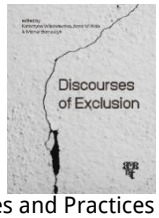

Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
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Discourses of Human Disqualification: The Story of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar on Screen and Stage

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Abstract

The article centres on a contemporary short film and two plays that were inspired by the story of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar, the first known victim of the Nazi programme of the extermination of people with disabilities; these are: Robert De Feo and Vito Palumbo's *Child K* (2014), Kristofer Blindheim Grønskag's *Kinder K* (2012), and Weronika Murek's *Feinweinblein* (2015). I examine verbal and visual discourses of human disqualification that these works reveal and challenge or reinforce. Following Tobin Siebers, I define disqualification as "a symbolic process" that excludes individuals from being considered rightful human beings, thereby exposing them to "unequal treatment, bodily harm, and death" (Siebers, 2013, p. 23). As regards visual discourses of human disqualification, the article argues that even though each play or film employs a different representational strategy, which can respectively be called: monsterization, sublimation, and normalization, they all render the "severely" disabled body of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar invisible. In other words, they hide the "unsightly" from view, hence denying full representation to those body-minds that fall significantly outside the "norm" and perpetuating their aesthetic disqualification.

Keywords: cultural disability studies, disqualification, aesthetics, disability, Nazi Germany, Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar, theatre, drama, film

1. Disability Aesthetics, Human Disqualification, and the Beginning of the Nazi Extermination of People with Disabilities

In his book in which he examines disability as an aesthetic category, Tobin Siebers states that "[a]esthetics tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies" (2013, p. 1). Strong affective responses that disabled body-minds elicit in those that fit in the "norm" are one of the reasons why they are often devalued by "the aesthetics of human disqualification" (Siebers, 2013, p. 21), whereby disqualification is understood "as a symbolic process [that] removes individuals from the ranks of quality human beings, putting them at risk of unequal treatment, bodily harm, and death" (Siebers, 2013, p. 23). Impaired body-minds are rarely appreciated and valued for their diversity, heterogeneity, and non-conformity. Yet, as Siebers argues, they are a major source of innovation in art; for instance, they were foundational to the modernist works of Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani, Ernst Klee, and Marc Chagall. At the same time, atypical body-minds are rarely recognized as such and hence their role in modern art has for decades remained unacknowledged. One notable exception is Nazi Germany, where both modernist works (seen as representations of disabled body-minds or products thereof) and actual disabled body-minds were disqualified from the realm of art and the ranks of humanity, respectively. Nazi authorities publicly labelled modernist art "degenerate" (cf. Siebers, 2013, pp. 28-39) and presented people with disabilities as not fully human.

Disability featured widely in the Nazi visual discourse of human disqualification, as best evidenced by Hermann Schwenninger's 1942 propaganda film *Dasein ohne Leben* (*Existence without Life*),[1] which used the camera angle and dramatic, expressionist lighting to present psychiatric patients as terrifying and monstrous sub-humans that pose a threat to the Aryan race. The film was presented to medical and military staff—those at the helm of Aktion T4, the programme of the extermination of people with disabilities in the Third Reich, which officially started in October 1939 when Adolf Hitler authorized "mercy killings" of those who were deemed incurable.[2] The Nazi propaganda envisaged disability as a threat to the "healthy" social tissue and a burden that affects not only non-disabled citizens but also impaired persons themselves since it precludes the possibility of them leading satisfactory lives. Thus, Hitlerites sought to implement a utopian eugenic vision of a "better" world that does not have disability in it.

[1] Fragments of the film are available on the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (https://collections.ushmm.org/search/?f[orig_title_facet][]=Dasein%20ohne%20Leben%20[Existence%20Without%20Life]).

[2] The letter that authorized the murder was backdated 1 September 1939—the date of the German invasion of Poland.

One of the most vulnerable groups targeted by the Nazis were the children considered "defective." The first one was killed already in July 1939. Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar was a few-months-old child from Pomssen in Saxony. Born blind, without a leg and a part of an arm, he might also have had an intellectual disability. In the spring of 1939, Kretschmar's father—a local farm labourer—wrote a letter to Hitler, pleading "that this creature should be killed" (as cited in Schmidt, 2007, p. 118), as we learn from physician Karl Brandt, whom Hitler asked to examine the child personally. The baby was "euthanized" in July. Officially, he died of heart failure.

For a long time, the child's identity remained a secret. Gerhard Kretschmar was commonly referred to as the Knauer child. In his 2007 book, Ulf Schmidt explains, "German medical historian Udo Bezenhöfer has recently found the name and sex of the child, but he is adamant that he cannot disclose this information because of strict German data-protection laws;" Bezenhöfer, therefore, argued that the child should be referred to as "child K" (2007, p. 177). Schmidt was the first one to reveal the boy's real name. As he explains, his decision was ethically motivated. He notes that Bezenhöfer's argument "somehow overlooks the child itself [sic!] and its [sic!] suffering. […] By calling the case the 'child K,' we would not only medicalize the child's history, but also place the justifiable claim of the parents for anonymity above the personality and suffering of the first 'euthanasia' victim" (Schmidt, 2007, pp. 117-118). Furthermore, Schmidt explains that at the Nuremberg Trial, Brandt "never mentioned the child's real name" (2007, p. 120). This could have been motivated by his wish to present himself as a professional who respects the confidentiality of medical data or provide a strategy to defend his ideological stance. Thus, when questioned by the investigators, Brandt referred to the Kretschmar child not as "an infant" but a "thing" (as cited in Schmidt, 2007, p. 122). Consequently, Schmidt's choice to reveal Kretschmar's name was a step towards recognizing the disabled victim as an individual rather than a life unworthy of life (*Lebensunwertes Leben*).

The story of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar exemplifies a much broader problem related to the fact that disabled victims of the Nazi regime for a long time remained neglected and forgotten. In Germany, it was only in recent decades that the memory of them has to some extent been restored thanks to initiatives such as the Gadenkort-T4 blog, the new memorial erected near Berliner Philharmoniker, individual attempts to reconstruct forgotten parts of the family history (see e.g., Hechler, 2017; Gilfert, 2022) as well as various artistic endeavours to commemorate the victims and reveal the prejudice which caused that for a long time they remained unrecognized (e.g., the theatre contest titled *andersartig gedenken on stage*, Jochen Meyder's project *Grafeneck 10654*, Daniela Klein's 2017 play *Brandenburger Märchen*).

Further in the article, I will explore how three different non-German visual works (one film and two plays) address the story of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar. More specifically, I will focus on verbal and visual discourses of human

disqualification that they either expose and problematize or perpetuate. In visual terms, as will be argued, each work uses a different representational strategy, which I call monsterization, sublimation, and normalization. Yet, what they all have in common is that they render the "severely"[3] disabled body of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar invisible.

2. The Monstrous: Robert De Feo and Vito Palumbo's *Child K* (2014)

The Italian short film *Child K* (2014, dir. Robert De Feo and Vito Palumbo) is closely based on the story of the first victim of Nazi "euthanasia." Robert De Feo and Vito Palumbo gave the family depicted in *Child K* a fictitious name (Kretschkopf), which seems to underscore the fact that the film offers a fictionalized vision of the past, even though the directors make it clear that it is based on historical facts.

Set in Germany, *Child K* opens with Lina Kretschkopf giving birth to a stillborn child. Unable to emotionally cope with the situation, her husband becomes consumed with a desire for a strong and brave son to the point of obsession. Richard projects these characteristics onto his future child by naming them Gerhard (Ger. *ger-* meaning spear + *-hard* meaning strong/brave) and thus attributing them with virtues that will make them a worthy member of the Aryan Volk-Community. Such a narrow set of expectations disqualifies all manifestations of human embodiment that do not conform to the narrowly defined criteria.

When Richard's wife, troubled with his manic behaviour, seeks help from the local priest, the protagonist gives vent to his anger and disappointment. He accuses God of injustice and banishes him and the priest from his house, announcing that he will be the sole architect of his family's future. Having witnessed this emotional outburst, the terrified, God-fearing Lina cries and asks the Blessed Virgin Mary not to "listen to the angry words of this poor ungrateful soul" (De Feo & Palumbo, 2014). Her prayers, however, go unanswered. Kretschkopf is soon punished for his sin of pride as the film clearly suggests a possible causal connection between the act of banishing God from the house and the later birth of a disabled child. In this way, *Child K* perpetuates superstitions that inform the so-called religious/moral model, which sees disability as a divine retribution for the wrongdoings of the impaired person or their parents.

When Gerhard is born in the Kretschkopfs' modest cottage and lets out his first cry, we do not see him. The film cuts to the next scene, which takes place at night. The viewers hear an owl's cry, and the camera quickly moves into the room where Lina is sleeping. Richard is still awake, rhythmically rocking in a wheelchair. His manic gaze is directed at a hand-carved cradle with the name

[3] I intentionally use inverted commas to accentuate the constructedness of this category.

Gerhard inscribed on it, from behind which the camera eye stares at him. Featuring tracking shots, low angles, late-night setting, and disturbing sounds of creaking floor, the scene resembles a horror film. What additionally helps build the tension is the fact that the child remains invisible. Like in the final scene of Roman Polański's *Rosemary's Baby*, we get close to the cradle, yet we are not given an opportunity to catch a glimpse of the baby whom the protagonist describes in the letter that he writes to Hitler as a "monster."

Richard does not recognize Gerhard as his son and suggests that the child "may not even be a human being" (De Feo & Palumbo, 2014). This alludes to German folk beliefs in changelings (German *Wechselbalg*, *Wechselkind*). Already in the nineteenth century, Jacob Grimm noted in his *Teutonic Mythology* (*Deutsche Mythologie*, 1835) that "the physicians […] say that the disease named bolismus […] apetitus caninus […] makes the child so unshapely, that men call it a *changeling* (wächsel-kind)" (2012, p. 1777). More recently, in her analysis of descriptions of these fantastic creatures in the British Isles, Susan Schoon Eberly argued that they correspond to specific congenital disorders, which "evoked a […] response of mingled awe and fear" (1988, p. 59). These folk beliefs frequently served as justification for violence directed at those suspected of being changelings, which often led to their premature death. In De Feo and Palumbo's film, the disabled Gerhard Kretschkopf is effectively monsterized; what turns him into a horrifying changeling are not only his father's words but also the camera work, setting, and sounds in the cradle scene, in which the viewers are made to share Richard Kretschkopf's perspective as if the baby were too horrifying to look at both for the parents and the spectators.

In the last five minutes of *Child K*, the audience's attention is redirected from the family to Richard's letter, as the camera traces its long journey to Hitler's desk. As De Feo explains,

> The change of focus from the Kretschkopf family to the journey of the letter was pivotal for our vision, because in that shift lies all the meaning of "Child K." An insignificant farmer wrote an apparently insignificant letter, and a series of events that was meant to mark history forever was set in motion. How many of us think we're leading an ordinary life, without any power of changing things? I think every one of us, in [our] own small way, everyday, with small gestures, can change the world. For the better, one hopes. (2015, Jul. 23)

The film makes Richard Kretschkopf/Kretschmar co-responsible for the mass extermination of people with disabilities, suggesting that it was his letter that set the wheels of the killing machine in motion. While the directors' intentions to make the viewers realize the importance of their individual choices seem noble, it needs to be remembered that Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar's case was instrumentally used by Nazi authorities to justify the "euthanasia" programme

that they had earlier developed. Already in 1935, Hitler planned to implement it once the war started (see Evans, 2004, p. 25). As Schmidt explains,

> [t]he petition of the Kretschmar family was certainly not the only one KdF [Kanzlei des Führers, the Chancellery of the Führer] received from German parents since 1933, especially after racial propaganda had stressed that such children were "ballast existences" for the German body politic, and should be eliminated. [...] It is likely, however, that Gerhard Kretschmar's case would have caught the attention of the KdF officials. Given the many disabilities of the boy, they must have realized that the case could serve as a precedent to implement further eugenic measures. (2007, p. 119)

In the film, Richard's decision seems largely decontextualized. Even though he uses the Nazi rhetoric, his letter seems to be predominantly a fruit of his trauma and obsessive desire to have a strong and healthy son. In other words, *Child K* locates the origins of the Nazi extermination of children with disabilities in the emotionally unstable and unpredictable mind of a German farm labourer, rather than in the eugenic milieu and its discourses of human disqualification.

The film ends with slides presenting a brief history of Action T4 and six black-and-white historical photos taken from the Bundesarchiv and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, most of which present children with mental disabilities. The images seem somewhat incongruous with the film, which depicts the disabled newborn as a mysterious monster hidden from the audience's curious eyes. It is only at the end of *Child K* that the viewers get an opportunity to see children whom the Nazis considered beings that are unworthy of life as fellow humans, even if their bodies and facial expressions uncomfortably depart from the so-called norm. Although they appear more relatable than Richard's monstrous son, the film does not provide the spectators with sufficient tools that would help them fully recognize these victims' individuality and humanity.

3. The Sublime: Kristofer Blindheim Grønskag's *Kinder K* (2012)

Gerhard Kretschmar is also concealed from the audience's view in the play *Kinder K* (2012) by Norwegian dramatist Kristofer Blindheim Grønskag.[4] The text juxtaposes the history of the child with a contemporary story of a pregnant woman and her husband who face an ethical dilemma when amniocentesis indicates that the baby will be born with an impairment. As Grønskag explains, his play was inspired by his visit to Berlin's Topographie des Terrors, where he learnt about Gerhard Kretschmar and Aktion T4, and the public debate that was held in Copenhagen, his place of residence at the time, "about prenatal testing,

[4] Originally written and produced in Norwegian, the play was translated into English and staged in 2017 by Cut the Cord at Drama Centre London (dir. Camilla Gürtler). I am very grateful to Kristofer Blindheim Grønskag for sharing the text of his play with me before it was published.

where some mothers had felt that they were advised to remove fetuses with Down Syndrome" (K. B. Grønskag, personal communication, 2018, February 6; also cf. Bernt, 2014).

Kinder K opens with a symbolic domestic scene in which one of the characters trims a pot plant with scissors. Always dissatisfied with the result, she "*cut*[s] *off all the good shoots, all the flowers and flower-stalks until all that is left is a short little stump*" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 33). The scene alludes to the Nazi gardening metaphors and the destructive outcomes of strife for impossible perfection. It is followed by a poetic fragment, repeated at the very end of the play, whose central metaphor is that of a furnace. Alluding to Nazi crematoria, the furnace and its fire devour all that does not fit in the medical norm:

> It gorges on fused fingers and hare-lips.
> It delights in empty pupils and hearts lacking valves.
> It gorges on the voices in heads. (Grønskag, 2019, p. 34)

Although the furnace is "[h]idden, deep in the darkest woods you can imagine," its "fire never goes out" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 34). The fire is described as one that "warms us" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 34). It is a source of sensory pleasure and comfort. Fire also gives a sense of safety as it dispels darkness, which represents our greatest fears. The images of physical atypicality and a mention of mental disability in the poem suggest that disability is one of those fears. In fact, the drama essentializes human fear of disability, accentuating its continuity over the years, rather than exploring changing social and political contexts in which it emerges.

Grønskag's play features two actors (referred to as HE and SHE) who impersonate multiple roles, which underscores the parallels between the present and the past that the text seeks to uncover. The protagonists are not presented as realistic flesh-and-blood characters but rather as receptacles for a myriad of concepts and ideas related to human impairment. These include various discourses of human disqualification that have been used against people with disabilities, for example,

- the religious discourse which attributes devilish provenance to disability (Grønskag, 2019, p. 61);
- the medical discourse, represented by Karl Brandt, who is convinced that incurable disability is a source of pain and suffering and hence needs to be eradicated (Grønskag, 2019, p. 83);
- the physiognomic or moral discourse, according to which "the body's outside is a true picture of the body's inside" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 36);
- the discourse of social stagnation, according to which the world is and will be a hostile and unwelcoming place for people with certain disabilities (Grønskag, 2019, p. 86); much like the ideas expressed by

> Brandt, the discourse is informed by subjective assessments of what constitutes a life that is worth living.

The ideas expressed by the play's flat characters serve as commonly reiterated clichés.

The plotline set in 1939 starts with Richard Kretschmar bringing his son to a doctor in Leipzig. The baby is carried in a bag—hidden from the audience's as well as his own father's eyes, as apparently even his parents cannot bear to look at him. When the doctor is about to examine Gerhard, his father "*puts the baby bag on the floor*" and says: "There… But don't… Just… OK. Just look" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 38). The physician slightly uncovers the boy. Her immediate reaction is grotesque and exaggerated: "*a sharp light shoots up from the bag. SHE leaps back,*" screams: "Oh, for fuck's sake! Jesus!" and asks Richard to "cover *it* up" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 39, emphasis added). The unsightly child "[i]s lacking a number of limbs," is probably blind, "sometimes enters a kind of epileptic state," and is most likely "an idiot" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 76). For these reasons, Gerhard is treated like a repulsive object (or, as Kristeva would put it, abject), or an incurable "monster" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 41), "a stain[, a] smear against us, the family, the race" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 42)—the one who pollutes, an impurity that needs to be removed. Gerhard is never shown to the audience, who only see him as the blinding light emanating from the bag. As specified in the stage directions, the light causes painful discomfort, like "*a shard in the eye*" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 49).

Writing about the affective impact of disability on the viewer, Tobin Siebers takes recourse to Roland Barthes's notion of punctum—"the sensitive point that rises out of the [image], 'shoots out of it like and arrow,' and 'pierces' [one] to the heart" (2013, p. 128). He thus underscores the vulnerability of the viewer (perhaps related to the uncomfortable realization of their own vulnerability and "imperfection") and the high affective potential of the disabled image. In *Kinder K*, it is Lina whose reaction to the child is the strongest. She describes her revulsion towards the unsightly newborn in visceral and physical terms, calling Gerhard a monster that is "eating [her] up" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 51), tearing off her nipples, and injecting her with "mercury-grey poison" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 52). Lina's sense of fear and disgust are so strong that the woman does not want to look at or touch her child, whom she perceives as venomous and unclean. She uses the Nazi rhetoric that presented people with disability as a burden that causes degeneration of Volk-Community to describe her own individual, bodily experience.

The visual representation of the child on the stage in no way corresponds to these descriptions as the light emerging from the bag, even if hard to look at, evokes a number of positive metaphorical associations with, for instance, knowledge, innocence, hope, potential, as well as a form of divine radiance that ordinary people find impossible to endure. Like the Christian God, Gerhard

cannot be seen or even "embraced by the words" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 51), as the Kretschmars put it in their letter to Hitler. In fact, the stage metaphor of light clearly alludes to the concept of the sublime, which has often been associated with divinity and which, as the eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke argues, elicits delight that is more sophisticated that the pleasure humans derive from beauty since it incorporates elements of fear and pain. As he further notes, "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful" (Burke, 2017, p. 40). Grønskag's choice to represent Gerhard Kretschmar with the use of the light metaphor sublimates the image of his bodily difference to the extent that he renders it virtually invisible. In other words, in the process of creating a safe distance between the viewers and the disabled child and thus allowing them to delight in the Burkean sublime, the author conceals and, in a sense, eliminates from the stage that which the aesthetics of human disqualification labels as unsightly, monstrous, or/and unhuman.

4. The Normal: Weronika Murek *Feinweinblein* (2015)

Yet another dramatic work that alludes to Gerhard Kretschmar's case and that I would like to discuss in this article is a Polish dramatic text—Weronika Murek's *Feinweinblein*. Recognized with the prestigious 2015 Gdynia Drama Award, the play is set in timeless rural limbo which yet resembles the Stalinist 1950s in the region of Upper Silesia[5]—an area with a sizeable German minority and complicated history, famous for its mining, iron, and steel industries. As Anna Zalewska-Uberman (2015) notes, the characters represent people who are "isolated from the world, deprived of a sense of time, place and national identity, suspended between Poland and Germany." It is into this context that Murek inserts the story of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar—in the play referred to as the Knauer child. Even though the fictional plot does not claim to be an accurate representation of history, it is interesting to examine the authorial choices of what to include in the play and what to leave out.

Murek presents the Knauers as very simple, poor, illiterate people who live in a secluded Silesian village, forsaken by God and the Polish government, away from the capital where even cloakroom attendants allegedly have big lives. The Knauers do not differentiate between the Nazi and the communist regimes but see them as the same nameless authorities. What serves as the central element

[5] In the play, it is not clearly stated when or where it is set. Yet, there are numerous hints that suggest a more specific time and place, such as frequent mentions of "Adenauer's gob," allusions to Hindenburg (today's Silesian city of Zabrze), and references to the eponymous Feinweinblein, a creature that allegedly belongs to the Silesian folklore [at one point, the author herself admitted that she may have invented the Silesian bogeyman (Murek, 2015, October 15; Szyngiera as cited in Podgajna, 2017)].

in their lives is a radio receiver whose major role is to create a sense of connection to the world and society, kill boredom, and fill in the uncomfortable silence which brings back painful memories of the past. When the wireless breaks down, we learn that the Knauers got it during the war. To be precise, they received the device together with "almost a pound of meat" in exchange for their disabled child who was "stupid" and "would not pass the fit-to-work tests" (Murek, 2019, I.VI). The discourse of human disqualification that resonates in the characters' words alludes as much to the Nazi concept of "useless eaters" (*Unnütze Esser*) as to the Soviet work ethos which was particularly strong in Poland in the decades after the Second World War, when "the heroism of the sword" had to be replaced "with the heroism of labour" (Wycech, 1961, p. 45) in order to rebuild the devastated country. When they can no longer listen to the radio, the Knauers visit Świetlicowy (the manager of a local community centre) and his wife, who are the only literate people in the area. The protagonists hope that they will help them write a letter of complaint to the authorities so that they will have their radio receiver repaired or get their child back. In the very last scene, Świetlicowy receives a letter from "the old committee for aggressive ailments [komitet dawny chorób zajmujących]" (a fictional equivalent of the Reich Committee for the Scientific Registration of Severe Hereditary Ailments?).[6] Its content is not revealed to the audience, but we may suspect that it is a much belated note informing the parents about the death of their son.

In the play, the wireless resembles a historically-inspired character in its own right. Although the Nazi authorities did not reward the parents who reported their disabled children with radio receivers, as the author suggests,[7] it is possible to claim that the wireless was their "gift" to common German citizens. It was in the 1930s that radio receivers were finally made affordable for general public—the elitist entertainment was transformed into a populist tool of totalitarian propaganda. As Joseph Goebbels, who commissioned *Volksempfänger* (People's receiver) for mass production, stated in his speech *Der Rundfunk als achte Grosmacht* (*Radio as the Eighth Great Power*), delivered on 18 August 1933: "[w]e live in the age of the masses; the masses rightly demand that they participate in the great events of the day. The radio is the most influential and

[6] Historically, when the parents were asked for consent to have their child transferred to a facility, they were often reassured that the place offered "the best and most efficacious treatment available" (as cited in Lifton, 1986, p. 55). Some time after the child was murdered, they would receive a certificate with a false cause of death.

[7] Even though the author claims otherwise (Murek, 2015, July 23), there does not seem to be any historical evidence that would prove that parents were encouraged to report their disabled offspring in return for radio sets or other specific material rewards, unlike "German doctors and midwives [who] were obliged to report all children under their care who had been born with" specific impairments "[i]n return for a small payment" (Evans, 2004, p. 26). Some historians argue that, since the extermination was conducted in secret, initially both doctors and parents may not have been aware of the fate awaiting the children (see e.g., Lifton, 1986, p. 52).

important intermediary between a spiritual movement and the nation, between the idea and the people" (2013, p. 613). The radio in the Third Reich was a gift to the nation struggling with the consequences of the Great Depression that hit them extremely hard, and an instrument of Nazi propaganda. As Michael Windover explains,

> [t]he Bakelite models that proliferated throughout Germany after 1933, due to low price, were designed to receive only medium-wave signals . [...] This effectively meant that the owners of Volksempfänger models could only tune in to nearby (German) broadcasts. These receivers thus carried the propaganda of the ruling Nazi party, in addition to the "look" of a modern appliance. (2019, p. 152)

In other words, by giving common people access to fashionable products, Goebbels sought to increase their sense of dignity and self-worth as well as show the benevolent face of the Nazi regime, which cares for all its citizens.

Among its various other roles in Murek's play, the wireless serves as a site of what Susanne Knittel calls historical uncanny—"the vertiginous intrusion of the past into the present, the sudden awareness that what was familiar has become strange" (2015, p. 9). This is, for instance, conspicuous in the echoes of the Nazi eugenics that resonate in the words coming from the Knauers' radio, such as Orchardman 3's question: "Do you know how many people work to feed a field rodent?", to which he answers: "One hundred thousand only in the USSR" (Murek, 2019, II. VIII). This alludes to Nazi propaganda posters presenting calculations according to which the money spent on one mental patient could feed a healthy Aryan family. The words of Male Voice 4, who encourages the listeners to "[c]ultivate plants with the help of an educationist not God" (Murek, 2019, II.I), also sound ominous and uncanny, as they allude to the gardening metaphors used by the Nazis, including the main ideologist of the Third Reich and specialist in agriculture Richard Walther Darré (Darré 1978, p. 115; Bauman, 1989, pp. 113-114). Explaining the concept of "a gardening estate," Zygmunt Bauman writes that "it usurped the right to set apart the 'useful' and the 'useless' plants, to select a final model of harmony that made some plants useful and others useless, and to propagate such plants as are useful while exterminating the useless ones" (1992, pp. 178-179). The Third Reich created a medical and legal system that helped put this idea into practice. Allusions to its ideology and propaganda ominously reverberate in Murek's play. The Knauers themselves mindlessly repeat the slogans: "like empty shells, they told us,"[8] "there is no compassion where there is no feeling" (Murek, 2019, II.VII), trying to justify their deed and assuage the sense of guilt.

[8] The phrase "human shells" was used by Alfred Hoche (2012, p. 35) in the 1920 book *Allowing the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life. Its Measure and Form* (co-authored by Karl Binding), which had a major influence on the later Nazi policies.

In a sense, the wireless replaces the lost boy. The couple use it to reenact gestures of love and care for their child:

> KNAUER'S WIFE
> Before we noticed all these taps that one can turn one way or the other, we listened to the radio very, very quietly.
> KNAUER
> Well… So close. Such flutter.
> KNAUER'S WIFE
> Like listening to a heart.
> KNAUER
> Putting it close to your ear.
> KNAUER'S WIFE
> Holding it in your arms and putting it close to the ear. (Murek, 2019, II.VI)

Overcome with a sense of guilt, the characters do not seem to be able to mourn their child, whose name they never even mention as to do so would be too painful. They mourn the radio receiver instead. Ironically, however, when the wireless is broken (like their child was "broken"), they seek to have it replaced with one that works properly, which suggests an entrapment in a vicious circle of repetition (and eugenic discourse which still emanates from the radio).

Even though the Knauer child is not physically present in the play, he features on the book cover, designed by Iwona Chmielewska, of a collection of Murek's dramatic texts released in 2019 by Wydawnictwo Czarne. The image shows the front of an old-fashioned grey wireless whose speaker resembles prison bars behind which we see a profile view of a boy's screaming head. The boy does not have any atypical features while the scream seems to be a reaction to the forced confinement. In fact, in *Feinweinblein* references to bodily non-normativity are conspicuous by their absence and what serve as sole reasons for the Knauer child's murder are his "stupidity" and unproductivity. In the actual play, his only visual representation can be found in an embroidered piece of cloth hanging above the Knauers's bed. It shows a child with a bowl of soup, "holding the spoon the other way round" (Murek, 2019, I.II). It is doing things otherwise that serves as evidence of his inferiority. By choosing not to attribute the boy with visible markers of "severe" disability, Murek normalizes his body, or, to be more precise, "return[s it] to an acceptable degree of difference" (Mitchell & Snyder 2000, p. 7), which David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder see as a strategy typical of traditional representations of disability grouped under the label of "the narrative prosthesis." Once again, Gerhard Kretschmar's atypical embodiment is erased from the stage.

5. Conclusion

While De Feo and Palumbo's film reinforces, even if unwittingly, certain discourses of human disqualification by validating the superstition that informs the religious model of disability and monsterizing Gerhard Kretschmar, the two theatrical plays inspired by the same story are more successful in problematizing such discourses. Tackling various negative clichés about disabled lives, *Kinder K* and *Feinweinblein* hint at the enduring uncanny presence of the past in post-war and contemporary times. Yet, the origin of the prejudice informing these discourses of human disqualification is presented as markedly different. While in Grønskag's play ableism is suggestive of an innate human fear of disability, in Murek's drama it is just part of radio drivel which the characters mindlessly devour.

Despite these and other differences, there is at least one crucial element that all three reworkings of Gerhard Kretschmar's story have in common. The representational strategies that their authors use, be it monsterization, sublimation, or normalization, serve as a mask to conceal the "severely" disabled body-mind and hide its perceived difference. In other words, the film and the dramatic texts help remove that which pierces the eye more than the bright light in Grønskag's play from the stage or the screen. Even if some of these works are more effective in challenging and questioning various ableist discourses and models of interpreting disability, none of them uses the positive aesthetic potential of alternative forms of embodiment labelled as disability, which Tobin Siebers brought to light in his monograph. This, in turn, suggests that some, especially "significant," forms of disability are still considered grounds for human aesthetic as well as social and cultural disqualification.

Perhaps what is needed is not so much the sublimation or normalization of images of disabled body-minds, but rather some guidance on how to view them differently. This can, for instance, be found in the 2001 film entitled *A World Without Bodies*, which is a documentary presenting a trip to the former killing centre in Bernburg, now a memorial site—a trip that American scholars Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell took together with their children Cameron and Emma Mitchell. Towards the end of the film, we see a group photo of children from Brandenburg standing or sitting against a brick wall. They are hardly presented as medical specimens, and their individuality is underscored by means of the camera closing up on specific faces. The photo is juxtaposed with a shot of Emma Mitchell vigorously rolling in her wheelchair towards the camera. The narrator (Snyder) comments: "[w]hen I looked at this photo, I saw my daughter. I saw beautiful children, stubborn children, children who might say, like she does, 'let's get out of this scary castle'" (Snyder & Mitchell, 2001). Snyder thus helps the viewer find new ways of interpreting atypical body-minds and seeks to replace the aesthetics of human disqualification with that of appreciation.

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