Transnational sense of place: cinematic scenes of Finnish war child memories

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Abstract
In this article I discuss the role of popular geopolitics and people’s performative repertoires in voicing the social silence. I have selected for close-reading some of the episodes of the film Mother of Mine, which tells the story of a Finnish war child. In my analysis I ask what the transnational memory sites of forced displacement are, how they are depicted, and in general what kind of socio-spatial identity struggles they are involved in. Moreover, in this article I argue that the many forms through which silence becomes expressive need to be studied on the scale of the body and daily performative practices. Thus, I conclude that through several daily practices the Finnish war children unconsciously developed transnational agencies in order to survive and re-create the existential social and spatial ties of belonging.

Keywords: sense of place and placelessness; performative repertoires; silence; popular geopolitics; film; memory studies; Finnish war children

“Where do I belong?” is the existential question humans often pose to themselves. The socio-spatial ties of belonging are constantly negotiated in personal and intersubjective arenas. In the contemporary fluid world, our ties of belonging are more spatially diverse than before. For many people, however, their sense of place was permanently changed during and after the Second World War due to evacuations and displacements. In some occasions, the socio-spatial ties of belonging were formed in a transnational setting. For the youngest generations in particular, this displacement experience often created fragmented memories and left permanent marks on how they conceived their spatial ties and social identity later in their life.

Kevin Hetherington argues that identity is not only achieved through identification with groups of individuals, but also through performative repertoires that are expressive and embodied. Forced displacement in the transnational setting changed this socio-spatial dynamic. People were torn away from their familiar places. This created, I argue, fractures in their experience of spatiality. These fractures are long-standing and continue to affect the memory politics and visual imageries of individuals and collectives.

The transnational setting where the Finnish war children operated is finely depicted in some of the documentaries and films made in the early 2000s. The film is a very powerful way of narrating geopolitical events and has been widely studied for instance in political geography and geopolitics. As Klaus Dodds puts it: “the power of popular geopolitics products, such as the films, lies not only in the broadcasting itself but also in the manner in which events, people, and places are framed”. Thus, in the study of popular geopolitics focus is on the multiple agencies and mediums through which the everyday politisation occurs and also on how people are affected by these geopolitical imaginations.

In this article, I will analyse the cinematic scenes of the displacement experiences of a Finnish war child. The empirical data of my analysis is the film Mother of Mine (original title: *Mother of Mine*).


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Äideistä parhain), based on the novel of Heikki Hietamies and directed by Klaus Härö. It tells the story of a Finnish war child called Eero, who is sent to Sweden at the age of nine. In my analysis I show what these transnational sites of belonging are and how they are depicted in Mother of Mine. Finally, I also discuss the role of cinematic scenes and popular geopolitics in voicing the collective silence of the community of Finnish war children.

**SENSE OF PLACE AND WAR CHILDREN’S TRANSTHIATIONAL AGENCY**

The sense of place relates to the understanding of existential place relations in humanistic geography. Spatiality, identity, community and history are combined in a sense of place. It also plays a necessary part in collective identity politics. The forced displacement tore apart the familiar place relations, and sense of belonging was challenged by mobility. Displacement changed the logic of belonging: people had to struggle for their survival and their familiar spatial ties had also been altered. The multiscaled confusion in personal and collective spatial identity politics was often felt as rootlessness, which is placelessness.

Along with Nora and Kritzman, I argue that the sites of memories are not restricted to physical and material dimensions of places but they should equally be viewed as mental and associational elements of spatial sense-making. Moreover, the memories are formed in everyday life—in Nora’s terms, “memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name”.

Finnish war children are one real testimony of how forced displacement in early childhood affects the sense of place and placelessness. Because of their young age, these children often, very appealingly, negotiated their ties of belonging through varied bodily practices, i.e. they expressed their longing and process of being “placed” again through the body politics.

During the Second World War, Finland sent around 70 000 to 80 000 children to other Nordic countries. Most of the children were sent to Sweden, about one thousand to Denmark and a few hundred to Norway. Being emotionally “in between” these two national contexts meant that the war children simultaneously had to develop multiple strategies of remembering and adjusting. These strategies were often unconscious, yet loud and visible. In the current light of things, it can be argued that these children were actually developing transnational agencies in order to survive and recreate the existential social and spatial ties of belonging.

After the war, the experiences of the Finnish war children were silenced for many decades, but in the early 1990s the historical silence was broken. Several major events occurred in the life of these war children: many had recently lost their biological parents and retired from their work. These changes raised questions and provided an opportunity to discuss their childhood years from different perspectives. In addition, during the last 15 years, these Finnish war children have founded national and local associations.

There is also an interesting geopolitical paradox in voicing the war child histories. The silence had its roots in the transnational geopolitical turmoil of the Second World War—and the deliberative force, i.e. giving voice to these people, in the early 1990s was again linked with the unravelling of the geopolitical establishment of the Cold War. For example, the collapse of the Soviet Union also changed the Finnish national context into being more accepting of the different narrations of wartime experiences.

**SCENES OF DISPLACEMENT**

The main story line in Mother of Mine describes how Eero is half-orphaned when his father dies in the war. Eero’s biological mother, Kirsti, becomes depressed by this devastating news and can no longer take care of Eero. The social workers from the Lotta Svärd organisation suggest that Eero should be sent “on a holiday” to Sweden, which the mother Kirsti then re-phrase and explains this difficult decision to her son. Eero will be hosted by a childless couple living in a small farm in Skåne in southern Sweden.

The visual narration of the film happens in two temporal contexts: the main events are told through Eero’s childhood memories on travelling to and living in Skåne, but the storyline is intensified by inserting into the main story clips of discussions between the 69-year-old Eero and his decrepit, frail mother who are reaching to one another across the gap of silence.

Mother of Mine visualises the existential ontology of socio-spatial belonging of humans: sense of
place and placelessness. From this rich source, I have selected few episodes, with different but intertwined themes, which illustrate how the emotional and spatial ties are negotiated. The first episode describes the leaving of home. This theme can be found in two different scenes: the first scene of leaving shows children on the gangway boarding the SS Arcturus, the vessel that took many Finnish war children to Sweden, and the second scene of leaving occurs at the end of the film, when Eero is sent back to Finland. These two cinematic scenes are also most iconographic settings of collective narrations on war child memories.

The second episode I have chosen for close-reading focuses on some of the performative strategies in which Eero tries to understand and interpret the socio-spatial changes he is living through. This theme is also found in two scenes: Eero’s first day at school and Eero building a raft out of planks of wood. These sites of memory are crucial because in a sense of place, everyday practices matter.

**Tearing the ties**

In the first scene of leaving, the SS Arcturus is in port, rain is pouring from the sky, the ship’s foghorn blows, and small children are crying. Eero’s mother Kirsti enrols her son in the list of children travelling to Sweden as war children. Eero remains silent and solemn. A piece of paper stating his name and age is put around his neck. Eero looks at this tag and asks his mother: “Why can’t you come with me?” These are his last words to her in the scene. His journey to the unknown has begun. Around him, some children try to resist and cling to the handrails but the adults escorting the children force them all into the ship, which then sails away. Tearing the ties of belonging began from the moment Eero was put in the ship. When the ship arrived in Sweden, the youngest and prettiest girls were the first to be picked by the host families. Even at this point Eero is still convinced that if he remains the last one and is not picked, they will send him back home to Finland. But suddenly, the reality strikes: he is put aboard the bus to Skåne and left off to meet (Aunt) Signe and (Uncle) Hjalmar Jönsson.

Displacement broke the familiar rhythms of life, changed the language and ways to communicate, and also children’s trust in adults. Travelling objects, such as photographs, a bedtime toy or a backpack, as in Eero’s case, were symbolic objects of lost places. The definable instant that these children lived was formed out of their confusion with the past that ceased to act but did not cease to be. In the film, it is only little by little that adults regain Eero’s trust, and he finds his place in the heart and home of Signe and Hjalmar. Unfortunately, the daily routines are suddenly broken again when the war ends and the letter reclaiming Eero back home reaches Signe and Hjalmar. The displacement experience strikes again.

For Eero, it is time to return to Finland. In the second scene of leaving, Hjalmar forces Eero into the car while Signe remains inside the house, crying. Eero desperately screams for his mother, Signe. The car is leaving the yard with Eero looking through the rear window when Signe rushes out of the house and starts running behind the car, finally collapsing on her knees. After this episode, the film cuts to the arrival of the ship in Finland. The same port the ship departed from is now full of waving mothers, and children are shown running to meet their parents. Eero disembarks the ship but his mother is late. The arrival hall is empty, and the only sound is the screech of the slowly swinging anchor chain in the background. The emotional and visual atmosphere in the film is at the same time devastating and sentimental.

The common ground for collective memory of war child experience is based on these sites of leaving. This is not surprising whereas they were easily recognised by the community itself as the key turning points of their journey. Also the wider Finnish audience could be emotionally included to this narration: “it must have been horrible to leave all the familiar behind”. However, the sense of being out of place, being placed again and the constant negotiations of social identity occurred in and through daily routines that have often left unacknowledged in the Finnish narrations of war experiences and in the academic research. Thus, Mother of Mine also offers important depictions of daily agencies and strategies of socio-spatial identification.

**Conflicting daily routines**

Between these two temporal points of being displaced, Eero was gradually drawn into the normal
routine of the Jönsson family. Eero applied several performative strategies that aim at preserving the past ties but simultaneously and often unconsciously open him for the future. This paradox is essential in the social construction of the sense of place. The socio-spatial ties never merely exist but they are constantly becoming. Thus place (and spatial identity) is not being but becoming.\textsuperscript{16} The routines, cycles, and repetition make the everyday life. With Eero, most of these routines were altered due to displacement. Confusion was both socio-spatial and temporal. While Eero maintained his ties to the distant home, at the same time he also adopted new survival strategies.

In the film, the scene of Eero’s first day at school shows how he is constantly struggling with the overwhelming scale of changes in his everyday life. Signe forces Eero to go to school because she wants him to learn Swedish. The only thing that the Finnish-speaking Eero understands is the word “school” and tries to refuse going. But Hjalmar takes Eero to school on his bike rack. At school, Hjalmar asks Eero in Swedish: “Will you find your way back home?” [original in Swedish: \textit{Hittar du hem?}], to which Eero answers: “Bye!” [original in Finnish: \textit{Hei}]. Eero’s reply clearly shows that he has no idea what Hjalmar is saying. Eero is only imitating the last word that he assumes to mean “bye”. Imitating is one of Eero’s strategies that aim at learning the new language and coping with the new linguistic environment. When Hjalmar leaves the school yard, Eero tries to run away, but the school teacher sees him and shouts from the window: “You must be that war child, welcome!”

The visual means to show the transnational confusion Eero experiences are fascinating in the film. For example, Eero is shown walking into the school building, which has the Swedish flag hanging above the main door. Also, when Eero writes his name on the blackboard, the other students are singing the Finnish national anthem in Swedish. These visualisations of the director Klaus Hårö illustrate the confusion in the sense of belonging of Finnish war children. They were abroad but were longing for their Finnish home. The war children lived the daily life within the Swedish families but could not even communicate with them at the beginning without the Swedish language. In fact, many of the children operated within the symbolic schemas familiar to them from Finland.\textsuperscript{17} For example, on his first school day Eero is shown playing outside when he hears an aeroplane coming. Because of his prior experiences in wartime Finland, he runs to the school basement to hide. When the plane has flown away, Eero returns to the school yard and realises that he was hiding in the girls’ toilet. All the other children are laughing at him because of his strange behaviour.

In Eero’s symbolic schema, the aeroplane means bombings. The wartime experiences activated a survival strategy: hiding. This example shows how deep the socio-spatial confusion was in war children’s mind. Moreover, war children had to constantly struggle to understand where they were, what home meant for them, what the ties of belonging were, and how these could be maintained across the national boundaries. In contemporary terms, these children tried to cope with the challenges and possibilities of transnational sense of place, even though they did not have a clue of what was going on.

\textbf{Laying down the roots}

An extremely touching performative strategy in Eero’s daily life is the building of the raft. Missing his mother in Finland, Eero has decided to sail back home. He collects wooden planks in secret and takes them to the sea shore. One day Hjalmar follows Eero and sees what he is doing. But instead of blaming Eero for doing something stupid, Hjalmar actually gives more planks to him. They discuss [in Swedish] the building process, and Hjalmar tells Eero what a great builder Eero is. Hjalmar also tells a story of how he wanted to travel to America but found himself stuck to the land of Signe.

The above episode is a significant turning-point in Eero’s spatio-emotional engagement. Learning Swedish has opened up new symbolic schemas for him. Also the Jönsson family has accepted that Eero is in-between the two national contexts. Moreover, Hjalmar’s kind attitude has provided a new path to create ties of belonging. One night Eero says to Signe, who is tucking him up: “I want to stay here. Hjalmar said to me that his boots are
stuck in your land, Signe. I want mine to do so too”.

Everyday life has gradually become routine again. Eero can speak Swedish. The ties of belonging are still dispersed between Finland and Skåne, but the roots to the land of Signe have started growing. The interplay of learning Swedish and actively protecting Finnish skills (using the native language for example in difficult emotional situations), the daily routine of waiting for the postman to bring a letter from Finland, building a raft, and so forth are the events that clearly illustrate the overlapping and often contradictory performative repertoires of socio-spatial identification in Mother of Mine.

I have analysed some of the scenes of displacement in the film Mother of Mine. Instead of focusing exclusively on the most iconic sites, such as the scenes of leaving, I have also studied the mundane sites. I argue these everyday sites are in fact crucial in two ways. First, they are the sites where daily confrontation and conflict occur and become visualised. Second, the sense of place and placelessness are in fact created and negotiated in and through the daily socio-spatial routines and practices. Thus, these are the contexts where the existential ontology of humans’ spatial being is emotionally constructed.

**POPULAR GEOPOLITICS MATTERS: VOICING THE SILENCE**

As Jay Winter has argued, silence is a social process, involving different actions and agencies. Thus, silence should always be analysed in connection with remembering and forgetting. Forgetting, instead, is a tacit form of remembering and should not be considered equal to silence. This means that silence does not refer to something totally absent in the social sphere, but rather to the absence of narration. According to Winter, silence is a boundary condition to narration.

In this case the cinematic narration enabled the voicing of silence. Visualisation of the war children’s everyday practices that often were embodied and silent rather than oral and loud meant that the boundaries of silence were finally broken. Even before the cinematic visualisations, the stories and experiences of the Finnish war children were not forgotten, but the strength of social silence was too strong that the personal narrations could have entered into public sphere.

The spatial, social, and emotional in-betweeness that the war children carried silently in them had lasted for decades. Thus, I argue that in the contexts of transnational identity, it is important to move away from the fixation that remembering and silences would best be projected on the national level. Rather, the many forms through which silence becomes expressive need to be studied on the scale of the body and daily performative practices. The body remembers performances executed in the past, and these performances above all are non-textual and some even non-cognitive. In Mother of Mine bodily performances, transnational socio-cultural context and spatial identity politics come together by creating fascinating visual narrations and imageries. Popular geopolitics indeed became one tool for the voicing of collective and personal silences among the war children.

In the cinematic narrations fragmented memories can be re-told in a coherent form. The sense of place and placelessness can be described in the same episodes. Thus, I argue, the role of films as popular geopolitical products can be powerful and appealing. Mother of Mine includes several emancipatory aspects. The possibility of Finnish war children having a transnational sense of place was never acknowledged after the war. Social silence made their experiences and spatial ties personal secrets. Only after the 1990s, some routes to personal and collective healing were found. Forgiveness is also the final theme in Mother of Mine.

The film ends with the episode depicting the culmination point of reaching over the boundaries of silence within the family. Eero says to his now old mother: “60 years, it is a lifetime. Some part of us was left there—in Skåne. I decided then that I will never miss you again”. His mother replies: “But you did miss me!” Eero touches her hand and says: “Yes, I did”. This example clearly illustrates the “hidden” power of film as a popular geopolitics product. After the war the most problematic question in the personal emotional histories often was the relationship between the biological mother and the war child. The “double” silence, i.e. in national and family spheres, needed a channel to be expressed. The social emancipation of the burden of the mothers sending these children abroad and the burden of children who
tried to adjust in-between national contexts were first time said aloud and also widely recognised through this film. Thus, it is not surprising that exactly this theme in *Mother of Mine* received very pleased commentaries from the war child community itself and the general public.21

Transnational contexts and sites of memory are fascinating environments for studying the sense of place and placelessness. Often, however, researching these emotional “borderlands” is challenging because of the social silence. I find the approach of popular geopolitics extremely workable in this context. Voicing the silence always requires multiple practices, agents, and also novel research methodologies. People, their daily practices, and sites of identity struggles formed the core contexts of belonging. As an appealing popular geopolitical product, the film has gained an important role in voicing the multiple social and emotional histories of Finnish wars.

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**Notes**

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10. See e.g. Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire [1984]*, *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–25.

11. Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire [1984]’, *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–25.

12. Pertti Kaven, *70 000 pientä kohtaloa* [70 000 small destinies.] (Otalampi: Sahlgrens, 2003); Jarmo Knuutila and Kari Levola, *Sotalapsi ei unohda* [War child will not forget.] (Helsinki: Tammi, 2000), 20.

13. Lotta Svärd (1920–1944) was a voluntary national defence organisation. It was a women’s organisation and particularly during WW II it carried several home front duties but they also were involved in medical care in the front line field hospitals.

14. Celia Lury, ‘The Objects of Travel’, in *Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory*, ed. Chris Rojek and John Urry (London: Routledge, 1997), 75–95.

15. See e.g. Mike Crang, ‘Time:Space’, in *Spaces of Geographical Thought*, ed. Paul Cloke and Ron Johnston (London: Sage, 2005), 208; Also see Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

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