

## Creating a Gendered Transnational and Multigenerational Trauma Narrative in Márta Mészáros's Film, *Északi fény* ['Aurora Borealis']\*

Agatha Schwartz

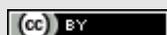
**Abstract:** In this paper, Schwartz offers a gendered analysis of Mészáros's most recent feature film [*Aurora Borealis*]. She argues that the film presents a transnational narrative about repressed traumatic memories as they pertain to sexual and political violence dating back to the early 1950s. The film explores the effects of postmemory (Hirsch) through three generations across Hungary, Austria, Russia (the former Soviet Union), and present-day Spain. With the help of theories of trauma (Herman, Kaplan, Caruth, LaCapra) and through a close reading of the symbols and colors used in the film, Schwartz reflects on the healing potential of narrative recovery together with the role children born as a result of armed conflict can play in rethinking narratives of war and in exploring their own transnational bridge-building potential in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** *Transnational narrative, children born of war, postmemory, multigenerational trauma*

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Márta Mészáros's (b. 1931) films have been rated as "intricately entwined with Europe's socio-cultural history" (Bittencourt 2019). She was the first female director to be awarded the Golden Bear at the Berlinale in 1975 for *Örökbefogadás* [*Adoption*], which was followed in 1983 by the Grand Prix at Cannes for *Napló gyermekeimnek* [*Diary for my Children*] and many further distinctions—including more recently a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2018 Transylvania International Film Festival. Throughout her illustrious career, she has enriched the national and international cinematographic communities with over forty remarkable films. Although Mészáros does not identify as a feminist, she has successfully broken through many barriers in the male-dominated film world as a woman director, though her films were initially downplayed as "woman's pictures" (Gray 2017). As a matter of fact, women and their stories have always played a prominent part in her work. This is also true of her latest feature, *Aurora Borealis* (2017).

*Aurora Borealis* casts Mari Töröcsik, the diva of post-WWII Hungarian theatre and cinema, in the role of "elderly Mária who has kept secret the tragedy of her destiny throughout her life" [*az idős, sorstragédiájának titkát egy életem át rejtegető Máriát*] (Pataki-Mészáros-Töröcsik 2017: 194). In fact, the role was created by Mészáros for Töröcsik who offers (need I add: as usual) a marvelous performance. The film has been shown to much acclaim at numerous film festivals and received national and international prizes, among them the Audience Choice Award at the Chicago International Film Festival in 2017 and in 2018, Best Feature Film Prize at La Laguna Film Festival in Spain (Hegedűs 2018). Praised by critics as a family drama, an important document of its period that contains the "black box of history" [*a történelem feketedoboz*] (Jankovics 2017: 50), the film explores the importance of breaking the silence surrounding painful memories when it comes to understanding the links between the present and the very cold phase of the Cold War in the early 1950s. I will argue that Mészáros's film constructs a gendered transnational narrative, one that connects repressed traumatic memories about sexual and political violence going back to the early 1950s as they pertain to Hungary, Austria, and Russia (the former Soviet Union), memories about events that have affected three generations across borders. As stated by Aline Sierp and Jenny Würstenberg (2015: 324), transnational narratives are "narratives that have the power to transcend national boundaries and the role of individual and institutional actors in driving those narratives to (un)successful representation." As further elaborated by the authors, a transnational narrative investigates "the mechanisms by which memories are (trans)formed, displayed, shared, and negotiated through transnational channels, while maintaining their local rootedness." I further argue that, as the main focus of the film is on the lives of women, it succeeds very well in representing such a narrative from a gender perspective, not only regarding the plot that takes the viewer back and forth between Austria and Hungary and finally Russia, but also visually and linguistically.

The opening sequence of the film introduces the medium of water (one often connoted with birth and femininity) which plays a significant symbolic role in the movie to the point that we could call it a leitmotif as it connects the major themes addressed: memory, birth (both in the physical and figurative sense), trauma, and healing. Elderly Mária sits by the pond, carried away by a visibly happy memory (she is smiling) which in the next shot takes us back to the past: a young woman (young Mária) and a young man (her beloved Ákos, as we later find out) are kissing passionately in the same pond (1:33-2:03). The exact same scene will be repeated, in expanded form, in a flashback at 21:08. The same young woman then appears in the following

shot, where we are taken from the beautiful, bubbly luminosity of the pond and the bright colours of summer to the dark interior of the corridor and maternity ward in a convent the location of which remains unidentified for the time being. The stark contrast of the dark colors underlines young Mária's physical and mental anguish; her happy face from the previous scene in the pond is now bathed in drops of sweat as she screams from labor pains while slowly collapsing on the floor. The water motif returns a little later in the narrative when Olga, Mária's daughter, goes for a swim following old Mária's falling into a coma and Olga's visit to the hospital in Hungary. The scene of Olga swimming in the lake is not only her attempt to deal emotionally with the uncertainty regarding her mother's condition: this scene beautifully engages the symbolic connoting of water with birth. Olga dives, naked, in the position of an unborn child, and resurfaces, as if reborn, which indeed indicates the beginning of her healing journey and her inner rebirth, for the moment unbeknownst to her. The first step on this path of healing is her phone call to her estranged Barcelona-based husband, Antonio, at which time she asks for his support in this difficult period (13:03-13:37). Finally, the end of the film takes us to the shores of the Barents Sea near Murmansk in Russia where Olga's journey has brought her following a long path of searching for the truth about her origins and the identity of her biological father. It is here, by the sea, that Olga will not only witness the flamboyant northern lights of her father's homeland but, more importantly, she will also heal the post-generational trauma she had both inherited for decades and passed on to her son—a trauma that has turned her into a workaholic preventing her from living life fully and embracing a relationship with her husband who accompanies her on this journey. I borrow "post-generation" and "postmemory" from Marianne Hirsch (2012: 5) who developed these terms in the context of Holocaust studies. The term post-generation refers to the generation that inherited the trauma of the survivors even though the descendants themselves were not directly affected by the traumatic events of the Holocaust. Postmemory can be passed down through images, stories but also affectively through behavior patterns. The mechanism of postmemory has been observed in historical situations other than the Holocaust as well. In the German context, the transgenerational passing down of behaviors and emotional patterns to children and grandchildren of the war generation has been extensively researched (see for instance Bode 2004 and 2009). Mészáros's film is another powerful illustration of postmemory and its multigenerational effects.

Mészáros invites the audience to plunge into a suspenseful and emotionally charged narrative (it is as if we, the audience were swimming through the water to the shores of the truth) with leaps back and forth between the present and various stages of the past. She introduces pieces of a puzzle that both the audience and her protagonists, Olga and her son, Róbert, have to gradually put together. We as the audience are at an advantage in that visually, the film offers hints of the truth that a careful viewer can decipher before it is finally expressed in a long sequence complemented by flashbacks, which puts old Mária and Olga face to face (in an amazing demonstration of acting brilliance both by Mari Töröcsik and Ildikó Tóth) in a very painful, but at the same time healing revelation. In the words spoken by Töröcsik: "It will hurt me. And it will hurt you, too" [*Fájni fog nekem. És neked is.*] (54:04). It is significant that this conversation is placed in the middle of the film and thus leads up to the film's climax, which is the truth about Olga's identity and Mária's past. What helps in putting the decisive crack into Mária's wall of silence is the object Olga hands back to her after Mária is released from hospital: the medallion that had belonged to Ákos's grandmother and that he gave Mária before their

attempted crossing of the Austrian border. The medallion thus features as a "trauma object," which Catherine Ann Collins and Alexandra Opie (2010: 115) define as visual symbols that become "iconic of the trauma, a placeholder from which to resolve its hauntings." A memento she has kept all her life, the medallion is this placeholder for Mária; it is only taken off her in the hospital and handed over by the doctor to Olga, thus symbolically inviting her to uncover the truth and thereby end the haunting of an unresolved traumatic past.

The journey that leads to the communication of the truth begins when Mária receives a mysterious letter from Russia that pushes her into a coma, forcing Olga to leave her busy professional life in Vienna and rush to Mária's home village, Megyer. The three main stations this transnational narrative connects—Hungary, Austria, and Russia—are thus juxtaposed from the beginning. Another station is added with Olga's son, Róbert, a university student whose father is from Spain. Róbert thus displays a true transnational European identity manifested also through his multilingualism. The shooting of the film and the cast also speak to this transnationalism. In addition to working with an international cast and crew, the film was shot at several locations in Hungary, Vienna, Barcelona, and Latvia ("*Elkezdődött*" 2015) and it uses Hungarian, German, English, Spanish, and Russian throughout.

Róbert's identity becomes further complicated once the truth about his maternal grandfather begins to surface. The first stage to this revelation is aided by Olga's swim in the lake mentioned above. Shortly thereafter, Olga gets drunk while waiting for Antonio, who lives up to the stereotype of the Hispanic who always arrives late. To sober up, she takes a shower in her elegant Viennese apartment—thus the water motif re-enters in order to ease the flow of the narrative to the revelation of the truth. It is after the shower that Olga tells her son that his biological grandfather was not Mária's Austrian husband, Stephan, but rather Ákos (18:35). It was Mária's wish to keep this secret for so long since, in her opinion, "we cannot allow the past to ruin our lives" [*nem engedhetjük, hogy a múlt tönkretegyje az életünket*] (19:28). Hence Mária's stubborn avoidance to face the past and her insistence on hiding its mysteries from Olga who, as per the mechanism of postmemory, "inherits" this pattern of avoidance from her and acts it out in her own life with the consequence of her broken marriage and a strained relationship with her son.

To emphasize the multigenerational impact of traumatic past events that affect not only the generation of the children but also that of the grandchildren, it is Róbert who, while Mária is lying in a coma at the hospital, opens her living room cabinet full of dolls whose faces have been painted or rather disfigured by Mária: they are either marked with streaks of red as if bloody, have a black eye or missing eyes indicating abuse and violence. Róbert further discovers a drawing (presumably Mária's) of a Russian soldier. He leaves his grandmother's house with a sigh, which indicates that the weight of a repressed and hidden past is beginning to catch up with the entire family even into the third generation.

The informed viewer will by now be able to put together some pieces of the puzzle, thinking that Mária was probably raped by a Russian soldier—the trauma of which she would have acted out on her bruised dolls and in her drawings—and that Olga, introduced as her daughter, may not be Ákos's child, but rather a child of rape. The truth will turn out to be much more complicated. To better understand the development of this fictional narrative and the historical background it uses as its framework, it is important to present some historical facts regarding the extent and consequences of sexual violence during WWII and into the years of the

Allied occupation.

The number of women raped in WWII will remain an estimate given the complex issue of memorializing wartime rape and the proverbial wall of silence that surrounds rape as a social phenomenon in war as in peace. Nevertheless, researchers talk about millions of women affected by sexual violence in both Nazi-occupied territories and those liberated/occupied by the Allies. As a consequence of these mass rapes, numerous children were conceived; although many were aborted, many were also born. As a matter of fact, abortion policies differed widely from country to country after WWII. In Germany, given the extent of rapes committed in Soviet-occupied territories, the previously strict Nazi anti-abortion laws were eased, thereby allowing raped women to seek abortions. German historian Miriam Gebhardt (2015: 74-81) has demonstrated that abortions were difficult to obtain for most raped women and their requests were often turned down. According to historian Barbara Stelzl-Marx (2012: 476), the situation was not any better in Austria. Abortions were treated as "exceptional" and only authorized by a physician as a hospital procedure if the pregnancy could be proven to be the result of rape. Regarding Hungary, historian Andrea Pető (2018: 105-112) claims that pregnancies resulting from rapes resulted in abortions in most cases. She considers the temporary legalization of abortion in February 1945 an important step toward women's reproductive rights in Hungary. She further quotes examples of the discourses around aborting children of rape at the time, an action even the Church did not outright condemn. Unlike in Germany, in Hungary racial considerations did not seem to have figured in these debates.

Despite the likelihood that numerous fetuses conceived through rape may have been aborted using various methods, Silke Satjukow and Rainer Gries estimate that millions of children were fathered during WWII by German and Allied soldiers all over Europe and the former Soviet Union, whether through rape or in consensual relationships, a distinction that is difficult to establish in some situations. British historian Antony Beevor (2002) reminds us of the difficulty to clearly distinguish between rape and consensual sex in wartime. He quotes American feminist author Susan Brownmiller who addresses "the murky line that divides wartime rape from wartime prostitution" and German feminist filmmaker Helke Sander who talks about "the grey area of direct force, blackmail, calculation and real affection." Anna Hájková (2013) proposes the term "sexual barter" that essentially contains all of the above. Estimates for children fathered in Germany by all Allied soldiers combined and/or children born of rape vary between 100,000 (Stelzl-Marx 2009: 361) and 300,000 (Eichhorn and Kuwert 2011: 28), while Mechthild Rawert (2016: 9) sets this number at 250,000 in Germany. Stelzl-Marx (2012: 411) estimates the number of raped women in Austria to be a maximum of 270,000, of which between 70,000 and 100,000 in Vienna alone (Stelzl-Marx 2012: 411). Regarding the number of children born, Rawert (2016: 9) mentions a minimum of 20,000 children for Austria while Stelzl-Marx ("Elkezdődött": 2015) sets the number at 30,000. In the film, Mária's grandson Róbert visits an exhibition in Vienna about the sexual violence and children born during the Allied occupation (31:52-32:43). The figures quoted at the exhibition refer to 240,000 raped women and 40,000 children fathered by the Soviets alone in Austria.

We can see from the aforementioned numbers how difficult it is to reach a consensus regarding the number of rape victims and/or children born of rape in wartime. It is impossible to establish reliable figures given the taboo surrounding the phenomenon of rape and even more the children of rape. Given the complex nature of sexual violence in wars, it is even more difficult to

differentiate in the statistics between children born of consensual relationships and children born of rape. Stelzl-Marx cautions that we will never have reliable figures regarding children born of rape in conflict. Without trying to normalize this violent historical phenomenon—one that unfortunately has seen more recent episodes—, she adds that sexual violence and relationships between soldiers of the invading army and local women with the consequence of children born from such contacts have been a part of history since times immemorial. She quotes: "Wherever foreign soldiers—be it as allies or as conquerors—enter into contact with the population of a country, illegitimate children will be born. This happened at the time of the Roman legions and it likely won't change for some time to come" [*Wo immer ausländische Soldaten – als Verbündete oder als Eroberer – mit der Bevölkerung eines Landes Beziehungen anknüpfen, werden uneheliche Kinder geboren. Das war zur Zeit der römischen Legionen so, und daran wird sich wohl noch lange nichts ändern*] (Srnecik qtd. in Stelzl-Marx 2009: 352).

Unfortunately, no reliable figures exist for rapes perpetuated by the Red Army in Hungary, as explained by Pető in her recent book *Elmondani az elmondhatatlant* ['Speaking of the Unspeakable']. Pető argues that in Hungary, the memory of the rapes perpetrated by the Soviets during WWII became a "hot" memory (a term she borrows from Charles Maier) after the fall of communism. She further argues that following the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s (with mass rapes particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina) a new vocabulary was created that subsequently enabled a new discussion of other, earlier historical episodes of sexual violence, including the one in Hungary at the end of WWII. However, Pető avoids giving any numbers regarding raped women in Hungary and refuses to partake in what she terms "waging wars with numbers" [*számháború*] as she considers that the various, very rough estimates quoted by other authors are not based on any reliable sources. As to date no research has been carried out in Hungary regarding children fathered by the Soviet occupation forces, there are no figures regarding their possible numbers.

*Aurora Borealis* conveys this historical complexity and ambiguity regarding sexual violence in WWII and during the Soviet occupation through the intertwined stories of Mária and her Viennese friend Edith, Ákos's cousin. While Ákos is shot and left to bleed to death at the Hungarian-Austrian border by a Soviet patrol who gang-rape Mária and take her to Vienna, Edith, who looks after Mária, has a love relationship with Anton, a kind Soviet officer and doctor. Both women find themselves pregnant and give birth to daughters on the same day in August 1954 at the same Viennese convent. The film thus demonstrates how the Cold War and the occupation (not only by the Soviets) continued to wage the battles of WWII also through women's bodies. As Stelzl-Marx asserts (2012: 498), although relationships between Soviet soldiers and local Austrian women were not explicitly forbidden—given that, unlike the enemy country, Germany, Austria was classified as a "peaceful nation"—, the Kremlin considered these relationships suspicious (2012: 488) and treated Austrian women who engaged in relationships with members of the Soviet occupation army as potential anti-Soviet spies. Some were sent to Gulags while others were even executed. In the film, the story of Edith, who is sent to Siberia and perishes there—the information conveyed in the letter from Russia that pushes Mária into a coma—because of her relationship with a member of the Soviet armed forces (who is also sent to a Gulag), is thus, although fictional, historically credible. The film thus confirms Stelzl-Marx's findings that a happy end was virtually impossible for such relationships. Especially in cases when the relationship, like Edith's, became serious to the point of marriage plans and the birth of

a child (2012: 498), the Soviet soldier/officer would be sent away. Despite the imposition of these political constraints and the danger they brought to people's private lives, Stelzl-Marx concludes that (regardless of the possible consequences for either party) relationships between the young Soviets and young Austrian women were rather frequent between the post-WWII years until the end of the Soviet occupation in 1955.

Given the long arm of WWII that created the conditions for the occupation and the political divisions of the Cold War, we can speak of a "traumatic situation" that extended beyond a single traumatic event. While referring to David Becker, Ann Kaplan (2005: 39) defines a traumatic situation as the context in which a particular traumatic event happens, involving the community and the culture and politics surrounding the individual, which all contribute to the experience of trauma. In *Aurora Borealis*, the traumatic events are cumulative, beginning with the repressive effects of the communist regime in Hungary as shown through Ákos's brutal treatment for belonging to the "wrong" class (he is an aristocrat) and his subsequent violent death while trying to escape to Austria with Mária. While one can argue that Ákos's very presence in the idyllic Hungarian countryside where he meets Mária (who comes from a simple background) may not be terribly likely historically speaking, it does allow the viewer to gain an insight into the brutality of the communist regime. The violence experienced at the border establishes the chain of traumatizations for Mária, events which would not have happened without the traumatic situation of the occupation and of the Iron Curtain. She is gang-raped minutes after witnessing her beloved's terrible death and only narrowly escapes imprisonment or possible deportation to the Soviet Union by jumping off the truck at an opportune moment on the nocturnal streets of Vienna. Small wonder that she collapses after arriving at the apartment of Ákos's relatives (58:17).

Mária's traumatization continues due to the continuous presence of Soviet soldiers in Vienna, as seeing them is a constant reminder of the sexual violence she experienced; this trauma is further reinforced when she discovers that she is pregnant. We see an acting out of traumatic memory when Mária first meets Edith's boyfriend Anton (1:04:02). Mária tries to shut the apartment door in his face and runs away, throwing various objects at him, with visible signs of panic in her entire body language. Despite Edith's reassurances that Anton is a good person and that he helped arrange her papers, Mária locks herself into her room. To understand Mária's behavior in this scene and throughout the film, it is important to be aware of the ways in which traumatic memory operates. According to Judith Herman (2015: 27), traumatic memories are "not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear way that is assimilated into an ongoing life story" but rather exist "encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images." Traumatic memories thus "lack verbal narrative and context" and instead manifest in somatic ways and in uncontrollable and fragmented intrusions of images in the mind. Herman's findings have been corroborated by recent research in brain science, which explains the dissociation experienced by most trauma survivors (Kaplan 2005: 34): the cerebral cortex (i.e. the meaning-making part of the brain) shuts down during a traumatic impact, which is why there is no cognitive registration of the horror being experienced. Only the amygdala part, i.e. the part of the brain that registers sensation, remains active. We can see this mechanism at work in Mária. She does not explicitly communicate to anybody that she was raped and only hints at it to Edith when she expresses uncertainty regarding the paternity of her child after finding out that she is pregnant: "And ... what if it is not from Ákos?" [*Und ... wenn es nicht von Ákos ist?*] (1:09:18).

While she tries to put her past behind her and build a life in Vienna, the traumatic memory continues its acting out, creating the conditions for multigenerational and transnational trauma even decades later after she returns to her village in Hungary following her Austrian husband's passing. Her daughter Olga "inherits" Mária's traumatization and patterns of avoidance which, as was mentioned above, manifest in the obstacles she meets in having a happy private life.

Mária's coma becomes a crucial factor in the process of working through her traumatic past as it allows repressed memories to resurface. Most notably, what re-emerges is the painful fact that Olga is not her biological daughter. While she is in the coma, the repressed ghosts of her past begin to haunt again as she has flashbacks of Ákos, Edith and Anna, her biological daughter whom she handed over to the Soviet secret service in order to save Edith and Anton's daughter Olga from being taken away to the Soviet Union. However, at this point in the narrative, the audience still does not know these rather important details that will be fully revealed later. During the coma, the cognitive part of the brain shuts down and the images stored in the amygdala resurface. What happens to Mária has been researched by German psychologists and trauma therapists, Svenja Eichhorn and Philip Kuwert. According to their research conducted with elderly German women who had survived rapes by the Soviets at the end of WWII (2011: 13), about half of them developed long-term traumatic symptoms that often resurfaced in old age. The temporal collapse between past and present following traumatic distress, as explained by Cathy Caruth (1995: 9), will manifest at a later point in a fragmented form. This belated response, diagnosed in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), may involve "repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event" (Caruth 1995: 4). The symptoms of PTSD essentially amount to what Dominick LaCapra (2001: 141-151) described as the "acting out" of traumatic event(s) through compulsive repetition; it is a reliving of the past, a haunting by its "ghosts" in flashbacks and nightmares whereby the past occurrences intrude upon the present, thereby erasing the ability to distinguish between past, present, and future. The numerous jumps in the film's narrative sequence from the present to various stages of the past and back into the present reflect this temporal break in a traumatized person's mind.

In order to move beyond the acting out of past traumatic events and to heal the trauma, it is important to break the wall of silence and allow for the process of narrative recovery. The suspense in Mészáros's film as the narrative builds to the revelation of the truth in the scene between Mária and Olga not only allows for Mária to enter the process of narrative recovery regarding her own trauma but also reflects the way in which the search for the identity of children fathered by Allied soldiers has been described. In Austria and Germany, numerous children fathered by Allied soldiers have been looking for their fathers or other family members in recent years, with some success. Stelzl-Marx (2009: 86-87) considers the ability to look for and sometimes find the biological father and other family members an act of "empowerment." This search is guided by questions formulated by a German child of rape in the following terms: "Who am I / Where do I come from / Who is my father?" (Behlau 2015: 23). We can follow this process of empowerment through Olga's search for her father's family in Russia once Mária tells her the truth about her biological parents. When it comes to finding family members on the paternal side, success stories are virtually impossible in the case of children fathered through rape in war as, unlike in consensual relationships—the case of Olga's parents—the identity of the father in the vast majority of cases remains unknown.

Although we do not find out about Mária swapping the babies until the end of her long talk with Olga, the identity of her biological child's father is visually implied already in the scene of the rape at the Austrian border. Although she is raped by four soldiers, the face that is shown the most clearly as she looks at with tears in her eyes is that of a "Mongol," as the racialized members of the Soviet army from the Asian parts of the Soviet Union were commonly referred to in Central Europe, and not only in Nazi Germany but also in Austria and Hungary (53:25). The same "Mongol" soldier also sits next to Mária on the truck that takes her to Vienna. Finally, he is the one whom we see in a close up, for a few seconds (55:27) as he looks down the street where Mária ran away and where she is saved by her future husband, Stephan. These are important visual hints that the child Mária carries will be a racialized "Mongol" child as it indeed turns out to be. This circumstance explains why Mária cries after giving birth to her daughter Anna and has no interest in nursing her, displaying what would be called today postpartum depression, while Edith happily embraces Anton's baby, Olga. I argue that the fact that Mária's daughter has Asian features makes it easier for her to hand over her daughter to the women from the Soviet secret service when they intrude in her apartment with the intention of taking Edith's baby away. In this suspenseful scene, Mária disappears in the adjacent room, where she hides little Olga in a trunk and walks out with little Anna wrapped in a blanket. Although her later explanation to her adoptive daughter Olga is that she had promised Edith to save her after both her parents were deported, I contend that had her own baby been a non-racialized, i.e. "white" child with Ákos as the possible father, her choice between the two babies would have been much more difficult. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that, throughout her pregnancy, Mária instinctively seems to know that the child she carries is a child of rape. First, she tries to abort it by lying in the tub in steaming hot water; it is only thanks to Edith that this abortion attempt fails. To Olga, Mária communicates the experience of her pregnancy in less than joyful terms: "Those nine months were horrible. An enemy is growing inside you. And it keeps stirring, stirring, telling me that it is alive." [*Szörnyű volt az a kilenc hónap. Egy ellenség növekszik benned. És mocoog, mocoog. Tudatja velem, hogy él.*] (1:12:23). These words convey that Mária was aware of the fact that she was carrying a child of rape, a child she did not desire and to which she did not wish to give birth.

We may understand Mária's decision better if we look at the "traumatic situation" in which she conceived and gave birth to a child of rape. According to Stelzl-Marx, in Austria (just like in Germany), the racist discourse of national socialism lived on after the end of the war. As previously mentioned, relationships with members of the occupying armies were not encouraged. Particularly relationships with racialized men were looked down upon, including African-American GIs, Moroccan members of the French forces and "Mongols" from the Soviet Union (Stelzl-Marx 2012: 160). In general, the Soviets fell under the category of the "wild hordes from the East," and their girlfriends and offspring were poorly treated: "especially the children of Soviet occupation troops were confronted with racial, ideological and moral prejudice that can be traced back to the Nazi era. *Russenkind* ['Russian child'] or *Russenbalg* ['Russian brat'] were common abusive words up into the 1960s" (Stelzl-Marx 2009: 352). Building on what German psychologist Heide Glaesmer (2015: 91) has stated regarding the double stigma (i.e., the stigma of being a product of a violent act, and the stigma of being a child of the perpetrator of a violent act) faced by children born of rape, we can say that racialized children born of rape faced a triple stigma in that they were children of rape, children of the enemy and children of an undesirable

racial background. It is therefore not difficult to comprehend why the mothers of such children would have kept silent or given the child away, and why many children likely never found out the truth about their origin.

In Mészáros's film, the search for Olga's biological father becomes connected to the search for Mária's biological daughter, Anna. Olga leaves with Antonio for Russia where she not only finds her father's family—her father unfortunately passed away—, but at her uncle's home she comes across a picture of Anna with two young people whom we can assume to be Anna's children, i.e. Mária's grandchildren. Anna, we are told, was raised in a Soviet orphanage, which was very often the fate of children born of similar circumstances in post-war Europe and the former Soviet Union. Very little research data is available regarding the situation of children like Mészáros's Anna in today's Russia. As stated by Pető, the Russian archives are still not open to researchers investigating these painful topics going back to WWII. Some research results do, however, exist regarding children fathered in the Soviet Union by German soldiers. German historian Regina Mühlhäuser (2010) has researched relationships between soldiers of the German *Wehrmacht* with women in the occupied Soviet Union. Stelzl-Marx (2017) discusses the discrimination children born of such relationships experienced. Similar to the "Russian bastards" in Germany and Austria, the children fathered by Germans in Russia were branded "German bastards." Many grew up in orphanages and their origins have been a lasting taboo. The film *One War* [*Odna vojna*, 2009], directed by Vera Glagoleva, is exceptional in that it addresses this taboo topic. The director spoke of the great difficulties she had faced when researching the background to her film and of the poor reception it garnered in Russia.

While in Mészáros's film the outcome of Olga's search for her paternal family may seem unlikely, it is not an impossible scenario. In recent years, some success stories in Austria and Germany alike have been reported by children—now in their seventies—who were fathered by Soviet occupation soldiers and succeeded in their long search to locate family members on their father's side in Russia. New Internet platforms such as Facebook are often what helps in these searches. The website *Distelblüten—Russenkinder in Deutschland* [*Thistleflowers—Russian Children in Germany*] reports on these stories.

*Aurora Borealis* similarly makes use of the opportunities inherent to digital communication. What helps to identify Anna in the film is the teddy bear that functions as another "trauma object" in the narrative. Before they were separated, baby Olga and Anna had identical teddy bears and Mária gave her daughter's teddy to the women from the Soviet secret service to be taken along with her baby girl. Thanks to this teddy bear that adult Anna holds in the picture, Olga can identify Mária's long lost biological daughter. For Mária, who almost immediately receives a digital copy of this photograph in Hungary via her grandson's smart phone, the search has come full circle and she happily closes her eyes forever in Róbert's presence. Freed from the weight of the trauma she had "inherited," Olga reunites with her husband under the Northern lights by the sea.

Narratives about children of the occupation/children born of rape in conflict particularly allow us to complicate narratives of wars and their multigenerational and transnational psychological and social consequences. They deconstruct the concept of a homogeneous national identity (like Olga and Anna do) in that they open up the space for cultural hybridity and erase the boundaries between Us and Them. By extension, they also allow for a positive connoting of the (here Russian/Soviet) Other. Children born of armed conflict, like the members of the

German group *Thistleflowers*, emphasize the urgent need that societies do more for children born under similar circumstances. Founding member and leader of the *Thistleflowers* group, Winfried Behlau (who publicly identifies as a child of rape), formulated his message to children born as a result of conflict and occupation in the following words: "Speak up and do not feel guilty. And say, you are strong, it happened to your mother, but you yourself are innocent and do not have to pay for what your father has done" (Schwartz 2016). In the film, Mária similarly states to Olga: "Little Anna is innocent" [*Annácska ártatlan.*] (1:28:00). Unfortunately, the politics of the nation state still prefer to keep children born under similar circumstances stigmatized, ostracized and invisible, a process that also happened more recently in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. Fortunately, groups of children born of war have begun to organize and raise their voices to come out of the shadows, such as the *Thistleflowers* group in Germany or the group *Forgotten Children of the War* [*Zaboravljena djeca rata*] in Bosnia. Illustrating what Marita Nadal and Mónica Calvo stated about the ethical role trauma survivors can and should play in society, German children born of war define themselves as "bridge builders" (Rawert 2016: 10). Accordingly, Satjukow and Gries (2015: 364) refer to children born of war as "children of the future." Márta Mészáros's film brings this message to the screen through a haunting transnational narrative that raises awareness about the complex and lasting consequences of wars on women, men, children and societies across national borders, and invites us to rethink the dominant narratives of war for the twenty-first century.

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