*, 17.

<sup>40</sup>Plantinga, "Art Moods and Human Moods," 455–475.

<sup>41</sup>von Moltke, "Sympathy for the Devil," 19–23; 43.

<sup>42</sup>See for example Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*.

<sup>43</sup>Marks, *The Skin of the Film*.

<sup>44</sup>Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," 604; cf. Burgoyne, "Embodiment in the War Film: Paradise Now and The Hurt Locker," 7.

classical narrative structure, having instead “lapses” in realism, and because it displays primal emotions. Williams talks about the affectivity of body genres as “a form of ecstasy”:

While the classical meaning of the original Greek word is insanity and bewilderment, more contemporary meanings suggest components of direct or indirect sexual excitement and rapture, a rapture which informs even the pathos of melodrama. Visually, each of the ecstatic excesses could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm—of the body “beside itself” with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness.<sup>45</sup>

*The Midwife* may not be a fully developed melodrama, but its characters are “beside themselves” with their intense feelings. There is something excessive in their movements and tones of voice. The narrative repeatedly picks out their anguished looks and nervous gestures—the constant fiddling with the glasses in Helena’s case and the bursts of shrill laughter in Gödel’s. Certain techniques, such as reflections in windows and mirrors and a kind of modified iris shot, direct the audience’s attention to the characters’ emotional states in some scenes, thus also narrowing down the view of events to the immediate vicinity of the protagonists.

The fragmentary narrative and the aesthetic flourishes can be seen as the kinds of lapses that Williams talks about, and they can be interpreted as an externalisation of the excessive emotions. The excess spills over throughout the film, creating moments saturated with affectivity and sensuality: the oppressive orange and blue glow of the mountain vistas, the close-ups of water drops hitting the ground in slow motion, and the couple making love in a space saturated by blood-red hues all express and produce affectivity.

The film stresses that all the characters have been damaged by the war and are in that way victims. Helena is so determined to get Johannes that she is ready to put up with anything, even her new position as “an angel of death”, as she calls herself. She is defiant, but her facial gestures indicate the internal turmoil. Johannes is a man tormented by a traumatic experience and is thus a good example of the personalisation of war. The film’s flashbacks signal his vague memories of his participation in the genocide in Ukraine, and his shaking hands are the outward sign of this trauma. He doubts whether Helena could love a man like him. The fact that Johannes is a war photographer and not an ordinary soldier softens this character, with his rather sinister history (Figure 3).

Although Gödel is depicted as formidable in his measured calmness, nonetheless remorse and disappointment come through in his behaviour too (Figure 4). He puts up with Helena’s recalcitrance



Figure 3. The figure of Johannes is an embodiment of war trauma. (Reproduced with permission from Solarfilms.)



Figure 4. Herman Gödel, the sadistic leader of the war camp, has a soft spot for Helena, who is introduced to him as a Finnish nurse. (Reproduced with permission from Solarfilms.)

because he wants intimacy with her. He says about Helena, “You are the bravest woman I have ever met”. Through such characterisations the film emphasises humanity and vulnerability. On the other hand, the entanglement of sexuality and Nazism manifested in the figures of Johannes and Gödel, as well as their depiction as neurotic figures who suffer from alcoholism and drug use, link them to the tradition of cinematic Nazis.<sup>46</sup> These figurations contribute, in any case, to the overall impression that the film is saturated with emotion and loaded with affective force.

Let us now look more closely at one sequence from *The Midwife*, one that exemplifies the excessive affectivity of the film; it indicates the film’s music-video-like expression and the fact that the film’s affective nature does not derive only from the emotions of individual characters. The sequence takes place shortly after the armistice between Finland and the Soviet Union has been announced and the Germans are busy organising the evacuation of the war camp. Helena has been ordered to destroy documents, but she refuses to do it.

<sup>45</sup>Williams, “Film Bodies,” 604–605.

<sup>46</sup>See Kerner “On the Cinematic Nazi,” 203–220.

Gödel tries to kiss Helena, only for her to spit on him and shout that she will have nothing more to do with this war. She is planning to escape with a Finnish female prisoner of war whom she has hidden. Enraged by yet another rejection, Gödel tells Helena that she will be punished for having helped a prisoner to escape. Her hair is cut and she is given an injection that makes her unconscious.<sup>47</sup>

Space and time are condensed in the dream-like montage sequence that begins after the kissing scene. We hear Chopin's C sharp minor Nocturne while images of soldiers moving in slow motion in the courtyard, where papers are floating in the air above a big bonfire, are intercut with images of Helena preparing to escape. A German soldier is playing the piano in the rain in the courtyard in a scene that is reminiscent of a German newsreel from 1943 in which a German soldier plays an organ in a ruined church. Rain falls in slow motion while the soldiers stand unnaturally still. Helena is arrested and taken outside, where night seems suddenly to have turned into day. It is still raining—raindrops fall on the soldiers' helmets in slow motion—and the image is saturated with bluish grey. The music slowly fades away and the time for Helena's punishment is at hand. Gödel says, "I must punish you", and two soldiers drag her back inside.

In this sequence, the narration is slowed down and a thoroughly affective moment emerges. The melancholy music, the rain, the soldiers standing still, shadowy images, and the slow motion, together with the montage, create a feeling of deep sadness and shared desperation. The roaming camera connects the characters in an emotional gesture. There is a strong sense of common suffering here.

### The promise and challenges of affectivity

In analysing *The Midwife* as a film situated between national, or local, and global concerns, we have identified an affective force that is not so much linked to the historic events of WWII as moving memories, but to the film's form, that is to say, the affectivity of the film as a whole. We have characterised it as an aesthetic and emotional experience that appeals to the senses in a pervasive manner, synaesthetically.<sup>48</sup>

It is this affective basis that could, in principle, enable the formation of a link between the present and the distant past and an encounter between the spectator and the cinematic world that could result in both new understandings and empathy. In her

discussion of post memory, Aleida Assmann distinguishes among three lines of transmission of memory: identification, ethics, and empathy.<sup>49</sup> In the age of post memory, the potentiality of the empathetic mode is linked to its ability to coalesce "cognition and imagination, combining intellect and knowledge with feelings and concern for others".<sup>50</sup>

Are then contemporary memory products, that is to say mass-produced representations on screen, whether television or cinema, able to transmit empathy and generate solidarity across borders? Is *The Midwife*, for example, able to promote what Shohini Chaudhuri has termed "affective thinking", which raises ethical consideration through the medium of a film that makes spectators simultaneously think and feel, and which has the potential to disrupt "habitual perceptions" and "coercive habits of thinking"?<sup>51</sup>

We have already pointed out that to a certain extent *The Midwife* breaks with the traditional images of the enemy and representations of heroism typical of Finnish WWII films, thus possibly challenging habitual attitudes. *The Midwife* may bring a new perspective to the genre of the Finnish war film by presenting an intimate portrayal of a relationship between a Finnish woman and a German man, but essential to this perspective is not the imparting of new knowledge but rather an emphasis on affectivity. The stylistic aspect of affectivity is particularly prominent: emotions are not only acted and talked about, but also expressed through the film's form. *The Midwife* thus aestheticises its representation of the war by emphasising seemingly secondary details. Such foregrounding of aesthetics seems to contribute to the film's globalised, decontextualised, deterritorialised, and denationalised characteristics, which are not in any simplistic manner either negative or positive trajectories of contemporary culture. On closer analysis, they may be both.

In discussions around the contemporary modes of the cultural production of memory, some critics have brought up worries related to the deterritorialisation, decontextualisation, and homogenisation of memory. While the globalisation of memory may open up the promising possibility of the mass media providing an arena for confronting various traumatic pasts on a global level, leading to solidarity, for some there is the risk, as Silverman neatly puts it, of trivialising memory at the expense of historic specificity, or an emergence of banal empathy and normalised horror.<sup>52</sup> Silverman reminds us that dystopic visions that

<sup>47</sup>There is a similar scene in another WWII film *The Black Book* (Paul Verhoeven, 2006), where the Jewish heroine is given an injection to make her unconscious. Another example of the circulation of cultural memory of war is Chopin's music, which was also used in *Pianist* (Roman Polanski, 2003).

<sup>48</sup>Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 67–68.

<sup>49</sup>Assmann, "Frames of Transmission and Mediation," 29–39.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>51</sup>Chaudhuri, *Cinema of the Dark Side*, 15–19.

<sup>52</sup>Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory*, 175–176.

emphasise the annihilation of lived memory as a possible implication of deterritorialisation are themselves grounded on the presupposition that the local and global, authentic and inauthentic, are oppositional terms.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, as Assmann has said, the global transmission of memory as such does not necessarily lead to the homogenisation of memory in any straightforward manner.<sup>54</sup>

As far as the dynamics between national, or even local, and global are concerned, *The Midwife*, as we have argued, is a complicated case. Is the kind of affectivity exemplified by it too detached from the particularities of this specific war to create meaningful connections? Is its treatment of history too general to arouse the interest of a local or national spectator? On the other hand, does it (paradoxically) contain too many obscure elements (local traces), which hinder it from functioning as a rewarding love story or a historical film for a foreign audience? For example, the nature of the relationships between the various characters and between the nationalities may remain unclear, not only to foreign viewers but also to those Finnish viewers who are not familiar with Katja Kettu's novel. The critical reception of the film suggests that the answer to the question about whether it is too general for the local spectator is yes, it is, because in Finland the film did not succeed in generating discussion about the Lapland War, the relationships between German soldiers and Finnish women, or any other issues that the film touches upon. The question of whether or not it has too many local elements to work as a worthwhile love story or historical narrative for foreign audiences is difficult to answer at the moment, because foreign reviews of the film are almost non-existent.<sup>55</sup>

In the film we took as our example, the topic, the love story, is a detached and decontextualised memory or, to use Landsberg's terminology, a prosthetic memory, that makes emotional engagement possible even without historical knowledge. On the other hand, our analysis of *The Midwife* draws attention to the trend for traumatic pasts and poignant histories to become popular topics in cinema precisely because of the affective force of such memories. Such affective force as *The Midwife* exemplifies is experienced in the body and preserved also as a bodily

memory. Affectivity may well function in this way as a cinematic means that can communicate across borders. We suggest that the privileging of affectivity over knowledge in the film *The Midwife* seeks to transmit the memory of WWII as an affectively engaging transcultural memory. The transnational character of the film is closely linked to the assumption that the global audience is an affective community that can be reached and moved through cinematic means.

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 178.

<sup>54</sup>Among those who have perceived globalisation of memory in positive terms, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder view the paradigmatic example of globalised memory—the memory of the Holocaust—as an example of the positive effects of globalisation. For them, the memory of the Holocaust has developed into a cosmopolitan memory that can offer a solid moral foundation for a global humanity. See Levy and Sznajder, “Memory Unbound,” 87–106; see also Assmann, “The Holocaust—A Global Memory?,” 97–118. However, more recently many critics have identified a tendency running in the opposite direction. Gavriel Rosenfeld has observed that recent representations of the Third Reich in cinema and on the internet tend to relativise, universalise, and aestheticise, and thus normalise, the Nazi past. As a result, the moral framework has increasingly been sidelined (Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized*, 11).

<sup>55</sup>In Internet Movie Database there is only one external review of *The Midwife*.

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