

**German Actresses of the 2000s –  
A Study of Female Representation,  
Acting and Stardom**

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## Abstract

This thesis centres on four German actresses active from the year 2000: Nina Hoss, Sandra Hüller, Sibel Kekilli and Diane Kruger. These performers have embodied a range of multifaceted female characters, as well as offering insightful representations of ‘Germanness’ at home and abroad. Their films are emblematic of the revival of German cinema in the 2000s, which has seen the proliferation of commercially successful historical dramas and the emergence of the critically lauded Berlin School art film movement. This research seeks to contribute to German film studies by considering the role actresses have played in the context of the resurging German cinema of the new millennium. The four actresses are discussed both in terms of the female representations offered by their films, and as performers and stars. The films of Nina Hoss, Sandra Hüller and Sibel Kekilli explore the particular social, political and cultural circumstances of women in contemporary Germany, such as the ramifications of reunification and a changing economic order, the persistent female inequality in the workplace and the family, and the nationally specific conception of the mother role. Contributing to the study of film acting and performance, analyses of the four actresses’ performances are conducted to demonstrate how they enhance the films. Analysing and comparing the work of actresses from the 1920s until the present day, a German screen acting tradition is identified that is characterised by the actresses’ maintenance of a critical distance to the character they portray: female performers working across different decades share a stilted, non-naturalistic acting style, which imbues their characters with a sense of mastery and counteracts their frequent experience of oppression or objectification. The four performers studied also function as representations of national identity, with Diane Kruger, who acts in French and US films, contributing to the formulation and reflection of national identity both in Germany and abroad. Drawing on the findings of star studies, the media representations of the four actresses are analysed to illustrate how they reflect dominant social discourses about femininity, ethnicity and film stardom in Germany.



# Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	1
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	7
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	17
<b>Author's Declaration</b> .....	19
<b>Introduction</b> .....	21
Charting Female Performers in the History of German Cinema .....	24
German Cinema in the New Millennium: Sweeping Historical Dramas and Astute Social Commentary.....	29
Studying Contemporary German Actresses as Performers and Stars.....	34
<b>Part I: Actresses in the History of German Film</b> .....	41
<b>Chapter One</b>	
<b>Actresses in the History of German Film I:</b>	
<b>Weimar Cinema and the New German Cinema</b> .....	43
Weimar Cinema – Creativity and Anxiety at a Time of Momentous Social Change .....	43
Exploring Feminine Identities in the Weimar Street Film .....	45
Marlene Dietrich in <i>The Blue Angel</i> (1930): Challenging Female Objectification, Defining Cinematic Spectacle .....	47
Dietrich, Stardom, and National Identity .....	53
The New German Cinema: Confronting the Past, Capturing the Present .....	57
Feminist Filmmaking within the New German Cinema – The Nation as a ‘Pale Mother’ .....	59
Hanna Schygulla: Female Representation and the Agency of the Actor in the New German Cinema .....	62
Embodying the Nation: <i>The Marriage of Maria Braun</i> (1978) .....	67
Conclusion .....	71
<b>Chapter Two</b>	
<b>Actresses in the History of German Film II:</b>	
<b>Third Reich Cinema and Post-war Cinema</b> .....	75
Cinema in the Third Reich: Orchestrating Entertainment and Propaganda .....	75
Reconciling Contradictions: Wholesome Mothers and Exotic Divas .....	77
Zarah Leander: Negotiating Female Subjectivity and Stardom in Nazi Germany .....	80
Rebuilding National Identity in the Aftermath of the War: Hildegard Knef and the ‘Rubble Film’ .....	86
The Genre Cinema of the 1950s: Reformulating National Identity .....	91
Redeeming Germany: Romy Schneider as Sissi .....	94
Conclusion.....	99

**Part II: Case Studies of Contemporary German Actresses** ..... 103

**Chapter Three**

**Nina Hoss: The First Lady of German Arthouse Film** ..... 105

The Face of Social Critique: Career Trajectory and Screen Persona ..... 105  
Mis-en-scène and Performance in *A Girl Called Rosemarie* (1996) ..... 108  
The ‘Star-as-Performer’: Reflecting Attitudes towards Stardom in Germany ..... 111  
*Yella* (2007) and *The Heart is a Dark Forest* (2007): Exploring Working Women and  
Motherhood in Reunified Germany ..... 114  
*A Woman in Berlin* (2008): Representing Germany’s Past  
in Mainstream Historical Films ..... 133  
*Barbara* (2012) and *Gold* (2013): Transplanting Social Critique to a Historical Setting ... 137  
Conclusion ..... 148

**Chapter Four**

**Sandra Hüller: Performing Female Subjectivity**

**in Contemporary German Art Film** ..... 155

‘The One for the Tough Parts’: Role Choices and Approach to Acting ..... 155  
Foregrounding Performance: Sandra Hüller in *Requiem* (2006) ..... 161  
*Madonnas* (2007): A Counterintuitive Performance ..... 172  
*Brownian Movement* (2010): Performing Female Sexual Agency ..... 179  
*Above Us Only Sky* (2011): The Self-conscious Performance  
and the Long Shadow of *Vertigo* (1958) ..... 190  
Conclusion ..... 199

**Chapter Five**

**Sibel Kekilli: Between Otherness and Normalcy –**

**Turkish-German Identity on Film** ..... 207

Kekilli’s Public Persona: Embodying ‘Otherness?’ ..... 207  
Turkish-German Cinema: Negotiating Questions of Home and Belonging ..... 209  
Turkish-German Femininity in *Head-On*:  
Transgressing Cultural and Gender Boundaries ..... 213  
Conflating Actress and Character: from *Head-On* to *When We Leave* (2010) ..... 228  
Moving Beyond Ethnic Stereotyping? – Kekilli in *What a Man* (2011) ..... 237  
Femininities in *What a Man*: the ‘Businesswoman’, the ‘Bimbo’  
and the ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl’ ..... 242  
Conclusion ..... 248

<b>Chapter Six</b>	
<b>Diane Kruger: International Stardom and the Diffusion of National Identity</b> .....	255
Career Trajectory: From Ex-model to International Film Star .....	255
Kruger's Star Image: Beauty, Fashion, and the American Dream .....	258
Star Discourse in the USA and Britain, France and Germany: Stardom Through a National Lens .....	263
The Face that Failed to Launch a Thousand Ships: Kruger's International Breakthrough .....	267
Becoming American: <i>National Treasure</i> (2004) and <i>Unknown</i> (2011) .....	269
Kruger's Period Dramas: Exploring National and Feminine Identities .....	273
Bridget von Hammersmark, a Feminist Film Star? – Performing Stardom and National Identity in <i>Inglourious Basterds</i> .....	283
Recognition as an Actress: <i>Farewell, My Queen</i> (2012) .....	295
Conclusion .....	301
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	307
<b>Filmography</b> .....	315
Selected Filmography Marlene Dietrich .....	315
Selected Filmography Hanna Schygulla .....	315
Selected Filmography Zarah Leander .....	316
Selected Filmography Hildegard Knef .....	317
Selected Filmography Romy Schneider .....	318
Filmography Nina Hoss .....	320
Selected Teleography Nina Hoss .....	321
Filmography Sandra Hüller .....	322
Selected Teleography Sandra Hüller .....	322
Filmography Sibel Kekilli . .....	323
Selected Teleography Sibel Kekilli .....	323
Filmography Diane Kruger .....	324
Selected Teleography Diane Kruger .....	325
Other Films Cited .....	325
Other TV Programmes Cited .....	332

<b>List of References</b> .....	335
---------------------------------	-----

<b>Bibliography</b> .....	367
---------------------------	-----

I. German Film after 2000 .....	367
---------------------------------	-----

II. German Cinema Studies .....	370
---------------------------------	-----

III. Feminist Film Studies/Women on Film .....	374
--	-----

IV. Film Studies .....	375
------------------------	-----

V. Studies of Individual Performers .....	377
---	-----

VI. Studies of Film Acting/Performance, Star Studies .....	377
--	-----

VII. Cultural Studies .....	378
-----------------------------	-----

VIII. Sociological Research .....	379
-----------------------------------	-----



## List of Figures

Figures	Page
<b>Figure 1:</b> Marlene Dietrich in <i>The Blue Angel</i> (1930). <b><i>The Blue Angel</i> DVD capture (detail). Eureka DVD, 2002.</b>	43
<b>Figure 2:</b> Hanna Schygulla in <i>The Marriage of Maria Braun</i> (1978). <b><i>The Marriage of Maria Braun</i> DVD capture (detail). Arrow DVD, 2006.</b>	43
<b>Figures 3&amp;4:</b> The differences between Lola Lola's first and second performance of 'Falling in Love Again' epitomise her transformation from seemingly innocent flirt to callous femme fatale. <b><i>The Blue Angel</i> DVD captures (detail). Eureka DVD, 2002.</b>	49
<b>Figure 5:</b> Dietrich's/Lola Lola's legs are fetishised by von Sternberg's camera. <b><i>The Blue Angel</i> DVD capture (detail). Eureka DVD, 2002.</b>	50
<b>Figure 6:</b> A static long shot of Effi, facing away from the viewer, contrasts markedly with the voiceover, which describes a moment of intense feeling. <b><i>Fontane Effi Briest</i> DVD capture. Studiocanal DVD, 2008.</b>	66
<b>Figure 7:</b> Schygulla's Maria Braun symbolises the blind materialism and moral hollowness of 1950s Germany. <b><i>The Marriage of Maria Braun</i> DVD capture (detail). Arrow DVD, 2006.</b>	69
<b>Figure 8:</b> Zarah Leander in <i>La Habanera</i> (1937). <b><i>La Habanera</i> DVD capture (detail). Universum Film DVD, 2005.</b>	75
<b>Figure 9:</b> Romy Schneider in <i>Sissi</i> (1955). <b><i>Sissi</i> DVD capture (detail). Studiokanal DVD, 2007.</b>	75
<b>Figures 10-13:</b> Zarah Leander's character changes from lascivious, vain revue star (above) into an angelic figure boosting German morale (below). <b><i>Die große Liebe</i> DVD captures (detail). Koch Media GmbH DVD, 2009.</b>	85

<b>Figures</b>	<b>Page</b>
<p><b>Figures 14&amp;15:</b>            Skewed angles communicate the male protagonist's lack of control, while the agency of Knef's Susanne is communicated by her mastery of the gaze.  <i>The Murderers Are Among Us</i> DVD captures (detail). Icestorm Entertainment GmbH DVD, 2002.</p>	89
<p><b>Figures 16&amp;17:</b>            In the <i>Sissi</i> trilogy, Romy Schneider portrays her character's transformation of from carefree child of nature (left) into a troubled young woman trapped in the golden cage of courtly life in Vienna (right).  <b>Left:</b> <i>Sissi</i> DVD capture (detail). Studiokanal DVD, 2007.  <b>Right:</b> <i>Sissi – Die junge Kaiserin</i> DVD capture (detail). Studiokanal DVD, 2007.</p>	98
<p><b>Figures 18&amp;19:</b>            The endings of the second (left) and third <i>Sissi</i> film (right) epitomise the trilogy's revelling in melodramatic excess, presenting the empress as a suffering, self-sacrificing saviour figure.  <b>Left:</b> <i>Sissi – Die junge Kaiserin</i> DVD capture (detail). Studiokanal DVD, 2007.  <b>Right:</b> <i>Sissi – Schicksalsjahre einer Kaiserin</i> DVD capture (detail). Studiokanal DVD, 2007.</p>	99
<p><b>Figure 20:</b>            Nina Hoss in <i>Yella</i> (2007).  <i>Yella</i> DVD capture (detail). Artificial Eye DVD, 2008.</p>	105
<p><b>Figures 21-24:</b>            Rosemarie's typical cold, disdainful look. Above left: in the prison cell, Above right: with Hartog; Below left: confronting Fribert, Below right: at the party preceding her death.  <i>Das Mädchen Rosemarie</i> DVD captures (detail). Eurovideo DVD, 2001.</p>	109
<p><b>Figures 25&amp;26:</b>            Physical attributes, hairstyle and lighting reinforce the characterisation of Rosemarie (left) as emotionally detached as opposed to Hartog's sympathetic fiancée (right).  <i>Das Mädchen Rosemarie</i> DVD captures (detail). Eurovideo DVD, 2001.</p>	110
<p><b>Figure 27:</b>            Yella's ghostlike state after escaping from the water signals her mental and emotional disintegration.  <i>Yella</i> DVD capture. Artificial Eye DVD, 2008.</p>	118

<b>Figures</b>	<b>Page</b>
<p><b>Figures 28&amp;29:</b>            During the masked ball sequence, Marie transforms herself from mousy housewife (left) into sexually confident vamp (right).  <i>Das Herz ist ein dunkler Wald</i> DVD captures (detail). Warner Home Video DVD, 2008.</p>	129
<p><b>Figures 30&amp;31:</b>            Hoss as Marie defiantly exhibits her naked body in the forest (left) and on the bus (right).  <i>Das Herz ist ein dunkler Wald</i> DVD captures (detail). Warner Home Video DVD, 2008.</p>	130
<p><b>Figures 32-34:</b>            Hoss's clumsy body language when encountering André makes Barbara appear bashful and childish, whereby she resembles the protagonist of a romantic comedy who behaves awkwardly in the presence of their paramour.  <i>Barbara</i> DVD captures (detail). Indigo DVD, 2012.</p>	141
<p><b>Figures 35&amp;36:</b>            Emily's frequent smiles demonstrate her relief to have reached the town and happiness to have found a partner in Boehmer, after she had been serious and taciturn throughout the journey.  <i>Gold</i> DVD captures (detail). Indigo DVD, 2014.</p>	147
<p><b>Figures 37&amp;38:</b>            As Emily bids farewell to Boehmer, saluting to him at his grave, she appears serene and even somewhat cheerful.  <i>Gold</i> DVD captures (detail). Indigo DVD, 2014.</p>	147
<p><b>Figure 39:</b>            Sandra Hüller in <i>Above Us Only Sky</i> (2011).  <i>Über uns das All</i> DVD capture (detail). Indigo DVD, 2012.</p>	155
<p><b>Figure 40:</b>            Michaela's staring into the distance signals the beginning of the hallucination.  <i>Requiem</i> DVD capture. Soda Pictures DVD, 2007.</p>	163
<p><b>Figure 41:</b>            Hüller's hand movements suggest Michaela's beginning spasms.  <i>Requiem</i> DVD capture. Soda Pictures DVD, 2007.</p>	165
<p><b>Figure 42:</b>            Michaela rolls around on the bed.  <i>Requiem</i> DVD capture. Soda Pictures DVD, 2007.</p>	165

<b>Figures</b>	<b>Page</b>
<p><b>Figure 43:</b>  Michaela, unable to control her hands, rips the rosary apart.  <i>Requiem</i> DVD capture. Soda Pictures DVD, 2007.</p>	166
<p><b>Figure 44:</b>  Hüller's physical make-up also contributes to the overall impact of the scene.  <i>Requiem</i> DVD capture. Soda Pictures DVD, 2007.</p>	167
<p><b>Figure 45:</b>  The shaky images produced by a handheld camera contribute to the disorienting quality of the scene.  <i>Requiem</i> DVD capture. Soda Pictures DVD, 2007.</p>	169
<p><b>Figure 46:</b>  A demon face appearing in the clouds suggests that the threat to Emily is real.  <i>The Exorcism of Emily Rose</i> DVD captures (detail). Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006.</p>	170
<p><b>Figures 47&amp;48:</b>  The empty space in the frame hints at the presence of Emily's invisible attacker.  <i>The Exorcism of Emily Rose</i> DVD captures (detail). Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006.</p>	170
<p><b>Figures 49&amp;50:</b>  Rita's relationship with her children is marked by alienation and distrust, epitomised by a scene in which they line up in front of Rita's bed, unsure of how to approach her.  <i>Madonnen</i> DVD captures (detail). Filmgalerie 451 DVD, 2008.</p>	174
<p><b>Figures 51-54:</b>  The aesthetic of <i>Madonnas</i> is one of observation and distanciation: long shots dominate (above), a static camera captures characters moving in and out of the frame (below left), and we occasionally see an empty room as the characters speak next door (below right).  <i>Madonnen</i> DVD captures (detail). Filmgalerie 451 DVD, 2008.</p>	177
<p><b>Figures 55&amp;56:</b>  Low key lighting, tight framing and intimate gestures signal the mutual trust and familiarity between Charlotte and her husband.  <i>Brownian Movement</i> DVD captures (detail). Lighthouse Home Entertainment DVD, 2011.</p>	183
<p><b>Figures 57-59:</b>  <i>Brownian Movement</i> features a number of shots of spacious, empty rooms that create an atmosphere of calmness, orderliness and detachment.  <i>Brownian Movement</i> DVD captures (detail). Lighthouse Home Entertainment DVD, 2011.</p>	184

<b>Figures</b>	<b>Page</b>
<p><b>Figures 60-63:</b>  The men's distinct physical features, such as a hairy body, a pot belly or a flabby midriff, are foregrounded through close-ups or by being placed in the centre of the frame.  <i>Brownian Movement</i> DVD captures (detail). Lighthouse Home Entertainment DVD, 2011.</p>	185
<p><b>Figures 64-67:</b>  The characteristic half-smile rarely leaves Charlotte's face: be it during her sexual encounters (above left), in court (above right), when showing her husband her secret apartment (below left) or at the psychiatrist's (below right).  <i>Brownian Movement</i> DVD captures (detail). Lighthouse Home Entertainment DVD, 2011.</p>	189
<p><b>Figures 68-73:</b>  Martha's angry outburst in front of Alexander constitutes a performance-within-the-performance.  <i>Über uns das All</i> DVD captures (detail). Indigo DVD, 2012.</p>	192
<p><b>Figures 74&amp;75:</b>  <i>Above Us Only Sky</i> features two near-identical scenes between Martha and Paul and Martha and Alexander.  <i>Über uns das All</i> DVD captures (detail). Indigo DVD, 2012.</p>	195
<p><b>Figures 76-79:</b>  Martha's emotional outburst is captured in one single take, the static camera resting on Hüller while another character moves in and out of the frame.  <i>Über uns das All</i> DVD captures (detail). Indigo DVD, 2012.</p>	198
<p><b>Figure 80:</b>  Sibel Kekilli in <i>Head-On</i> (2005).  <i>Head-On</i> DVD capture (detail). Soda Pictures DVD, 2010.</p>	207
<p><b>Figures 81&amp;82:</b>  <i>Head-On</i>'s first shot of Sibel shows her in a sexually suggestive pose, her bandaged wrists being the only reminder of her attempted suicide.  <i>Head-On</i> DVD captures (detail). Soda Pictures DVD, 2010.</p>	214
<p><b>Figure 83:</b>  Having arrived in Istanbul, Sibel looks very masculine, wearing short hair, baggy trousers and a bomber jacket.  <i>Head-On</i> DVD capture (detail). Soda Pictures DVD, 2010.</p>	219
<p><b>Figures 84-87:</b>  Sibel provokes and attacks a group of men several times, continuing to taunt them even when she is severely injured.  <i>Head-On</i> DVD captures (detail). Soda Pictures DVD, 2010.</p>	221

Figures	Page
<p><b>Figures 88&amp;89:</b> Sibel's personal development is mirrored in the changing representations of Istanbul: initially at risk of being swallowed by its dark streets, she later enjoys panoramic views of the city, visualising the degree of mastery over her life she has achieved. <i>Head-On DVD captures (detail). Soda Pictures DVD, 2010.</i></p>	225
<p><b>Figures 90&amp;91:</b> Sibel casts her daughter an affectionate look, suggesting that Pamuk gives her happiness and a new responsibility to care not only for herself, but for the child that is dependent on her. <i>Head-On DVD captures (detail). Soda Pictures DVD, 2010.</i></p>	227
<p><b>Figure 92:</b> Kekilli's facial expression communicates her character's exhaustion and resignation. <i>Die Fremde DVD capture. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment DVD, 2010.</i></p>	233
<p><b>Figures 93&amp;94:</b> Opposing representations of femininity in <i>What a Man</i>: Nele/Sibel Kekilli (left) and Karolin/Mavie Hörbiger (right). <i>What a Man DVD captures (detail). Twentieth Century Fox, 2012.</i></p>	239
<p><b>Figure 95:</b> As Nele gets changed, her long black hair falls over her bare back, highlighting her sensuality or erotic allure. <i>What a Man DVD captures (detail). Twentieth Century Fox, 2012.</i></p>	240
<p><b>Figures 96-98:</b> Friedrich August von Kaulbach's painting <i>Deutschland August 1914</i> (1914) foregrounds the allegorical figure's blond hair (left); Nazi propaganda posters perpetuating the ideal of the blonde German woman (centre and right). <b>Left: <i>Germania 1914</i> (1914) by F. A. von Kaulbach. Scanned from a postcard. Available at:</b> <a href="http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:F_A_von_Kaulbach_Germania_1914.jpg">http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:F_A_von_Kaulbach_Germania_1914.jpg</a> <b>Centre: <i>Bund Deutscher Mädel in der Hitler Jugend</i> (1933), designed by Ludwig Hohlwein. Available at:</b> <a href="http://www.bildindex.de/obj14003460.html# 0">http://www.bildindex.de/obj14003460.html# 0</a> <b>Right: <i>Neues Volk 1838</i> (1938), designed by Ludwig Hohlwein. Available at:</b> <a href="http://www.wolfsonian.org/category/collection-themes/war-and-political-propaganda?page=29">http://www.wolfsonian.org/category/collection-themes/war-and-political-propaganda?page=29</a></p>	242
<p><b>Figure 99:</b> Diane Kruger in <i>Inglourious Basterds</i> (2009). <i>Inglourious Basterds DVD captures (detail). Universal Pictures UK DVD, 2009.</i></p>	255

<b>Figures</b>	<b>Page</b>
<p><b>Figures 100-103:</b>            In a 2011 issue of the French fashion magazine <i>Madame Figaro</i>, Kruger appears once again as a model, posing in various elaborate ball gowns and other designer clothes in a 24-page feature consisting of 22 pages of pictures and only two pages of text.  <b>Diane enchanteresse. <i>Madame Figaro</i>, February 2011, pp. 72-93 (digital copy) (excerpts).</b> Available at:  <a href="http://thedarlingmissg.blogspot.co.uk/2012/11/kruger.html">http://thedarlingmissg.blogspot.co.uk/2012/11/kruger.html</a></p>	259
<p><b>Figure 104:</b>            Playing Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world, Kruger was judged both on her appearance and charisma.  <b><i>Troy</i> DVD capture. Warner Home Video DVD, 2005.</b></p>	268
<p><b>Figures 105-108:</b>  <i>National Treasure</i> showcases Kruger's good looks and repeatedly presents her character a sexual object: a male colleague stares at her bottom for several seconds, and she wears a low-cut evening dress revealing her cleavage for a large part of the film.  <b><i>National Treasure</i> DVD captures (detail). Buena Vista Home Entertainment DVD, 2005.</b></p>	271
<p><b>Figure 109:</b>            High-angle shots communicate the intensity of Sørensen's singing, while also showcasing Kruger's beauty.  <b><i>Merry Christmas</i> DVD captures (detail). Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006.</b></p>	277
<p><b>Figure 110:</b>            Sørensen/Kruger's red robe stands out among the soldiers' uniforms.  <b><i>Merry Christmas</i> DVD captures (detail). Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006.</b></p>	277
<p><b>Figure 111:</b>            The figure of Sørensen is highlighted against the background of the white snowy field and candlelit Christmas trees.  <b><i>Merry Christmas</i> DVD captures (detail). Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006.</b></p>	277
<p><b>Figures 112&amp;113:</b>            Sørensen's audience is surrounded by darkness akin to the one in a cinema auditorium, while close-ups of individual soldiers' faces suggest that they are as enraptured by Sørensen's angelic appearance as they are by her singing.  <b><i>Merry Christmas</i> DVD captures (detail). Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006.</b></p>	278

<b>Figures</b>	<b>Page</b>
<p><b>Figures 114-119:</b>            In the concert sequence, close shots and close-ups of Beethoven’s and Holtz’s faces and hands show that the composer looks to Anna for guidance, and Beethoven’s gestures repeatedly mirror Holtz’s, communicating her vital role in the concert’s success.  <i>Klang der Stille – Copying Beethoven DVD captures (detail). Concorde Video DVD, 2007.</i></p>	280
<p><b>Figures 120-122:</b>            Anna wears simple, unshowy dresses in muted colours, and her hair is either tied in a tight bun, or, when she is transcribing music, it looks unkempt and messy, suggesting that the character is focused more on her musical skills than her appearance.  <i>Klang der Stille – Copying Beethoven DVD captures (detail). Concorde Video DVD, 2007.</i></p>	281
<p><b>Figures 123-126:</b>            Kruger’s sweeping hand gestures and her use of props reinforce the scene’s focus on appearance and performance as opposed to interiority.  <i>Inglourious Basterds DVD captures (detail). Universal Picture UK DVD, 2009.</i></p>	287
<p><b>Figures 127&amp;128:</b>            During the interrogation scene, von Hammersmark is the dominant character both visually and verbally: the camera is either focused on her, or keeps her within the frame as Raine is speaking.  <i>Inglourious Basterds DVD captures (detail). Universal Picture UK DVD, 2009.</i></p>	290
<p><b>Figures 129-132:</b>            Frequent close-ups of von Hammersmark’s anxious face communicate her profound fear and despair, but she also briefly raises her hands, admitting defeat while signalling that she is not willing to plead with Landa for her release.  <i>Inglourious Basterds DVD captures (detail). Universal Picture UK DVD, 2009.</i></p>	293
<p><b>Figures 133-136:</b>            In the reading scene, Kruger uses Kruger’s expressive hand gestures and body language to portray the queen as cheerful, energetic, and flirtatious, inching closer to Laborde as she reads a suggestive passage from a novel.  <i>Farewell, My Queen DVD captures (detail). Cohen Media Group DVD, 2013.</i></p>	297
<p><b>Figure 137:</b>            A manservant taking off the queen’s large wig functions as an indication that Marie Antoinette is about to drop her facade of composure, orderliness and control she previously maintained in front of strangers.  <i>Farewell, My Queen DVD capture. Cohen Media Group DVD, 2013.</i></p>	298



<b>Figures</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Figures 138&amp;139:</b> Once Polignac is gone, Marie Antoinette breaks down in tears, staggers and squirms, before sinking into a chair. <i>Farewell, My Queen</i> DVD capture (detail). Cohen Media Group DVD, 2013.	298
<b>Figures 140&amp;141:</b> Through her condescending yet curious gaze at the naked Laborde, Kruger's Marie Antoinette signals a shift in the dynamics of looking and thus in the power relations between the queen and her servant. <i>Farewell, My Queen</i> DVD captures (detail). Cohen Media Group DVD, 2013.	299



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I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Elisabeth von Eicken,  
who passed her love of the cinema on to me.



## **Author's Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as references.



## Introduction

German film has been experiencing a moment of revival since the turn of the millennium. Film scholar Marco Abel proclaims a “renaissance of German cinema” (2008), while Jaimey Fisher and Brad Prager identify a “tectonic shift in German cinema since the late 1990s” (2010, p. 1), pointing to a renewed presence at film festivals and awards ceremonies for the first time since the auteur-based, political New German cinema of the 1970s. In 2004, *Gegen die Wand (Head-On)* (dir. Fatih Akin) became the first German film in almost two decades to win the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival, while the German-Austrian co-production *Die fetten Jahre sind vorbei (The Edukators)* (dir. Hans Weingartner, 2004) was the first German-speaking film in eleven years to be nominated for the Palme D’Or at the Cannes Film Festival, where in 2007 Fatih Akin was subsequently awarded the prize for best screenplay for his contemporary drama *Auf der anderen Seite (The Edge of Heaven)*. *Das Leben der Anderen (The Lives of Others)* (dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmark) won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 2006, with three other German films: *Der Untergang (Downfall)* (2004, dir. Oliver Hirschbiegel) *Sophie Scholl – Die letzten Tage (Sophie Scholl – The Final Days)* (dir. Marc Rothemund, 2005), and *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex (The Baader Meinhof Complex)* (dir. Uli Edel, 2008) also being nominated for this award in the 2000s.

Big-budget productions such as *Downfall* or *The Lives of Others*, offering well-crafted, if narratively conventional, melodramatic and neatly closed-off representations of the darkest chapters of German history, have been successful at the international box office and popular with the US Academy Awards voters. But German and international critics have also celebrated the revival of the German art film heralded by the ‘Berliner Schule’ (‘Berlin School’), a loose affiliation of filmmakers whose works are characterised by astute observation and a realist aesthetic, capturing a mood of unease and alienation following reunification and the advent of globalisation that has profoundly changed the face of Germany over the last two decades. Scholars have noted that in contrast to the creative drought of the 1990s, the country’s cinematic output in the new millennium has been distinguished by its variety, encompassing the “historical films at one end of the spectrum and the Berlin School at the other” (Fisher and Prager, 2010, p. 10), whereas the works of prolific filmmakers of the 2000s such as Akin or Tom Tykwer “fall[ ] somewhere between the worlds of the art house and the Academy Awards” (ibid).

Central to the critical acclaim enjoyed by many German films of the 2000s have been

the charismatic central performances of young actresses. Examples include Sibel Kekilli in *Head-On*, Julia Jentsch in *Sophie Scholl*, Sandra Hüller in *Requiem* (2006), and Nina Hoss in *Yella* (2007). Be it Kekilli's young woman rebelling against the oppression through her Turkish-German parents, Jentsch's portrayal of the anti-Nazi activist Sophie Scholl shortly before her execution, Hüller's powerful performance of a girl who in 1970s Bavaria subjects herself to an exorcism that ends in her death, or Hoss as an eastern German moving to the west to take up a promising job, where the alienation from her surroundings increasingly threatens her sense of reality – all of these characters are placed in extreme situations, demanding the performers to demonstrate their acting skill. Meanwhile, Diane Kruger has achieved a popularity not enjoyed by German actresses since Hanna Schygulla in the 1970s, establishing herself as an international film star by acting in a large number of French and American films. The fact that the Berlin International Film Festival's prize for Best Actress went to German performers in three consecutive years – Jentsch in 2005, Hüller in 2006 and Hoss in 2007 – not only honours their acting skills, it also testifies to a notable ambition within recent German film to tell women's stories, bringing forth a number of films featuring a central female character and depicting their viewpoint, experiences, struggles and aspirations in the process.

This thesis focuses on the significance and contribution of these actresses. As such I seek to address an underrepresented area within the study of contemporary German film that has so far focused primarily on the contested filmic representations of the country's complex past<sup>1</sup> and the work of the Berlin School directors<sup>2</sup> who offer aesthetically innovative and timely explorations of life in Germany today. I will consider contemporary German actresses from two angles. Firstly, their films will be analysed in relation to the particular social, political and cultural circumstances, problems and challenges faced by women in contemporary Germany. How do depictions of female experience, personal and professional goals and sexuality reflect the position of women in Germany today, a country that is governed by a female chancellor but looks back at a long history of limiting women exclusively to the mother role? Which pressing issues that shape life in Germany are the

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of such research are the numerous chapters on German historical films of the 2000s in the edited collections *The Collapse of the Conventional: German Film and its Politics at the Turn of the Century* (Fisher and Prager, 2010) and *New Directions in German Cinema* (Cooke and Homewood, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Examples include Jana Heberlein's book *Die neue Berliner Schule: Zwischen Verflachung und Tiefe: ein ästhetisches Spannungsfeld in den Filmen von Angela Schanelec* (2012), Marco Abel's book *The Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School*, which is organised into chapters that focus on Berlin School directors, and Jaimey Fisher's book *Christian Petzold* (2013).



protagonists confronted with and can they be said to represent 'Germanness' or German national identity? Secondly, I will consider the actresses as both performers and stars. This raises questions such as: how are performances and acting styles deployed within the context of particular films and how do they serve to enhance these films? How can we account for the working process and agency of the film actor, whose representation on screen has frequently been derided for being created by director, cinematographer and editor? How do media representations of the actresses reflect dominant social discourses about femininity and ethnicity in Germany? And what does the construction of their public personas tell us about Germany's attitude towards film stardom?

These issues will be addressed via case studies of four key contemporary German actresses. These individuals are Nina Hoss (\*1975), the most prolific German actress of her generation who has been successful in both mainstream and art films; Sandra Hüller (\*1978), whose preference for complex, conflicted, and non-conformist characters makes her an ideal subject for the consideration of performance in the context of German independent cinema; Sibel Kekilli (\*1980), a Turkish-German actress whose film work and public persona reflects Germany's preoccupation with questions of (national) identity and belonging in an increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse society; and Diane Kruger (\*1976), who has emerged as the most internationally successful German actress today and provides invaluable insights into the representation and understanding of 'Germanness' abroad.

These case studies will be preceded by a historical survey of the most prominent female performers in German cinema from the 1920s to the 1980s, which will also offer an alternative to the more common focus on the great auteur-directors (from F. W. Murnau, Fritz Lang, and G.W. Pabst to Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders and Werner Herzog) who shaped the reputation and international appeal of German film at its peaks during the Weimar period and the era of the New German Cinema from the mid-1960s until the early 1980s. My focus on Marlene Dietrich, Zarah Leander, Hildegard Knef, Romy Schneider and Hanna Schygulla will explore how these actresses functioned to affirm, negotiate or criticise the versions of 'Germanness' or 'German national identity' that their characters embodied at different stages in the country's history. This will also provide a sense of a longer historical tradition that provides an important context for the consideration of the significance of contemporary German actresses.

## Charting Female Performers in the History of German Cinema

As noted above, the current Berlin School movement continues the tradition of a flourishing of art film at times of profound social change or crisis in Germany. This began with the much lauded cinema of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933), which reflected the material and psychological repercussions Germany faced after the loss of the First World War, as well as the political and economic instability of the new republic that was confronted with inflation and unemployment, which coexisted with a rapid modernisation and liberalisation of society prompting a cultural flourish as well as female emancipation. The films constituted an artistic preoccupation with the country's anxieties, evoking bizarre worlds by using skewed camera angles, chiaroscuro lighting and highly stylised sets and often including characters on the verge of insanity (Hake, 2002, pp. 28-29). Due to their innovative *mise-en-scène* – commonly referred to as German expressionism – they are considered a central contribution to world cinema.

One of the founding works of German Film Studies, Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of German Film* (1947) sets out to analyse films from the Weimar period, and my study of films as reflections of a country's social issues and prevalent mood bears parallels to his approach. Kracauer interprets the themes and narratives of Weimar films as expression of a male identity crisis triggered by the lost war and the humiliating conditions of the 1919 Versailles treaty and compounded by the threat of the independent woman. He evoked the idea of a collective tormented psyche, a mental disposition shared by all (male) Germans at the time that was marked by paralysis, immaturity and a rejection of responsibility, and that explains Adolf Hitler's subsequent rise to power as a much-desired leader figure. Despite having been rightfully criticised for its oversimplification of complex historical circumstances and its deterministic outlook, Kracauer's book remains a major contribution to film studies, notably in its pioneering consideration of the style and themes of films as embodying a preoccupation with social and political issues. However, in assuming male spectators as the target audience for Weimar films, Kracauer can also be accused of treating female emancipation merely as one of the demons haunting the psyche of German men in the 1920s.

This negligence is counteracted by American film scholar Patrice Petro, whose book *Joyless Streets. Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (1989) constitutes a valuable addition to the study of Weimar cinema. Taking a feminist approach, Petro draws attention to the wealth of films that feature female protagonists and explore women's

struggles and aspirations. She expands on the work of other scholars, who have argued that melodrama is particularly suited to exploring female subjectivity, “deal[ing] with aspects of women’s experience marginalised by other genres” (Cook, 1991, p. 248). Petro seeks to address the “existence of a female spectator, and the function of representation to mobilise her desires and unconscious fantasies” (1989, p. xxii) that previous analyses of Weimar cinema had neglected. The Weimar melodramas Petro discusses are primarily set on city streets, and Petro observes that the female protagonists’ “presence there threatens both male authority and bourgeois morality” (ibid, p. xxi). Featuring protagonists who meet with adversity since their ambitions exceed marriage or because they desire men who are deemed unsuitable, melodramas allow viewers to experience the conflicts or dilemmas of female experience: “melodrama [...] posits the possibility of female desire, and female point of view, thus posing problems for itself which it can scarcely contain” (Cook, 1991, p. 251). However, female protagonists of melodramas are frequently punished for their transgressive desire and put in their ‘right place’ by the end of the film: as Griselda Pollock observes, melodramas typically end with a “reconstitut[ion of] the family through the acceptance of the only available position for women in both patriarchy and bourgeois society, the mother” (1991, p. 281). Thus, melodramas problematise the ways in which female identity has frequently been limited to the mother role, by presenting female protagonists who struggle or refuse to conform to this mother role, presenting them as sexual subjects or depicting their efforts to achieve personal and financial independence. Pam Cook explains that “the heroine’s transgression [in melodrama] resides in her desire to act against maternity and the family, bringing her to face with society. Work and career is set against maternity and the family” (1991, p. 254). The use of melodramatic tropes in films with female protagonists is not limited to the Weimar Street films that Petro discusses, but recurs throughout the history of German film, as my discussions of Sirk’s 1937 melodrama *La Habanera*, the *Sissi* trilogy of the 1950s (dir. Ernst Marischka, 1955-1957) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*) (1978) will show. My analyses of Nina Hoss’s, Sandra Hüller’s and Sibel Kekilli’s contemporary films *Das Herz ist ein dunkler Wald* (*The Heart is a Dark Forest*) (dir. Nicolette Krebitz, 2007), *Madonnen* (*Madonnas*) (dir. Maria Speth, 2007) and *Head-On* will demonstrate that filmmakers continue to utilise melodramatic forms in order to explore female subjectivity and to investigate the ideologically loaded German ideal of motherhood. Furthermore, I seek to emulate Petro’s approach of considering the significance of female characters and the contribution of actresses to a specific period of

German film, in order to highlight women's important, but often neglected role in reflecting and creating images of attitudes, social problems and fears prevalent in Germany at a certain time.

Thus, my account of Weimar cinema places Marlene Dietrich – probably the biggest German film star of all time – centre stage via a consideration of her 1929 film *Der blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*) (dir. Josef von Sternberg) to demonstrate how Weimar cinema approached issues of female agency and empowerment. Dietrich's character Lola Lola emerges as a strong female figure, even if this positive representation of her *personality* is somewhat undermined by a voyeuristic display of her *body*. Drawing on Erica Carter's research on Dietrich, I will also demonstrate how the actress functioned as a site for the negotiation of complex and conflicting versions of national identity. While being held in high esteem for her exceptional career as a German in Hollywood, the assertive femininity and promiscuity associated with Dietrich's characters were often identified as 'un-German' in the press, especially during the Third Reich that assigned to women the role of man's subordinate and asexual mother figure.

German cinema during both the Third Reich and in the immediate post-war period functioned to affirm specific (if rather different) conceptions of national identity and, correspondingly, of German femininity. During the most infamous period of German filmmaking, stretching from 1933-1945, the Nazi Regime controlled and instrumentalised cinema and made it a key component of its propagandistic apparatus. My discussion of the films and star persona of Zarah Leander, the most important actress in Third Reich cinema, will focus on her complex role as a representative of fascist ideology on the one hand and a figure of identification for female audiences on the other, as her film characters lived through the struggles and desires experienced by many German women. In the immediate post war period, the key function of actresses Hildegard Knef and Romy Schneider was to provide an affirmative version of Germanness associated with innocence, pacifism and hope as the country was engaged in a material and mental process of rebuilding.

If the extremely popular Heimat films of the 1950s were long overlooked by critics and scholars, the New German Cinema by contrast was a critically praised art cinema that provided astute social commentary but failed to attract audiences. This, however, was of little concern to the filmmakers, since they "were largely protected [from the market] through generous publicly funded subsidies" (Cooke, 2006, p. 228). Influential German film scholar Thomas Elsaesser has argued that the New German cinema should be considered a national

cinema despite the films' limited distribution and resonance with viewers. Since the directors had the support of the liberal, left-wing government, "filmmaking became part of official culture and entered into a primarily ideological arena" (Elsaesser, 1989, p. 3). The independence from the market allowed the New German cinema to contribute to the complex and painful working through the Nazi past, as well as to comment on societal misgivings, such as the discrimination against women or immigrants in a way mainstream entertainment cinema could not.

My own consideration of the New German Cinema will demonstrate how it provided progressive representations of women that were fuelled by the agenda of Second Wave feminism with which it coincided. The films of feminist filmmakers such as Julia Brückner or Margarethe von Trotta problematised the legacy of Nazism through female protagonists that belonged to either to the first or second post-war generation. Women filmmakers of the New German Cinema often told the stories of young women who sought to emancipate themselves from their mothers who had fallen back into traditional role models after experiencing a period of independence during the absence of men during the war and the immediate post-war years. My main focus, however, will be on the actress Hanna Schygulla and her performance in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978), in which she created an exceptional female character epitomising the tensions characterising post-war German national identity.

In the aftermath of the New German Cinema, there was a backlash in the German film industry against the period's inaccessible avant-garde style and complex, challenging subject matter. In his influential article 'From new German cinema to the post-wall cinema of consensus' (2000), Eric Rentschler introduced the term 'Cinema of Consensus' to describe a wave of 1990s comedies that were "unabashedly conventional in [their] appearance and structure" (2000, p. 275) and that Paul Cooke describes as "both politically and aesthetically conservative" (2012, p. 27). Funding policies were changed, driving filmmakers towards a greater focus on economic viability, and a new generation of filmmakers emerged. Filmmakers like Doris Dörrie and Sönke Wortmann, director of the 1994 hit comedy *Der bewegte Mann* (*Maybe... Maybe not*) sought to create films with high entertainment value and a wide audience appeal, thereby not surviving on government subsidies, like most films of the New German Cinema, but raking in large profits. The romantic comedy, featuring young affluent couples on their winded path towards bourgeois stability and reflecting the materialist and socially conservative spirit of the decade, became the predominant and most

successful genre at the German box office (Rentschler, 2000, pp. 262-263). Centring on “attractive young [...] professionals working in [...] advertising, mass media [...], the comedies evoke[d] a contemporary society unburdened by ideology, politics and history and held together by the unbridled pursuit of money and status” (Hake, 2013 [2002], p. 202).

Rentschler believes that the reason the films were extremely popular in Germany yet did not do well abroad is that they addressed a specific German sensibility: its “directors [...] aim to please, which is to say that they consciously solicit a new German consensus” (2000, p. 264). He contends that with the end of the oppressive East German regime after the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, Germany was keen to insist on its ‘normalcy’ as a member of the community of nations. Filmmakers avoided disturbing the consensus of the recently reunified republic by inspecting its problematic (national socialist and communist) past, which meant that the films were distinguished by “a marked disinclination towards any serious political reflection or sustained historical retrospection” (ibid, p. 263).

Rentschler also points out the problematic gender images perpetuated by the consensus comedies, suggesting that the films fail to question middle-class values or introduce feminist ideas despite their frequent focus on female protagonists. He argues that the “essential female centrepiece of German comedies, played by Katja Riemann, longs above all for romantic bliss and bourgeois security” (ibid, p. 273). Indeed, the quintessential consensus comedy *Maybe... Maybe not* offers rather essentialist and stereotypical representations of chauvinistic masculinity and weak, dependent femininity. Axel (Til Schweiger), the male protagonist, retains his macho persona throughout the film despite ostensibly becoming more responsible and considerate, while his partner Doro (Katja Riemann) forgives his repeated philandering as she is expecting his child.

While I do not identify an actress with an iconic relevance to the period similar to those noted above, my case study of Sibel Kekilli will include a consideration of the 2011 romantic comedy *What a Man* (dir. Matthias Schweighöfer). This film indicates that ‘relationship comedies’, which reflect dominant ideas about romantic relationships and gender roles, continued to be made in Germany in the new millennium and remained very popular with viewers. However, the main body of this thesis will also demonstrate that the somewhat limited female representation of 1990s German film has been replaced by not only a greater variety of female characters, but also an acute preoccupation with gender roles and equality as part of “a more complex, formally more diverse, and thematically more critical cinematic scene” (Mueller and Skidmore, 2012, p. 3) in the 2000s.

## **German Cinema in the New Millennium: Sweeping Historical Dramas and Astute Social Commentary**

The most commercially successful films to emerge in the 2000s, which also prompted a renewed international recognition of German cinema, are historical dramas. High profile examples include the abovementioned *Downfall* and *The Lives of Others* that focus on the last days of the Nazi elite before the German capitulation, and the surveillance state of East Germany, respectively. The production and distribution of these films is indicative of the reorientation of the German film industry towards a global market, which has been taken up in the scholarly discussion of German cinema of the last decade. In his book *German Film After Germany: Toward a Transnational Aesthetic* (2008), Randall Halle points to the incisive changes in the local film industry guided by concerns of competitiveness and profitability that precipitated the resurgence of German cinema in the 2000s. Lutz Koepnick (2002a) discusses the recent upsurge of what he calls 'period films' set during the time of the Third Reich and the Second World War, identifying them as mainstream entertainment films directed at a broad national and international cinema-going public. Similarly, Paul Cooke and Chris Homewood describe these historical films as "straightforwardly melodramatic, identificatory narratives that follow international genre rules and resonate with mainstream international film audiences" (2011, p. 9).

In his book *Postwall German Cinema: History, Film History and Cinephilia* (2013), a comprehensive study of recent German historical films, Mattias Frey advocates a more differentiated analysis of this group of films. Frey points that productions such as *Downfall* and *The Lives of Others*, are often dismissed for their "naive historicism" (2013, p. 4), combining an excessive striving for period accuracy of costumes, sets and props with positivist representations of the national past that "are about war, poverty, suffering, exile, or the Holocaust, and [that] cast Germans as the *victims* [emphasis in original] [...] of a cruel history" (ibid, p. 6). The World War II drama *Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin (A Woman in Berlin)* (dir. Max Färberböck, 2008), in which Nina Hoss plays the lead role, is an example of a recent high-budget historical films that has been criticised for recreating the past as a visual spectacle depicting individuals' tragic fates, rather than confronting the system of totalitarianism, warfare and genocide. Frey, on the other hand, insists that even films which "many would regard as conservative or even reactionary come in very sophisticated forms", (ibid, p. 5) and that "German postwall historical cinema is above all a site of contestation and debate, where a multi-polar refashioning of national identity is taking place" (ibid, p. 174).

My analysis of *A Woman in Berlin*, which is set in Berlin in 1945 and which combines the viewpoint of the wife of a high-ranking Nazi officer with those of Russian soldiers, will support Frey's reading, demonstrating the film's complex and conflicted take on German guilt and suffering in the context of contemporary mainstream cinema.

*Anonyma* is also noteworthy for being part of a group historical films aiming for fresh representations of the well-known historical periods by replacing or complementing the typically male agent of the war film by a female character, from whose point of view the unfolding events are witnessed, other examples being the Traudl Junge (Alexandra Maria Lara) character in *Downfall*, and the titular character in *Sophie Scholl*. However, Frey notes that a notable number of recent films with a post-war setting, among them *Goodbye, Lenin!* and *Das Wunder von Bern* (*The Miracle of Bern*) (dir. Sönke Wortmann, 2003), "consider the past in the figure of or through the perspective of a boy or young man" (ibid, p. 168) who contributes to shaping a more positive future for Germany. Female experiences and perspectives, on the other hand, are often neglected. *The Miracle of Bern*, for example, which presents the 1954 German football World Cup win as a catalyst for the reconciliation of a returning soldier and his young son, suggests that "only when [...] traditional gender roles are recovered [,] the family can be redeemed and [...] the nation can be reborn (ibid, p. 26). Completely sidelining its female characters in its last half hour, the film "foregrounds the vital, recuperative role of [men] in nation-building" (ibid) and offers a take on 1950s Germany that is "particularly nostalgic, conservative, and masculine" (ibid, p. 29). Paul Cooke, in his analysis of a number of recent female-centred historical films, among them *Sophie Scholl* and *A Woman in Berlin*, but also films set in the more distant past such as *Geliebte Clara* (*Clara*) (dir. Helma Sanders-Brahms, 2008) on 19th-century pianist Clara Schumann or *Die Päpstin* (*Pope Joan*) (dir. Sönke Wortmann, 2009) on the legend of a medieval female pope, equally criticises the films' representations of femininity. Cooke observes that the way "female identity construction" is represented in these historical dramas is "ultimately both very conventional and very conservative" (2012, p. 176) since the female protagonists' (often unsuccessful) efforts to secure romantic relationships are foregrounded at the expense of their professional or artistic achievements.

Recent German historical dramas have met with criticism not only for being ideologically conservative, but also for being artistically conventional. Marco Abel for example laments that films such as *Downfall*, "notwithstanding the many accolades [they] received, they did not really advance the *art* of filmmaking in Germany" (2008), while



Ekkehard Knörer observes that “in the shadow of [the] mainstream achievements something aesthetically far more interesting (and commercially far less successful, of course) has developed” (2007). Knörer is referring here to the work of a loose group of filmmakers that became known as the Berlin School. Originally comprising Thomas Arslan, Christian Petzold and Angela Schanelec, who met when studying at the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (Berlin Film Academy) in the late Eighties and early Nineties, the group have now been joined by a younger generation of directors such as Christoph Hochhäusler, Maren Ade and Valeska Grisebach.

Their films share a distinct visual style, being frequently shot on location and often mixing observation with fictional elements in their attempt to explore the experience of life in contemporary Germany. In offering the first comprehensive study of the Berlin School films, Marco Abel explains that

the films associated with this School distinguish themselves from other postwall German films primarily in that they constitute the first significant (collective) attempt at advancing the aesthetics of German cinema within German narrative filmmaking since the New German cinema (2013, p. 10).

As Rüdiger Suchsland notes, “the plots are flat, they renounce psychologising characters as much as they renounce music; instead, the films stroll about in a world that seems normal, but strangely uncanny at the same time”<sup>3</sup> (n.d.(a)). For example, Angela Schanelec’s *Nachmittag (Afternoon)* (2007), inspired by Anton Chekhov’s 1895 play *The Seagull*, depicts a deceptively quiet summer afternoon in a Berlin villa. The mutual alienation of the family members is palpable as the son (Jirka Zett), who is in his early twenties, fails to connect with either his mother or his girlfriend. The film ends with him taking an overdose of sleeping pills and awaiting his death on a raft in a picturesque lake behind the house.

But the Berlin School movement is also notable for its exploration of female experience. Rajendra Roy points out that this group of directors “who are a remarkably equal mix of women and men” (2013, p. 47) provides insights into the changing German

identity and the role that women could play in interpreting and shaping it [...]. Collectively, they investigate from different angles the merging of East and West, male and female roles in society, the nature of authority, and capitalism and its pitfalls – all set against Germany’s complex political history (ibid).

Some of the female protagonists “of these directors’ narratives [...] are presented as blank

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<sup>3</sup> Quotes from German and French sources which I translated into English will be reproduced in the original in the endnotes.

slates, liberated but yet not able to fully harness and direct their power, others struggle to set a new course. All of them provoke questions” (ibid, pp. 47-48). Thomas Arslan explains that his “starting point”<sup>ii</sup> for *Der schöne Tag (A Fine Day)* (2001), the concluding film of his Berlin trilogy<sup>4</sup>, which chronicles the everyday lives of young German-Turks, was to “tell[ ] the story of a female character. A young woman who has a job and asks herself questions about her life. For instance, how to be happy, what people should know about her and how she could spend her day”<sup>iii</sup> (cited in Seidel, n.d.). The life of Deniz (Serpil Turhan), the protagonist of *A Fine Day*, is not dominated by “the often-discussed turmoil resulting from being torn between [Turkish and German] culture[ ]” (ibid): Arslan insists that Deniz “has other things to do than to constantly worry about her identity”<sup>iv</sup> (ibid). Correspondingly, the female protagonists of Arslan’s Berlin trilogy are presented “as having more agency and freedom to move, whereas the male characters seem rather stuck in their own attempts to define themselves and their territories” (Stehle, 2012, p. 82).

While Arslan retains an equal focus on male and female characters, Christian Petzold stands out as the Berlin School filmmaker who uses female leads most consistently. His films *Die innere Sicherheit (The State I Am In)* (2001) and *Gespenster (Ghosts)* (2005) focus on teenage girls (both played by Julia Hummer) burdened by the worries and instability of their parents’ generation. Chale Nafus explains that

focusing on a central female character allows the male director to avoid autobiography in his films. Through this distancing from the narrative, he believes [ ] [he] ‘was able to see from a greater distance the mechanisms of dependence and exploitation that prevail: the men still own the companies, while the women have to work’ (n.d.).

Petzold’s work thus epitomises “the fascination of the West-born Berlin School directors with female protagonists from the former East” (Roy, 2013, p. 51), which is owed to “the more profound cultural impact that reunification had on the East and particularly, on the women there” (ibid), who have shown a greater mobility and willingness to adapt to the economic and social change. He explores this in *Yella*<sup>5</sup> (2007) and *Jerichow*, which centre on women living in the former East Germany, and which are typical Berlin School films in that they “deal with threat, uncertainty, the loss of identity and problematic relationships – all

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<sup>4</sup> Arslan’s Berlin trilogy consists of *Geschwister (Siblings)* (1997), *Dealer* (1999) and *Der schöne Tag (A Fine Day)* (2001).

<sup>5</sup> *Yella* is the final instalment of Petzold’s *Geistertrilogie* (ghost trilogy), being preceded by *The State I Am In* and *Ghosts*, all of whose protagonists are held “captive in [...] a mode of being that blocks their full, and fulfilled, participation in the world of the living (let us call it ‘normality’ as defined by German bourgeois discourse)” (Abel, 2013, p. 70).

topics emerging in a time of growing insecurity”<sup>v</sup> (Gupta, 2005). This insecurity stems from an acute awareness of how Germany has changed since reunification and the advent of global capitalism. Crucial in this context are the comprehensive economic and social reforms put forward by the coalition government of the Social Democrats and the Green Party in the early 2000s (Hake, 2002, p. 190). Seeking to make the country more internationally competitive, they changed labour policies and cut unemployment benefits in ways that were perceived by many as a deliberate move towards a dismantling of the welfare state. These reforms came at a time when the euphoria about the reunification of West Germany and the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) had already made way for a general awareness of the pervasive problem of unemployment in eastern Germany, whose economic assimilation was not as easily achieved as it had been hoped. Correspondingly, characters in films of the Berlin School are afraid of not being able to bear up in the situation of competition and strife in which changing economic and social circumstances will place them. Marco Abel explains that the films regularly depict people struggling against the dictate of “neoliberal mobility” (2013, p. 17), which forces them to move against their will

to communities away from home, to different careers, to a different state of mind no longer beholden to the belief that the role of the state is supposed to be to take care of its citizens – lest the final remnants of the once well-functioning welfare state vanish, too (ibid).

No Berlin School film addresses this conflict more acutely than Petzold’s *Yella*, in which the eponymous heroine, played by Nina Hoss, is forced to leave her hometown in eastern Germany because she is only able to find work in western Germany. Yella soon finds herself assisting an executive of a venture capital firm in his efforts to squeeze as much profit as possible out of the desolate businesses for which an investment of his represents the last chance. She is at the same time haunted by her past and doomed in her determination to hold on to her new life at any cost. Having also collaborated with Arslan on the 2013 film *Gold*, Hoss has become “the face of the Berlin School” (Roy, 2013, p. 51), a performervital for a cinema functioning as social critique. My analyses of Hoss’s films will therefore illustrate how her characters face situations representative of the challenges many German women encounter today such as the threat of unemployment in an increasingly harsh economic climate or persistent institutional and mental barriers that stand in the way of female equality in the workplace and in relationships.

## Studying Contemporary German Actresses as Performers and Stars

By analysing the performances of four contemporary German actresses and charting the development of their acting style and screen personas across a number of films, I also seek to contribute to the study of screen acting, a field that has attracted a considerable interest within film scholarship in recent years. The work of the film actor had been neglected by film scholars in favour of more obvious and accessible aspects of filmmaking such as film form, auteurism or the analysis of films as texts embodying dominant values and ideologies. However, the last decades have seen a number of books attempting to theorise film acting. James Naremore's pioneering collection *Acting in the Cinema* from 1988 was followed by Alan Lovell and Peter Krämer's *Screen Acting* (1999), *Movie Acting The Film Reader* (2004) by Pamela Robertson Wojcik, and most recently Aaron Taylor's edited collection *Theorising Film Acting* (2012).

The study of film acting is complicated by the fact that filmic performance is a complex construct authored not only by the actor him- or herself, but also through framing, editing and music. As Lovell and Krämer have pointed out, "the way technology mediates acting in the cinema is a disincentive to taking it seriously [...] it is all too easy for the work of the individual actor to be discounted" (1999, p. 5). Consequently, a defining feature of film acting is the fragmentation of the actor's performance even before the filmed recording of it goes into the editing room. Film performance, as Karen Hollinger points out, "is unquestionably more [...] discontinuous, and disunified than stage performance" (2006, p. 7). The director or cinematographer, rather than the actor decides if the performer is captured in close up, or in a medium or long shot, although this is crucial in determining the effect and meaning of a scene. Several takes are produced of each scene or part of a scene, with the performer rarely acting for more than a few minutes at a time. His or her performance "occurs in short bits roughly over a three month period, and the entire work is shot and pieced together by other people", as Peter Lehman and William Luhr explain (2003 [1991], p. 148). It has therefore repeatedly been argued that "screen acting is not acting at all" (Hollinger, 2006, p. 7) but "merely an effect of cinematic technique" (Robertson Wojcik, 2004, p. 2).

This is likely to be one of the reasons why actors tend to compare stage work favourably to film work in terms of the skills and commitment they bring to the performance, which is then rewarded by a live audience. Meryl Streep, for example, has said that "working on movies [...] you can afford to do so little [...] My fear is that in doing so

little I will not be able to do what I do on stage, which is to be brave, to take the larger leap” (cited in Hollinger, 2006, p. 91). Streeper’s comment reflects a common belief among actors and scholars that stage acting is “the more sustained exercise in acting skills and commitment, the place where live performance offers the actor the ideal environment for perfecting his or her craft” (Hollinger, 2006, p. 5). However, in my conversation with Sandra Hüller, who has extensive experience in both stage and film acting, she suggested that this view of stage acting as more demanding and rewarding is too simplistic. Instead, Hüller is adamant that the two modes of acting are distinguished by different working conditions and challenges, each requiring specific skills. In view of the myriad external influences on film performance, the question to which extent the actor is able to shape and author his own performance, and to which extent it is determined by the technical means of the medium is central to the scholarly discussion of film acting. Analysing Hüller’s performances as well as taking into account her own experiences will provide useful insights into the film actor’s craft.

In her book *The Actress. Hollywood Acting and the Female Star* (2006), Karen Hollinger points out that actresses are still much more rarely studied than their male counterparts. While early feminist film scholarship, which approached actresses as semiotic constructions objectified by a male gaze, provided a useful ideological critique, it neglected the discussion of actresses as performers. When studying acting techniques on the other hand, scholars have often approached the style of Method Acting, which is associated with famous male actors such as Paul Newman and Al Pacino, as one of the key instances of actorly craftsmanship. As Hollinger explains, Method Acting is “ideally suited to the traditional conception of masculinity (2006, p. 15), expressing “a tension between an outer mask of stoic strength and self-control and an inner emotional core constantly on the verge of breaking through” (ibid). The fact that Method Acting has been associated, by acting trainers and scholars, “with male actors[,] has indisputably denigrated the actress as an artist” (ibid). Many acclaimed performers of German cinema today, among them Nina Hoss and Sandra Hüller, have received acting training that notably differs from the school of Method Acting. Hoss and Hüller trained at the country’s most prestigious drama school, the Schule für Schauspielkunst Ernst Busch (Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Art) in Berlin, which was founded by Max Reinhardt (1873-1943), one of the most influential German-speaking stage directors and producers. Managing the Deutsches Theater Berlin from 1905 till 1933, he “set

new standards of rehearsing, acting and directing”<sup>6</sup> (Hortmann, 1998, p. 30). Convinced that “it is to the actor and to on-one else that the theatre belongs”<sup>vi</sup> (1953 [1928]), Reinhardt advocated an ‘actor’s theatre’ “in which all the elements of the production supported the work of the actors on stage” (Hostetter and Hostetter, 2011, p. 28). In his famous speech ‘Rede über den Schauspieler’ (‘On the Actor’) (1928), Reinhardt claims that “the actor’s power of autosuggestion is so strong that he can produce not only interior, spiritual changes but [...] indeed also exterior physical changes”<sup>vii</sup> (1953 [1928]). However, Reinhardt’s acting training does not encourage performers to draw on one one’s own experience of emotional turmoil when portraying a character, as advocated by The Method, but seeks to equip them with the skills and craftsmanship to convincingly embody the character to be played. Steve Earnest explains that

the approach to acting at the [Ernst Busch Academy], initially developed by Max Reinhardt, is pragmatic, problem-solution based, and has survived the many shifts in ideology of twentieth century Germany. It has been, and continues to be, exemplary in its ability to adapt to the repertory needs of the German theatre system (2001, p. 34).

The Ernst Busch Academy also works with concepts developed by Marxist playwright Bertold Brecht (1898-1956), whose “practical understanding of theatre” (Luckhurst, 2006, p. 194) was indebted to his working as Reinhardt’s dramaturg from 1924-1925. Brecht developed the ‘epic theatre’, which envisions a use of the theatre as a political tool, consciously avoiding a complete identification of actor and character by employing a non-naturalistic acting style. The concepts developed by the playwright, a key theorist on acting and performance techniques, are studied by most German performers who complete a formal acting training.

In this context, my study of German actresses past and present will highlight notable parallels between the acting styles of Hanna Schygulla and Nina Hoss. Both guided by the tenets of ‘epic theatre’, they share a stilted, self-conscious acting style, creating distant, aloof screen personas that counteract common filmic representations of female characters as victims or sex objects. Considering the similarities between their acting styles, despite their working thirty years apart, invites the question whether it is possible to identify the actresses’

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<sup>6</sup> Lotte Eisner has traced the stylistic innovations of Weimar cinema back to Max Reinhardt. In her book *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt* (1969 [1952]), Eisner notes that “when the cinema became an art-form, it quite naturally took advantage of Reinhardt’s discoveries, using the chiascuro, the pools of light falling from a high window into a dark interior, which people were used to seeing every evening at the Deutsches Theater” (1969, p. 47).

portrayals as recurring performances of 'Germanness'. In her Berlin School films, Nina Hoss typically embodies stark, single-minded characters whose experiences, ambitions and problems mirror those of many contemporary German women. However, Hoss has also played leading roles in a number of mainstream films, such as the African-set drama *The White Masai* (the most popular German film of 2005) and the World War II drama *A Woman in Berlin*, successfully combining commercial and art films. Her career trajectory will allow me to illustrate the wide range of roles offered to female German performers in the 2000s, and the way this has contributed to the aesthetic and thematic specificity of recent German cinema.

Sandra Hüller is emerging as a similarly important figure within contemporary German art film. She followed her breakthrough performance in the exorcism drama *Requiem* with a series of equally difficult, demanding roles. In *Brownian Movement* (2010) by the Dutch director Nanouk Leopold, Hüller plays a young doctor who has affairs with older and physically disadvantaged men, her character providing an interesting take on feminine experience and identity that is not contained by marriage and motherhood. Hüller often portrays characters in situations of distress and psychological instability, which she translates into a physical, expressive acting style. This makes her an excellent case study of an actress at the beginning of her career who is in the process of making a name for herself in art house circles through her acting ability rather than through physical attributes or the use of marketing strategies usually associated with mainstream cinema. Hüller's role choices are distinguished by her continuous pursuit of acting challenges on the one hand, and her ambition to be a part of film projects that function as social critique on the other, two aims that are not always reconcilable since her characters are at times too idiosyncratic to provide much identificatory potential for viewers. Hüller's and Hoss's work with directors associated with or inspired by the Berlin School nonetheless illustrates the film movement's sustained interest in women's stories and I seek to demonstrate how their films testify to a renewed consideration of feminist themes and agendas by offering fresh and unorthodox representations of women and mothers.

Turkish-German actress Sibel Kekilli equally portrays an exceptional female figure in her debut film *Head-On*. Vibrant, brave, and promiscuous, her character defies conventions not only by rejecting her family's cultural customs, but also through her reckless lifestyle. Centring on members of the Turkish diaspora that is the biggest immigrant group in Germany, Kekilli's films capture key moments of confrontation or dialogue between cultures

and genders. In her 2010 film *Die Fremde (When We Leave)* (dir. Feo Aladag), Kekilli's protagonist is even more threatened by archaic cultural conventions as her strife for a self-determined life makes her the likely victim of an honour killing. I will explore how Kekilli's films portray the life choices of young Turkish-German women oscillating between cultural and family traditions and the experience of life in Germany. This will enrich my study of the different versions of femininity or women's life stories offered by contemporary German films. I will also discuss Kekilli's career trajectory, which sees her moving away from roles that problematise her 'hyphenated national identity' and towards characters that are assimilated into a group of German friends or colleagues, such as in the 2011 romantic comedy *What a Man*. This will allow me to explore how recent German films address issues of integration and belonging through the cinematic representation of (second generation) immigrant actors and characters. This analysis will form part of my enquiry of the way in which performance and embodiment in Kekilli's, Hüller's and Hoss's films relates to questions of identity and gender roles in 21<sup>st</sup> century Germany.

Furthermore, I will examine the careers and public persona of the four chosen contemporary German actresses in a way similar to Karen Hollinger's study of American female performers. Hollinger takes an approach that integrates Star Studies, pioneered by Richard Dyer, noting that actresses need to be studied both "for their projection of star images and as craftspeople skilled in the art of acting" (2006, p. 22). This is particularly useful in considering the significance of Diane Kruger, who enjoys the greatest international popularity and highest public exposure of all four actresses studied in this thesis. Kruger is an international film star, having favoured roles in big-budget US and European productions from the beginning of her career. Her portrayal of Helen in the Wolfgang Petersen epic *Troy* introduced her to large international audiences, and a supporting role in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) further raised her profile. Kruger enjoys particular popularity in France, having acted in several French films such as the successful thriller *Pour elle (Anything for Her)* (dir. Fred Cavayé, 2008), and the period drama *Les adieux à la reine (Farewell, My Queen)* (dir. Benoît Jaquot, 2012). The tension between Kruger's mostly French and American film characters and her public persona that is informed by her German nationality makes the actress an ideal subject for the study of the image of 'Germanness', German femininity, and German film stars abroad. Drawing on Dyer's notion of the star text, I will investigate the construction of Kruger's public image and the extent to which it reflects dominant social ideals of femininity, beauty and romantic relationships. The other three case studies will



equally feature analyses of the actresses' media representation or 'star image', highlighting Germany's complex and somewhat fraught relationship with film stardom as well as demonstrating how issues of cultural and national identity are mapped out on the performers' public personas.

In each of my case studies I will produce close textual readings of some of their key films in order to explore the visual and narrative strategies employed to represent feminine identity, agency and sexuality in the new millennium; as well as drawing on sociological research (such as statistics on female employment, lifestyle and migration in Germany, surveys on German women and men's attitudes towards gender roles and equality, and anthropological studies on the ongoing merging process of western and eastern Germany), in order to demonstrate how the work of the four actresses reflects and engages with the personal and socio-economic situation of German women today. This, in turn, will allow me to highlight how the performances and filmic representations of contemporary actresses contribute to the formation of and engagement with German national identity. In this way I seek to establish the key role of female performers within contemporary German and world cinema and highlighting the key contribution of a new generation of actresses to the thriving German cinema of the new millennium.

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<sup>i</sup> "die Plots sind flach, auf Psychologisierung wird ebenso weitgehend verzichtet wie auf Musik, dafür flanieren die Filme durch eine Welt, die zwar normal, aber doch seltsam unvertraut scheint."

<sup>ii</sup> "Ausgangspunkt"

<sup>iii</sup> "die Geschichte einer weiblichen Figur zu erzählen. Einer jungen Frau, die einen Beruf hat und die sich Fragen über ihr Leben stellt. Zum Beispiel, wie man glücklich sein kann. Was kann man von ihr wissen und wie könnte sie ihren Tag verbringen."

<sup>iv</sup> "hat noch etwas anderes zu tun, als sich ständig mit ihrer Identität zu beschäftigen"

<sup>v</sup> "behandeln sie Bedrohungen, Ungewissheiten, Identitätsverlust und schwierige Beziehungsverhältnisse – alles Themen aus einer Zeit wachsender Verunsicherung"

<sup>vi</sup> "[dem Schauspieler] und keinem anderen gehört das Theater"

<sup>vii</sup> "die autosuggestive Kraft des Schauspielers ist so groß, daß er nicht nur innere seelische, sondern [...] tatsächlich auch äußere körperliche Veränderungen hervorzubringen vermag"



**Part I:**  
**Actresses in the History of German Film**



Figure 1:  
Marlene Dietrich  
in *The Blue Angel* (1930)



Figure 2:  
Hanna Schygulla in  
*Maria Braun* (1978)



## Chapter One

### Actresses in the History of German Film I: Weimar Cinema and the New German Cinema

#### **Weimar Cinema – Creativity and Anxiety at a Time of Momentous Social Change**

The cinema of Weimar Germany has long been understood by film scholars as a prime example of the use of film as a preoccupation with pressing social and political issues at a time of profound societal change and instability. Germany had lost the First World War, its empire had collapsed and was replaced with the country's first democratic government, which struggled in the aftermath of the war with reparation payments and inflation as well as a lack of support by the population. The political climate was heated: leftists were disillusioned after the failure of the German Revolution of 1918-1919, and, more detrimentally, right-wing reactionary groupings benefited from the survival of authoritarian power structures in the military and in the political system itself.

At the same time, the citizens of Weimar Germany, especially during its period of economic consolidation in the mid-1920s, enjoyed a liberalisation of society and a flourishing of the arts and cultural life, of which the centre was metropolitan Berlin. Weimar was relatively tolerant towards homosexuality (McCormick, 2001, p. 17), while women gained more rights and became more visible in the public sphere. They were admitted to universities from 1908 (ibid, p. 19), gained the vote in 1919 as part of a democratic constitution that granted them legal equality (Wager, 1999, p. 20), and between the wars, 111 women were

elected to the Reichstag (Kaes, Jay, and Dimenberg, cited in Williams, 2010, p. 59). Breaking out of the traditional role of mother and housewife assigned to her in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Wilhelmine society, the 'New Woman' emerged as an image in the media and became part of the reality of shops, cafés and offices, where women began to work, joining the expanding class of white-collar workers populating the cities (Wager, 1999, p. 21).

How are female characters portrayed in Weimar cinema with respect to their living conditions, agency, concerns and desires, and what were the contributions of the actresses portraying them? Analyses that seek to answer this question are guided by an understanding of a society plagued by a male identity crisis. The fact that women entered paid jobs and claimed financial and legal autonomy fed into an already existing "masculine crisis of identity stemming from defeat on the battlefields and perceived submission at the peace negotiation tables" (Wager, 1999, p. 21). Richard W. McCormick explains that the "male psyche [...] was haunted by paranoia that a conspiracy of 'others' – women, socialists, Jews, homosexuals, foreigners – had humiliated the German 'fatherland' and were hindering efforts to resurrect its power" (2001, p. 25). The collective male psyche, "equating German national identity with manhood" (ibid), was haunted by a perceived "loss of male power and authority" (ibid), and scholars agree that the crisis of male identity became a central motif in Weimar cinema. The conception of Weimar film as an insight into a tormented (male) German psyche was coined by Siegfried Kracauer in his immensely influential book *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of German Film* that was published in the United States in 1947. Kracauer distilled from Weimar films what he considered a "German collective soul" (1947, p. 74) or national character: shocked and paralysed by the lost war, infantile and immature, it was seeking a leader figure that would be fulfilled in the person of Hitler.

In the late 1980s and 1990s the classical reading of Weimar cinema was enriched by feminist approaches, which examined female representation. These were pioneered by American film scholar Patrice Petro, who called attention to the substantial female audiences of Weimar cinema, and in her analyses of the so-called 'street films' demonstrates their appeal to female viewers. These productions were often preoccupied with the fate of female characters, and they explored the difficult living conditions of urban, working class women, highlighting the discrepancy between the promise of emancipation and the persistent oppressive patriarchal system.

## Exploring Feminine Identities in the Weimar Street Film

The term 'street film' is used for a number of films that epitomised the "very specific idea of the city" (Hall, (2009, p. 136) envisioned by Weimar films, which often functioned "as a stand-in for Berlin" (ibid, p. 7), and which "found its proper milieu in the Street" (ibid). Among them are *Hintertreppe (Back Stairs)* (dir. Leopold Jessner and Paul Leni, 1921), *Die Strasse (The Street)* (dir. Karl Grune, 1923) and *Die freudlose Gasse (The Joyless Street)* (dir. G. W. Pabst, 1925), which have in common stories involving "a narrative clash of bourgeois and criminal elements" (Petro, 1989, p. xxi) in the city streets and back alleys. They all share a plot structure that revolves around a middle-class man who, bored by the dullness of home, enters the city by night. He gets drawn into its criminal underbelly, often by way of a seductive yet dangerous woman, only to ruefully return to the safety of the bourgeois home and his dotting wife (Wager, 1999, p. 35). Petro's study of urban melodramas underpins Kracauer's observation that Weimar cinema is a "cinema firmly rooted in middle-class mentality" (1947, p. 8), and consequently reflects the fear of female liberation that threatens the bourgeois patriarchal family. Sabine Hake explains that in Weimar society not only the private, but also the public sphere were perceived as spaces "dominated by women, and the male characters fight this perceived loss of authority through a mixture of resentment, dread, and self-pity that often culminates in the symbolic punishment of the sexually threatening woman" (2002, pp. 40-41).

The niche genre of the street film offered female characters that attenuated the femme fatale figure by providing insights into her back story and the adverse circumstances she finds herself in. They explore the plight of women who possess "surprising psychological complexity" (ibid, p. 41). These female characters' often unsuccessful fight for financial independence and fulfilment of her romantic and sexual desires "reinforces what is [...] for many street films a gender-specific interpretation of tragedy: the tragedy of a woman who excessively speaks her desire within an order she knows to exceed her" (Petro, 1989, p. xxii). McCormick explains that while "the 'shock of modernity' in Germany was often experienced as a crisis of traditional male authority, agency and identity", "traditional conceptions of female identities were undergoing just as much strain – or more" (2001, p. 3).

The destabilisation of female identity, through social change and economic hardship, is dealt with to great effect in G. W. Pabst's 1925 film *The Joyless Street*, which offers exceptionally differentiated representations of Weimar women. The film functions as a social critique, displaying (yet exceeding) the social realism associated with the art movement of the

‘Neue Sachlichkeit’ (New Objectivity), “a visual and narrative style that featured prominently in the artistic, literary and journalistic culture of the stabilisation period” (Hall, 2009, p. 139). It is characterised by a spirit of disenchantment and a scientific dissection of human nature and adverse lower class living conditions introduced by authors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century realist novel (Hake, 2002, p. 38). *The Joyless Street* centres on the ramifications of the post-war economic crisis marked by unemployment and inflation. The film parallels and contrasts the stories of lower-class Marie Lechner (Asta Nielsen), who slides into prostitution, and middle-class Grete Rumfort (Greta Garbo), who emerges as the only character with a chance to escape the corrupting, inhuman environment of the street through her relationship with American Red Cross Lieutenant Davy (Einar Hanson). Hall observes that *The Joyless Street*, as a typical street film, foregrounds female characters:

while the male characters mark the tale in terms of economic history, their stories are not where the substantial narrative interest lies. They shape the social and material circumstances in this fictional version of post-war Vienna, but it is the women who must navigate the fallout (2009, p. 142).

In the course of the film, Grete is forced to perform in a strip club and brothel to pay off her debts to shopkeeper madam Greifer (Valeska Gert). Her storyline is indicative of the rare socially critical stance of the film, as Hall observes: “*The Joyless Street* provides speculative answers to a question never even raised, let alone addressed in many other street films of the era: what is the prostitute’s story?” (ibid, p. 148). While Grete is saved from having to appear on the club stage half-naked by her father and Davy, Marie murders her rival Lia Leid after catching her in bed with her fiancé Egon Stirner (Henry Stuart). Though portraying the bourgeois character more sympathetically by giving her a happy ending, the film offers multiple scenes complicating “Maria’s tale of desperation and murder” (Hall, 2009, p. 141) and Grete’s tale of “innocence and the reward of virtue” (Petro, 1989, p. 140). *The Joyless Street* portrays the struggle of its two female leads to surmount the adverse social surroundings, as well as depicting how they “vent (or quiet) [their] frustrations”, thus providing multiple, very distinct, points of emotional and political identification for the female viewer” (ibid, p. 152).

The prolific silent film actress Asta Nielsen portrays Marie “in such a way as to create the image of a striking, but aging, femme fatale who was at the same time emotionally complex and sympathetic” (ibid, p. 140). Thus nuancing the stereotypical femme fatale character alongside Grete’s virtuous, maternal female, *The Joyless Street* explored and problematised the hardship, sexual exploitation and oppression of women in 1920s Germany



and Austria to great effect. In casting the Danish Nielsen alongside the Swedish Greta Garbo in her first role as Grete, director G. W. Pabst had a major stake in creating icons of Weimar femininity, none of whom are of German origin. His choice of the American dancer Louise Brooks in his two successful films *Die Büchse der Pandora* (*Pandora's Box*) (1929) and *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* (*Diary of a Lost Girl*) (1929) further consolidated this tendency. In this context, Isenberg speaks of a “venerated line of international stars that radiated from the Weimar screen” (2009, p. 3), which suggests that their foreign nationality further added to the exotic nature of the wordly, alluring, promiscuous femme fatale figure – Brooks’s Lulu in *Pandora's Box* being another incarnation. The modernity of the ‘girl’ (used as an Anglicism in German), who dons a bob and is frequently seen at nightclubs and varietés, was perceived as foreign, or more specifically, American: Brooks embodied a “newly aggressive and public middle-class female sexuality” “blatantly detach[ing] sex from procreation, and from traditional notions of masculinity and femininity” (Hamilton, cited in Petro, 2009, p. 260) emerging in US metropolises like New York.

**Marlene Dietrich in *The Blue Angel* (1930):  
Challenging Female Objectification, Defining Cinematic Spectacle**

The German actress that would bring these qualities of worldliness and sexual allure, which were considered thoroughly ‘un-German’ to perfection, was Marlene Dietrich (1901-1992). Dietrich’s Lola Lola in Josef von Sternberg’s 1930 film *The Blue Angel* is Weimar cinema’s most famous, complex and ambiguous femme fatale figure. Lola Lola epitomises the era’s conflicted position of women – confident, independent and attractive yet in their very emancipation constituting an acute threat to men. While unabashedly being presented as erotic object, this object position is simultaneously challenged through Dietrich’s performance, her costuming and von Sternberg’s camerawork, rendering Lola Lola a fascinating and ambiguous figure. *The Blue Angel* is an adaptation of Heinrich Mann’s 1905 novel *Professor Unrat*, however, von Sternberg shifted the focus from the fate of the titular character to the seductive night club singer who brings about his demise (Bach, 1992, p. 107). ‘The Blue Angel’ is a cabaret and night club at which Lola Lola performs, and into which middle-aged college teacher Immanuel Rath (Emil Jannings) follows his students, intending to catch them in the act and to punish them for frequenting this place of debauchery and immorality. Instead, he falls for Lola Lola and gives up his profession and status to marry her, hence being forced to tour through nightclubs with her troupe and

witnessing her taking up with other men. The climax of the film, and of Rath's humiliation, is reached when he is made to perform as a clown on the stage of 'The Blue Angel' in front of his former colleagues and students. Rath then runs away from the club and is found dead in his former class room, clutching his desk.

What is remarkable about the film is that Lola Lola is spared any kind of punishment for her cruelty and toying with Rath's feelings and ultimately, his life, the ending suggesting that she will continue her life as a cabaret singer as if she had never known him. The open ending for Lola Lola's is the first hint at the film's ambiguous portrayal of femininity: Lola's "earlier anarchy" (McCormick, 2001, p. 125) is never tamed and she emerges as a remarkably strong character by the end of the film. *The Blue Angel* devotes little time to characterise the two main protagonists through dialogue, instead, they are superficially identified through their dress and body language. The characters *are* their social roles: Lola Lola, the shrewd, coldly seductive cabaret singer, and Rath, the bumbling professor, who stands for middle-class narrow-mindedness. Scholars agree that Rath functions as "the onscreen stand-in for normative symbolic order, who is drawn into and consumed" (Williams, 2010, p. 68) by the anarchic underworld of the night club, a place emblematic of Germany's transition to modernity. His death symbolises "modernity's threat to fragile and aging remnants of Kaiserreich German culture" (ibid). Rath is driven by his irrational passion for Lola Lola and marries her, the decline of his character being owed to his naiveté and immaturity. By the end of the film, Rath is forced by the manager of Lola Lola's troupe to perform on stage as his assistant – no longer fulfilling the role of breadwinner, but being dependent on her and the group of performers. Once on stage, he appears paralysed and confused, before breaking out into a frenzied imitation of a rooster cry, which he had used earlier in the film to amuse Lola Lola and the troupe, but which now expresses his desperation and descent into insanity upon the humiliation of having to perform as a clown in front of those who knew him as a professor. Meanwhile, Lola Lola observes the spectacle Rath makes of himself "coolly and egoistically" (Walker, 1984, p. 26). Stephen Bach suggests that it is precisely this "utter immorality" which made her character "revolutionary": "she is provocative, seductive, and unsentimental" (1992, p. 111).

Her transformation into femme fatale is completed just before Rath's ultimate humiliation, when she performs 'Falling in Love Again', which was to become a trademark Dietrich song, for the second time in the film. The striking differences between the two performances of the song in terms of Dietrich's mode of performance and von Sternberg's

staging encompass in a nutshell the way Dietrich was constructed as a filmic icon (see fig. 3&4). Lola Lola's first performance of the song is an unmistakable move to woo Rath. Her costume (a white top hat and a frilled white brief visible from under her dress) as well as the soft, high-pitched tone of her voice and her body language (mockingly shameful gazes to the floor) suggest her feigned innocence. She is part of a group of dancers on the stage, and addresses herself exclusively to Rath, who stands on a balcony, with reaction shots to him showing that he is flattered by her attention. The viewer's attention is also drawn to the audience, as we follow Rath's gaze down to the crowd, composed of men of different ages and ethnicities, and their gazes up to him. Elisabeth Bronfen observes that "Prof. Rath is clearly staged by von Sternberg as the object of the gaze of an anonymous audience" (2003, p. 25). Thus, the director "self-consciously provides identifications that uncannily blur the traditional distinction between female performer and male spectator in that both the professor and the singer take on the position of voyeur and exhibitionist" (ibid), complicating a perception of Lola Lola as looked-upon object and Rath as gazing subject. Lola Lola's second performance of the song is staged very differently. Not only is the cabaret audience eliminated from view, but Lola Lola is alone on the stage. Straddling a chair, her posture and appearance is a lot more masculine than during the first performance. Her voice is significantly deeper and her tone appears harsher, not least through Dietrich's pronounced rolling of the letter 'r'. The performance forcefully expresses her evil nature, her power of deception and coldness, completing her transformation into the "quintessential cinematic vamp" (McCormick, 2001, p. 31): She now is the perfect "image of a tart, a man-eater, a seductress and destroyer of men" (Mayne, 2000, p. 13).



**Figures 3&4:** The differences between Lola Lola's first and second performance of 'Falling in Love Again' epitomise her transformation from seemingly innocent flirt to callous femme fatale

The way Dietrich is set in scene also enhances Lola Lola's status as a filmic spectacle. Sitting in front of a plain white background and filmed in a full-frontal shot, she seems to address viewers directly: "she is no longer a theatrical phenomenon, but rather a truly 'cinematic' illusion' in the classical sense: an illusion of reality unburdened by any evidence of its construction or the audience that watches it" (McCormick, 2001, p. 123). The visual representation of Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel* has been used by feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey as a prime example of the fetishisation of a female performer for the male viewer's gaze (1975, p. 14). The woman's "body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look" (ibid), exemplified by the shot of Dietrich's legs in black stockings that can be seen during Lola Lola's first appearance on the stage of the 'The Blue Angel' before Rath appears at the club. It has no narrative motivation, but functions as a moment of erotic contemplation for the heterosexual male viewer (see fig. 5).



**Figure 5: Dietrich's/Lola Lola's legs are fetishised by von Sternberg's camera**

Mulvey, however, also points out the subversive power of *The Blue Angel*, arguing that the film lacks a strong male lead typical of classic Hollywood cinema. Viewers are usually invited to identify with this male protagonist, who fetishises and/or ultimately punishes the woman her for her erotic digression (1975, pp. 12-14). Rath fails to fulfil this function. Instead, von Sternberg's camerawork puts the viewer into "in direct erotic rapport" (Studlar, 1990, p. 248) with Lola Lola, using a succession of shots and reverse shots that "reveals the image of Lola from the perspective of the audience and then the reaction of the audience from the perspective of Lola" (Williams, 2010, p. 58) during her first two stage

performances. The film thereby establishes “a system of looking that elicits both the female spectatorial identification with and *desire for the powerful femme fatale*” (Studlar, 1990, p. 248). The film thereby subtly destabilises stereotypical gender images and male spectatorial pleasure, since Lola Lola not only captures the male gaze, but “ursurps [its] power” (Williams 2010, p. 58) by reciprocating it. The scene was the first of many to demonstrate Dietrich’s quality as an “‘exceptional’ female star who ‘gets away with a return of the look’ – with, that is, an ironic commentary on the mechanics of performance and particularly on the sexual politics of the look” (Mayne, 2000, pp. 5-6).

Peter Baxter insists that “if Lola has continued to fascinate us over the years, it is because the film is not simply misogynist, and she is not simply a destructive female” (1985, p. 563). Rather, Dietrich’s sexual ambiguity and distinct performance style effectively nuance the stereotypical figure of the fatal woman that is Lola Lola. The sequence constitutes the first display on screen of the gender ambiguity that would be associated with Dietrich throughout her career. Erica Carter points out that “in gender terms, Dietrich hovered on the border between masculinity, femininity and a more androgynous identity. Her husky vocal delivery suggested gender transition” (2002, p. 75), and cross-dressing became a “trademark” of hers (Studlar, 1990, p. 245). Herself bisexual, Dietrich would habitually incorporate homoerotic elements in her performance and choice of costume, mostly notably in *Morocco* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1930), in which her character kisses a woman on the lips, whereby von Sternberg “explicitly referenced the lesbian desire she had publicly celebrated in Berlin” (Carter, 2002, p. 75). Jennifer Williams illustrates this sexually ambiguous connotation of Dietrich’s costume in *The Blue Angel*: “Lola Lola dons a flapper dress and a wide-brimmed hat. The flapper dress has particularly interesting cultural implications because the flapper was made famous by her deviation from existing gender norms. Her Bubikopf is edgy in its proximity to masculinity” (2010, p. 66). Her masculine appearance and body language during the second performance of ‘Falling in Love Again’ underpin a conception of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ as social constructs:

clothes ‘make the man’: with only the exterior trappings of ‘masculinity’ she assumes the male’s prerogative of sexual assertiveness and the expectations of heterosexual desire. That desire, like her clothes, appears as a consciously chosen momentary pleasure rather than a biologically determined compulsion (Studlar, 1990, p. 247).

Thus, Rath’s and Lola Lola’s respective appearances on stage imply a questioning of “the whole system of gender roles – or personae: ‘masculinity’ as well as ‘femininity’, for men as well as for women” (McCormick, 2001, p. 127): while Rath is ‘feminised’ in his hysterics,

Lola Lola subverts gender stereotypes and complicates her status of female erotic object through her sense of assertiveness and mastery conveyed in her final performance.

*The Blue Angel* thus showcased Dietrich's unique stage and screen 'presence' that according to German literary scholar Silvia Bovenschen was founded on her ability to ironically distance herself from the idealised and objectified image of femininity she supposedly represents. Having watched a live performance of Dietrich in a television special in the 1970s, Bovenschen comments: "her body is just as artificial [as her face], absolutely smooth as though encased in some unfamiliar fabric – we are watching a woman demonstrate the representation of a woman's body" (1977, p. 129). Bovenschen further notes that "Dietrich, [...] alone controls the image to be projected [...] She gazes down from the stage not once but twice, once as an image and once as an artist, as if to say okay, if this is how you want it ..." (ibid, pp. 129-130). This observation in turn inspired Mary Ann Doane's influential essay 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator' (1982), in which she argues that the use of masquerade or an excess of femininity by actresses such as Dietrich allows "a realignment of femininity, the recovery, or more accurately, simulation, of the missing gap or distance. To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image" (1982, p. 82), allowing for a re-appropriation of objectifying filmic representations of femininity by actresses and audiences.

Dietrich's trademark performance of femininity as masquerade would reach new extremes with her portrayal of variety performer Concha in *The Devil Is A Woman* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1935). Carter characterises Dietrich's acting style in the film as "unremittingly anti-realist; frontal acting and self-conscious preening, studied erotic poses and knowing winks repeatedly signal the status of 'Concha' as performed identity" (2004, p. 151). Gemünden and Desjardins note that "resistance is an effect of the self-consciousness" of Dietrich's performances (2007, p. 11). Film critics, as suggested above, uniformly remark on the sense of mockery, sarcasm, "coldness" and "indifference" (McCormick, 2001, p. 120) associated with Dietrich's performances. Particularly her Hollywood films directed by von Sternberg brought out Dietrich's "fabled air of insolence [...] creat[ing] [a] coldy erotic atmosphere" (Studlar, 1990, p. 237) that prompts "a distanciation from her constructed image, a refusal to invest in her 'femininity' and its presumed aim of attracting men" (ibid, p. 243). Ironically commenting on, resisting, or even reversing her characters' status as an object of male desire, Dietrich thus cultivated a distinct acting style shaping her screen persona as an autonomous, confident, seductive woman that would make her a screen icon.

It has long been a topic of debate to what extent Dietrich shaped her own famous screen persona, and to which extent it was manufactured by von Sternberg, a discussion heavily influenced by von Sternberg's insistence that he 'created' Dietrich for the screen, epitomised in his famous statement that "Marlene is not Marlene, Marlene is me, and she knows that better than anyone" (cited in Desjardins and Gemünden, 2007, p. 8). The 'Dietrich persona' is more likely a product of the combination of Dietrich's performance skill and looks, von Sternberg's directorial skills, and the fact that they worked together extraordinarily well. In his autobiography *Fun In A Chinese Laundry* (1966), von Sternberg recalls his first meeting with Dietrich when looking for an actress to play the part of Lola Lola. He recounts her "cold disdain" and "indifference" (1966, p. 231), her apathy and insolence and a seeming lack of interest in the part, which to him suggested her very potential. Once they started filming, however, he recalls her slavishly following his instructions: "she [...] responded to my instructions with an ease that I had never before encountered" (cited in Bach, 1992, p. 110). Von Sternberg can thus be credited with employing to the maximum qualities already present in her personality and behaviour. He and Dietrich, who exerted "considerable influence on her performances, ranging from her voice" (Williams, 2010, p. 55) to her skilfully composed, sexually ambiguous appearance, together created the 'Dietrich icon' we know today.

### **Dietrich, Stardom, and National Identity**

*The Blue Angel* was from its beginning envisioned as a film addressed to German as well as foreign, especially American audiences, which made it an invaluable stepping stone for Dietrich's future Hollywood career (even if American audiences saw her in *Morocco* before *The Blue Angel* was released in the US). Petro stresses that the film "was always destined to be viewed by multiple audiences in an international marketplace" (2009, p. 255), von Sternberg's avowed aim being to unite the virtue of both Germany's (expressionist) and Hollywood's (melodramatic) cinematic traditions in a prestigious inauguration of German sound film. The arrival of sound in the late 1920s introduced language barriers that producers hitherto did not have to cope with, since intertitles in silent films could be easily translated and inserted to the original reels. Von Sternberg and his producer Erich Pommer, with a view to conquering the US market, filmed an English version of *The Blue Angel* parallel to the German version, with not only the dialogue but also the songs being re-recording in English (Lawrence, 2007, p. 84)), thereby retaining their powerful effect.

Silent film star Emil Jannings, who played Professor Rath, had initiated the project hoping to have in von Sternberg a skilled director to oversee his transition to sound film, not foreseeing that he would be outshone by Dietrich. Jannings' theatrical and mannerist acting style was no match to "Dietrich's cooler, surface-oriented, cinematic style" (Petro, 2009, p. 266) discussed above, which made her the star of the film. While Jannings' heavy German accent made him partly incomprehensible to audiences of the English version, Dietrich learned English more quickly and successfully during filming. Amy Lawrence observes that Dietrich's English in *The Blue Angel* "is fine. This makes her character more accessible to an English-speaking audience. It also makes Dietrich (as well as her character) more flexible" (2007, p. 84).

Lawrence demonstrates how the producers, through a subtle alteration of the dialogue in the English version, enhanced English-speaking audiences' identification with Lola Lola:

for an American audience, Dietrich's English in *The Blue Angel* makes her stand out from the rest of the cast. Dietrich's Lola Lola not only speaks English, but English appears to be her mother tongue. Despite her accent, Lola Lola supposedly does not even understand German. When people speak to her in German she is put into the position of having to ask what they said (2007, p. 84).

Similarly, Petro observes that Dietrich is even speaking American vernacular (2009, p. 265), thereby already identifying as the American she would later become, rather than as a German. Lola Lola's and thus Dietrich's status as a 'German woman' and all the associations it carried, especially in the wake of the Nazi takeover, is complicated in the English language versions of *The Blue Angel* by associating her with the English language and American culture, prompting American audiences to perceive her as 'own of their own' from the very beginning of her international career. What is more, Petro's comparison of the German and English language version of the film suggests that Lola Lola's character is softened and rendered more empathetic, while Rath loses crucial lines giving insights into his character. The effect is to "diminish our sympathy for Rath" (Petro, 2009, p. 265) and "transform Lola from a creature of sexual instinct to a helpless romantic" (ibid, p. 263). Thus, by diminishing the vulgar, transgressional elements of her character, her screen persona is arguably idealised, facilitating her rise to the status of filmic icon and star.

In his biography of Dietrich, Steven Bach poignantly remarks on the effect of *The Blue Angel* as Dietrich's 'star-over-night' vehicle, suggesting that her star status would find its way into all the film roles that were to follow as an excess value:



Lola Lola was the last role Marlene Dietrich would ever play in her life that was not created *for* her, or tailored to her measure. There was challenge and aspiration to Lola Lola that would never be there again, the stretch she had to make as an actress to fit a role. The roles would now have to fit her, and something got left behind in the Blue Angel cabaret (1992, p. 120).

Dietrich would not embody 'ordinary women', but glamorised ideal images of femininity and seductiveness. Erica Carter in this context speaks of a "self-referential acting mode that Dietrich had adopted in her work with von Sternberg, in which her mannered acting style pointedly drew attention to her own status as star" (2004, p. 159).

Dietrich was one of the few German actresses to achieve such star status through successfully pursuing a career in the United States and rising to the status of Hollywood star. It meant that she would function as a platform for a discussion of German (and American) national identity in her native country as well as internationally, which became ever more acute once the Nazis rose to power and their conceptions of racial purity permeated all aspects of life in Germany. Gemünden and Desjardins observe that "the past and ongoing debates about national identity in relation to Marlene Dietrich" (2007, p. 7) point to the tensions between her different "biographical and performative personas in specific historical, cultural and even geographic contexts" (ibid, pp. 7-8). Her "penchant for the femme fatale, her refusal of traditional roles of womanhood in favour of sexual independence and androgyny" (ibid, p. 5) are characterised by Gemünden and Desjardins as "profoundly un-German" (ibid). Her image as a seductive, modern and fashionable woman complicated the screen persona she cultivated throughout the 1930s to which, as Carter explains, "her 'Germanness' was integral", especially in "four early Austro-German roles" before her characters came to represent a "less specific [...] European identity" (2002, p. 75).

Carter illustrates how Dietrich's star persona functioned as a projection screen for Germany's conflicted attitudes towards stardom and the new mass-culture ideal of beauty "as the commodified product of modern technologies of cultural production – fashion, cosmetics, photography, film" (2004, p. 145) that had emerged in the 1920s. Dietrich's image proved particularly hard to reconcile with the National Socialists' conception of woman revolving around women's reproductive function, their maternal role and the ideal of natural beauty. German reviews of Dietrich's 1930s Hollywood films such as *The Scarlet Empress* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1934), *The Devil is A Woman* or *Desire* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1936) demonstrate critics' efforts to assess the value of her performance and the film as a whole according to National Socialist racial politics, deciding whether or not Dietrich functioned as

a model for the ideal 'German woman' in the respective roles. A German newspaper article in 1936 states that Dietrich "must be decisively rejected" (cited in Carter, 2004, p. 157) for not meeting the arbitrary criteria of Aryan purity:

her facial profile and the colour of her hair and eyes may perhaps exactly resemble those of the Nordic race. Her performances, as well as her behaviour during the 'system era' [...] and her particularly intimate intercourse with Jews (Sternberg!) have nothing in common with the Nordic way of life (ibid).

1930s press coverage thus demonstrates Nazi Germany's conflicted attitude towards Dietrich. On the one hand, it demonstrates the admiration for and pride in the international success of the star actress. Dietrich's popularity in Germany remained "unbroken, at least until the mid-1930s" (Carter, 2004, p. 137), her name guaranteeing box-office success. *Desire*, her last film distributed in Germany under Nazi rule, premiered in Berlin rather than in the United States (ibid, p. 147). Carter notes that "Dietrich found representation in German star discourse both as an embodiment of the national values the domestic industry sought to assert, and the internationalisation after which it (often unsuccessfully) strove" (2002, p. 72). Dietrich, the "German-yet international star" possessed the rare ability "to transcend the boundaries of nation" not only on screen, by playing characters of different European nationalities (a French thief in *Desire*, a Russian Countess in *Knight without Armour* (dir. Jacques Feyder, 1937) and an English diplomat's wife in *Angel* (dir. Ernst Lubitsch, 1937)) (Carter, 2002, p. 75), but in her "actual geographical mobility" (ibid), travelling effortlessly between the United States and various European capitals to promote her films.

On the other hand, Dietrich's transgressive role choices were looked upon with disdain, and there was growing indignation as Dietrich's disavowal of her German roots and anti-Nazi stance became undeniable: repeated press announcements of imminent visits to Germany proved false (Carter, 2002, p. 78). She would in fact not return to Germany until 1960 for a concert tour, "the smear campaigns that accompanied [her] throughout that visit [being] the final nail in the coffin of her relation to Germany" (ibid, p. 79). After the war, Dietrich's reputation in Germany had remained tainted by the fact that she immigrated to the United States and had taken US citizenship, her performances for Allied troops in Europe in 1944 and 1945 being considered by many as a betrayal of her home country (Bronfen, 2003, p. 10). The strained relationship of Germans to their film stars is, however, not exclusive to Nazism and its aftermath, but is rather a phenomenon persisting throughout the twentieth century, as Stephen Lowry and Peter Korte point out: "it is universally acknowledged that Germans and the German press do not treat their stars with particular respect, especially not

those successful abroad”<sup>viii</sup> (2000, p. 241). Lowry and Korte suggest that this attitude is partly culturally motivated, pointing to the “different publicist traditions and structures”<sup>ix</sup> (ibid) in Germany and the United States: “while in the United States the press and film industry unite to promote stars to mutual benefit”<sup>x</sup> (ibid), journalists in Germany see themselves first and foremost as film critics, sometimes effectively destroying a star’s image.

Analysing the German biopic *Marlene* (2000), Carter points out that Dietrich’s contested ‘Germanness’ remains a central issue to her image in her native country until the present day. Carter observes that the film distorts historical events, imagining “as the object of Dietrich’s ‘true love’ a German officer involved in the resistance” (2002, p. 79), suggesting a persistent urge to reclaim Dietrich as a (morally irreproachable) German. Carter concludes that “even after her death [...] it seems that Dietrich’s star image lives on as a disruptive element in cultural nationalist fantasies of Germany as aesthetic totality and/or integrated nation” (ibid). Dietrich’s public persona thus functions as a prism highlighting the numerous, conflicting refractions of ‘German national identity’. On the one hand, she was celebrated for her rare popularity as a German actress who succeeded in Hollywood. On the other hand, her very success, based on her image as a modern, independent, sexually provocative woman alienated her from her ‘German identity’, which referred not only to her Berlin roots, but also under National Socialism became an ideological construct incorporating a specific conception of woman. The fact that Dietrich emigrated to the United States to pursue her career, and that she refused to return lest she be implicated with Nazi Germany meant that she was perceived, and still is perceived to some extent today, as a star, actress and woman lost to her native Germany. Germany’s fraught relationship with Dietrich epitomises the country’s complex and contradictory attitude towards stardom, defining itself against the United States and the Hollywood star system, a contradiction that marked Dietrich’s career ever since multiple language versions of *The Blue Angel* posited her as both a German and a US film star.

### **The New German Cinema: Confronting the Past, Capturing the Present**

The New German Cinema, dating from the late 1960s to the early 1980s is widely seen as German cinema’s second high point. Though it is commonly identified as an auteur cinema shaped by a group of visionary (mostly male) directors such as Alexander Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff, Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders and Margarethe von Trotta, actress Hanna Schygulla (\*1943) emerged as one of its few internationally recognised

stars next to actors Bruno Ganz (\*1941) and Klaus Kinski (1926-1991). Working primarily with Fassbinder, Schygulla embodied a number of exceptionally strong female characters through which a conflicted post-war German national identity was negotiated. I will therefore analyse Schygulla's career in conjunction with the New German Cinema movement in order to shed new light on the importance of the actress in one of the most prolific periods of German cinema.

The emergence of the New German Cinema coincided with the student protest movement of 1968, the sexual revolution and second-wave feminism, as well as various other movements of political and social change and upheaval that made the 1960s and 1970s a particularly tumultuous period in German history. The questioning of and rebelling against their parents' generation that the student protests throughout Europe had in common was particularly charged in Germany due to the legacy of Nazism and the Holocaust. The suffocating feeling of a displaced, unspeakable past haunting German society is central to the films of the New German Cinema. A socially critical, state-funded art cinema (which was embraced by critics abroad yet shunned by audiences at home), its directors addressed and sought to come to terms with the legacy of their parents' generation: their being part of the Third Reich, the war and genocide they were responsible for, and the society they built after World War II. Children of one of the growing affluent consumer societies of Western Europe and the USA, young people in 1960s Germany perceived their society and its political landscape as ossified and reactionary:

the generation of the fathers, compromised by the Third Reich and the Second World War was accused of focusing only on economic recovery, without reflecting on, let alone changing the societal conditions that had made the Third Reich possible. The result was a self-satisfied affluent society, in the iron grip of industrialists and their media in their service, unable to recognise social misgivings and unwilling to undertake reforms<sup>xi</sup> (Borowsky, 2007).

High-profile politician and former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, a prominent representative of the generation, recalls the stifling atmosphere of the time, in which young people were under the impression "that nearly all of the West German elite was permeated by followers and accomplices of Adolf Hitler"<sup>xii</sup> (cited in Hammerstein, 2008). This was exemplified in the chancellorship of Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a former member of the National Socialist Party, who led the Great Coalition that governed Germany from 1966 until 1969.

The deep rift between the generations and the

long-repressed hatred toward the older generation [...] exploded in 1967, intensified by worldwide protest campaigns against the Vietnam war, against the new state

emergency laws passed by the Bundestag, and against the right-wing mass-circulation newspapers controlled by the press baron Axel Springer (Kaes, 1992 [1989], p. 76).

The late 1960s and 1970s continued as a very eventful and unsettling period for the young FRG. The first Social Democratic government in the Federal Republic under chancellor Willy Brandt came into power (in a coalition with the Liberals) in 1969, forcing the conservative Christian Democrats into opposition and taking “ambitious reform initiatives” such as the “liberalisation of family laws, changes in the educational system, [and] improvements in East-West relations” (Hake, 2002, p. 154). Second-wave feminism grew stronger and more visible in Germany in the 1970s, fuelled by a campaign against the abortion ban by feminist activist Alice Schwarzer. In the late 1970s, the FRG faced one of its deepest crises triggered by the outbursts of urban terrorism led by the Red Army Fraction group (RAF) during the so-called German Autumn of 1977, a term coined by directors of the New German Cinema, who had produced a 1978 joint venture film entitled *Deutschland im Herbst* (*Germany in Autumn*), focusing on the suicide of RAF terrorists Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe in a high security prison and the killing of industrialist Hanns Martin Schleyer, president of the Employers’ Association, by second-generation RAF members when their demand to release their comrades from prison in exchange for Schleyer was not met. The term ‘German autumn’ denotes a climate of fear of terrorist attacks and a sense of disillusionment after leftist ideas that had been associated with the student movement and the progressive social-democrat government of chancellor Schmidt were used by terrorists to justify blackmail, abduction and murder. The fact that the title of a socially critical film was adopted by Germans to characterise a specific moment in national history suggests that the filmmakers of New German Cinema were at the centre of the country’s public debate on its turbulent political and social situation. Conceiving of filmmaking as means of social criticism and a way to offer “counter-representations” (Rentschler cited in Knight, 2004, p. 1) of German identity, films of the New German Cinema addressed

the presence of the Gastarbeiter in Germany, the rise of urban terrorism in the 1970s [...], the role of American cultural imperialism in shaping the experiences of the post-war generation, especially with regard to Hollywood cinema, and [...] the development of the women’s movement which had a powerful effect on West-German society as a whole (Knight, 2004, p. 5).

### **Feminist Filmmaking within the New German Cinema – The Nation as a ‘Pale Mother’**

Female filmmakers and film and literary scholars in West Germany were at the forefront of

the feminist movement of the 1970s, filmmaker Helke Sander, who in 1974 established the academic journal *Frauen und Film*, “today the oldest feminist journal on film anywhere” (Frieden, 1993, p. 2) being one of its founders. Around the same time, literary scholar Silvia Bovenschen took up the ideas of Laura Mulvey in her own work. Hake explains the two central aims of German feminist filmmakers: “to tell different stories, and to tell stories differently” (2002, p. 166). They often favoured “melodramatic forms”, which they used to “reaffirm emotionality as a female strength, but this time under female authorship” (ibid). The substantial group of female filmmakers, including Sander, Helma Sanders-Brahms, Jutta Brückner, Margarethe von Trotta and Ulrike Ottinger is habitually neglected in academic discussion of the New German Cinema. The only member of the group receiving wider recognition is Margarethe von Trotta, whose film *Die bleierne Zeit* (*The German Sisters* (UK)/*Marianne and Juliane* (USA)) (1981), which gives a fictionalised account of the Red Army Fraction activist Gudrun Ennslin (Barbara Sukowa), who hung herself together with her fellow inmates in a high-security prison in 1977, being the most critically acclaimed and discussed.

All of the female directors sought to “establish a link between German history, the post-war period and the particular difficulties confronting a woman in finding a viable identity” in German society of the 1960s and 1970s (Elsaesser, 1989, p. 233). Women bore a double burden of dealing with the social, economic and psychological repercussions of Nazism and the war on the one hand, and the forceful reinstatement of patriarchal structures in the 1950s on the other, after having been left to manage on their own during the war and its immediate aftermath: it was the so-called ‘Trümmerfrauen’ (rubble women) who began to rebuild houses and cities that had been destroyed. Kristina Schulz explains that “after the war, during which thousands of women had taken up the job of men, who were at the front, most women returned to being housewives”<sup>xiii</sup> (2008). The daughters of the ‘Trümmerfrauen’ came to feel the repercussions of their mothers’s experiences of war and deprivation, and their inability to challenge traditional gender roles. Thomas Elsaesser points out that female directors of the New German Cinema frequently

explor[ed] the full ambiguity in which they found themselves as the daughters of mothers who had both lived through the war [...], had borne and brought up children under extraordinarily difficult circumstances, but who – as their daughters remembered only too well – had become rigid, timid and neurotic women in the 1950s, poorly preparing their children to challenge male stereotypes of femininity or to lead independent lives (1989, p. 233).

Helma Sanders-Brahms' 1980 film *Deutschland bleiche Mutter* (*Germany, Pale Mother*), which tells the story of a 1940s mother's (Eva Mattes) psychological decline through the eyes of her daughter (Elisabeth Stepanek), is a prime example. The tendency to liken Germany to a (dysfunctional, marred) mother figure indicated by the title of the film is particularly worth noting in that it was a common device in New German films to liken female figures to the fate of Germany as a country and play out its history of war and its aftermath on their bodies (von Moltke, 1994, p. 97).

Another striking example of such a film is Hanna Schygulla's last collaboration with Fassbinder, *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*) (1979), which was critically and unusually, also commercially successful and is generally considered Fassbinder's masterpiece. As I will discuss below, the experiences of Schygulla's character stand in for Germany as a whole, the repression of her experiences during the war and her guilt feelings leaving her emotionally numb and unable to sustain healthy familial or romantic relationships. Elsaesser explains that "*The Marriage of Maria Braun* confirmed Hanna Schygulla as Fassbinder's ideal actress and set the style and tone for a number of historical films centred on strong female characters by German directors" (1996, p. 292). The abundance of powerful, independent female characters stands in relation to another male identity crisis after Weimar that was reflected in the films of the New German Cinema. Hake observes that male figures in the films are often characterised by "melancholy, reflexivity, and a deep sense of self-alienation" (2002, p. 163), suggesting a profound crisis of masculinity. The typical male lead, who is "sensitive but also completely self-centred [...] contrasted sharply with the image of the strong, independent woman conveyed by Hanna Schygulla, Eva Mattes and Barbara Sukowa" (ibid). Given that "this gendered imbalance of power[...] also appeared in many DEFA (GDR film association) films from the 1970s", it can be understood "as a preoccupation with "more deep-seated psychological traumas related to the body of the German nation" (ibid): the male characters' "unwillingness, or inability, to make decisions and take responsibility" (ibid) can be seen as a consequence of their fathers' guilt. The New German Cinema thus constitutes a compelling field of study by encompassing two key areas: the concept of a 'national cinema' and the representation of women and the goals of feminism in cinema as a locus of political and ideological debate, with Schygulla being a key figure in this process of raising questions about post-war German identity and feminine subjectivity in particular.

Schygulla is also crucial in negotiating and mitigating the all-powerful figure of the

(mostly) male director-as-auteur that dominates conceptions of the New German Cinema. Tim Bergfelder characterises Schygulla as “one of the few internationally recognisable stars” (2010, p. 437) in an era of German cinema generally identified by the names of its directors. Key figures in this regard are, alongside Schygulla, the actors Klaus Kinski, who frequently collaborated with Werner Herzog, and Bruno Ganz, who was introduced to international audiences through Wim Wenders’ success film *Der Himmel über Berlin (Wings of Desire)* (1987). Elsaesser identifies a ‘star system’ that was sustained through a small, but identifiable group of German actors repeatedly used by one director, while at the same time appearing in film of other directors, often in smaller roles (1989, p. 286). Schygulla, Kinski and Ganz “helped to establish an intertextuality sufficiently stable to give the impression of a coherent fictional universe”, providing the New German Cinema with “a recognisable identity and existence as a national cinema” (Elsaesser, 1989, p. 285).

### **Hanna Schygulla: Female Representation and the Agency of the Actor in the New German Cinema**

Hanna Schygulla achieved a rare star status, becoming “New German Cinema’s most recognisable face around the world” (Fisher and Prager, 2010, p. 26). Her career provides invaluable clues for assessing the importance and influence of an actress during a crucial period of German cinema. Schygulla and Fassbinder met at acting school where they both took lessons, and he approached her about starring in a production of the Aktionstheater (action theatre), a private Munich theatre company Fassbinder had become involved with in the late 1960s. Schygulla subsequently worked exclusively with Fassbinder between 1969, when the duo filmed their debut *Liebe ist kälter als der Tod (Love Is Colder Than Death)* and 1974, when they fell out over the interpretation of Schygulla’s titular character in the Fontane adaptation *Fontane Effi Briest*. What strikes the viewer especially in her earlier Fassbinder films such as *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant (The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant)* (1972) and *Fontane Effi Briest* is her tendency to speak their lines *as lines*, that is, to slowly and distinctly declaim them, often with a bland facial expression. Carrie Rickey observes that Schygulla habitually plays “somnambules” (1977, p. 39) or “otherworldly wom[e]n” (ibid, p. 46): “icons of an unusually mesmerising quality; they almost never confront the camera or the other actors, but dolefully relate to outer space, the other world to which they have enviably transcended” (ibid, p. 40). Schygulla’s aloofness and the artificiality of her acting style, whereby she maintained a distance between herself as an actress and her characters, ideally



suiting Fassbinder's directorial style that was influenced by Brecht's epic theatre and the concept of the alienation effect, but to which she brought her own distinct contribution. Her performance in these films differs from the one she gives in *Maria Braun*, where her coldness and aloofness seems much more internal to the character.

Lowry and Korte explain that there is a common perception that Fassbinder made Schygulla into a star in an interesting parallel to Dietrich's and von Sternberg's working relationship, which they however dismiss as "a male creation myth" (2000, p. 22). They insist that Schygulla's "contribution to Fassbinder's films must under no circumstance be underestimated [...] her acting style [...] [is] crucial for her [distinctive] screen presence by which she impacted on the films of Fassbinder and other directors" (ibid). She retains a distinctive acting style throughout all her performances, marked by different degrees of artificiality and aloofness, making her characters appear withdrawn and enigmatic; as well as a soft, high-pitched, childlike voice. She delivers her lines slowly and monotonously, while at the same time her slight hint of a Bavarian accent (she grew up in Munich) gives it rhythm and melody. Lowry and Korte use words such as "stylis[ation]"<sup>xiv</sup> (2000, p. 220), "distanciation"<sup>xv</sup>, "other-worldliness"<sup>xvi</sup>, and "indifferen[ce]"<sup>xvii</sup> (ibid, p. 223) to describe her performances.

Schygulla's early work with Fassbinder was, without doubt, crucial for the development of her screen persona, Fassbinder's indebtedness to Brecht being an important factor in guiding the way he directed his actors (Barnett, 2005, p. 6). Brecht's 'epic theatre' and the associated concept of the 'Verfremdungseffekt' (alienation or defamiliarisation effect), that is, a deliberate rupture of the dramatic illusion of a play's reality, asks actors and thus spectators to retain a critical distance to the characters. Composer Peer Raben, who worked with Fassbinder on productions of the alternative action theatre, for example explains that "to Fassbinder, the actor should remain the person he [sic] is on stage" (Barnett, 2005, p. 77). In the same vein, Schygulla recalls how she was encouraged by Fassbinder to develop her own screen persona through stylised acting, costume and makeup:

In the first films, we did our own makeup and costume. You wear what you like, Rainer said [to me] – he liked the way I dressed. My makeup was like that of a doll back then. I thought of myself [my characters] as being controlled remotely<sup>xviii</sup> (cited in Hoghe, 1993, p. 52).

Looking back at her career in an interview in 2007, Schygulla explains that the way she presented herself in her early films was indebted to her negative, melancholic attitude towards life at the time: "I didn't want to live. This is where the air of indifference came

from that I exuded in the films. It was the recipe of my early years. I thought that I don't care about anything. I talked myself into believing that"<sup>xxix</sup> (cited in Müller, 2007). The different accounts of how Schygulla's signature acting style emerged suggests the variety of factors influencing an actor's performance, such as their own biography, the way they are guided by the director of the film, and theoretical approaches to acting and performance they adopt.

Schygulla is aware of the effect that her unnaturalistic mode of performance has on the viewer, a preference she shared with Fassbinder:

to be sure, that was something that connected us, one reason why we got along so well: because I continued something he had, in my own way. So that people were never ] quite sure: is what she's doing good or is it dreadful? Is she beautiful or is she ugly? Is that banal or is it deep? (cited in von Moltke, 1994, p. 104).

Schygulla's contention that her distinct acting style developed somewhat arbitrarily and was to some extent a case of her 'playing herself' is confirmed by critical and scholarly descriptions on her performances such as "she is always recognisable as 'Hanna Schygulla'"<sup>xxx</sup> (Lowry and Korte, 2000, p. 220), or she "does not have a great range"<sup>xxxi</sup> and therefore is "not exactly a great actress"<sup>xxxii</sup> (Donner, cited in Lowry and Korte, 2000, p. 233). While her own statements somewhat support those critics accusing her of a lacking versatility, Schygulla's performance was vital to the films and characters Fassbinder envisioned, and contributed greatly to their appeal.

When Schygulla and Fassbinder filmed *Fontane Effi Briest* in 1974, however, the actress perceived both her screen persona and Fassbinder's fickleness and tyrannical ways as oppressive. She recalls that "he considered total obedience as a proof of love, although he constantly claimed that he made films arguing against dependence"<sup>xxxiii</sup> (cited in Müller, 2007). Schygulla finally voiced her frustration with the director's overbearing nature and the dictatorial control he exerted over his actors – a control she felt had always kept her from considering herself part of his close circle of friends and co-workers – and she and Fassbinder would not work together for five years.

An adaptation of Theodor Fontane's 1896 novel *Effi Briest* and Fassbinder's first historical film, *Fontane Effi Briest* tells the story of a young woman (Schygulla) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, who in her temperament is ill-matched to her stiff aristocratic husband (Wolfgang Schenck). When he discovers that she has had an affair, he kills his rival, divorces Effi and estranges her from her daughter, leading to Effi's premature death. The film explores the impact of social rules and mores, a central theme of Fassbinder's, portraying the institution

of the bourgeois marriage as stifling and oppressive to the individual. Its full title being *Fontane Effi Briest oder Viele, die eine Ahnung haben von ihren Möglichkeiten und ihren Bedürfnissen und trotzdem das herrschende System in ihrem Kopf akzeptieren durch ihre Taten und es somit festigen und durchaus bestätigen* (*Fontane Effi Briest or Many People Who Are Aware of Their Own Capabilities and Needs Just Acquiesce to the Prevailing System in Their Thoughts and Deeds, Thereby Confirming and Reinforcing It*), the film chronicles Effi's destruction through the conservatism of her upper middle class environment.

Anna K. Kuhn discusses the director's use of the alienation effect and the tension he creates between the written and spoken words of Fontane's novel that is brought to the fore through a voice-over narration, intertitles and shots of actual pages of the book. Fassbinder's filmic interpretation of the novel "create[s] gaps or spaces that open the story to a political critique" (Kuhn, 1993, p. 25). The use of alienation effect is most apparent "in the disparity Fassbinder sets up between the image on the screen and the spoken word of the narrator" (ibid, p. 39-40). Scenes that are crucial to the narrative, or in which characters go through some emotional turmoil, are often presented as tableaux vivants, with the characters freezing in a certain pose. Not they themselves relate their feelings to the spectator through dialogue or body movement, but we hear it from the narrator in the off. For example, a sequence which shows Effi walking in a park by herself, her face unmoved and expressionless, is coupled with the reading of a passage from the novel describing Effi's guilt feelings over betraying her husband. It ends with the phrase "she laid her head upon her arms and wept bitterly"<sup>xxiv</sup>, describing a moment of intense feeling that contrasts markedly with the image we see, a static long shot of a meadow with the Effi in the centre, facing away from the viewer (see fig. 6). This enhances the viewer's perception of the characters as rigid and lacking in emotion, an impression typically created by Fassbinder. He aimed to "de-individualis[e] his characters" (Barnett, 2005, p. 74) and thereby "reveal[ ] their dependency on social codes and structures" (ibid). Kuhn observes that "the characters are dispassionate creatures, devoid of spontaneity, their movements are as static and ritualised as the society which has produced them" (1993, p. 27).

This conception of the characters, particularly the titular Effi, led to a confrontation between Fassbinder and Schygulla. Fassbinder's dreary tale of societal confinement and "interpersonal manipulation" in a "traditional Wilhelminian marriage" (ibid, p. 47), in which Effi's free spirit was eclipsed before it could unfold, did not sit well with Schygulla's conception of the character. She wanted to portray "the dramatic fight of a fiery young

creature that is pushed into coldness” (cited in Penkert, 1985, p. 8), while Fassbinder sought to stage “death through suffocation in lace-trimmed, posh surroundings” (ibid). Schygulla recalls that “seeing myself in *Effi Briest*, I felt like looking at a mummy and thought: Is that really me? Good God! High time to stop!”<sup>xxv</sup> (cited in Müller, 2007). *Fontane Effi Briest* functions as an important point in Schygulla’s career, equipping her with greater self-awareness as an actress and leading to her emancipation from Fassbinder’s formative influence after starring a film in which she appears as a highly stylised, soulless ideal image of woman.



**Figure 6: A static long shot of Effi, facing away from the viewer, contrasts markedly with the voiceover, which describes a moment of intense feeling**

Schygulla made only one film within the next five years, *Falsche Bewegung* (*Wrong Move*) (1975) by Wim Wenders, and took up other pursuits such as theatre projects with children and travelling through the United States (Lowry and Korte, 2000, p. 222). *Wrong Move* marked the beginning of Schygulla’s collaboration with other directors, some of them part of the New German Cinema movement (such as Wenders or von Trotta, with whom she made the film *Heller Wahn* (*Sheer Madness*) in 1983), and others acclaimed European directors of the time (such as *Passion* (1982) with Jean-Luc Godard). Schygulla also displays her trademark acting style in these films, proving that her screen persona was at least as much her own creation as that of Fassbinder. Wenders’ *Wrong Move* seeks to capture “a society paralysed by post-1960s disillusionment” (Hake, 2002, p. 158). Scholars observe that all of Wenders’ films are about men rather than women (Geist, 1993, p. 19), habitually addressing “the dilemmas of modern masculinity” (Hake, 2002, p. 158). Käthe Geist points out that “the typical

Wenders hero is alone – usually by choice – alienated, adrift in society [...], unable to communicate easily or to relate well with people. For him human relationships are nonexistent or tenuous at best” (1993, p. 11). *Wrong Move*, which follows author Wilhelm Meister (Rüdiger Vogler) is a loose adaptation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s (1749-1832) novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lebrjahre (Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship)* (1795-96), and employs the “Goethean motif of the educational journey” (Hake, 2002, p. 148). The film’s characters are without exception disillusioned, either by the inefficacy of recent political movements such as the Social Democrats’ optimistic reforms to promote social inclusiveness (Wilhelm laments that he cannot adopt any political stance, stating that “I wanted to write politically and I realised that words failed me. The words meant nothing to me”<sup>xxvi</sup>) or by their Nazi past (such as the character of Laertes (Hans Christian Blech), a man in his 60s regretting that he did not save a Jewish friend of his from deportation). Schygulla’s character Therese unfortunately amounts to little more than a member of the group of people of different ages surrounding the hero, who are equally lost and aimless. Shots of her wandering around, gazing voidly, are abundant, and she has little dialogue. The film underpins Geist’s observation that Wenders ultimately shows “little interest” in women (1993, p. 19), since we are given no tangible insights into what constitutes Therese’s desires, wishes or frustrations. Like the other characters, she appears like a cipher in a somewhat superficial evocation of a paralysed Germany whose inhabitants cannot make sense of their lives.

### **Embodying the Nation: *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978)**

Schygulla’s four-year career hiatus after filming *Wrong Move* precipitated her perhaps biggest artistic and commercial success and most applauded performance as the eponymous heroine in Fassbinder’s *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979). In a review of the newspaper *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, Hans-Dieter Seidel writes that “Hanna Schygulla, through her grace and self-assurance, her devotion and simultaneous detachment, is overwhelming in the title role” (1979, cited in Rheuban, 1986, p. 217), a view shared by many domestic and foreign critics. The narrative stretches from 1944 to 1954, starting with Maria Braun’s wedding ceremony during the last days of the war, the ceremony being interrupted by a bomb hitting the town hall. Maria and her husband Hermann (Klaus Löwitsch) are then separated for the next ten years. Hermann is at first at the front, then taken as prisoner of war, and then imprisoned again shortly after his return to Maria, since he takes the blame when she kills her lover, an American G.I. (George Byrd), in Hermann’s presence. Hermann returns to Maria on the day

of the football World Cup final of 1954, and both are killed by a gas explosion as Maria lights a cigarette on the gas stove in her newly bought house.

Maria is a remarkable female character, overcoming material and emotional hardship through a combination of spirit, iron will and pragmatism – succinctly expressed in her line “I rather make miracles myself than wait for them”<sup>xxvii</sup> – and subsequently rising to wealth and comfort by making herself indispensable as an assistant to Franco-German entrepreneur Oswald (Ivan Desny), her second lover. However, Fassbinder’s presents the 1950s setting as the root of the problems articulated by the social unrest of twenty years later: the mental displacement of the experience of war and Nazi atrocities and the following emotional numbing, opportunism, materialism and conservatism. ‘Rising from the rubble’ and quickly accumulating wealth and material security, Maria represses the past at the price of emotional numbing and her very ‘humanity’: when visiting her husband in prison, he asks her: “is that what it’s like between people outside now, so cold?”<sup>xxviii</sup>, and she replies: “this is a bad time for feelings, I think. But I prefer it like that, because this way nothing really touches me”<sup>xxix</sup>.

Maria thus functions as an allegory for post-war Germany itself. An article in the French newspaper *Le Monde* observes that

Maria Braun not only symbolises Germany; in Fassbinder’s eyes she obviously ‘is’ Germany. What has become of Maria, what has become of Germany? In cynical and horrid images, Fassbinder gives the answer: a creature dressed in obviously expensive clothes that has lost its soul” (de Baroncelli cited in Kaes, 1992 [1989], p. 98) (see fig. 7).

Johannes von Moltke speaks of a “distinct ‘nationalisation’ of Schygulla’s (super)star image” associated with her performance in *Maria Braun*: “Hanna Schygulla’s performance[ ] as [...] Maria Braun ha[s] often been read for the way in which she represents German history itself [...]; but she is seen to literally embody Germany, becoming a ‘*Germania*’ of the New German Cinema” (1994, p. 97). Through Maria’s character arc – her rise and fall – Fassbinder explores what he and many others of his generation recognised as irredeemable faults of their parents generation: their moral hollowness and blind materialism, as well as the untenable imbalance between genders it practices.

This is particularly evident in the denouement of the film. The scene leading up to Maria’s and Hermann’s death holds an additional symbolic charge since it is supposed to be taking place while the German football team was playing the World Cup final in Switzerland in 1954. We hear the live broadcast of the match on the radio that Maria has switched on, the moment of the team’s unlikely win through the decisive 3-2 goal coinciding with the gas

explosion. Elsaesser observes that “Maria accidentally blows up both of them, just at the moment when West Germany wins the football world championship, symbolically – and for Fassbinder highly ironically – finding itself once more as a ‘nation’ ” (1996, p. 292). Kaes reads Fassbinder’s symbolism in a similar way: “one person’s utopia disappears in rubble and ashes, but the nation ‘is somebody’<sup>7</sup> again” (1992 [1989], p. 98). Fassbinder interprets this ‘founding moment’ of the FRG as burying “the hopes for a radical new beginning [...] with the rise of Germany from the pariah of 1945 to the proud victor and ‘world champion’ in 1954” (ibid). For Fassbinder, the nation that Germany became after 1954 is built on a denial of its guilt, trading its conscience for a superficial chase of material wealth and respectability.



**Figure 7: Schygulla’s Maria Braun symbolises the blind materialism and moral hollowness of 1950s Germany**

The film’s ending also constitutes an astute comment on the situation of women in post-war Germany. It remains for the viewer to decide whether Maria left the gas on deliberately before she returns to the stove to light a cigarette. She would have reason to kill herself and her husband, since Oswald’s will, which had just been read out to them, revealed to her that Hermann effectively traded her in for Oswald’s money, promising in return to stay away from Maria so Oswald could be with her until his death. Ingeborg Majer O’Sickey comments that “the closing moments of the film depict her as a victim of patriarchal (and of her own) machinations, suggesting that, all along, her power had been illusory” (2001, p. 24), since it is ultimately the men who decide about her future life. Similarly, Lowry and Korte

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<sup>7</sup> The phrase “Wir sind wieder wer” (“We are somebody again”) was used by contemporaries after Germany’s unexpected football World Cup win of 1954 to describe the feeling of optimism and international recognition the country experienced for the first time after the war.

observe that Maria's death completes her alienation from herself, which increases throughout the film: "money, possessions, power, the postponing of happiness replace the living of life"<sup>xxx</sup> (2000, p. 234) and the "male-capitalist separation of rational business and private feeling"<sup>xxxi</sup> Maria practices ultimately "costs [her] her life"<sup>xxxii</sup> (ibid).

The ending of the film highlights once more that rather than being a shining model of an emancipated woman, Maria is a conflicted, complex character through which Fassbinder highlights the oppressiveness of gender roles in post-war Germany. *Maria Braun* criticises the detrimental effect of the reinstatement of traditional gender roles on Germany's women, who were forced to develop strength and independence during the war and its immediate aftermath. Peter W. Jansen points out that Maria's death makes sense given her characterisation and symbolic function as the archetypal German woman of the 1950s: her life ends, since "what also ended in the mid-fifties was the participation of women in the reconstruction" (cited in Rheuban, 1986, p. 221). Building a life for herself and Hermann, Maria's motivation for her actions rests on the contradictory premise that she will subjugate herself to her husband once he returns. At the same time, her very strength, independence and the confidence she gains depend on his being away and her being in charge: "it is for him that she does what she does – but only on condition that his place remains empty" (Elsaesser, 1996, p. 258). Maria does not challenge, let alone reject the patriarchal society she lives in, yet although she works to "bring about the takeover of power by men [...] she chose freely and her choices were dictated by the needs of mind and body. [...] [T]hese were her needs and her decisions – experienced and resolved upon by her, independently of a man" (Jansen, cited in Rheuban, 1986, p. 221). Maria is promiscuous and has no scruples admitting to her husband and lovers about her affairs and sexual desires, and neither do the men slight her for this behaviour, nor does she experience social repressions for it. Elsaesser observes that "the secret of her success is that she exploits men the way men usually exploit women" (1996, p. 292). Maria's strength and determination, but also her coldness and emotional numbness are expressed in great clarity in her dialogue. The character is refreshing in her openness and honesty, for example when she answers the G.I.'s question of where she learned such good English by replying: "In bed". The interaction between her and her second lover, industrialist Karl Oswald, is marked by a reversal of traditional gender roles of male dominance and female submission. Maria dictates the terms of the relationship, whereas Oswald is dependent and submissive, some of his melodramatic statements recalling the stereotype of a weak, clingy female. Meeting Maria in his office after they spent the night



together, Oswald is puzzled about Maria's dismissiveness, saying that "last night, you were someone else"<sup>xxxiii</sup>. Maria coolly replies: "last night I was Maria Braun who wanted to sleep with you, today I'm Maria Braun who wants to work for you. [...] I do not want you to think you are having an affair with me, because it is me who's having an affair with you"<sup>xxxiv</sup>.

Fassbinder and Schygulla were universally praised for creating this unusual, complex and strong character. Lowry and Korte for example comment that "Maria is unable to recognise that precisely by insisting on [her future] [...] with Hermann, she denies herself happiness in real life. But the very determination, tenacity and strength she demonstrates time and again make her a very likeable person"<sup>xxxv</sup> (2000, p. 233).

Critics also resoundingly praised Schygulla's performance. Some reviewers suggested "that the success of the film had less to do with Fassbinder's direction than with the fact that someone else wrote the script<sup>8</sup> and with Hanna Schygulla's performance in the title role" (Rheuban, 1986, p. 211), which is often considered her best. Christopher Sharp calls her performance "luminous", observing that "Schygulla has a quality of complementing intriguing emotions with equally interesting restraints" (1979, cited in Rheuban, 1986, p. 215). These comments suggest the noticeable, if not absolute difference between Schygulla's mode of performance in *Maria Braun*, as compared to her earlier films with Fassbinder. Her acting style can be described as more naturalistic, less self-consciously staged. Schygulla seems to be less concerned with drawing attention to the fact that she is uttering lines, but rather seeks to inhabit the character, even if the somewhat laboured or stilted dialogue and her empty gazes into the distance serve to retain elements of her screen persona established in her earlier Fassbinder films. Lowry and Korte point to her "differentiated and precise acting"<sup>xxxvi</sup> (2000, p. 234), explaining that "Schygulla credibly portrays the brokenness of the character – not only in dramatic moments of despair, but often through small pauses, through a look or blink of the eye"<sup>xxxvii</sup> (ibid). Having refined her acting style, Schygulla was able to suggest Maria's vulnerability as well as her determination and panache, and her performance, for which she earned widespread critical recognition, was instrumental to the success of the film.

## Conclusion

My consideration of Weimar and New German Cinema's most significant actresses Marlene

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Märtshheimer and Pea Fröhlich are credited as having written the script 'from an idea by' Fassbinder.

Dietrich and Hanna Schygulla has demonstrated their vital roles as the face of German Cinema in times of profound societal change and upheaval. Schygulla even came to function as a representation of Germany itself; it was through her characters that the pressing question of what it means to be German or to live in Germany was negotiated. The fact that these two actresses emerged as the most preeminent figures in the history of German cinema is no accident. These moments in which German male identity was in crisis, be it due to the humiliation through the lost war and its repercussions at the time of the Weimar Republic, or as a consequence of the trauma of being the descendants of a generation of perpetrators in the 1960s and 1970s, triggered filmmakers' interest in women's lives and experiences. It prompted them to offer more profound considerations of women's living conditions and female subjectivity, the manifestation of male weakness calling attention to female strength.

What is more, the two most prolific periods of German filmmaking coincided with the two consecutive women's movements: the First World War broke up traditional social structures and vindicated gender roles of the German Empire, partly as a consequence of the autonomy women gained during the war, and the figure of the 'New Woman' figured prominently in Weimar cinema. The liberal political climate of the time invited socially critical films such as the street film cycle. Fifty years later, second-wave feminism reacted to the conservatism of European societies in the 1950s, sharing its ideas of egalitarianism and liberation from oppressive social structures with the student movement of 1968, and the concerns of both were central to the films of the New German Cinema.

Both Schygulla's and Dietrich's careers are closely associated with a male director they repeatedly worked with, the successful collaboration prompting critics to suggest that their much-lauded performances are in fact largely the merit of the director, who 'created them' for the screen, a myth nurtured by von Sternberg in particular in his memoirs. However, my research suggests that the directors, rather than dictating the particulars of their performances, recognised and supported Dietrich's and Schygulla's already present talents and inclinations.

There are also notable parallels between the performances and screen personas of the two actresses, both of whom are associated with a detached, self-aware acting style. Dietrich and Schygulla display aloofness and practise distancing differently and to different effect – Dietrich is teasing, knowing, and ironic, while Schygulla is more ethereal, indifferent and passive, especially in her earlier films – yet it has a similar effect on how their characters are perceived. Both maintain a distance between themselves as actresses and their characters, the

remoteness and theatricality characterising their performances creating a space in which their characters' roles in the narrative and their societal position are negotiated. It allows them to draw attention to the way these women are objectified or oppressed by men (in the narrative or behind the camera) or are victims of societal norms and adverse social circumstances, and to mitigate this object position by imbuing the characters with a sense of confidence, autonomy and mastery, whereby they provide key contributions to the critical negotiation of gender roles and astute social commentary associated with Weimar cinema and the New German Cinema.

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viii “es ist ein Gemeinplatz, dass die Deutschen, und die deutsche Presse nicht besonders pfleglich mit ihren Stars umgehen und erst recht nicht mit denen, die im Ausland Erfolg haben”

ix “anderen publizistischen Traditionen und Strukturen”

x “während in den USA Presse und Filmindustrie die Promotion von Stars gemeinsam und zu beiderseitigem Nutzen betreiben”

xi “die durch das Dritte Reich und den Zweiten Weltkrieg kompromittierte Generation der Väter habe sich ausschließlich auf den wirtschaftlichen Wiederaufbau konzentriert, ohne die gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen, die das Dritte Reich möglich gemacht hatten, kritisch zu reflektieren geschweige denn zu ändern. Das Ergebnis sei eine selbstzufriedene Wohlstandsgesellschaft, fest im Griff der Interessen der Großunternehmer und ihrer publizistischen Helfer, unfähig zur Einsicht in gesellschaftliche Mängel und unwillig zur Reform.”

xii “dass nahezu alle westdeutschen Eliten durchweht waren von den Mitläufern und Mittätern des Adolf Hitler”

xiii “nach dem Krieg, in dem Frauen zu Tausenden berufliche Aufgaben der im Kriegsdienst mobilisierten Männer übernommen hatten, waren die meisten Frauen zurück an den Herd gekehrt.”

xiv “stilisierte”

xv “Distanz”

xvi “Weltentrücktheit”

xvii “unbeteiligt”

xviii “in den ersten Filmen konnten wir uns ja selber herrichten. Du ziehst an, was du magst, hat Rainer gesagt – ihm hat das alles sehr gut gefallen, wie ich mich zurechtgemacht habe. Ich habe mich ja damals wie eine Puppe geschminkt. Wie ferngesteuert ist mir zu mir eingefallen.”

xix “Ich wollte ja gar nicht leben. Daraus entstand dann diese Gleichgültigkeit, die ich in den Filmen ausgestrahlt habe. Die war das Rezept meiner frühen Jahre. Ich habe gedacht, mir ist alles egal. Ich habe mir das suggeriert.”

xx “ist sie immer als ‘Hanna Schygulla zu erkennen”

xxi “ist nicht sehr wandlungsfähig”

xxii “nicht unbedingt eine große Schauspielerin”

xxiii “er [betrachtete] die Hörigkeit als Liebesbeweis [...], obwohl er dauernd sagte, er mache Filme gegen die Abhängigkeit.”

xxiv “sie legte den Kopf in ihre Arme, und weinte bitterlich”

xxv “In dem Film *Effi Briest* bin ich mir wie eine Mumie vorgekommen und dachte: Bin das ich? Um Gottes willen! Schleunigst aufhören!”

xxvi “Ich wollte politisch schreiben, und merkte dabei, dass mir die Worte dafür fehlten. Das heisst, es gab schon Worte, aber die hatten nichts mit mir zu tun”

xxvii “Ich mache die Wunder lieber, als dass ich auf sie warte”

xxviii ist das jetzt draussen so zwischen den Menschen, so kalt?”

xxix “ist eine schlechte Zeit für Gefühle, glaub ich. Aber das ist besser so, denn so berührt mich nichts wirklich.”

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xxx “Geld, Besitz, Macht und Glücksaufschub ersetzen das Leben”

xxxii “männlich-kapitalistische Trennung von rationalem Geschäft und privatem Gefühl”

xxxiii “kostet ihr das Leben”

xxxiiii “gestern Nacht waren Sie eine Andere.”

xxxv “gestern Nacht war ich Maria Braun, die mit Ihnen schlafen wollte, heute bin ich Maria Braun, die für Sie arbeiten möchte. [...] Ich möchte nicht, dass sie denken, Sie hatten was mit mir, denn die Wahrheit ist, dass ich etwas mit Ihnen habe”

xxxvi “Maria kann zwar nicht erkennen, dass sie gerade durch ihr Beharren auf der zukünftigen Liebe mit Hermann [...] verhindert, im eigentlichen Leben das mögliche Glück zu gewinnen. Aber eben diese Zielstrebigkeit, Hartnäckigkeit und Stärke, die sie immer wieder demonstriert, machen sie auch wieder sympathisch.”

xxxvii “differenzierte[s] und präzise[s] Spiel”

xxxviii “Schygulla macht die Gebrochenheit der Figur in überzeugender Weise deutlich – nicht nur in dramatischen Momenten der Verzweiflung, sondern oft durch kleine Pausen, mit einem Blick oder einem Augenaufschlag.”

Figure 8:  
Zarah Leander  
in *La Habanera* (1937)



Figure 9:  
Romy Schneider  
in *Sissi* (1955)



## Chapter Two

### Actresses in the history of German film II: Third Reich Cinema and Post-war Cinema

#### Cinema in the Third Reich: Orchestrating Entertainment and Propaganda

The cinema of the Third Reich has been approached by generations of film scholars as “the ultimate Other of World Cinema” (Hake, 2001, p. 1), since film played such a prominent role as a propaganda tool for the totalitarian regime and ideology of Nazi Germany. Shortly after coming to power in 1933, the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) under the lead of Adolf Hitler created a propaganda ministry overseen by Joseph Goebbels, who was in charge of all mass communication (ibid, p. 61). In the process of ‘Gleichschaltung’, during which the media became completely state-controlled, the film industry quickly witnessed a profound reorganisation. Several measures were taken to integrate film production and consumption into the propagandistic programme of promoting fascist ideology. Films that were deemed ideologically unsuitable were withdrawn from the market, Jews and people associated with the Left were no longer allowed to work in the industry and the Reichslichtspielgesetz, a new Motion Picture Law in 1934, introduced positive censorship, that is, a scrutiny of all scripts before production by a ministry official (replacing the usual post-production check of films that resulted in the excision of offensive violent or sexual scenes at most) (ibid, p. 62). The compulsory screening of newsreels and propagandistic ‘documentary features’ before each feature film (ibid, p. 64) is symptomatic of the entwining

of entertainment and indoctrination. In 1936, Goebbels prohibited film criticism in trade journals and newspapers, and ordered it to be replaced with uncritical, benevolent commentary, dubbed *Filmbetrachtung* (film contemplation) (Carter, 2004, p. 9). In 1937, the Nazi Party gained a majority stake in Universum Film AG (UFA), one of the biggest production companies, and went on to acquire the other major companies such as Tobis, Terra and Bavaria Film Production, which together accounted for the production of 80 percent of feature films in Germany in the 1930s. By 1941, the four major companies, together with the Viennese West Film, were merged together into the Ufa-Film GmbH (UFi), a single state-owned corporation, thus completing the nationalisation of the industry (Bock, 2009, p. 560).

The vast majority of the more than one thousand films produced in Germany between 1933 and 1945 were light entertainment films such as comedies and musicals seeking to imitate the classical Hollywood cinema, with which they competed for audiences, taking over its characteristics such as “character motivation, the codes of realism [and] the strictures of dramatic development and closure” (Rentschler, 1996, p. 217). Rentschler explains that “German film during the Third Reich involved a highly successful popular cinema (Ufa escapism, formulaic fare, captivating diversion) replete with popular stars, upbeat scores, and alluring production values” (1990, p. 258). Hake insists that textual analyses of the films “defy[] speculation about fascist aesthetics”, since they do not display a discernible filmic style” (2001, p. 12). Avid to “systematic[ally] eliminat[e the] formal innovation and social critique” (ibid) of Weimar film, Third Reich cinema would allow for imaginative filmmaking only when the power of the image served its ideological purpose, as in the case of Leni Riefenstahl’s documentaries *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*) (1934) about the congress of the Nazi Party in 1934 and *Olympia* (1936), which offered a highly stylised documentation of the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. Riefenstahl was lauded for her use of innovative techniques and cinematographic skill. The special effects she created, such the technique of achieving maximum flexibility of the camera by mounting camera dollies on tracks entered the standard repertoire of documentary filmmakers (Sigmund, 1999, p. 157).

The orchestrated displays of Volksgemeinschaft and military strength during mass rallies for the NSDAP’s annual congress and other public holidays and commemorations that made National Socialist Germany what Rentschler calls a “society of spectacle” (1996, p. 21) found very little resonance in feature films. The images of “mass rallies, party pageants and ecstatic party followers, glorifying Hitler as a god-like Führer” (Bock, 2009, p. 560)

suggest that the regime's demonic power was strongly anchored in the popular conscience and associated with Third Reich cinema; however, they are incongruous with the majority of the "generic entertainments, innocuous comedies, frothy melodramas, and historical period pieces" Germany produced under national socialist rule (Rentschler, 1996, p. 7). Designated propaganda films, among them *Hitlerjunge Quex* (*Hitler Youth Quex*) (dir. Hans Steinhoff, 1933), and Veit Harlan's *Kolberg* (1945) and the notorious hate film *Jud Süß* (*Jew Süß*) (1940), accounted for no more than ten percent of all films produced. Rentschler points out that the overabundance of light entertainment films was a deliberate move by the increasingly state-controlled film industry: the countless "genre films maintained the appearance of escapist vehicles and innocent recreations while functioning within a larger programme" (ibid, p. 16), seeking to maintain the illusion of normalcy in a totalitarian state.

In view of the large number of seemingly apolitical entertainment films, the question to which extent cinema was a propagandistic tool has been central to the scholarly discussion<sup>9</sup> of Third Reich film. Sabine Hake cautions not to draw sweeping conclusions about the functions and impact of film in the Third Reich, insisting that terms such as 'Nazi cinema' or 'Nazi film' should be avoided since they "suggest a complete convergence of narrative cinema, cultural politics, and Nazi ideology that was never achieved" (2002, p. 59). Even films produced by a totalitarian state adopting a deeply racist and xenophobic ideology face "the fundamental problem of controlling images and, more generally, meanings" (ibid, p. 79).

### **Reconciling Contradictions: Wholesome Mothers and Exotic Divas**

The struggle between conflicting readings or ideological positions in Nazi Germany and its films was nowhere more evident than in the representation of women, whose overdetermined ideological position as the mother who safeguards the future of the Reich conflicted with the realities, as well as the aspirations of actual German women. The "National Socialist ideal of femininity: the tall, industrious, nordic blonde [...] surrounded by offspring at the hearth"<sup>xxxviii</sup> (Sigmund, 1998, p. 7) was hard to reconcile with 1930s society

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<sup>9</sup> Early studies such as David Stewart Hull's *Film in the Third Reich: art and propaganda in Nazi Germany* or Erwin Leiser's *Nazi Cinema* (1974) focused solely on propaganda films, examining them as means of fascist indoctrination while contending that the enormous body of genre films contained no political messages. More recent works such as Linda Schulte-Sasse's *Entertaining the Third Reich* (1996), Karsten Witte's *Lachende Erben, Toller Tag* (1995) or Eric Rentschler's *The Ministry of Illusion* (1996) offer a more differentiated evaluation of the extent to which the Nazi Party managed to control the country's filmic output and the functions and readings of the films by audiences.

that was shaped by increasing consumerism and mass media, in Nazi Germany as much as in other western European countries and the USA. Nazi Germany “fostered the era’s first full-blown media culture”, “introducing radios into almost every household [and] developing television” (Rentschler, 1996, p. 21), “sponsored a vibrant consumer culture and offered its customers a wide range of commodities [...] glossy magazines, fashion icons, cheap appliances and beauty products” (Bruns, 2009, p. 9).

The state-controlled film industry established a handful of actresses in the 1930s whose glamorous on- and off-screen lifestyle and melodramatic romantic trials induced female audiences to both idolise and relate to their characters. As Hake points out, “the representation of women in the feature films rarely reflected the normative definition of femininity in Nazi ideology; instead they functioned as complementary designs” (2002, p. 75). Later, during the war, numerous so-called ‘Durchhaltefilme’ (‘hold-out films’) such as *The Great Love* (directed by Rolf Hansen, 1942) or *Kolberg* centring on female protagonists were produced in order to uphold morale among the mostly female audience conveying the message that the deprivation and hardship of war were sacrifices to be made for the nation, which was to be placed above individual happiness.

Actresses of the Third Reich in recent years have attracted considerable scholarly attention: Jo Fox’s *Filming Women in the Third Reich* (2000), Antje Ascheid’s *Hitler’s Heroines* (2003) and Jana F. Bruns’s *Nazi Cinema’s New Women* (2009) all explore the conflicted position of actresses who lent a pretty face to fascist ideology on screen or conceal its workings through escapist fare, yet whose work cannot be simply dismissed on these grounds since their characters negotiate the desires, ambiguities and problems German women faced at the time. Their strong propensity for audience identification is the key to their popularity. The films provide crucial points of identification for the mostly feminine audience: the appeal of the glamorous stars and the emerging consumer culture of fashion and décor surrounding them, and later the evocation of women’s obligation to ‘do their bit’ in the war effort, make sacrifices and retain firm belief in victory.

Actresses were raised to star status through a combination of the stylised lead characters they were assigned to play and extensive coverage they received in equally state-controlled trade papers, in which biographical information was regularly modified to suit Nazi ideology. These leading ladies were Zarah Leander, Kristina Söderbaum, Marika Röck and to a lesser extent the British-German Lilian Harvey, all of whom repeatedly played variations of two narrowly defined roles: the star of the musical or light comedy, and the



tragic, lovelorn sufferer. Rökk and Harvey had a monopoly on musical and romance, Söderbaum was the face of many fascist propaganda films directed by her husband Veit Harlan such as *Opfergang (The Great Sacrifice)* (1944) and *Kolberg*. Zarah Leander, the Third Reich's biggest star, appeared in some of the period's more complex films, such as *Zu neuen Ufern (To New Shores)* (1937) and *La Habanera* (1937), both directed by Detlef Sierck, who after his emigration in 1938 changed his name to Douglas Sirk and pursued a successful career in the United States. His films often featured an ambiguous narrative solution, which suggested that the aspirations of Leander's characters were irreconcilable with the Nazi ideal of femininity.

Strikingly, none of the Third Reich's most prolific actresses were born in Germany: Leander and Söderbaum were Swedish, Rökk was Hungarian and Harvey was born in London. Hake notes that "the identification with otherness was especially pronounced in actresses whose careers began after 1933", their "foreignness" being crucial to "their erotic appeal" (2002, p. 68). Leander in particular, who was marketed as an import from Sweden pursuing a great career in Germany, conveyed an air of worldliness and internationality, suggesting an illusory "connection to the outside world for Nazi culture" (Silberman, 1995, p. 65) through her foreign accent, and "project[ing] cosmopolitan sensibilities onto the German screen" (Koepnick, 2002b, p. 74). It was due to their very status of 'foreigner' that the actresses were granted "forms of sexual agency that [...] challenged the general inhibition of pleasure so characteristic of Nazi cinema" (ibid, p. 74). These performers were central to Third Reich cinema whose propagandistic function vied with its capacity to address those pleasures and desires that fascist ideology denied: "to initially attract the spectator, even forbidden wishes and desires must be engaged, resulting in their *latent* invocation and *ambivalent* sexual meanings" [emphasis in original] (Ascheid, 2003, p. 203). *Kora Terry* (1940), for example, offers stereotypical portrayals of "both the desirable and the undesirable roles of women within the Reich" (Fox, 2000, p. 130), embodied by the sisters Kora and Mara, the two central characters (both played by Marika Rökk). A commentary in the film magazine *Filmwelt* on Rökk's performance suggests that it is precisely the exotic, erotic appeal of the depraved Kora that constitutes the film's attraction: "Kora Terry can dance – and how she dances": "hot and impetuous, whirling and wild ... sparkling and twinkling" (cited in Fox, 2000, p. 132).

Akin to the ubiquitous star actresses, their film characters are independent working women associated with the allures of elaborate costumes and makeup and thus with a

decadence diametrically opposed to the Nazi ideal of the pure and simple German woman that is strongly associated with nature (Ascheid, 2003, p. 215; Bruns, 2009, p. 126). Thus, Nazi divas, as Ascheid explains, “assumed a highly oxymoronic position in the overall cultural system” (2003, p. 215). Although the film narratives placed their characters firmly in the position of the humble housewife, their aspirations to an independent life are explored along the way. The popular melodramas produced during the Third Reich constitute endless variations of a master narrative: the seductive, transgressive (working) woman is put in her place by the end of the film as a wife and (future) mother, having learned to make sacrifices. Silberman characterises these figures as “the glamorous woman of the world with an independent nature, the femme fatale in low cut dresses who – and here is the typical National-Socialist twist – always reveals a warm heart and returns home in the end” (1995, p. 64).

### **Zarah Leander: Negotiating Female Subjectivity and Stardom in Nazi Germany**

Zarah Leander (1907-1981) has become a central focus of scholarship on Third Reich film, not only because she was German cinema’s most popular and highly-paid film star at the time, but also because her collaborations with Detlef Sierck are singled out as the few films of the era with some artistic merit of their own, not least because of their more complex characters and subversive tendencies. Analysing her films and the construction of her image by the media, Ascheid concludes that Leander “can neither be fixed to constitute an alternative or subversive discourse, nor firmly be placed within the Nazi box of propaganda tricks” (2003, p. 211). Between 1936, when Ufa offered the virtually unknown Leander an exclusive contract for three films with a huge salary, and her return to Sweden in 1943, she starred in some of the highest grossing and best received productions of the Third Reich. Leander (born Sara Stine Hedberg) was deliberately chosen and built up as a star, as Ufa vice president Heidemann recognised her potential to function as surrogates for film divas Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, who had left Germany for the US: “Leander promised to supply German audiences once again with the image of a powerful femme fatale, an ideal stopgap to fill the void left after both Garbo and Dietrich had turned their backs on the German film industry. From the moment of its inception, Leander’s star persona was therefore characterised, and jeopardised, by ostensible signatures of simulation” (Koepnick, 2002b, p. 81).

Central to Ascheid’s analysis of Leander is the idea of the “twofold persona” (2003,

p. 161) or the “ ‘doubled’ star image” (ibid, p. 212): she was presented by the press as a star, diva, glamorous stage performer and singer on the one hand, and a model wife and mother on the other. Leander featured in numerous magazines’ star portraits that presented her as a devoted mother, omitting or embellishing biographical details such as the fact that she had divorced her first husband and had brought two children into her second marriage, and justifying her profession as an actress and presence in the public domain by stressing her special artistic talent which compelled her to work alongside being a mother (ibid, p. 167). This discourse illustrates the efforts the state-controlled media undertook to reconcile the two opposite poles of the National Socialist conception of the wholesome mother figure and the actress or star as a figure of admiration and projection of the female audience’s own desires and fantasies. Thus, Leander is central to the trade-off between audience appeal and propaganda dissemination that characterises Third Reich film. Since her star status and the glamorous figures she played clashed with the National Socialist ideal of womanhood, she brought out the tension between cinematic fantasies of desire and individual fulfilment and fascist ideology that championed obedience and self-sacrifice.

Ascheid explains that Leander’s figures were frequently corrected and punished “for the emancipated and indulgent lifestyles her characters were initially associated with” (2003, p. 173): in the course of the narrative, her characters’ independence and sexual allure are regularly destroyed and replaced by “a less threatening female, such as a mother, a wife, or even a corpse” (ibid, p. 177). The films’ endings however, suggest that her heroines’ quest for female romantic and personal fulfilment cannot be answered by marriage and motherhood: her characters’

desirability and lust for life [...] can never be positively integrated into National Socialist discourse without either creating an element of contradiction or narrative disappointment in the viewer. The restrained endings of almost *all* Leander films strongly illustrate this dilemma (ibid, p. 203).

This tension between fascist propaganda and a genuine exploration of female subjectivity is particularly evident in Leander’s films *La Habanera* and *The Great Love*.

*La Habanera* tells the story of Swedish Astrée Sternhjelm (Leander), who on a holiday to Puerto Rico meets the rich landowner Don Pedro de Avila (Ferdinand Marian) and decides to stay and marry him against her aunt’s council, thereby being severed from her family. Ten years later, Astrée finds herself deeply unhappy, worn down by the climate and her husband’s irascible ways, who seeks to alienate her son from her. A fever epidemic breaks out on the island, which American scientists, on order of the US prefect, had

unsuccessfully sought to cure years before. Astrée's aunt (Julia Serda), who is the chair of the tropical institute foundation, sends scientist Sven Nagel (Karl Martell) to Puerto Rico with the order not only to vanquish the fever, but also to bring Astrée back to Sweden with him, since the two had been childhood sweethearts. Nagel does indeed succeed in developing a vaccine; however, it is destroyed on Don Pedro's orders. Don Pedro then falls prey to the fever himself and dies; Astrée, her son and Nagel board a ship to return to Europe.

The film's dialogue betrays scriptwriter Gerhard Menzel's intake of fascist propaganda. Characters are generally referred to by nationality rather than name, suggesting the spirit of impending war in which other nations were classified as either German enemies or allies. The film holds an open disdain for Americans, who are consistently mocked as incompetent, sloppy and dishonest in relation to their inability to find a cure for the fever. Also, Astrée's son Juan (Michael Schulz-Dornburg), child of two dark-haired parents, is a model of the blond and blue-eyed Aryan child.

Its main protagonists are subject to more subtle and ambiguous characterisations, not only the free-spirited and passionate Astrée, but notably also her husband Don Pedro, whom "the script does not make [...] totally unworthy of sympathy" (Rentschler, 1996, p. 133). Embodied by Ferdinand Marian, a favourite villain of Third Reich film, who would later play the title character in the ultimate anti-Semitic hate film *Jew Süss*, Don Pedro is a figure torn between unfeeling patriarchal dominance and sincere love for Astrée, whom he wants to see happy. Leander's Astrée is a typical character of a woman's melodrama in that she impassively defies convention at the beginning of the film, leaving the ship that would return her home at the last minute to stay in the unknown Puerto Rico, as she is taken in by its exuberant people and the promising encounter with Don Pedro. Pam Cook explains that in melodrama, "the heroine's transgression resides in her desire to act against socially accepted definitions of femininity" (2005, p. 65). These social rules in *La Habanera* are embodied by Astrée's fastidious aunt, who disapproves of Don Pedro's courtship before Astrée even recognises it as such. Astrée initially feels liberated in Puerto Rico, whose vibrant atmosphere apparently differs notably from Swedish high society, which she describes as dull and passionless, repeatedly condemning its "hopeless, cold reason"<sup>xxxix</sup> that she cannot bear any longer. Her initial encounter with Don Pedro at a bullfight leaves her deeply impressed: she recounts in front of her aunt how he killed the animal "with one single stab, straight to the heart"<sup>xl</sup>, expressing her ideal of passionate love she believes to have found in him. The not entirely positive portrayal of the Swedish homeland and the allure of Puerto Rico and Don

Pedro conflict with the film's vilification of the 'degenerate' south and its inhabitants (Bruns, 2009, pp. 122-123), which is epitomised by the aunt's description of Don Pedro as "a Creole, a Carib, whatever, straight from the Middle Ages"<sup>xli</sup>.

Astrée is plagued by homesickness for most of the film, passively yet restlessly dwelling in Don Pedro's stuffy, richly decorated house. The character's deep sadness and immobility, which stands in marked contrast to her naïve cheerfulness and exuberance when first visiting Puerto Rico at the beginning of the film, allows Leander to showcase her ability to unite opposites in her characters, which according to scholars distinguishes her as an actress: Bruns describes her as simultaneously "human and ethereal, fragile and statuesque, passionate and serene" (2009, p. 119). Similarly, Rentschler points out how she brought together "silent suffering and animated expressivity, domestic charm and foreign allure, solemn spirituality and playful sensuality, material warmth and vampish sadism" (1996, pp. 183-139). Her exotic allure, evoked chiefly by her exceptionally low, androgynous singing voice is showcased in the film when Astrée performs the habanera, wearing the local women's dress and hairstyle. "Leander's distinctive contralto prove[s] sublime and seductive" (ibid, p. 136), evoking a forbidden erotic appeal that opposed the female ideal type of Nazi ideology.

The fact that Astrée leaves Puerto Rico for Sweden at the end of the film appears to affirm the National Socialist blood-and-soil ideology doctrine, the "Reich's injunction to all Germans living in foreign countries to return to their homeland" (Nadar, 2000, p. 75). However, the final scene underlines the film's ambiguity towards fascist blood-and-soil politics and the possibility of female fulfilment in a patriarchal order. Astrée is pictured standing at the railing of a ship, wistfully looking back to the island, dreamily muttering 'la habanera', which locals play in the harbour. The scene "suggest[s] that she is already beginning to once again yearn for the idyll she had experienced as infernal" (Ascheid, 2003, p. 185), an impression that is underlined by Astrée explaining to Nagel that she "do[es] not regret"<sup>xlii</sup> her stay in Puerto Rico. Sirk himself comments on the scene by saying that "As [Astrée] looks back she is aware that she is getting out of rotten – but definitely interesting – circumstances. Her feelings are most ambiguous" (cited in Halliday, 1972, p. 51-52).

The failure of Astrée's fantasy of a life in the tropical paradise of Puerto Rico with the man she desired firmly places *La Habanera* in the melodramatic genre. The female point of view in melodrama "often projects a fantasy that is [...] transgressive – and so cannot be fulfilled. Despite the fact that in the end the female protagonist loses out, the female

spectators identified with and gained pleasure from her behaviour during the unfolding narrative” (Hayward, 1996, p. 205). Feminist film critics such as Mulvey (1977-78) and Christine Gledhill (1987) have argued that the structure of the melodrama envisions the ultimate failure of the woman who transgresses her socially cemented role as wife and mother, and thereby reinscribes the patriarchal order while simultaneously highlighting its contradictions, as the viewer sides with the female protagonist and shares her suffering and disappointment. In *La Habanera*, Astrée’s complex feelings offer female viewers a strong propensity for emotional identification: “the denial of a happy end for Leander’s protagonists produced a satisfaction of its own, enabling audiences to continue longing and to identify with her suffering even after the film’s conclusion” (Bruns, 2009, p. 128).

Hanna Holberg, the protagonist of Leander’s 1942 film *The Great Love*, provides an even stronger object of identification for female viewers. The escapist exotic fantasy setting of *La Habanera* made way for a patriotic tale set in wartime reality in Leander’s “only [...] film that attempted to use her image for specifically propagandistic purposes” (Ascheid, 2003, p. 199). The narrative clearly resonated with audiences: *The Great Love* became one of the Third Reich’s greatest box-office successes and “Leander’s most celebrated role” (Rentschler, 1996, p. 140). In another variation of her screen persona and star image, Leander plays the singer Hanna, who performs in a glamorous variety show in Berlin, where she is admired by air force pilot Paul Wendtlandt (Victor Staal). He follows her home and their mutual affection quickly becomes obvious, however, the couple’s union is repeatedly deferred to Hanna’s great frustration as the zealous Wendtlandt is compelled to return to the front, even when he is granted a holiday. It is only when he is wounded in an air fight and admitted into hospital that Hanna is finally able to join him, if only temporarily.

The film is symptomatic of “the increased production of melodramas during the last years of the war” with clearly “intended socio-psychological functions, namely, to translate suffering into aesthetic terms and to make pleasurable the delay of gratification” (Hake, 2002, p. 75). After German troops had invaded the Soviet Union in 1942, “the public had to relinquish all hope for a brief war, while [...] internal opinion polls suggested that by 1941/42, the desire for peace emerged as the dominant concern of the general public” (Ascheid, 2003, p. 198). Consequently, films were employed in the propagandistic effort of “integrat[ing] the war effort at home, the psychic stabilisation of the soldiers to enable them to pull through [durchhalten]. Both concerned women, it was their responsibility” (Schlöpmann, cited in Ascheid, 2003, p. 199). *The Great Love* is an example of a film seeking to “revitalise a flagging

female population, who were, in the third year of war, tiring of solitude and separation” (Fox, 2000, p. 97). It does so through the “the rousing, diversion, and re-containment of desires and impulses that threatened ideological conformity in any possible way” (Lowry, cited in Ascheid, 2003, p. 199).

The film depicts the heroine’s gradual renunciation of her egoistic affectations as she becomes an ordinary woman faced with the deprivations of wartime akin to the film’s female viewers, whom the film sought to teach communal solidarity for the good of the nation. The different stagings of Hanna’s musical numbers at the beginning and at the end of the film showcase her transformation from frivolous stage performer to dutiful future soldier’s wife (see fig. 10-13). During her first performance, the camera follows Hanna as she moves across the stage, her knowing smiles at the audience underlining her suggestive lyrics (“There should be no nights without love”<sup>xliii</sup>, “My motto is: all is permitted that pleases”<sup>xliv</sup>). Her coquettish comportment recalls Marlene Dietrich’s stage performances as vampish night club singer Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel*, which demonstrates Leander’s functioning as a Dietrich stand-in or surrogate.



**Figures 10-13: Zarah Leander’s character changes from lascivious, vain revue star (above) into an angelic figure boosting German morale (below)**

In Hanna’s final performance, the pursuit of pleasure has made way for an

imploring call not to lose faith in the war effort. The camera remains fixed on a close-up of Hanna, clad in angelic white, who sings that “I know one day a miracle will happen”<sup>xlv</sup>. Ascheid observes that this performance of what is allegedly a love song, in fact appears as “a fervent prayer for relief, an adjuration directed at sublime powers and intended to bring about the virtually impossible” (2003, p. 201): Hanna has become a madonna-like figure praying for her country.

After this performance, Hanna announces her intention to leave the stage for good; however, even the surrender of “her ‘selfish’ professional ambitions” (ibid, p. 202) in anticipation of assuming the role of wife and mother Third Reich society envisions for her “does not bring about private compensation” during wartime (ibid). The highly ambiguous ending of *The Great Love* exposes the film’s difficulty to boost morale in the face of a future marked by uncertainty, anxiety and an indefinite deferral of the lovers’ union: at Wendtland’s sickbed, Hanna learns that he has been granted three weeks for recovery. Hanna asks “And then?”<sup>xlvi</sup>, before the film’s final shot captures the couple’s stern gazes upward to an air squadron in the sky. Hanna’s anguished look at the sky, as Bruns observes, “is a subtle but powerful illustration of the high price she must pay for conformity” (2009, p. 166). Equally, Ascheid explains that “the film advocates an attitude of patience and endurance at the home front, a conclusion that cannot be read as fully satisfying” (2003, p. 202). Thus, the film’s National Socialist rhetoric cannot contain the viewers’ aspirations and their experiences of hardship. Its ending demands to place the war effort higher than romantic fulfilment, yet also forcefully demonstrates the sacrifice this entails for the heroine, thereby constituting a tightrope walk between relating its propagandistic message and triggering a potentially anti-patriotic identification of the audience with the character. *The Great Love* epitomises Zarah Leander’s placing self in the service of the Nazi regime by starring in its escapist and openly or indirectly propangandist fare. At the same time, the films she made in Nazi Germany are distinguished by their female focus, if not a female subjectivity, that suggested the discontentment of women reduced to obedient wives and self-sacrificing mothers, demonstrating that a film’s meaning can never be fully controlled.

### **Rebuilding National Identity in the Aftermath of the War: Hildegard Knef and the ‘Rubble Film’**

The representation of women in German films of the immediate post-war period testifies to the physical and psychological efforts of rebuilding the country after the collapse of the Nazi



regime and the genocide, war and destruction it had produced. The first films made in Germany after WWII were the so-called "Trümmerfilme" ('rubble films'). They typically centre on a man returning into a ruined city, struggling to deal with his experience of the war and the guilt all Germans faced, but they did in fact establish the first female star of post-war German cinema: the actress Hildgard Knief (1925-2002), who starred in *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers Are Among Us*) (dir. Wolfgang Staudte, 1946), Germany's very first post-WWII film. In the aftermath of destroyed cities and the disruption of society following the war, the German film industry witnessed a remarkably quick recovery and enjoyed enormous popular success. The number of cinemas almost doubled from 1,150 in May 1945 to 2,125 in 1946, and in 1954, West Germany had established itself as the world's fifth largest film producer. In 1956, 818 million tickets were sold, a number unprecedented in German cinema history (Bergfelder, 2005, p. 19; Baer, 2009, p. 2), before cinema attendance began to decline sharply in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the advent of television (Hake, 2002, p. 113).

Carter points to the "sheer physical difficulty of filmmaking" (2000, p. 93) immediately after the war, as "cast and crew were often undernourished, film studios bombed out, film stock scarce" (ibid). Decentralisation and the breaking up of the monopoly held by the all-powerful film concern Ufa controlled by the propaganda ministry during the Third Reich was a central concern of the Western Allies. Film companies were only allowed to be engaged either in production, distribution or exhibition (Hickethier, 2007, p. 195). Many of the films shown in the late 1940s were either Hollywood imports or re-runs of films produced during the Third Reich that the Allied Commission had reviewed and classified as harmless (Hake, 2002, pp. 89-90). Until 1950, films could only be produced if they had been licensed by the Allied forces. While the Americans issued the first license in 1947, the Soviet forces were the first to give a license to the Deutsche Film AG (DEFA), which produced *The Murderers Are Among Us*, and which would later become the GDR's state-owned film studio.

In *The Murderers Are Among Us*, Hildegard Knief plays Susanne, a concentration camp survivor, who in 1945 returns to a destroyed Berlin and begins to work as a photographer. She finds her flat occupied by Dr Hans Mertens (Ernst Wilhelm Borchert), a former military surgeon who drowns his tormenting war memories in alcohol. Susanne and Mertens grow closer and a successful emergency operation on a little girl somewhat restores Mertens' faith in himself. However, he holds a deep grudge against his former captain Ferdinand Brückner (Arno Paulsen), whom he witnessed ordering the shooting of more than 100 civilians in a Polish village on Christmas Eve 1942, and who now is a successful businessman. Susanne

finds out from Mertens' diary that he plans to murder Brückner, and manages to stop him, insisting that "we do not have the right to judge"<sup>xlvii</sup>. Mertens agrees, but adds that "we have the duty to accuse, to demand atonement on behalf of millions of innocent people who were slaughtered"<sup>xlviii</sup>. These final lines of *The Murderers Are Among Us* reflect the rubble films' ambiguous position in the much-discussed process of 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung', Germany's coming to terms with National Socialism: although its protagonists are haunted and ashamed by what they saw and did during the war, their shattered personal identity representing the wrecked German national identity, scholars agree that the films fail to acknowledge collective guilt. Antagonists are represented as 'evil Nazis', protagonists as innocent bystanders in an all-powerful regime. The suffering of Jews, the real victims of Nazism, is not explored (Hake, 2002, p. 92).

While only partly succeeding in confronting the past, the rubble films were more apt in capturing social realities of the present, particularly the disintegration of traditional gender roles that occurred during and in the aftermath of the war. The immediate post-war period can be seen as an "interregnum" (Carter, 2000, p. 95) of female emancipation since women had been forced to manage on their own and take up traditional male tasks involving heavy physical labour such as working in heavy industry or clearing the streets of rubble. Ulrike Sieglöhr explains that "given the extraordinary nature of women's experience during the war years, [...] an unproblematic return to the traditional pre-war confines of gender and class was impossible" (2000, p. 1). Erica Carter and Hester Baer have demonstrated the centrality of gender in the rubble films, whose preoccupation with German guilt for the war and Holocaust and the reconstruction of national identity hinges on very specific, contrasting representations of men and women. The films use flashbacks to disturb the narrative flow, as well as disorienting, skewed camera angles for point-of-view shots of male protagonists to suggest their inability to function as narrative agents (see fig. 14). They are psychically unstable and have lost their moral authority by being complicit in the war (Carter, 2000, p. 99; Baer, 2009, p. 34). Baer points out that *The Murderers Are Among Us* associates its two lead characters with "two different gendered gazes, which suggest alternative ways of remembering the past and confronting the present" (2009, p. 34). While the frequently inebriated, vulnerable and depressed Hans "never exhibits mastery of the gaze" (ibid), the female protagonist Susanne obtains "an unusual level of agency [...] that is figured by her control of the gaze" (ibid) (see fig. 15). What is more, Susanne emerges a remarkably independent female character, reflecting the reversal of traditional gender roles in the

immediate post-war period: “she is not fully redomesticated, forced to give up her work, or relegated to the role of wife and mother by the film’s ending” (ibid, p. 37), thereby remaining a “compelling figure of identification” (ibid).

A typical female lead for a rubble film, Susanne is hard-working, sensible and optimistic. Symbols of hope for a better future, characters like her assist the male protagonist in getting over his troubling memories, while they themselves are beyond reproach:

the recognition of the guilt and moral responsibility of German men [...] is weakened by an assertion [...] of German women’s moral purity, their non-participation in fascist history. The engagement with the past in these films is thus fundamentally gendered: while men struggle to remember, their women, ‘forgetting’ their own histories, help them (Carter, 2000, p. 107).

Confirming the appeal of the rubble film’s strong female protagonists, *The Murderers Are Among Us* and the similar *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen (Between Yesterday and Tomorrow)* (dir. Harald Braun, 1947) initiated Hildgard Knef’s (1925-2002) film career. Knef was twenty years old when she starred as Susanne in *The Murderers Are Among Us*, and rather than just a fresh face, she was a strong figure of identification for the post-war female audience. Women saw their own qualities represented in her down-to-earth, practical, and unglamorous characters, which constituted a distinct break with the divas of Third Reich (Sieglohr, 2000, p. 116; Baer, 2009, pp. 39-40).



**Figures 14&15: Skewed angles communicate the male protagonist’s lack of control, while the agency of Knef’s Susanne is communicated by her mastery of the gaze**

Knef’s performance as Susanne was marked by her forceful gaze and behaviour expressing her hopefulness and energy: “she conveys an impression of decisiveness, [...] exuding vitality; and [...] her youthfulness [...] comes across as a practical determination to

have a future: 'I want to work, to live, finally live' ” (Sieglohr, 2000, p. 116). When analysing her acting style, critics particularly lauded her “naturalism”, her “ability to play a role as if she embodied the character” (ibid, p. 121). Knef’s screen persona is thus a complex one from her first film on, as she is “considered ‘refreshingly genuine’ [...] on the one hand, [...] yet associated with metaphors of redemption on the other”<sup>xlix</sup> (von Moltke and Wulff, 1997, p. 308). She became an important site for a “negotiation of new notions of femininity and national identity” (Baer, 2009, p. 39), functioning as a “fulcrum between tradition and modernity, between the Nazi past and an uncertain future” (ibid)

Knef’s image of the innocent, hopeful ‘rubble girl’ would witness a decisive shift with her performance in the 1951 film *Die Sünderin (The Sinner)* (dir. Willi Forst), turning her “from a representative of the nation into its ‘punching doll’ ” (von Moltke and Wulff, 1997, p. 310). The uproar caused by Knef’s brief nude scene in the film, which pastors condemned from their pulpits, was triggered by “the depiction of female sexuality asserted in exchange for material gain which upset the new pillars of society” (Sieglohr, 2000, p. 121): the scandal around the film was a manifestation of the return of repressive sexual mores and the restoration of an ideal of respectable femininity associated with wife- and motherhood that characterised 1950s Germany. It was a symptom of “the struggle for the restructuring of the gender discourse at the beginning of the Adenauer era”<sup>1</sup> (von Moltke and Wulff, 1997, p. 310). The conservative Christian Democratic government under chancellor Konrad Adenauer that came into power in 1950 and the country’s swift recovery from the war known as the *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) established the values of “bourgeois individualism” (Hake, 2002, p. 95) and “economic liberalism” (ibid), as well as repressive sexual morals and a cementation of traditional gender roles.

Due to the success of *The Sinner*, Knef went on to play a number of overly sexualised and immoral females, such as in *Abraune (Mandragore (UK)/Unnatural (USA))* (dir. Arthur Maria Rabenalt, 1952), but she was also repeatedly cast as an ambitious investigative journalist, for example in the 1954 film *Geständnis unter vier Augen (Confession under Four Eyes)* (dir. André Michel), which offered an unusually favourable portrayal of a single, working woman. The film strongly resonated with young female audiences, making Knef a role model for young women: in a survey of university students, a majority named the profession of journalist as their dream job after having seen the film (Sannwald, 2005, p. 15).

Summing up Knef’s acting career, Sannwald observes that “ever since 1946, Knef [has] not fit[ted] the time period she was in. The ‘rubble girl’ character of the 1940s is

transient by nature, since the rubble itself is fleeting”<sup>li</sup> (ibid, p. 20), whereas in the 1950s and early 1960s, she stands for a woman’s way of life that is ahead of its time. Only in the 1963 film *Das große Liebespiel (And So to Bed)* (dir. Alfred Weidenmann), in which she plays a callgirl who is also a painter, she is able to “present all her abilities: [...] her sovereignty, her grown-up sex appeal [...]. Finally [Germany] has caught up with Hildegard Knef”<sup>liii</sup> (ibid, p. 18).

Thus, entering German cinema in the aftermath of the war as the ‘hands-on’ ‘rubble girl’, a symbol for the future of the nation, Knef’s roles and her own persona were characterised from the 1950s by attributes such as confidence, independence and a provocative sexuality that challenged the dominant image of women in Germany in the 1950s, making her a figure of transition to the more liberal and emancipated feminine ideal of the late 1960s and 1970s. On a tightrope walk “between high representational power and distanciation” throughout her career, Knef became “identified with historically different versions of Germanness” (von Moltke and Wulff, 1997, p. 308, translated in Sieglöhr, 2000, p. 124). The actress Hildegard Knef and her characters thus epitomise the shifts of gender roles in post-war German cinema and society, highlighting the problems and contradictions faced by “women emancipated by the war [...] only then to be reintegrated into a newly reforming and repressive patriarchal society” (Sieglöhr, 2000, p. 113).

The first rubble films had established Knef’s popularity, yet many others failed at the box office due to their depressing subject matter, before vanishing from the cinema entirely in the late 1940s (Hake, 2002, p. 92,104) to make way for unabashed genre cinema: German film production in the 1950s was dominated by genres such as the Heimatfilm, historical epics, war films and comedies, as well as an abundance of melodramas (Carter, 1997, p. 176). Knut Hickethier points out that the shift to genre filmmaking is a reflection of the unstable economic conditions faced by production companies, less than a quarter of which had sufficient facilities to produce more than one film at a time, thereby standing or falling on the success of individual films (2007, p. 197). They sought to maximise audience figures by offering reliable, uncontroversial entertainment: “even the producers, directors and authors involved approached genre films less as an artistic challenge [...] than as a mere commercial undertaking” (ibid, p. 199).

### **The Genre Cinema of the 1950s: Reformulating National Identity**

Alongside reflecting production conditions however, the popularity of genre films is closely related to the re-establishment of a conservative social order that would shape 1950s

German society. As Sannwald points out, “the foundation of the Federal Republic in 1949 marks the beginning of a restorative phase, which counteracts the spirit of reawakening in all cultural realms that had dominated the immediate post-war years”<sup>liii</sup> (2005, p. 10).

Consequently, the entertainment films of the era, characterised by “seemingly harmless, trivial subject matter” (Hake, 2002, p. 86) are said to conceal “conservative, if not reactionary [...] social values and political beliefs” (ibid). Decidedly focused on rebuilding the country and looking into the future, there was a “pronounced unwillingness on the part of political and cultural institutions, and in the public sphere as a whole, to deal with the Third Reich and the Holocaust” (ibid, p. 90). Much of the personnel active in film production under National Socialism remained active during the post-war years, ranging from cinematographers, set designers, composers and screenwriters to directors such as Veit Harlan, who had been in charge of some of the Third Reich’s most blatant propaganda epics. Well aware of the taste of the public shaped by the Ufa aesthetic, these film professionals continued to use, for example, the static panning shots revelling in the beauty of landscapes that had characterised films of the Nazi era. The resulting film aesthetic is symptomatic of a general continuity of cultural preferences in the 1950s: “magazines, popular music and films of the 1950s showed considerable similarities to those of the 1930s”<sup>liv</sup> (Schildt, 2002).

The abundance of genre films produced and enthusiastically received by audiences accounted for the extraordinary domestic commercial success of the supposedly banal, apolitical cinema associated with 1950s Germany. Baer explains that “the history of post-war German cinema has most often been told as a failure, a failure paradoxically epitomised by the remarkable popularity of film throughout the late 1940s and 1950s” (2009, p. 1). The genre responsible for post-war cinema’s greatest commercial successes was the Heimatfilm. The only genuinely German contribution to the genre canon, the country’s “film genre per excellence” (Kaiser, 2009, p. 1), the Heimatfilm consistently attracted audiences of more than five million (Hake, 2002, p. 109). The Heimatfilme, characterised by depictions of idyllic rural life in spectacular mountainous landscapes of the Bavarian or Austrian Alps, were denounced by critics for their kitsch, escapism and reinstatement of patriarchal family values – an “emblem[] for all that was wrong with West German cinema” (Fehrenbach, 1995, p. 148).

Works such as Johannes von Moltke’s *No Place Like Home: Locations of Heimat in German Cinema* (2005) and Heide Fehrenbach’s *Cinema in Democratizing Germany* (1995) have revised this dismissal of the Heimatfilm, demonstrating its crucial role in reconstructing

national identity after the Third Reich. Fehrenbach explains that the concept of 'Heimat' since its employment by 19<sup>th</sup> century writers and painters had been associated with a nostalgic notion of place and belonging (1995, p. 150). The depiction of such rural 'homes' and tightly-knit local communities in the Heimatfilme of the 1950s provided a fantasy space offering viewers a shared German identity untainted by the doctrines of National Socialism: "Heimat solved two post-war dilemmas with great economy: it provided an affirmative representation of the German nation and at the same time jettisoned the unsavoury aspects of the German past" (Fehrenbach, 1995, p. 151).

A key feature of the Heimatfilm tradition, initiated by 1951's *Grün ist die Heide* (*The Heath is Green*) (dir. Hans Deppe), are panoramic shots of unsullied rural landscapes, which functioned as a counterpoint to the "landscapes of consumption"<sup>iv</sup> of German cities marked by the industrious rebuilding of housing and department stores (Kaiser, 2009, p. 6). The idyllic settings of the Heimatfilm, however, are often threatened by the very processes of modernisation and industrialisation that changed the fabric of cities in the consolidating consumer society of 1950s Germany. In *Der Förster vom Silberwald* (*The Forester of the Silver Wood*) (dir. Alfons Stummer, 1954), the film that defined the genre like no other, attracting an unmatched 22 million spectators (Bliersbach, 1985, p. 47), the protagonist for example fights against the cutting down of his beloved forest. At the end of the film, the beautiful Silver Wood is saved and the city girl returns to her grandfather's village to marry the forester, the "restorative narrative[]" expressing "the desire for a harmonious reconciliation of traditional social structures with contemporary economic and political realities" (Hake, 2002, p. 110).

It is worth noting that *The Forester* was made in Austria, epitomising the enmeshing of the West German and Austrian film industries at the time: many Heimatfilme considered quintessentially German were in fact made by Austrian directors and featured Austrian actors. Mary Wauchope explains that "the interconnections between the Austrian and German film systems – including economic dependencies, co-productions, shared personnel and similar ideological goals" in the 1950s means that "for some aspects of film study it makes less sense to speak of separate national film traditions [...] than of regional developments in German-language film that ignore national boundaries" (2007, p. 21). The two countries' ties of a shared language and cultural traditions had been intensified after the annexation of Austria to the Third Reich in 1938, and after the war, Austria and Germany were forced to confront their shared Nazi past.

## Redeeming Germany: Romy Schneider as Sissi

One of the greatest domestic and international successes of German language post-war film was also Austrian-produced, although it was marketed by German distributors at home and abroad as German (Carter, 2010, p. 81): Ernst Marischka's *Sissi* trilogy, consisting of *Sissi* (1955) and its sequels *Sissi: Die junge Kaiserin* (*Sissi: The Young Empress*) (1956) and *Sissi: Schicksalsjahre einer Kaiserin* (*Sissi: The Fateful Years of an Empress*) (1957). Focusing on the princess Elisabeth of Bavaria (1837-98), her marriage to the Austrian emperor Franz Joseph I in 1854 and her subsequent personal trials and imperial duties, the film was "hailed as the title that triggered the rehabilitation among international audiences of the German language film" (ibid, p. 82). The films were a phenomenal box office success, attracting an estimated 20 to 25 million viewers in Germany alone and prompting a "European Sissi craze" (ibid) that propelled the lead actress Romy Schneider (1938-82) to instant stardom. Schneider's image created by the film itself and by the publicity surrounding it demonstrates the crucial role of actresses in the rebuilding of German national identity after the Third Reich in the context of popular entertainment cinema.

*Sissi* regularly places its protagonists in front of mountain landscapes or green rolling hills in a manner typical of the Heimatfilm: the film offers a "retreat from the modern into the fictional 'good old times', the imaginary imperial-and-royal idyll and an idealised landscape of mountains, forests and lakes"<sup>lvi</sup> (Lowry and Korte, 2000, p. 115). The work of cinematographer Bruno Mondi, who had been involved in the production of various Third Reich propaganda features, is representative of the abovementioned continuities in personnel and style between 1930s and 1950s German film. Mondi's static, unobtrusive camerawork is dominated by mid-distance shots of the protagonists and "painterly tableaux" of the countryside (Carter, 2010, p. 95). Lowry and Korte explain how *Sissi* presents itself to the viewer as an escapist fantasy "promising contemporary viewers, above all, pleasure"<sup>lvii</sup> (2000, p. 116). The films provide "visual attractions that often push the action to the background"<sup>lviii</sup> (ibid): they feature elaborate décor and costumes, with Sissi donning a different costume and hairstyle in almost every scene, employing Schneider's beauty to utmost effect.

Hake notes that the *Sissi* films are symptomatic of historical female figures such as queens who often were at the centre of "the rediscovery of nationalism" (2002, p. 106) in 1950s German film productions such as *Mädchenjahre einer Königin* (*The Pursuit and Loves of Queen Victoria*) (dir. Ernst Marischka, 1954) or *Königin Luise* (*Queen Luise*) (dir. Wolfgang



Liebeneiner, 1956). Additionally offering an “alternative model of masculinity”<sup>lix</sup> (Lowry and Korte, 2000, p. 116) embodied by Karl Heinz Böhm’s emperor Franz Joseph, who “unites traditional masculine traits such as steadfastness, inner strength and a strong will with more ‘feminine’, ‘soft’ virtues such as emotionality, compassion and propensity to romantic love”<sup>lx</sup> (ibid), *Sissi* is typical of German historical dramas of the time seeking to “satisf[y] the nostalgia for strong leader figures and for visions of empire unburdened by questions of guilt” (Hake, 2002, p. 107).

When the first film was made, Schneider was only 16 years old, like the historical Elisabeth at the time of her marriage, and her winning performance was integral to the films’ appeal. Even Alice Schwarzer, the figurehead of German second wave feminism, who in her biography of Schneider portrays the actress as a tragic victim of patriarchy enforced by her male directors, stepfather and first husband ever since she rose to fame through the *Sissi* trilogy, insists that Schneider “really need not be ashamed”<sup>lxi</sup> of the films, as she “outshines [their] mediocrity”<sup>lxii</sup> with her radiance and charisma: “people are right in loving you for it”<sup>lxiii</sup> (2000, p. 225).

Schneider’s Sissi was considered fresh and authentic, charming audiences with her vivacity and air of innocence. Lowry and Korte point out that the actress and character were fused in public perception and functioned as a saviour figure, an “allegorical preoccupation with the national socialist past and the question of guilt in the Federal Republic and Austria”<sup>lxiv</sup> (2000, p. 118): Schneider’s Sissi can be seen as a daughter of Germany

who bears the burden of the family that is too heavy for the generation of the fathers. At the same time, she, the innocent one, stands in for the German nation, making it respectable again internationally and soothing all feelings of guilt and shame<sup>lxv</sup> (ibid, p. 119).

Equally, Hake observes an “overidentification of star and role” (2002, p. 106) in Schneider<sup>10</sup> as “the post-war archetype of the good daughter who restored the reputation of Germans at home and abroad” (ibid).

Susanne Marschall explains that the *Sissi* films offered “the German audience in the years of reorientation and rebuilding a wealth of material suited for identification with the

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<sup>10</sup> Schneider later enjoyed a successful career in France, which however, led to a fraught relationship with German viewers similar to that of Marlene Dietrich: their international stardom was considered to corrupt or diminish the version of national identity they had embodied in their German films. Romy Schneider’s performances in French films, which did not correspond to her image of the sweet, innocent princess established by the *Sissi* films, provoked an “ambivalent, very often even aggressively dismissive attitude of large sections of the audience [...] in Germany” (Lowry and Korte, 2000, p. 124), while she was recognised both “as an actor” and a “film star” abroad (ibid).

characters”<sup>lxvi</sup> (1997, p. 372). The protagonists, “despite [wearing] fetching petticoats and imposing uniforms, are instantly identifiable as bearing the mental disposition of the 1950s”<sup>lxvii</sup> (ibid). Marschall observes that the structure of the imperial family, which “represents temporary displacements in the family structures of 1950s Germany”<sup>lxviii</sup> (ibid, p. 376) constitutes a central identificatory element for the post-war audience. As mentioned above, the late 1940s and early 1950s in Germany saw what Marschall calls a “regime of the mothers”<sup>lxix</sup> (ibid, p. 376), since many men had been killed, were kept as prisoners of war, or had forfeited their role as head of the family after their return. Correspondingly, in *Sissi*, the overbearing and dominant Archduchess Sophie (Wilma Degischer), the emperor’s mother, is in charge of the imperial household. She constantly interferes with her son’s political decisions as well as dictating his personal life, even attempting to select his wife for him.

Sissi helps to bring about an end to the archduchess’s reign. Functioning as a redeemer figure for Germany and Austria, her “deeply humane disposition”<sup>lxx</sup> (ibid, p. 372) contrasts with Sophie’s: “the emperor’s mother, in favour of death sentences and wars [...] is opposed to Sissi’s inclination for understanding and tolerance, her diplomatic sensitivity [...] It is obvious that a new, pacifist system is under way, replacing an old, cruel one”<sup>lxxi</sup> (ibid, p. 377). This is epitomised by a scene in which Sissi urges her husband to issue an amnesty for a group of Hungarian rebels, thereby going expressly against the archduchess’s will. It is followed by a confrontation between Sophie and the emperor depicting what seems to be the first real argument between mother and son from which Franz Joseph emerges triumphant. Marschall observes that “the ethics of demilitarisation, which is linked to the central figure of Sissi, dominates the plot in a way so obvious that it was impossible to miss, particularly for the war-weary viewers of the post-war period”<sup>lxxii</sup> (ibid, p. 380). Unlike her power-hungry mother-in-law, Sissi is uncorrupted and pacifistic. She never threatens her husband’s authority, but encourages the emperor to step out of his mother’s shadow and take his proper role as the head of the family and country.

The *Sissi* trilogy was marketed through a costly publicity campaign including not only images of Schneider as Sissi on posters and in magazine adverts, but also the distribution of postcards and matchboxes with her counterfeit, as well as Romy fashion dolls (Lowry and Korte, 2000, p. 115), which further sustained “the equation of the young actress with the fantasy image of the princess”<sup>lxxiii</sup> (ibid, p. 115). The marketing of the films complements the targeting of (young) female audiences suggested by the script and narrative structure that

incorporates several key elements of women's melodrama, defined by Hayward as a female-centred story that explores family values and the tension between duty and love, revelling in emotional excess of joy or sadness (1996, p. 202): Lowry and Korte explain that in *Sissi*,

the characters, their feelings and their relationships with one another are the focus of interest. It is about the conflict between longing (for love) and obstacles (the mothers' plans, the strictures of courtly life [...]) that are solved in the course of the rudimentary plot<sup>lxxiv</sup> (ibid, p. 112).

The films combine an affirmation of traditional gender roles with an exploration of female suffering typical of melodrama. In accordance with the socially conservative climate of 1950s Germany, the films affirm Sissi's rightful role as mother at the expense of her role as empress, who is potentially involved in governing and political decision-making. Marschall notes that the films present the office of Austrian empress as a burden Sissi has to bear (1997, p. 372), instead of being allowed to merely be a "perfect little housewife"<sup>lxxv</sup>, as Franz Joseph calls his wife at one point in the second film. Also, Carter explains that the films foreground Sissi's "longing for mother-child symbiosis, represented by her repeated return to [...] the parental home [...], by extended scenes of intimacy with her off- and onscreen mother Magda [Schneider]/'Ludovika' and by her furious defence of the mother-child dyad" (2010, p. 97) when confronting the archduchess, who wants to take charge of Sissi's child.

The films appeal strongly to viewers' emotions by heavily dwelling on Sissi's suffering in the golden cage that is the imperial palace: she misses her 'Heimat' in the Bavarian mountains; her husband, although caring, has little time for her, and her rigid and unfeeling mother-in-law openly displays her hostility. Seen together, the three *Sissi* films can be said to depict the breaking of Elisabeth's wild, carefree spirit: she is first introduced as a girl who rejoices in reckless horseriding and is closely associated with nature. Being informed by the archduchess about Franz Joseph's decision to marry her, Sissi furiously retorts: "I was happy [...] at home, maybe happier than all of you here [...] I wouldn't want to live another life for the world! I want to live freely, without restraints!"<sup>lxxvi</sup>. By the third film, she has changed into a quiet, humble creature bearing the burden of her duties as the emperor's wife. Schneider makes this transformation palpable by abandoning the carefreeness and youthful boldness she lends to the character in the first film, expressed through fast, energetic movements and a constant smile, in favour of a body language and delivery of dialogue that suggests Sissi's muted resignation: in the second and third film, Schneider's voice is more soft, brittle and high-pitched than in the first, and she is often pictured staring absent-

mindedly into the distance when receiving another piece of bad news or being informed of new duties to perform (see fig. 16&17).



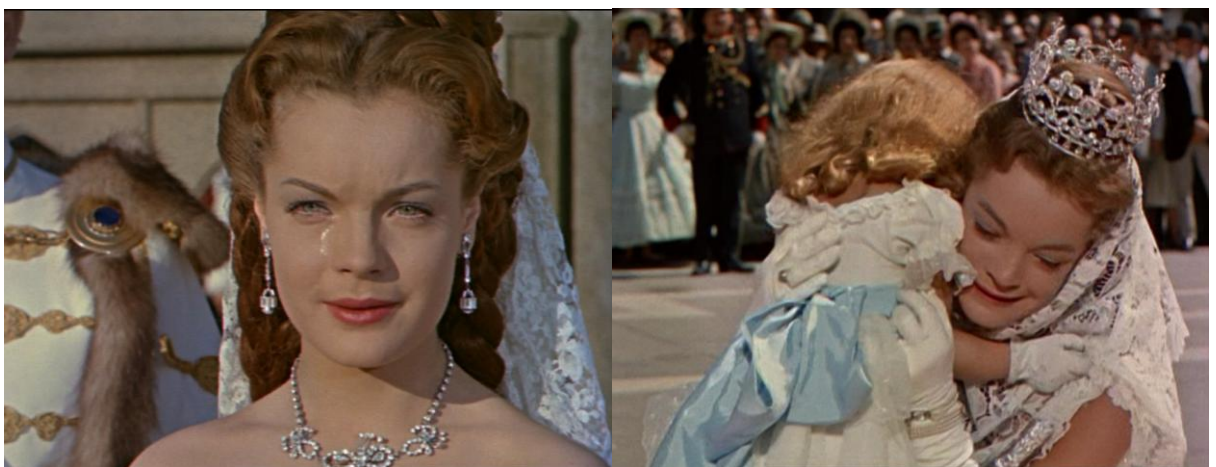
**Figures 16&17: In the *Sissi* trilogy, Romy Schneider portrays her character's transformation of from carefree child of nature (left) into a troubled young woman trapped in the golden cage of courtly life in Vienna (right)**

Carter notes that the on-screen Sissi experiences a “‘trauma’ of lost autonomy [that] surfaces melodramatically as bodily symptom” (2010, p. 97). Offering an attenuated version of the historical Elisabeth’s troubles, who was anorexic and “was dogged throughout her married life by both illness and self-inflicted bodily distress” (ibid, p. 97), the third *Sissi* film sees the empress contracting a consumptive disease, which the doctors predict may end in her death. Sent, on her own, to the warm climate of the Mediterranean to convalesce, Sissi falls into a deep depression, gloomily asking herself: “Was I ever happy in my life?”<sup>lxxvii</sup>

The film’s resolution, which sees her miraculously restored to health and reunited with her husband and child, places her personal happiness firmly in the service of the empire: Prematurely asked to return to her representative duties, a still frail Sissi meets Franz Joseph in Venice, the centre of a nationalist rebellion against the emperor. To her great surprise, Sissi spots her daughter in St. Mark’s Square. Overjoyed, she takes the child in her arms (see fig. 19), causing the initially hostile surrounding crowd of Italians to cheer wildly, solving the political crisis “through maternal sentiment on ostentatious display” (Carter, 2010, p. 97). This sequence, in which Sissi is clad entirely in white, completes the films’ “redemption fantasy, which presents the young empress, recently cured from a fatal disease, as a self-sacrificing, white angel of peace”<sup>lxxviii</sup> (Marschall, 1997, p. 374). Sissi then apologises to the waiting bishop for not greeting him first: “I did not know if I would see my child again in

this life. It makes me so happy”<sup>lxxix</sup>.

The second film closes with a similar melodramatic overflow of bittersweet emotion, ending with a close-up of Sissi during her coronation as queen of Hungary, crying in anticipation of the additional burden of responsibility (see fig. 18). Both endings epitomise the trilogy’s evocation “of the beauty of the suffering [female] victim [...] that overwhelms the mise-en-scène with what melodrama’s critics perceive as a suffocating feminine excess” (Carter, 2010, p. 98). Thus, the *Sissi* films, while gesturing towards the discontents of a female existence confined by rigid social and political structures, largely squanders melodrama’s subversive potential in favour of an affirmation of traditional gender roles in the context of its hopeful vision of the nation. The final shot of the third film depicts the royal couple and their daughter waving to the cheering crowd. An orchestra version of the German national anthem (originally a hymn to the Austrian emperor) sounds in the background, completing the film’s fantasy of a German(speaking) realm governed by a benevolent leader who is the head of an intact nuclear family with a young, virtuous female by his side.



Figures 18&19: The endings of the second (left) and third *Sissi* film (right) epitomise the trilogy’s revelling in melodramatic excess, presenting the empress as a suffering, self-sacrificing saviour figure

## Conclusion

Zarah Leander, Hildegard Knef and Romy Schneider all functioned as incarnations of skewed and instable notions of national and feminine identities. Rather than tackling pressing social issues or women’s complicity in the Nazi crimes, their German films primarily feature female characters that carried unambiguous patriotic messages. However, the screen

personas of Leander and Knef also highlight the contradictions between socially dominant ideal images of femininity, limiting women to traditional roles of housewife and mother, and the experiences of actual German women in the 1930s and 1950s.

Leander, who became Nazi Germany's biggest star, was at the centre of an escapist entertainment cinema eager not to reflect the country's status quo, but picturing what Germany ought to be like according to fascist ideology. Propagandistic content such as the blood-and-soil ideology, racism and the debasement of future war enemies is implied in dialogue and the narrative structure of her films. At the same time Leander lent her physique, distinguished by dark hair, foreign accent and low, masculine voice, to characters that evoked officially sanctioned desire and sexual transgression. The ideologically motivated deconstruction of the rebellious (working) woman in favour of the ideologically suitable wife and mother figure is complicated as the targeted female audiences are prompted to emotionally identify with her suffering heroines.

The screen personas of both Romy Schneider and Hildegard Knef were built on the image of the young woman as a symbol for a hopeful future that would banish the burden of guilt and shame Germany had brought upon itself during the years of National Socialism and the memories thereof. The rebuilding of German society after Nazism and the Second World War demanded a reformulation of the role of women. While many men were at the front or held as prisoners of war, women gained unusual independence and liberties, yet also had to perform traditionally 'male' tasks, a development echoed in the 'rubble films' of the immediate post-war period, which often featured independent female characters before the conservative backlash characterising 1950s German society.

In the rubble films, it is the female protagonist, most famously Hildegard Knef's Susanne in *The Murderers Are Among Us*, who actively tackles the coming to terms with the past, suggesting that it can be overcome. As a concentration camp survivor, Susanne is identified as a victim of National Socialism, rather than presented as a possible female perpetrator. In the 1950s, the successful, but controversial role choices and public persona of Hildegard Knef, who came to stand for female independence and an open and confident relationship to sexuality, stirred up German society, revealing its confines.

Most of Knef's films of the time are diametrically opposed to the genre films that dominated German cinema in the 1950s, such as the *Sissi* trilogy, which combines elements of the Heimatfilm and the melodrama, placing the female protagonist at the centre of a consoling, escapist fantasy located in the safe context of an idealised past. In the *Sissi* films,

the Austro-Hungarian empire functions as an alternative vision of Germany, the enormous success of the trilogy suggesting that it tapped into a deep-seated longing among Germans for a new source of national identity and even pride: the films' endings are structured around public celebrations of the royal couple employing highly charged symbols such as the German national anthem. A typical melodrama in that it foregrounds the heroine's noble suffering, the film targeted the overwhelmingly female audience of the 1950s by inviting identification with the semi-tragic fairytale princess and confirming the role of mother as woman's true vocation that echoes the ideological climate of the time.

Romy Schneider's charismatic performance brings the films to life, endowing the character with exuberance and simultaneous sincerity, while her beauty is optimally set in scene through costuming. Due to the popularity of the trilogy not only in Germany, but in the whole of Europe, Romy Schneider emerged as a model of innocent German femininity untainted by the Nazi past. The Sissi character is constructed as a symbol for a new Germany, signalling to viewers at home and abroad the country's commitment to humanism and pacifism. Actresses like Romy Schneider and Hildegard Knef thus play a central role in post-war cinema, which, although rightly criticised for its dubitable artistic value, had a crucial psychological function in recreating German national identity in the wake of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

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xxxviii "nationalsozialistische Ideal der Weiblichkeit: die große, arbeitssame nordisch-blonde [...] umringt von Kindern am Herd"

xxxix "hoffnungslose, kalte Vernunft"

xl "mit einem einzigen Stich, direkt ins Herz"

xli "Ein Karibe, ein Kreole, was auch immer, direkt aus dem Mittelalter"

xlii "bereue es nicht"

xliii "Nächte ohne Liebe [...] die sollte es gar nicht geben"

xliv "Mein Wahlspruch ist: alles ist erlaubt, was gefällt"

xlv "Ich weiss, es wird einmal ein Wunder geschehen"

xlvi "Und dann?"

xlvii "wir haben nicht das Recht, zu richten"

xlviii "wir haben die Pflicht, Anklage zu erheben, Sühne zu fordern im Auftrage Millionen unschuldig hingemordeter Menschen"

xlix "einserseits als 'erfrischend echt' [...] gilt, [...] jedoch andererseits mit Erlösermetaphern konnotiert ist"

l "Kampf um die Neuformierung des Geschlechterdiskurses zu Beginn der Adenauer-Ära"

li "fällt sie seit 1946 aus der Zeit, in der sie sich gerade befindet. Der Trümmernädchen-Figur aus den 1940ern ist der Verfall bereits eingeschrieben, denn die Trümmer selbst sind flüchtig"

lii "alle ihre Fähigkeiten präsentieren kann: [...] ihre Souveränität, ihren erwachsenen Sexappeal [...] Endlich ist [Deutschland] auf Hildegard Knef's Höhe angekommen."

liii "mit der Gründung der Bundesrepublik im Jahr 1949 setzt eine restaurative Phase ein, die auf allen kulturellen Gebieten die in der Nachkriegszeit vorherrschende Aufbruchsstimmung konterkariert"

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- liv “die Illustrierten, die Unterhaltungsmusik und die Filme der fünfziger Jahre [wiesen] nicht geringe Ähnlichkeiten zu jenen der dreißiger Jahre auf.”
- lv “Konsumlandschaften”
- lvi “die Entrücktheit aus der modernen in die fiktionale Welt der »guten alten Zeiten«, der imaginierten k.u.k.-Idylle und eine idealisierte Landschaft aus Bergen, Wäldern und Seen”
- lvii “versprach den zeitgenössischen Zuschauern hauptsächlich Genuss”
- lviii “seine visuellen Attraktionen [drängen] oft die Handlung [...] in den Hintergrund”
- lix “alternatives Modell der Männlichkeit”
- lx “das traditionelle Merkmale wie Standfestigkeit, innere Stärke und Willenskraft mit eher ‘weiblichen’, ‘weichen’ Tugenden wie Emotionalität, Mitgefühl und Fähigkeit zur romantischen Liebe verbindet”
- lxi “hättest [...] dich wirklich nicht schämen müssen”
- lxii “überstrahlt [...] die Mittelmässigkeit”
- lxiii “zu Recht lieben die Menschen dich dafür”
- lxiv “allegorische Verarbeitung der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit und der Schuldfrage in der BRD und Österreich”
- lxv “eine Tochter, die die familiäre Last trägt, die der Vatergeneration zu schwer geworden ist. Zugleich kann sie, die Unschuldige, die deutsche Nation symbolisieren, sie wieder international hoffähig machen und über alle Schuld- und Schamgefühle hinwegtrösten.”
- lxvi “dem deutschen Publikum in den Jahren der Neuorientierung und des Ausbaus ein gerüttelt Maß an identifikatorisch geeignetem Material.”
- lxvii “trotz kleidsamer Reifröcke und stattlicher Uniformen sofort als Träger mentaler Dispositionen der fünfziger Jahre zu erkennen sind.”
- lxviii “vorübergehende Verschiebungen in der bundesdeutschen Familienstruktur abbildet”
- lxix “Regiment der Mütter”
- lxx “zutiefst humane[ ] Gesinnung”
- lxxi “die Mutter des Kaisers, Befürworterin von Todesurteilen und Kriegen [...] hat an Sissis Neigung zu Verständnis und Toleranz, und ihrem diplomatischen Feingefühl, wenig Freude [...] Es ist unübersehbar, dass ein neues friedfertiges System im Begriff ist, ein altes grausames System abzulösen.”
- lxxii “die Ethik der Entmilitarisierung, die mit der Schlüsselfigur Sissi verbunden ist, bestimmt so deutlich den Handlungsablauf, dass dies gerade den kriegsmüden Zuschauern im Nachkriegskino nicht verborgen geblieben sein dürfte”
- lxxiii “die Gleichsetzung der jungen Schauspielerin mit der zum Fantasiebild modellierten Prinzessin”
- lxxiv “die Personen, ihre Gefühle und ihre Beziehungen zueinander bilden den [...] Fokus des Interesses. Es geht um den Konflikt zwischen den Wünschen (nach Liebe) und den Widerständen (die Pläne der Mütter, die Zwänge des Hofes [...]) die durch den rudimentären Plot aus dem Weg geräumt werden.”
- lxxv “kleine perfekte Hausfrau”
- lxxvi “Ich war bei uns zuhause [...] glücklich, vielleicht glücklicher als ihr alle hier! Ich denke gar nicht daran, ein anderes Leben zu führen als bisher! Ich will frei leben, ohne Zwang!”
- lxxvii “War ich eigentlich jemals glücklich?”
- lxxviii “die Erlösungsphantasie, die die von einer tödlichen Krankheit genesene junge Kaiserin als sich selbst opfernden, weisen Friedensengel ins Bild setzt”
- lxxix “Ich wusste nicht, ob ich in diesem Leben mein Kind noch einmal sehen würde, und ich war so glücklich darüber.”



**Part II:**  
**Case Studies of Contemporary German Actresses**





Figure 20:  
Nina Hoss in *Yella* (2007)

## Chapter Three

### Nina Hoss: The First Lady of German Arthouse Film

#### The Face of Social Critique: Career Trajectory and Screen Persona

The actress Nina Hoss, born in 1975 in Stuttgart, is a key figure within contemporary German cinema. While she has made a number of high-budget mainstream films, such as the African-set melodrama *Die weiße Massai* (*The White Masai*) (dir. Hermine Hungeburth, 2005) and the World War II drama *Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin* (*A Woman in Berlin*) (dir. Max Färberböck, 2008), Hoss is primarily associated with the socially critical art films of the Berlin School. She has starred in six productions directed by Christian Petzold, three of which were released in the cinema, as well as taking the lead role in *Gold* (2013) by Thomas Arslan, another director associated with the Berlin School.

In an article for the German weekly *Die Zeit*, Peter Kümmel explains that Hoss “plays borderline personalities in a borderline society. She is the angel, the ‘Star-Money’<sup>11</sup> of a country that lingers in a standby mode of depression and weariness”<sup>lxxx</sup> (2007). Defining her as a figure on which societal misgivings are projected, Kümmel sums up Hoss’s central role in contemporary German art film, which functions as a forum of social commentary, like Weimar cinema and the New German Cinema had done before it. Hoss is at the heart of a

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<sup>11</sup> Star Money is the titular character of one of Grimms’ fairy tales: a poor, orphaned girl who gives away her last possessions and is rewarded with gold coins raining from the sky.

resurgent cinema that in its mode of production, as well as through the stories it tells, reflects the massive changes Germany witnessed after its reunification and upon entering a globalised economy. The 2007 film *Yella* (dir. Christian Petzold) addresses the threat of unemployment and social uprooting in an increasingly harsh economic climate, while her character's situation in the drama *Das Herz ist ein dunkler Wald (The Heart is a Dark Forest)* (dir. Nicolette Krebitz, 2007) highlights persistent institutional and mental barriers that stand in the way of female equality in the workplace and in relationships.

Hoss's performance in *Yella*, in which she plays a woman from a small eastern German town who fails to build a life in the West, is the part that has brought her the most critical recognition to date. Hoss won the Silver Bear for Best Actress at the Berlin International Film Festival for this performance, reviewers praising her sobriety and minimalist acting style, which is ideally suited to the character. Hoss herself states that she seeks to avoid melodramatic acting at all costs, and names Romy Schneider as a role model, particularly her ability to "reduce her face"<sup>lxxxii</sup> (cited in Amend and Hoss, 2007), that is, to express maximum emotion with minimal facial expressions. Trained at Germany's most prestigious drama school, the Schule für Schauspielkunst Ernst Busch in Berlin, which specialises in theatre, Hoss subsequently joined the ensemble of the renowned Deutsches Theater Berlin in 1998 following her graduation, where she remained for the next fifteen years. Hoss then moved to another Berlin Theatre, the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, in 2013. Having combined her film roles with these continuous theatre engagements, her reputation is that of a skilled performer, who is associated with a distinct acting style.

Hoss has developed a notably consistent screen persona stretching across mainstream and art films, "typically portray[ing] icy beauties whose steely exterior often hides emotional vulnerability", as Hans-Michael Bock (2009, p. 216) aptly notes. Her acting and role choices come together to create this distinctive screen persona: she usually stars in dramas, rather than comedies, and she has repeatedly played characters with psychological problems (for example in 'Schwestern' ('Sisters'), an episode of the TV series *Bloch* (dir. Edward Berger, 2002) and in the feature film *Hannah* (dir. Erica von Moeller, 2006)) or people who find themselves in life-threatening situations, such as her character in the war film *A Woman in Berlin*. In most of Hoss's collaborations with director Christian Petzold, her characters are distinguished by emotional restraint which is a response to economic hardship, personal trauma, and romantic relationships that are a locus of dishonesty and distrust, rather than providing comfort or security: in *Toter Mann (Something to Remind Me)* (2002), the sister of

Leyla (Hoss) was murdered and the character she comes closest to is the very man who killed her, as Leyla plots revenge. Similarly, in *Wolfsburg* (2003), Hoss plays a single mother who falls in love with the man who killed her son in a hit-and-run accident. In *Jerichow* (2008), her character is trapped in a marriage of convenience and her love affair with another man is doomed to fail because of the pair's material poverty and emotional numbing.

Hoss first became associated such distant, but delicate female figures after starring in the 1996 production *Das Mädchen Rosemarie (A Girl Called Rosemarie)* (dir. Bernd Eichinger), in which she plays Rosemarie Nitribitt, a high-class prostitute whose murder in 1957 at the age of 24 was never resolved. The brainchild of prominent German film producer Bernd Eichinger, the film was part of a series of TV-remakes of 1950s German cinematic releases commissioned for the commercial broadcaster Sat.1. Made on a generous budget of four million DM, the film was seen as a calculated success, “recycling a story with wide audience appeal, set in scene by established professionals”<sup>lxxxii</sup> (Rother, 2009, p. 47). Reviewers criticised the “pedestrian mise-en-scène”<sup>lxxxiii</sup> (ibid), but insisted that Hoss's performance lifted it out of mediocrity. Frank Junghänel in his review states that *A Girl Called Rosemarie* would be a “polished, but empty product [...] if it wasn't for lead actress Nina Hoss”<sup>lxxxiv</sup> (1996), while Kai Strittmatter explains that “Eichinger has made a melodrama, and Nina Hoss acts out every nuance of it: scheming, lewd, cold, despairing”<sup>lxxxv</sup> (1996).

If this film launched Hoss's career and brought her into the spotlight of the media, her most commercially successful cinema releases to date are Doris Dörrie's 2002 comedy *Nackt (Naked)*, which attracted more than 900,000 viewers in Germany (FFA, n.d.(a)) and the abovementioned *The White Masai*, which was the most watched German film of 2005 with 2.156,934 viewers (FFA, n.d.(b)). Other ambitious mainstream productions Hoss has starred in, such as *A Woman in Berlin* and the 2010 vampire film *Wir sind die Nacht (We Are the Night)* (dir. Dennis Gansel) were less successful, attracting only 158,391 (FFA, n.d.(c)) and 106,318 viewers (FFA, n.d.(d)), respectively and thereby failing to recoup their 12.5 and 6.5 million euro budgets. However, these box office failures did not prove detrimental to Hoss's career: her 2012 film *Barbara*, the actress's fifth collaboration with Christian Petzold, garnered a level of critical and popular acclaim unprecedented for an art film by a director associated with the Berlin School.

With a career that has already spanned nearly two decades and a reputation as a skilled performer who is both a fixture of German art house cinema and has acted in commercially successful mainstream films, Hoss is an ideal subject for studying not only

questions of acting, performance and film stardom in German cinema, but also the thematic specificity of contemporary German film. Therefore, in the following chapter, I will discuss Hoss's films *A Girl Called Rosemarie*, *Yella*, *The Heart is a Dark Forest*, *A Woman in Berlin*, *Barbara* and *Gold*, tracking both the formation of her acting style and distinct screen persona, and highlighting key issues relating to German history, society and politics, and female representation in 2000s German cinema. Hoss's status as a domestic film star prompts a number of questions I seek to answer such as: how can her public or 'star'-image be characterised?, or: how does the German media approach popular German actors in comparison to Hollywood actors, who set the standards for film stardom?

### **Mise-en-scène and Performance in *A Girl Called Rosemarie* (1996)**

*A Girl Called Rosemarie* lends itself well to an analysis of the interplay between film acting, camerawork and mise-en-scène, since critics drew a clear distinction between Hoss's accomplished performance in the film and the effective, but unimaginative cinematography. This distinction is a crucial one within the scholarly discussion of film acting, since film performance is a complex construct authored not only by the actor him- or herself, but also through framing, editing and music. Paul McDonald insists that "any study of film acting needs first and foremost to be aware of the medium. Film acting is as much a product of camera angles, camera movements, lighting, editing, and music as it is of the actor's voice and body" (1998, p. 30). This trade-off between filmic means and the work of the actor is particularly evident in *A Girl Called Rosemarie*. While reviewers consistently stress Hoss's fine performance in the film, the mise-en-scène with its bold use of editing, close-ups, music and costume is equally instrumental in provoking the viewer's engagement with Rosemarie's fate. This performance reflects Hoss's abovementioned admiration for Romy Schneider's 'reduced face', which she apparently sought to emulate. Rother observes that Hoss's "gestures are minimal, her facial expression controlled"<sup>lxxxvi</sup> (2009, pp. 52-53). Indeed, Hoss's performance in the film is dominated by a single look on her face that recurs throughout the film: an expression of cold defiance. *A Girl Called Rosemarie* begins by recounting Rosemarie's stays at a workhouse and with foster parents, before she enters Frankfurt high society by pursuing an affair with entrepreneur Konrad Hartog (Heiner Lauterbach). When Hartog ends the affair in order not to endanger his engagement, Rosemarie agrees to a scheme by French businessman Fribert (Mathieu Carrière), who proposes to blackmail Hartog and his business partners. She records audiotapes when receiving the men at her home, which would

ruin their reputation if published, and which Fribert intends to use as leverage.

One of the film's most powerful scenes is set in the workhouse. A warden, whom Rosemarie had bitten in the arm in order to keep him from confiscating her shoes, brings the teenage protagonist to her cell. Unexpectedly, he brutally hits her in the face. She recovers surprisingly quickly, and rather than trying to shield herself from him, provocatively faces him and unbuttons her blouse. Here Hoss for the first time presents the aggressive, defiant look that will recur throughout the film. Slightly lowering her eyelids, and fixing him with a stern gaze, she gives the impression of being in complete control of the situation. The man hits her a second time, catapulting her onto the bed. Again, she quickly regains her composure, this time slowly pulling up her skirt as a calculated provocation, piercing him with the same disdainful look. Hoss employs this look in key scenes in which Rosemarie needs to demonstrate her strength to her antagonists. She uses it to hide her desperation when Hartog tells her he is going to leave her; she uses it when denying the Fribert the audiotapes, which she wants to use for her own ends, and she uses it in confronting Hartog and his fiancée at the end of the film (see fig. 21-24).



**Figures 21-24: Rosemarie's typical cold, disdainful look. Above left: in the prison cell, Above right: with Hartog; Below left: confronting Fribert, Below right: at the party preceding her death**

Extensive close-ups are used most effectively to heighten dramatic tension in the scene depicting Rosemarie's encounter with Hartog's fiancée – her rival to Hartog's affections, to whom she has irrevocably lost him at this point. Rosemarie appears uninvited at a party given for the pair on the night she is murdered. Watching the fireworks outside in a moment of solemn solitude, Rosemarie suddenly becomes aware of the couple's presence. The camera pans around her head in a close shot, resting briefly on her face before the film cuts to a close shot of the fiancée (Katja Flint). In this scene, Flint's character gives a benevolent smile, whereby she appears kind and maternal. Her expression is further softened by the fact that her face is in the shade, since she is placed in a dark corner in the back of the room (see fig. 26). Hoss as Rosemarie, on the other hand, is lit directly from the side (see fig. 25). She bears the stern look on her face that the viewers have seen at many occasions throughout the film. The unnaturally light colour of her hair and Hoss's pale complexion reinforce the impression of Rosemarie as a distanced, stylised figure apt at hiding her emotions. The specific look created for the character, together with camera perspective and lighting here complement Hoss's portrayal of Rosemarie.



**Figures 25&26: Physical attributes, hairstyle and lighting reinforce the characterisation of Rosemarie (left) as emotionally detached as opposed to Hartog's sympathetic fiancée (right)**

Hoss's performance in this scene is also enhanced through editing, sustaining an argument advanced by Carl Plantinga who discusses the ways in which the framing of the human face induces viewers to engage with filmic characters. Plantinga adopts a cognitivist approach, seeking to explain the way we are affected by films by considering spectators' mental processes. He is convinced that faces on film are depicted in such a way as to “not only *communicate*[ ] information about emotion”, but to also “*elicit*[ ] an emotional response” [emphasis in original] (1999, p. 248), thus strengthening the film's appeal to the viewer. Rosemarie's confrontation with Hartog and his fiancée is an example of classic point-of view



editing, a technique which “communicates information about emotion in an efficient and powerful way” (Plantinga, 1999, p. 241). This sequence of shots, Plantinga explains, juxtaposes “a shot of the character’s face” with a “point/object shot” (ibid) depicting what the character sees, namely the object of his or her emotion. After we have identified what Rosemarie sees – the couple sitting at the bar – the camera rests on her face for a considerable time, then quickly cuts to the fiancée, and back to Rosemarie again twice. As Plantinga explains, “close-ups of the protagonist’s faces are often shown for much longer than would be necessary for merely communicating emotion” (ibid, p. 244): “empathy is a process that occurs in time, and emotions take time to catch. Therefore, the faces are either left on the screen for sufficient duration, or else we continually return to them” (ibid, p. 250). The editing of the party scene maximises our emotional engagement with Rosemarie by inviting us to share her sense of defeat and loss as Hartog publicly displays his commitment to another woman.

Plantinga also points out that whether or not an emotional scene moves the viewer greatly depends on its narrative context. He explains that “films often attempt to elicit an empathetic response [...] after the protagonist has undergone some trial or sacrifice” or “has neared the end of her or his life” (ibid, p. 253). This dynamic also motivates the party scene. It takes place after Rosemarie has surrendered the audiotapes, and thus the control over her prominent customers. Her hope to win Hartog for herself is shattered, and most viewers anticipate her impending death. They are likely to be familiar with her story, which is one of the most famous unresolved murder cases in post-war Germany. The effect of the long close-up of Rosemarie at the party is therefore particularly strong because viewers have witnessed her failed strife for wealth and an affectionate partner, and because they know that her proud appearance at the party is the last triumph before her death. Hoss tangibly renders Rosemarie’s isolation and desperation, hidden under a mask of detachment and defiance, while the film’s effective use of editing, close-ups, costume and music complements her portrayal of the character.

### **The ‘Star-as-Performer’: Reflecting Attitudes towards Stardom in Germany**

*A Girl Called Rosemarie* proved seminal for Nina Hoss not only because her performance was approved by critics, but also because it served to launch her career. The film’s promotion constituted a deliberate attempt to build up a young actress, which is unusual in the German film industry. The marketing and reception of the film reflects the ambivalent attitude

towards film stardom in Germany, which was mapped out on the person of Nina Hoss. *A Girl Called Rosemarie* attracted 8.8 million viewers at its first broadcast, a figure that rewarded the producers' ambitious publicity strategy. Hoss was present in all newspapers and women's magazines as well as talk shows, being celebrated as Germany's "film star of tomorrow"<sup>lxxxvii</sup> (Erdtmann, 1996). A journalist remarks that "Hoss was already sitting in talk shows before she had been [on the screen] [...] for a single minute"<sup>lxxxviii</sup> (Junghänel, 1996). In his article 'German Stars of the 1990s', Malte Hagener recounts how

Eichinger deliberately refused to cast an established actress in the title role, but instead chose the newcomer Nina Hoss, still in acting school at the time. The film's considerable promotion concentrated on the 'star is born' aspect of Hoss, in a conscious attempt at a 'star launch' (2002, p. 102).

It was one of the rare occasions that saw the German film and TV industry, in which "no star *system* exists" [emphasis in original] (ibid, p. 100) seeking to build up an actress. After the broadcast of the film, "offers for film parts, offers to host talk shows and offers in fashion and advertising hit Hoss like a monsoon rain"<sup>lxxxix</sup> (Focus, 1996), as one journalist describes Hoss's popularity. Rather than taking up one of the numerous parts offered to her, Hoss withdrew from the public sphere after the hype around *Rosemarie* and appeared in productions of the renowned Deutsches Theater Berlin in East Berlin. She is convinced that she could not have realised her ambitions as a theatre actress with her portfolio created by *Rosemarie* alone: "they wouldn't have given me a chance at the theatre [...] I would have been the TV bunny. My training allowed me to get past the cliché"<sup>xc</sup> (in Jauer, 2005). This statement sustains an observation by Hollinger, who points to a long tradition among scholars and actors themselves to portray stage acting as "the more sustained exercise in acting skills and commitment, the place where live performance offers the actor the ideal environment for perfecting his or her craft" (2006, p. 5). Hagener confirms that this view is particularly popular in Germany. "There is [...] a persistent bias in Germany towards ranking theatre work more highly than film or TV" (2002, p. 99), which suggests that Hoss was well advised to continue her training.

Although quitting acting school was never an option for Hoss, journalists repeatedly interpret the fact that she finished her training as an indicator of her integrity, reasonability and foresight, characterising her as someone who knows her craft, as opposed to being an ineffectual celebrity. An article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* for example stated that "young [Nina] Hoss wasn't seduced or misled by the success, but continued her training"<sup>xci</sup> (Dössel, 2008). Similarly, in his article 'The Anti-Diva' (2007), Oliver Fuchs writes that

she [was] on top of the game, smiling at us from all the magazine covers, and she could have continued riding on the 'Eichinger-event-movie ticket' for a while. Instead, she decided to finish acting school and then go into [...] theatre. Coke parties and photo sessions in the Caribbean somehow wouldn't have suited her<sup>xcii</sup>.

Another critic speaks of detecting “these ‘American moments’ of [...] perfection”<sup>xciii</sup> in her which she could have “disappeared into”<sup>xciv</sup>, but did not (Kümmel, 2007). From these quotes, one can observe an attitude towards actors in Germany defined by an opposition to the excessive and shallow stardom associated with American stars in Hollywood, who are seen to define themselves merely by their impeccable looks and exalted lifestyle. This impression is sustained by Hoss’s agent Mechthild Holter, who points out that there is “a deep-seated suspicion regarding stardom in Germany” (in Hagener, 2002, p. 100), with “the belief [...] remain[ing] widespread that a star is a shallow individual chasing after (transitory) fame” (ibid). Hoss could establish herself as a character actress because she rightly judged the importance the German film industry places on actor training. After *Rosemarie* had generated interest in her, the information about her theatrical training allowed the media to perpetuate an image of German actors as skilled craftspeople closely related to the prestigious art form of the theatre, as opposed to vain Hollywood stars.

In her article ‘Re-examining stardom: questions of texts, bodies and performance’ (2000), Christine Geraghty introduces a classification of film actors that can be applied to Hoss’s public image. Geraghty establishes the categories of ‘star as celebrity’, ‘star as professional’ and ‘star as performer’. The first includes public personalities “whose fame rests overwhelmingly on what happens outside the sphere of their work and who is famous for having a lifestyle” (2000, p. 187) – precisely the sort of figure whom the journalists from major German newspapers praising Nina Hoss would look upon with disdain. The second group includes actors about whose private life little is known and whose public persona seems to blend in with their on-screen characters. In the case of Nina Hoss, there is considerable consistency across her screen roles. As mentioned above, she typically portrays stern, but brittle young women. However, this typical ‘Hossian’ figure is not conflated with her own personality. Hoss, whom Bock describes as “one of Germany’s most acclaimed [...] actresses of the new century” (2009, p. 217), therefore fits best into the third category. Her image is that of a ‘star-as-performer’, which, according to Geraghty, is “defined by work and is often associated with the high cultural values of theatrical performance” (2000, p. 188). Her representation in the media is based on the respect and prestige she has gained through her status as an actress in a major German theatre. Geraghty explains that the ‘star-as-

performer' is identified by his or her skill and demonstration of a distinct acting style or technique. She names method acting as a key example. "The method', developed by Lee Strasberg, constitutes an approach to acting asking the actor to draw heavily upon his or her own emotions to create a particularly 'realistic' performance, whereby the audience is "promise[d] that every gesture and grimace carries meaning in terms of character if not of narrative" (Geraghty, 2000, p. 193).

Nina Hoss's acting style could not be further removed from method acting and its heavy reliance on emotion. Instead, it is precisely her minimalist acting style that distinguishes her performances, as the reviews discussed above suggest. A closer look at Hoss's acting training provides clues as to how she developed this performance style. Hoss explains that the Ernst Busch Academy takes an approach "opposite to method acting"<sup>xcv</sup> (in Rother, 2009, p. 30). Steve Earnest explains that the school's approach to acting is indebted to the "non-emotional acting style" (2001, p. 36) associated with playwright Bertold Brecht. Convinced that "theatre is one means of creating the consciousness" (Benedetti, 2005, p. 187) that will produce social change, Brecht developed the concept of 'epic theatre' as a political tool. For Brecht, the actor should not only avoid being "emotionally involved", but have "a critical attitude towards the character and suggest that he could have behaved otherwise. That is 'epic acting' " (ibid, p. 190). By retaining an emotional distance from the character, the actor also denies audience an emotional attachment to them, inviting spectators to look at the character's actions and circumstances more critically. In her training, Hoss was therefore encouraged to adopt a minimalist, rather than a melodramatic acting style and to avoid channelling her own feelings into the portrayal of her characters: Hoss explains that she learned "the craft [of acting]. Maybe sometimes too much of it. As for the emotional, we had to find it for ourselves"<sup>xcvi</sup> (cited in Rother, 2009, p. 30). The principle of emotional restraint and detachment she encountered in her acting training has shaped Hoss's acting style, and is also evident in her 2007 films *Yella* and *The Heart is a Dark Forest*. These dramas are particularly apt in linking the aspirations and problems of Hoss's protagonists to wider social and economic developments in contemporary Germany, and explore issues of gender equality, motherhood and sexuality.

### ***Yella* (2007) and *The Heart is a Dark Forest* (2007): Exploring Working Women and Motherhood in Reunified Germany**

*Yella*, the third collaboration between Nina Hoss and director Christian Petzold, explores

gender images and women's aspirations a reunified Germany in the face of globalisation and neoliberalism. Hoss plays Yella, who leaves her hometown Wittenberge in eastern Germany for a lack of job perspectives to take up a promising position in Hannover instead. This narrative premise, as Anke S. Biendarra observes, "zeroes in on a theme that is at the heart of neoliberal capitalism and becomes one of the foci of the film: mobility" (2011, p. 467). Yella heeds the call for flexibility and mobility demanded by the neoliberalist economy and appears to succeed against all odds in the hostile business environment of private equity until her blackmailing of a client destroys her prospects. I want to argue that while the film provides an effective social commentary, it does take an ambiguous stance towards the idea of a successful working woman. The heroine's possible professional and romantic fulfilment are ultimately presented as inseparable, as the film represents the heroine as a Romantic, mythical creature whose fate is bound up with the man she desires.

The film is based on a realistic premise, however: the chronic shortage of high-profile jobs, which has prompted many young women to leave eastern Germany after unification. Director Christian Petzold states: "Cinema sees things that have not yet been registered empirically. You could feel that women were leaving East Germany, long before it appeared in the press" (cited in Peitz, 2007). Petzold and his fellow filmmakers of the Berlin School often seek to capture the "lonely landscapes of the East" (Peitz, 2007), regions that have witnessed a steady exodus especially of young and highly qualified workers, who seek their fortunes in bigger cities, often in western Germany. Great optimism prevailed among eastern Germans after the unification, fuelled by then chancellor Kohl's famous promise of transforming the *neue Länder*<sup>12</sup> (new states) into "blossoming landscapes"<sup>xcvii</sup> (Kohl, 1990). However, their hopes for prosperity upon becoming part of the capitalist economy of western Germany were often disappointed.

Between 1991 and 2005, 900 billion euros of transfer payments flew from western to eastern Germany in order to realise the ambitious goal to economically assimilate the five *neue Länder* to those of the FRG. New businesses were founded, modern factories built by external investors, former GDR workshops were overhauled and privatised (Ragnitz, 2009). However, unemployment rose dramatically, since the new, modern production facilities needed considerably less manpower. Lacking a business infrastructure like West Germany, with major corporations and firms engaged in research and development being sparse, the

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<sup>12</sup> The former GDR territory was converted into five new states: Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Sachsen, Sachsen-Anhalt and Thüringen.

five new Länder still had an unemployment rate of 13 percent in 2008, which is twice as high as in western Germany (ibid). Young women in particular, who are often more highly qualified than men of their age, therefore often seek work in western Germany. Statistics show that there is a disproportionately high percentage of young men in many eastern German Landkreise (districts), pointing to a “selective migration”<sup>xcviii</sup> of young women (Allmendinger, 2008, p. 65). And indeed, almost two thirds of the people that have left eastern Germany since 1991 are women (ibid).

*Yella* provides a filmic exploration of these women’s plights, the titular character’s move to Hannover “echoing the unidirectional movement of German unification” (Abel, 2013, p. 93). In an interview, Petzold characterises *Yella* as a ‘fortune seeker’, who has to leave her “home, because she can’t make a living there anymore” (Graham and Petzold, 2008). Making *Yella* a citizen of Wittenberge, Petzold takes into account the city’s reputation as a symbol of the economic demise of the GDR and eastern Germany in the wake of reunification (see Bude, Medicus and Willisich, 2011). Hosting three large factories that produced sewing machines, oil and cellulose, Wittenberge had been one of the GDR’s industrial centres. However, the population decreased from more than 32,000 in 1980 to 18,500 in 2010 (Haese, Eckert and Willisich, 2012, p. 55) after 6,000 people lost their job in 1991 alone (ibid, p. 52), when the three factories were closed, as they were no longer profitable. *Yella* thus problematises how reunification fundamentally altered eastern Germans’ lives, as well as the way Germany as a whole is affected by the workings of global capitalism.

*Yella* travels to Hannover to start her new job after surviving an attempt on her life by her delusional ex-husband Ben (Hinnerk Schönemann). Once there, it turns out that she was swindled ruthlessly by her alleged new employer. The new boss is banned from even entering the building of the company, which is bankrupt. *Yella* then meets Philipp (Devid Striesow), who works for a venture capital firm. He asks her to accompany him to one of his business meetings, and *Yella* turns out to be just the cold-blooded businesswoman that he needs to swing negotiations in his favour. Overjoyed, she tells her father on the phone: “I’m well. I’m working!”<sup>xcix</sup>. *Yella* and Philipp become lovers. However, *Yella*’s newfound happiness is not to last. Philipp tells her that he will soon be let off for siphoning off money for an investment of his own, which now is his last hope and for which he needs another 200,000 euros. *Yella* then tries to obtain this money by blackmailing Dr Gunthen (Burkhard Klaußner), their last customer. Gunthen commits suicide and Philipp realises that *Yella* is to

blame. At the end of the film, she once again stands before the ruins of her life.

It is worth considering the car crash sequence – Ben’s attempt to kill Yella and himself – in more detail, before turning to the film’s main action that takes place after Yella’s arrival in Hannover. Yella agrees when Ben offers to take her to the train station. In the car, Yella rejects his pleas that she should return to him. Ben then steers the car off a bridge into a river. Seconds later, in an eerie sequence, Yella, as if sleepwalking, inexplicably emerges from the water, and lies down on the shore for a few seconds with her eyes closed. Ben joins her. Yella then gets up, picks up her bags, which have been cast ashore, and walks away. Soaking wet, she manages to catch the train to Hannover at the last minute. The car crash sequence marks the beginning of two alternative versions of the story. We find out at the end of the film that everything happening afterwards is to be understood as a dream or fantasy: the very last scene shows Yella’s and Ben’s bodies again, lying next to each other on the shore, each with one arm awkwardly stretched out next to their head. However, this time, Yella does not open her eyes. As we might have guessed, she and Ben have actually died in the river, and their bodies were arranged in weirdly symmetric poses by the divers who pulled them out of the water. This twist<sup>13</sup> is central for the interpretation of *Yella*. For, as it becomes clear in the course of the film, Petzold’s narrative shows that even if Yella survives the car crash, there is no future for her: surviving, she goes to Hannover, but only to destroy her own fragile prospects of a job and a new relationship by driving a man into suicide. This twist in the narrative is foreshadowed by the film’s surreal atmosphere, with Ben repeatedly appearing and vanishing again; and Yella being separated by the people surrounding her by sounds that only she can hear and visions that only she can see.

The scene in which Yella comes out of the water is arguably the most striking moment in the film. She does not breathe heavily, nor does she cry or shiver. She is calm and composed, if slightly disoriented, behaving less like a human being, and more like a robot or the ghost she turns out to be in retrospect (see fig. 27). The image of the ghostlike Yella emerging from the water can be seen as representing the process of her becoming spectral, the idea that she leaves behind a part of herself when she leaves her home. She is being “ripped apart, because part of [her] wants to stay and part of [her] has to go” (Graham and Petzold, 2008). This idea of a mental and emotional disintegration of the protagonist is

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<sup>13</sup> The narrative twist in *Yella* is inspired by Herk Harvey’s 1962 horror film *Carnival of Souls*, in which a young woman miraculously emerges from the water after her car had plunged into a river and is subsequently haunted by ghosts, before it is revealed at the end of the film that she actually died in the accident.

central to the film's social critique: it “suggest[s] that globalised, postnational societies governed by neoliberalism increasingly turn the flexible, cooperative, and efficient individuals living in them [...] into zombie-like creatures disenfranchised from themselves and their environment”, their “subjectivity and identity” being shaped by “ghostliness” (Biendarra, 2011, p. 465).



**Figure 27: Yella's ghostlike state after escaping from the water signals her mental and emotional disintegration**

On the river bank, Yella re-awakens into an eerie half-life, to the sound of gurgling water and the cry of a crow. Petzold here employs the classic associations of water as a sign for catharsis and rebirth, and at the same time for death, with the sinister sound of the crow foreboding the bad omen under which Yella starts her new life. Monika Schmitz-Emans sums up the symbolic power of water in mythology and literature: “the path to the otherness of the water realm – or the passage through this realm – in many cultures is associated [...] with [the] passage [...] from life to death. The journey from our world to the other world takes us over the river of death”<sup>c</sup> (2003, p. 38). Schmitz-Emans goes on to explain that “even those who return from the realm of water are not the same person they were before. [...] Next to being associated with death [...] water is also likened to ideas of rebirth. Rebirth is imagined as a passage through the symbolic realm of death”<sup>ci</sup> (ibid), a central biblical image being Christ's baptism in the river Jordan, a “spiritual rebirth in the water”<sup>cii</sup> (ibid). Yella's re-emergence from the water has precisely these ambiguous connotations. She is reborn after the car accident, which constitutes the act of emancipation from her violent and emotionally dependent ex-husband. Thus, on the one hand, the sequence functions as a demonstration of Yella's strength: she is not to be stopped by the psychotic Ben, even when



he tries to kill her. Stubbornly, as if nothing had happened, she catches the train to Hannover as planned. On the other hand, her new life comes at a heavy price. After having experienced the attempt on her life, she appears cold, calculating and ruthless for the rest of the film. Yella has become an undead water woman, and she is associated with water throughout the film.

In her book *Liebe, Tod und Wasserfrau: Mythen des Weiblichen in der Literatur (Love, Death and the Water Woman: Myths of the Feminine in Literature)*, Anna Maria Stuby discusses the figure of the seductive, but fatal water woman or nymph. Common in European myth and poetry, she has a special place in German mythology in the figure of Lorelei (Lore Lay). First mentioned in an 1801 poem by Clemens Brentano, the legend says that Lore Lay drowned herself out of grief over losing her lover. Ever since, she has been sitting on a rock on the river Rhine, luring passing boatmen into their doom by distracting them with beautiful singing and by combing her lustrous long hair. Stuby, who analyses the myth from a feminist perspective, argues that it reflects a long-standing habit of male writers and poets to conceive of women as a duopoly; the saintly Virgin Mary and the evil, seductive Eve. The nymph physically embodies this dichotomy: she draws men to her with her beautiful appearance, but under the water surface lies an ugly fishtail (1992, pp. 51-53). Stuby insists, however, that for all her seductive power, the water woman never finds happiness with the human male. Instead, she is made to suffer bitterly for her transgression: In many variations of the myth, she has to die in one way or another to prove her love for him. A similar narrative is visible in *Yella*. She causes a man's death in a desperate attempt to achieve material security and maintain her new-found love. Yet Petzold's film not only reiterates the motif of woman as other-worldly or inhuman water creature, but complicates it by juxtaposing it with social and economic issues in modern-day Germany that prove to be stumbling blocks for women's self-fulfilment. Foregrounding Yella's determination to work in order to be financially secure and independent, which she pursues with increasing desperation and ruthlessness, the film problematises women's career chances in German society that is deeply affected by the harsh economic climate.

This becomes most palpable in the business meetings in which Philipp and Yella negotiate investments with start-up firms. In one of these scenes, Yella accidentally drops a glass of water, realising with irritation that no-one except her (and the viewer) seems to have heard the sound of breaking glass and splashing water. The men surrounding her obviously continue their conversation. This sequence affirms Yella's status as a ghost or an undead

person, suggesting that she is not actually there, that her presence in Hannover does not exist except in her own mind, or as a scenario played out for the viewer. The scene is typical for the Berlin School of art filmmakers, which seeks to relate an “experience of life” in Germany that is dominated by a feeling of estrangement: “the socially and emotionally transitory spaces that one frequently finds [...] in most of Petzold’s work show contemporary Germany as if from the perspective of a stranger” (Abel, 2008).

This feeling of alienation within one’s own country is grounded in a socio-political turn in Germany around the millennium, which was a reaction to “the economic [...] costs of the reunification” (ibid) and the pressures of an economic environment that is becoming ever more competitive due to globalisation. Elmar Wiesendahl explains that

since unification Germany has entered a period of societal and economic change with an uncertain outcome. The country is struggling with a chronic lack of economic growth, [...] mass unemployment, growing social expenditures, tax losses, household deficits and unlimited national debt. This dramatic situation is owed to a failure to make political adjustments reaching way back into the era of chancellor Kohl<sup>ciii</sup> (2004),

who governed the country from 1982 to 1998. Radical reforms began in 2003, when Gerhard Schröder introduced the controversial ‘Agenda 2010’, a “key project marking a political turning point for the welfare state”<sup>civ</sup> (Wiesendahl, 2004) that envisioned the biggest social reform in the history of the Federal Republic. It entailed comprehensive reforms in the health, pension and labour market sectors aimed at “making the country more competitive in global markets and less inflexible in [...] employment issues” (Hake, 2002, p. 179). They brought decisive cuts in unemployment benefits, leaving even people who had worked for decades with a minimal allowance shortly after they lost their job or requiring them to do social work for a symbolic wage of one euro per hour. Wiesendahl evaluates the reforms as follows: “the reforms undoubtedly show an imbalance to the disadvantage of [...] the sick, the unemployed and older workers and employees. The interests of entrepreneurs and the self-employed on the other hand remained largely untouched”<sup>cv</sup> (2004). The fact that these reforms, which echoed the neoliberal turn in international politics, were introduced by a social-democratic chancellor unsettled many Germans. The general unease was reflected in a debate sparked off by a comment of Schröder’s fellow Social Democrat Franz Müntefering, then head of the party. He likened private equity firms to “a ‘swarm of locusts’ that ‘graze’ on under-priced businesses, lay off employees and then proceed to resell the firm for a sweet profit” (*Spiegel*, 2005). Seeking to maximise their profits at all costs, they are devoid of any

moral conscience.

*Yella* can be read as a filmic exploration of Müntefering's condemnation of modern capitalism. As Biendarra observes, the film "is a first aesthetic attempt to render visible the processes of venture capitalism and the people involved in them in German narrative cinema" (2011, p. 471), the negotiation scenes pitting the visibly nervous, intimidated entrepreneurs against the calm and cold-blooded Philipp and Yella. Hoss herself states that "Yella gets more confident in each scene" (Graham and Hoss, 2008), until she and Philipp deal with their customers as equal partners. During the third negotiation, Philipp wants her to intimidate the entrepreneurs through a gesture they had agreed on before. However, Yella is able to baffle their opponents with hard facts, rather than with a well-rehearsed show. She has a moment of triumph confronting the group of entrepreneurs over manipulating figures in their data, helped by a lesson she learned from her husband's bankruptcy. She notices that their firm calculated 80,000 euros for a network and software it purchased, although its resale value would be less than 2,000 euros. The businessman tries to question her competency, announcing that he cannot follow her argumentation, and asking the other men with a sardonic smile whether they can. Yella does not falter, but backs her argument by referring to the figures she has before her on the computer screen. Next to exposing the merciless logic of venture capitalism, the scene presents her as a woman who is able to stand her ground in a male-dominated corporate sphere.

Yella's triumph is, however, completely revoked by the film's ending. It affirms her status as a ghost or undead person and reveals that her experiences in Hannover were no more than the delusions of her dying self. The day after she has attempted to blackmail Gunthen, Yella, Philipp and Gunthen's business partners have gathered in the meeting room. All wait for Gunthen with increasing impatience in order to seal the deal they agreed on. Yella then suddenly sees him standing in the doorway. He is soaking wet, his eyes are closed, seaweed hangs in his hair. Again, we hear the sound of gurgling water. Immediately realising what happened, Yella rushes to Gunthen's house, asking his wife if there is "water somewhere"<sup>cv</sup>. She then finds Gunthen who drowned himself in a lake behind his garden. The final sequence associates Yella most strongly with water and consequently, with death. Yella, the water woman, thus brought down a man not over not love and lust, but money.

What prompted Yella to blackmail Gunthen in the first place? Her decision results from a confrontation with Philipp, who reacts furiously when he wakes up in the car and

realises that Yella has taken a detour on one of their business trips in order to visit her father. He orders her to stop the car, insisting that

That's not what we agreed on! [...] [S]itting in the living room with your father, trying to make conversation. [...] 'Do you enjoy your work? What do you earn? Does it have a future? Where and how do you want to live? A house with a garage and a green Jaguar, and kids, in the suburbs? Try to understand, that's exactly what I don't want. I'm not interested in that!<sup>cvi</sup>

Yella's impetus to introduce to her father a man she has only known for some weeks, and Philipp's suggestion that Yella, for all her mobility and business acumen, in fact wants to settle down and start a family, undermines her characterisation as an independent working woman. Yella's confrontation with Philipp prompts her to blackmail Gunthen since this is the only option for Yella to maintain not only her financial security, but, crucially, also her relationship with Philipp, demonstrating once more that Yella's professional and romantic future are closely entwined.

The figure of Yella, then, represents an ambiguous stance towards the idea of a successful working woman. On the one hand, she is as capable as Philipp of maintaining her place in the hostile corporate world in which they work, and both are equally affected by its pressures. On the other hand, the fact that the whole film operates under the premise of Yella being an undead water woman who in the end drags a man with her into death perpetuates the male myth of the femme fatale and suggests that her ability to succeed professionally was always only theoretical. As Biendarra correctly observes, Yella never transcends her status as "victim" (2011, p. 475), both as "an inhabitant of a de-industrialised and economically depressed East Germany" (ibid), and as the sole female in a male-dominated business environment in which she fails when trying to outperform her male mentor by using the same ruthless methods. At the same time, it is Yella's very failure that makes the film such a powerful commentary on the ills of contemporary German society and economy, the lack of perspectives for women in eastern Germany and the neoliberal turn in politics, which fuel Yella's conviction that she has to provide for herself at all costs since there is no social net to catch her fall.

While *Yella* explores the economic difficulties following German unification and globalisation, Hoss's next film focuses even more specifically on the situation of women in contemporary Germany, addressing questions of gender roles, motherhood, and female sexuality. Directed by Nicolette Krebitz, *The Heart is a Dark Forest* pays tribute to the stirrings of a rekindled feminism in Germany in face of a social legislation and labour market

structures that belie the equality of women, which has long been taken for granted.

The film begins with a deceptively ordinary morning at the family breakfast table, with Marie (Hoss) feeding her young son. Her husband Thomas (Devid Striesow) is a violinist, Marie gave up her profession as musician to take care of the children. When she follows Thomas to bring him his instrument, she is surprised to find that he enters a family house only a few streets away, which eerily resembles her own. It turns out that Thomas is living a double life with another partner, with whom he also has a child. The film takes place on the day and night after Marie's discovers this, and falls into two distinct parts. The first part shows Marie during the day and the early evening, trying to deal with the shocking discovery. The second part pictures Marie at a fancy dress party at a remote villa, a setting strongly reminiscent of the masked ball sequence in Stanley Kubrick's 1999 film *Eyes Wide Shut*. The two parts can be seen as roughly equivalent to Marie's two separate identities as a mother and wife on the one hand, and as a woman and sexual subject on the other. This ties in with Krebitz's avowed goal to rectify filmic representations of women by male filmmakers as "objects or reduce them to being only mothers" (cited in Jahn, 2009). Krebitz's script highlights the tension and incompatibility of the two, problematising questions of gender equality in Germany and the social, political, and economic issues that relate to it.

Critics have suggested that the film is narratively and stylistically somewhat overwrought, alternating as it does between "social realism, emotional tragedy and mysticism" (Jahn, 2009). While it may not succeed overall, it does draw attention to central issues regarding relationships and family in a society in which women have long been "gleichberechtigt" (equal) according to the German Grundgesetz (Basic Law), which came into effect in 1949. Ending with Marie's murder of her children, *The Heart is a Dark Forest* highlights the tension between her responsibility and duty as a mother on the one side, and as a woman who is unfulfilled and being deceived by her partner, on the other.

Illustrating the discontents of married life and motherhood from the perspective of a female protagonist, and being not primarily plot-driven but focusing instead of the psychological repercussions of Marie's discovery of her husband's infidelity, the film incorporates a number of aspects of women's melodrama, which explores "psychologically focused conflicts" that "touch[] at the heart of discontents concerning patriarchy, the family, and [the] personal and sexual identity" (Landy, 1991, p. 20) of its female protagonists. The domestic setting of *The Heart is a Dark Forest* and its representation of the home reproduces a central melodramatic convention. Marie's literal entrapment in the home represents her

figurative entrapment in the position of housewife and mother who lacks personal and financial independence. Hayward notes that “the melodrama is played out in the home or in small-town environments. Time is made to stand still, suffocating the [...] women” (1996, p. 242). The first half of *The Heart is a Dark Forest* features numerous scenes that show Marie at home, carrying out domestic tasks such as preparing meals for her children, and the lingering bewildered look she casts her son while feeding him suggests that she is questioning the value and meaningfulness of her role as a carer for the children, which Thomas further undermined by proving it to be completely exchangeable. The melodramatic trope of the suburban house as a place of entrapment and suffocation is also taken up in a scene in which Marie spontaneously attempts to suffocate herself and the children by turning up the gas stove and closing the doors and windows in the kitchen, which is thwarted by her daughter. Moreover, the film begins and ends with a static shot of the front of Marie’s and Thomas’s house, framing the events of the film which include Marie fulfilling her mother role by taking care of her children, her venturing to escape this role, and her defeat and return to the house where she ends her life and that of her children. These framing shots call attention to the home as the site of Marie’s entrapment, to which she returns at the end of the film.

As Christine Gledhill explains, “melodrama seeks to move its audience emotionally by an appeal to everyday feelings and experiences that are then magnified in intensity through a complexity of baroque incident and coincidence” (2007, p. 322). In terms of its *mise-en-scène*, melodrama has therefore been associated with the concept of ‘excess’, “a ‘too much’ of music, colour, movement that indicates not simply a heightening of emotion but a substitution for what cannot be admitted in plot or dialogue” (ibid, p. 320). *The Heart is a Dark Forest* notably foregoes this stylistic choice. The film mixes a matter-of-factly and observational aesthetic with anti-realist passages, both of which prevent viewer identification with the characters and showcase Hoss’s minimalist acting style. I want to argue that the film goes beyond a melodramatic representation of female suffering by openly and provocatively addressing the discontents of stay-at-home mothers that melodramas typically only allude to in an indirect manner. Rather than providing an emotionalised representation of Marie’s unhappiness that foregrounds the experience of an individual’s inevitable suffering, the film presents Marie’s existence as stay-at-home-mother despite her education and skills as a symptom of a wider social problem, namely the outmoded gender images and family models and the lack of equal opportunities in the workplace that dominate German society and culture.

The discovery triggering the tragic ending of the film, the fact that the husband is living two variations of the same life, is crucial here. Thomas is not cheating on his wife with a more economically or emotionally independent woman, but has two nearly identical families. This makes his behaviour very unintelligible for the audience, and highlights Marie's redundancy or exchangeability. Director Nicolette Krebitz explains in a interview this was the issue that fascinated her the most about envisioning the film's scenario: "if there is somebody just like you and an entire situation that mirrors your own life, you could just as well be deleted, because you are no longer of any use" (cited in Jahn, 2009). Marie has no life of her own outside her domestic duties. She is apparently well-educated, and has the same profession as her husband. Nonetheless, she becomes a housewife upon the birth of her children, her situation thereby mirroring that of a majority of women in Germany today.

Journalist Heike Faller (2009) observes how girls and young women in Germany are brought up to take gender equality for granted, experiencing it in their education and often faring better in their early career. However, once they enter working life, "young women [begin] to see a sharp discrepancy between the legally guaranteed rights and opportunities their predecessors had won for women and their individual experiences in the workplace and their relationships", as Esther K. Bauer explains (2009, p. 51). They are forced to realise that German society and its labour market is neither ideologically nor structurally open to working mothers. Sociologist Christel Eckhart points out that "the German workplace has 'a lot of catching up to do' with European neighbours like France or Belgium" (cited in Kirchner, 2008), with respect to equal wages and promotion prospects, but especially regarding day care facilities. In 2010, only 23.1 percent of German children under the age of three attended day care, as opposed to, for example, 39 percent in Belgium and 48 percent in France (OECD, 2014, p. 3). The number of German children under three attending day care is thus significantly below the OECD average of 30 percent (ibid), a circumstance that is partly owed to a notorious shortage of places, especially in bigger cities. While a legal entitlement to a day care place for children under the age of one was introduced in 2013, this was coupled with the introduction of the *Betreuungsgeld*, a monthly childcare allowance of 150 euros for those parents who do not put their children in a childcare facility. This was seen by many politicians and sociologists as "the wrong signal to parents about the family roles, discouraging mothers in particular from returning to the labour market" (Janta, 2014, p. 13). Such government decisions reflect the country's "strong[ ] historical attachment to the male breadwinner model" (Lewis, Knijn and Martin, 2008, p. 268), and the fact that childcare

in Germany is still considered primarily the mother's responsibility.

Thus, once couples have children, they tend to fall back into traditional roles. Women often stop working entirely or take part-time jobs, while “employers continue to expect long working hours from fathers” (ibid, p. 270). What is more, German women earn around 20 percent less than their male colleagues. This makes Germany, together with Cyprus, Slovakia and Estonia, one of the countries disadvantaging women the most within Europe (Eurostat, 2008). Meredith Haaf illustrates how insufficient childcare facilities and unequal wages come together to cement the traditional family model:

if, as ever so often, there is no day care place available, the task of supporting the family falls to one partner alone. However much a father would like to stay at home with his child, if his partner earns 1000 euros less in her job, there is no question about who works and who takes care of the children<sup>cviii</sup> (2009).

Statistics confirm this considerable imbalance between men and women in the German labour market. Of those in employment, only 25.2 percent of women with children under the age of eighteen work full time, 69.9 percent work part-time (Keller and Haustein, 2013, p. 871). 29.4 percent of all German women with underage children, however, are stay-at-home mothers not seeking employment (ibid, p. 870). Statistics also indicate that even young women quit their job temporarily or completely once they have children, a circumstance unlikely to change in the future (Hollstein, 2004, p. 176). Sociologist Walter Hollstein points out that a striking two thirds of the women staying at home are dissatisfied living the family model reliant on the single male breadwinner (ibid). This dissatisfaction is articulated in Krebitz's film through the character of Marie. She is given various dialogues with different characters, such as her father (Günther Maria Halmer) and her husband, each highlighting the struggle of a woman entirely devoting herself to her family. They portray the family model relying on the single male breadwinner as ultimately unfulfilling and undesirable.

Marie unexpectedly finds her father in one of the rooms of the villa hosting the masked ball, in front of the fireplace with a glass of brandy. A model of the distant, unfeeling patriarch, he shows no signs of compassion or understanding when Marie tells him about Thomas' other 'wife'. Instead, he congratulates her on her discovery: “now you can watch the idiot spend the rest his life working for your maintenance”<sup>cix</sup> (Krebitz, 2007). Marie sarcastically calls this “a great idea”<sup>cx</sup>, and goes on to gloomily predict that she “will live the same life as my mum. I will be sitting at home depressed and terrorise my children”<sup>cxii</sup>. She expresses similar ideas in one of several conversations with her husband. Separated from the main action, these six scenes are staged as short plays enacted by the couple on a minimalist



theatre stage. Taking place in a spatial and temporal isolation, they function to de-individualise Marie and Thomas and suggest that the characters perform social roles rather than merely express the views of two individuals. Thomas tries to her appease Marie by saying that she is “doing a great job”<sup>cxiii</sup> as a stay-at-home mother, that the children need her and that other women in her situation “manage as well”<sup>cxiii</sup>. Marie stubbornly replies: “then I’m not a woman”<sup>cxiv</sup>, suggesting her unwillingness to conform to the role assigned to her, and insists that she, too, should get a job. These scenes constitute a notable departure from melodramatic depictions of silent female suffering, which express “undischarged emotion [...] in the music and [...] the mise-en-scène” (Nowell-Smith, 1991, p. 117), instead allowing Marie to openly voice her dissatisfaction with the role that her father and husband assign to her. Katherine S. Woodward introduces the concept of the ‘anti-melodrama’ to describe a group of films from the 1970s directed by Jean Godard, Francois Truffaut and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, noting that anti-melodramas use “techniques of distancing the viewer from events portrayed, thus eliciting contemplation rather than emotional identification” (1991, p. 591). The stage scenes in *The Heart is a Dark Forest* fulfil precisely this function, inviting viewers to critically think about the conflicting attitudes towards gender roles and parental responsibilities embodied by Marie and Thomas.

Thus articulating feminist goals through filmic means, Krebitz’s film is part of a development described in an article for the magazine *Spiegel* entitled ‘Neither muse nor madonna’ (2008), which identifies the culture industry as an important motor for a reawakening women’s movement in Germany: “young writers, artists and directors seek to come to terms with their experiences of discrimination as women and mothers and create unusually honest images of womanhood”<sup>cxv</sup> (Dürr, Knöfel and Voigt, 2008, p. 136). In the 2000s, German media witnessed a wave of books and newspaper articles by young women. Carrying titles such as *Wir Alpbamädchen: Warum Feminismus das Leben schöner macht* (*We Alpbagirls: Why Feminism Makes Life Better*) (Haaf, Klingner and Streidl, 2008) or *Neue Deutsche Mädchen* (*New German Girls*) (Hensel and Ratether, 2008), they advocate a ‘new feminism’. It is a ‘new’ feminism in that it seeks to distinguish itself from the approach of second wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, whose main proponent in Germany was journalist and author Alice Schwarzer. Her brand of feminism is nowadays often dismissed as “sweeping, undifferentiated” (McCarthy, 2009a, p. 24), “moralistic”<sup>cxvi</sup> (Musall, Wellershoff and Weingarten, 1999) and “bitter” (Bauer, 2009, p. 51). Schwarzer saw women in Germany as “victims of a patriarchal society” (ibid, p. 53), which was to be revolutionised by the

women's movement. Invaluable as her achievements are, she held a "radically feminist worldview"<sup>cxvii</sup> (Musall, Wellershoff and Weingarten, 1999), conceiving of men "only as perpetrators [...], not as partners, let alone fathers"<sup>cxviii</sup>(*ibid*). Young women today, on the other hand, do not pit women against men or childless women against stay-at-home mothers. Instead, they "espouse a feminism that is less interested in a general critique of male-dominated society than in helping women deal directly with sexuality and their everyday lives" (Kirchner, 2008).

*The Heart is a Dark Forest* features precisely this preoccupation with female sexuality and offers precisely the 'honest images of womanhood' mentioned by Dürr, Knöfel and Voigt. This is most apparent in the masked ball sequence, which adds another dimension to the film. Inspired by Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) (which is in turn an adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler's novella *Traumnovelle (Dream Story)* (1926)), this sequence explores the themes of repressed desire and fantasies, sexuality and the body. Marie decides to go to the theme party, where her husband is playing in order to confront him. Like Bill Harford (Tom Cruise), the protagonist of *Eyes Wide Shut*, Marie experiences the masked ball as a place where her sexual fantasies, which fell by the wayside in her everyday married life, are revived. She is wearing high heels and the flashy blue dress she had been sporting already at breakfast, which then totally failed to catch her husband's attention. At the ball, however, Jonathan (Marc Hosemann), a handsome young man, spots her among the other guests, his looks signalling his interest.

The motif of the masquerade is very prominent in this sequence. Many party guests wear masks, and Marie herself sports a big, curly blond wig that completes her transformation from insecure stay-at-home mother into a sexually confident vamp (see fig. 28&29). The concept of masquerade has been employed by Mary Ann Doane in her essay 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the female spectator' (1982). She therein questions the notion of 'the feminine' or 'female identity'. Her essay was influenced by Laura Mulvey's seminal article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in which Mulvey argues that female characters in classic Hollywood films are defined by their 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (1975, p. 11): Prompting the viewer to take on a "male gaze" (*ibid*), the films reduce female characters to passive objects of male desire and action. Since the woman is "associated with the surface of the image rather than its illusory depths" (Doane, 1982, p. 76), women in the audience are placed in a position "too close to [themselves], entangled in [their] own enigma" (*ibid*, pp. 75-76). They are denied the ability to retain a distance that would allow them to see the

female character on the screen as a person possessing thoughts and feelings, rather than a spectacular, but hollow erotic object: “women are body” (ibid, p. 79), the woman “*is* the image” (ibid, p. 78). Doane takes the example of Marlene Dietrich, who stylised herself as “an excess of femininity” (ibid, p. 82), self-consciously demonstrating the image of a woman’s body to suggest that through masquerade, women can achieve a certain distance to the image with which they tend to be conflated. Women can use it to demonstrate that what is commonly seen as defining femininity, is in fact, a fabrication or mask, and the “masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance” (ibid, p. 81).



**Figures 28&29: During the masked ball sequence, Marie transforms herself from mousy housewife (left) into sexually confident vamp (right)**

This, I would argue, is precisely what Marie does when appearing at the masked ball. Her ‘performance’ as the mysterious seductress is a masquerade, allows her to successfully conceal her utter desperation after the morning’s discovery, and to fulfil her sexual desires. The sequence following the masked ball supports this reading. When a fire in a nearby building drives the party guests outside the house, Marie walks off into the surrounding woods, well aware that Jonathan is following her. Having spent the night with him, we see her wrapped up in his jacket the next morning. When he asks to have it back, Marie gives it to him without hesitation, then stretches herself out on the ground, demonstratively displaying her naked body (see fig. 30). Apparently unable to deal with this aggressive demonstration of her physicality, promiscuity and sexual desire, Jonathan shakes his head and walks away. This scene, in which Hoss flaunts her impeccable body, powerfully draws attention to Marie’s status as a sexual subject rather than a mother.

When asked whether she had scruples showing herself naked on the screen, Hoss

replies that “this scene is not about my naked body, it was just important for it to look aesthetic, like a painting”<sup>cxix</sup> (cited in Schumann and Hoss, 2007). This quote is interesting, suggesting as it does the effort on the part of the actress and filmmakers to stage Marie precisely as the beautiful object of erotic contemplation which Mulvey and Doane would criticise. However, considering the sequence as a whole can sustain an alternative view. The next scenes show Marie letting herself roll down a slope, plunge into water, swimming in a lake in the woods, and finally stepping into an otherwise empty bus to go home, still naked (see fig. 31). The bus driver watches her with bewilderment, but does not object.



**Figures 30&31: Hoss as Marie defiantly exhibits her naked body in the forest (left) and on the bus (right)**

This scene cements the impression that the film has now entered a surreal space that stands in stark contrast to the realist aesthetic of the beginning. Marie’s nakedness is a powerful physical demonstration of the fact that she is now stripped of everything that formerly constituted her identity, having left her life as mother behind her. Affected as she is neither by the morning cold nor the social convention not to walk around naked in public, her character is imbued with a sense of mastery and victory. Never does she seem as much in control as when she hands Jonathan back his jacket and lets him leave without protest, never is she as composed as when she calmly steps into the bus.

Hoss’s brittleness and sobriety and her minimalist acting style secure the character’s “dignity”<sup>cxix</sup> in these scenes, as Krebitz (cited in Rother, 2009, p. 127) observes: “Marie goes through the end of the film naked, therefore it was very important to me to use an actress who retains a lot of humanity, even when she is naked”<sup>cxix</sup> (ibid). Krebitz’s script was inspired by the classic Greek tragedy *Medea*, in which the titular character kills her two children to take revenge on her adulterous husband. And it is indeed in the forest sequences

that Marie comes closest to Medea, who, as Helene P. Foley explains, emerges in the end of Euripides' play as "a near goddess" (2001, p. 261) "whose nature and authority were not recognised by the mortals around her" (ibid), but whose actions are acquitted by the gods: she "speaks her final lines from a chariot provided her" (ibid) by the sun god himself.

Unlike Medea, whose cruel murders go unpunished by the gods, Marie inflicts the ultimate punishment upon herself, but also her husband, by ending her own life. Having had Marie walk into her house with a revolver, the film's final shot is one of the front of the house. We hear three gunshots from within: apparently Marie has killed herself and her children. Krebitz decided to have Marie die after researching real-life cases of women discovering their husband's second life with another woman and child(ren), many of whom commit suicide. Krebitz explains that these women "see no more reasons to go on living" (cited in Jahn, 2009), since the discovery of their husband's double life has

a major impact on their desire for being wanted, being needed, and [...] it has something to do with their roles as mothers in society. They must have felt betrayed [...] in the way that they had given their lives and bodies to build a family, to become mothers and to raise children (ibid).

Thus, supported by real-life cases, the ending of *The Heart is a Dark Forest* reinforces its statement on the position of women in contemporary German society, demonstrating how those who are 'only mothers' are made to feel obsolete and left alone with the responsibility of raising children.

However, having Marie take the lives of her children and die rather than submit to the unfulfilling existence assigned to her by her husband, *The Heart is a Dark Forest* goes beyond merely demonstrating the extent of her despair. Marie's murder of her children and suicide at the end of the film also signals her ultimate unwillingness or inability to conform to the mother role, whereby the film parts ways with melodramatic conventions, despite using key themes and tropes of the genre. Critics of melodrama such as Susan Hayward have called into question the genre's potential to generate progressive representations of femininity and motherhood, noting that melodramas "function ideologically as a repression of female desire and reassertion of the woman's role as reproducer and nurturer" (1996, p. 244). Similarly, Griselda Pollock has argued that melodramas typically end with a "reconstitut[ion of] the family through the acceptance of the only available position for women in both patriarchy and bourgeois society, the mother" (1991, p. 281). *The Heart is a Dark Forest*, by contrast, both insists on Marie's status as desiring sexual subject which she inhabits alongside her mother role (in the masked ball and forest sequences), and ends with

Marie's absolute refusal and negation of her motherly responsibilities, powerfully demonstrating that the restriction to and reinstatement of women to the position of 'mother' is impossible for Marie, a contemporary German woman socialised with the tenets of gender equality.

As much as the *The Heart* implies a call to improve childcare facilities and career prospects for mothers, the protagonist's lack of fulfilment as a stay-at-home-mother are a strong signal to women not to give up their work for children in the first place. Nicolette Krebitz as well as Nina Hoss explain in interviews that far from seeing Marie merely as a victim of male cruelty, they believe she herself is also to blame: Hoss insists that "Marie reproaches her husband for a decision she herself has made. [...] It's easy to say: 'I had to give up my job'. But maybe she was afraid of working life"<sup>cxix</sup> (cited in Wesseling, Hoss and Krebitz, 2007). Krebitz believes that women fail to adapt what they expect from a man to their changed social and economic circumstances: "women are [...] still looking for a leader, rather than for someone who supports them in what is asked of them today"<sup>cxix</sup> (cited in Wesseling, Hoss and Krebitz, 2007). Thus envisioning gender equality as a goal that men and women must strive for together, dealing with both its benefits and challenges, Krebitz and Hoss align themselves with the third-wave feminists like Haaf, who call for an end of the old 'battle of the sexes':

the feminist approach we need today is much more about finding ways for men and women to be actually equal. In order to achieve this we need more solidarity – among women, but also between the sexes. [...] Men can be involved in feminism, in fact they should<sup>cxix</sup> (Haaf, 2008).

*Yella* and *The Heart is a Dark Forest* function as an inventory of gender images, women's aspirations and struggles that reflects the social, political and economic circumstances in Germany. According to both, the central decisions women make in their lives are not located in the personal sphere, as could be expected in a liberal, democratic society whose citizens have the greatest possible freedom to live their lives the way they wish. Instead, Petzold and Krebitz envision very bleak scenarios in which their female protagonists are strongly determined by adverse social forces. They thereby continue a tradition of social conscience in German filmmaking that harks back at least as far as the New German cinema of the 1970s which lamented acute social misgivings in Germany, and which finds a new stronghold in the Berlin School films.

*The Heart is a Dark Forest* emerges as a more constructive social commentary than *Yella*, which limits itself to a portrayal of the status quo of German society typical for films of

the Berlin School. Krebitz explicitly spells out the frustration over the inequality of women via the film's dialogues. At the same time, she distances herself from Marie's decision to become a housewife, as does Hoss, both engaging in a self-critical assessment of the position of women in Germany today that is informed by third-wave feminism. The film thus displays a marked feminist agenda, while *Yella* ultimately conflates the heroine's quests for romantic and professional fulfilment. However, both films are equally carried by Hoss's performance, which is dominated by the reserved, composed and determined demeanour she lends her characters. It gives them an element of strength, granting them moments of mastery, such as Yella's emergence from the water or Marie's sense of liberation on the morning of her death. Hoss thereby creates a fascinating space of negotiation and tension between the characters' powerlessness and failure and the potential strength of women. She reinforces the films' messages by creating strong women characters who meet unhappy ends not because of their personal defects, but because of adverse social circumstances.

#### ***A Woman in Berlin* (2008):**

#### **Representing Germany's Past in Mainstream Historical Films**

Nina Hoss's next project was a much larger production: the World War II drama *A Woman in Berlin*, which is based on the memoir of journalist Marta Hillers. Hoss embodies Anonyma, the nameless protagonist who, during the last months of the Second World War, struggles to survive in the ruins of Berlin together with a group of women, enduring mass rape by the invading Russian soldiers. The film proves once more Hoss's ability to obtain roles in art and mainstream films alike that she had demonstrated four years earlier with the success of *The White Masai*, an adaptation of a popular novel. However, *A Woman in Berlin* is also indicative of the difficulties in creating adequate representations of the country's fraught past in recent German historical films. The film continues a trend initiated by films such as *Downfall* and *The Lives of Others* that focus on the darkest episodes of German history. Already in the late 1990s, "the most ambitious projects were reserved for historical narratives" (Hake, 2002, p. 186). Beginning with *Aimee & Jaguar* (1999) and *Nirgendwo in Afrika* (*Nowhere in Africa*) (dir. Caroline Link, 2001) at the turn of the century, the genre blossomed in the 2000s, spawning an abundance of films set during the time of the Hitler regime or the Second World War (*Downfall* (2004), *Napola* (dir. Dennis Gansel, 2004), *Sophie Scholl* (2005), *Berlin 36* (dir. Kaspar Heidelbach, 2009), *Jud Süß – Film ohne Gewissen* (*Jew Süß: Rise and Fall*) (dir. Oskar Roehler, 2010)) or the surveillance state of the GDR (*Goodbye, Lenin!* (2003), *The Lives of Others* (2006)).

Scholars point out that films such as *Downfall*, “notwithstanding the many accolades [they] received, they did not really advance the *art* of filmmaking in Germany” (2008). Seeking to attract a large audience, they are often “conventional in their reliance on the identificatory effects of the classical narrative and [...] conservative in their validation of the personal in opposition to the political”, as Hake notes (2002, p. 187). *Downfall*, which narrates the last days of Hitler and other leading figures of the Nazi party, is the prime example of a historical drama successfully targeting a broad market. With a budget of 13.5 million euros, it grossed 5.5 million dollars in the USA and more than 86 million dollars worldwide (Box Office Mojo, n.d.(a)). These films are marked by a curious tension: on the one hand, they represent national cinema attempting to ‘come to terms with the past’, that is, confronting the viewer with Germany’s national guilt. But on the other hand, they are products of a media industry encompassing both cinema and television, whose focus on profitability demands films that seek to entertain viewers, rather than alienating them.

*A Woman in Berlin* is a similarly ambitious period production epitomising this tension. The film shows Anonyma being abused several times, before she decides to seek out a high-ranking Russian officer, Major Rybkin (Yevgeni Sidikhin) whom she asks to become her protector in return for sexual intimacy. Director Max Färberböck was acutely aware of the sensitivity of the subject matter, seeking to portray the women’s plight without downplaying the atrocities their countrymen suffered at the hands of Nazi Germany that the Soviet soldiers had witnessed when arriving in Berlin in 1945. He wrote the first version of the screenplay from the point of view of a Russian soldier “because the contradictions in the Red Army were considerable and hundreds of thousands of soldiers could not have been rapists and murderers”<sup>cxxv</sup> (in Kilb, 2008).

*A Woman in Berlin* does show several rapes: in one of these scenes Anonyma has to bear the ultimate humiliation of being spat upon by the soldier abusing her. Cooke points out that *A Woman in Berlin* is a notable example of a film addressing the former ‘taboo topic’ of German suffering<sup>14</sup> during World War II by focusing on the mass rapes, but argues that this dwelling on German suffering “is invariably balanced by a strong didactic element, the female protagonists often exhibiting an extraordinarily broad understanding of their historical position and [are] consequently easily able to empathise with the position of the enemy” (2012, pp. 173-174): for example, among a group of women sitting together, one

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<sup>14</sup> For an in-depth analysis of filmic representations of German suffering, see Paul Cooke’s and Marc Silberman’s edited collection *Screening War: Perspectives on German Suffering* (2010).



says to another that “if the Russians will do to the Germans what the Germans did to them, soon no-one in Germany will be alive”<sup>cxxvi</sup> (Färberböck, 2008). Later on, Hoss’s character is forced by a young Russian soldier to translate into German his account of how he was forced to watch German soldiers stab all the children in his village. Färberböck is thus visibly concerned with giving a balanced view of the occupiers and the occupied.

The film thereby supports an observation by Randall Halle, who points out that recent German popular films centring on the Third Reich are engaged in “a complicated quest for value neutrality” (2008, p. 122). In his analysis of *Downfall*, he notes the ambition of director Hirschbiegel to “film every scene and every figure with the conscious attempt to avoid taking [...] position” (ibid, p. 123). Hirschbiegel felt he could not comprehend the motivations of the heads of the Nazi Regime he was portraying and saw the risk of rendering them as sympathetic if he gave an insight into their feelings. Färberböck appears to have taken a similar approach in *A Woman in Berlin*. Several reviewers comment on the film’s distanced, neutral representation of the events it is portraying. They note its episodic structure, which often has individual scenes following one another without a visible underlying thread. In his article for the magazine *Spiegel* for instance, Joachim Kronsbein states that “Färberböck depicts the few days at the end of April 1945, on which the [...] diary primarily focuses [...] in such a statuary manner that the viewer gets the impression that it stretches over endless dire weeks”<sup>cxxvii</sup>. Furthermore, Nina Hoss’s voice-over narration has been described by reviewers as “detached” (Weitzman, 2009) and “laconic” (Finger, 2008), “whereby the character obtains a [certain] distance from herself”<sup>cxxviii</sup> (Kronsbein, 2008), and one reviewer identifies the nameless protagonist she plays as “one of those cagey Nina Hoss characters”<sup>cxxix</sup> (Lenssen, 2008). This suggests that Hoss’s minimalist acting style further contributed to the film’s attempt at a balanced and value-neutral account of events, which, however, lacks narrative tension and thus is rather uninvolved, which was reflected in the film’s poor performance at the box office.

Färberböck’s avowed intention to acknowledge German guilt and to educate viewers about the atrocities Germans committed demonstrates the way in which recent historical films are part of what Matthias Frey calls a ‘culture of memory’ (2013, p. 169). They function as an educational tool, exemplified by the German Agency for Civic Education’s call to use of historical films as teaching materials (Frey, 2013, p. 2). Such initiatives must be seen as part of the efforts of German public and cultural institutions to ensure that also younger generations are aware of the politics of the Third Reich, and the Holocaust and its victims:

Frey characterises contemporary Germany as “a nation whose citizens have now in the majority experienced the war not as a memory, but through the prisms of school lessons and TV movies” (ibid, p. 169). A closer look at the aesthetic and narrative resolution of *A Woman in Berlin* illustrates the limitations of such mediated representations of national history. Critics note the obvious concessions the film makes to the demands of entertainment cinema. In his review for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* for example, Andreas Kilb writes that the beginning of *A Woman in Berlin* shows

artillery fire, the ruins of houses, wildly gesticulating German soldiers and fleeing civilians. [...] It is a side narrative of Eichinger’s *Downfall*, with the same visual and aural language [...] only without the Führerbunker. Even the set representing the basements in which the vanguard of Russian soldiers assaults the women is designed according to the demands of the cinema. This basement is huge, bearing no relation to the actual bomb shelters [...]. But Färberböck needs the catacombs to fill the wide screen format that he chose for his film<sup>cxxx</sup> (2008).

This sustains an observation by Halle, who points out that “entertainment dominates [the] aesthetic” of German films about the Third Reich. Halle explains this by pointing to the films’ orientation towards a broader market: “in as much as they are stories from Germany, they are stories told to interest the world” (2008, p. 113). *A Woman in Berlin* is an example of such a film seeking to maximise its domestic and international audience appeal by drawing “on classic narrative forms, the language of popular world cinema” (ibid).

The fact that the relationship between Anonyma and her protector is presented as a hesitant romance sustains this impression. Rybkin confesses to her that he wants to stay together with her forever and the film ends with the couple clasping hands in front of his soldiers. This divergence of the film from its literary source was criticised by several reviewers. Kilb complains: “shame, guilt feelings and bodily pleasure are not enough [...] – it must be love when the woman in blue welcomes the major. Thus [the director] glosses over his historical testimony with the candy colours of melodrama”<sup>cxxxii</sup> (2008). Anonyma thanks the major “for having had the chance to meet [him]”<sup>cxxxii</sup>, whereby *A Woman in Berlin* “submit[s] to the temptations of closure and redemptive meaning” (Koepnick, 2002a, p. 60) similar to the sample of 1990s historical dramas set at the time of the Third Reich or World War II discussed by Koepnick.

*A Woman in Berlin* is thus marked by a tension between the director’s determination to objectively portray events and not to downplay German war guilt in a story that potentially casts German women as victims, and the film’s concession to mainstream entertainment cinema by imagining a romance between Anonyma and Rybkin. Their capacity

to love amidst chaos, deprivation and hostility marks them as ‘good’ characters whom viewers can identify with, and the film neatly resolves questions of German guilt and Russian retaliation through a symbolic German-Russian reconciliation. This supports Frey’s reading of recent German historical films as “highly ambivalent negotiation[s] of German history” (2013, p. 12) functioning as “a site of contestation and debate” (ibid, p. 174) of German national identity: on the one hand, the film is part of an officially sanctioned ‘culture of memory’ committed to keeping alive the memory of the darkest periods of the country’s past, maintaining that the responsibility of remembering the Third Reich and Holocaust must always be part of what it means to be German. On the other hand, the film re-imagines this past along the lines of popular narrative fiction in order to appeal to and entertain German and international viewers, which is problematic since it undercuts a deeper engagement on the part of the viewer with the culpability and moral ambiguity of Anonyma’s character. Ultimately, *A Woman in Berlin* abandons the attempt to critically approach its protagonists in favour of tried and tested cinematic conventions in order to secure the film’s appeal to large German and international audiences.

***Barbara* (2012) and *Gold* (2013):  
Transplanting Social Critique to a Historical Setting**

Five years after *A Woman in Berlin*, Nina Hoss starred in a historical film that proved to be more effective and successful in providing a nuanced representation of a contested period in German history: *Barbara* (2012), Hoss’s fifth collaboration with director Christian Petzold, is set in East Germany in 1980 and takes a sympathetic, but not apologetic look at life in the GDR. Both *Barbara* and Hoss’s 2013 film *Gold*, which was directed by Berlin School filmmaker Thomas Arslan, provide the elements of social commentary that marks the art film movement their directors are identified with, even as they replace the contemporary setting with a historical one. *Gold* is a western set in Canada at the time of the 1890s gold rush, which depicts a group of German immigrants on their way to the gold fields of the Klondike river. The two films draw on Hoss’s well-established screen persona of the distant, proud and independent woman, but her characters’ trajectory in these films requires Hoss to further develop and vary this screen persona, thereby demonstrating that she continues to challenge herself as a performer as her career progresses.

Hoss’s eponymous *Barbara* is a doctor who has been transferred from a prestigious Berlin hospital to an unnamed small town in East Germany after she had requested to leave

the country. Fellow doctor André (Ronald Zehrfeld) is keen to befriend her, but Barbara remains wary, aware that he is likely to report back to Schütz (Rainer Bock), the Stasi<sup>15</sup> officer in charge of observing her, who repeatedly searches her flat and her person. Barbara and André bond over taking care of two teenage patients, one of whom is Stella (Jasna Fritzi Bauer), a girl who escapes from the Werkhof Torgau, a juvenile detention centre known for its draconian military drill, mistreatment and harassment of the young offenders. Barbara's West German boyfriend Jörg (Mark Waschke) arranges for her to flee to Denmark via the Baltic Sea, but the penultimate scene shows Barbara sending Stella to Denmark in her place. In the final scene, Barbara joins André at a patient's bedside, their exchange of affectionate looks confirming their budding romance.

Including a number of humorous exchanges between Barbara and André, and ending with a scene that suggests the couple will be happy together, *Barbara* is notably lighter in tone than Petzold's and Hoss's previous films. In his review for the magazine *Spiegel*, Daniel Sander describes it as "Christian Petzold's first love story – a film about more than just adversity that always remains hopeful"<sup>cxxxiii</sup> (2012). Attracting 369,415 viewers in Germany (FFA, n.d.(e)), *Barbara* is Petzold's most commercially successful<sup>16</sup> film to date, benefiting from its construction as a love story, as well as from German audiences' interest in films addressing the country's past that the success of *Goodbye, Lenin!*, *Downfall* and *The Lives of Others* attested to.

*Barbara* casts an affectionate look at life in East Germany, while not failing to acknowledge its oppressive political regime and state surveillance system. It thereby counteracts both the image of the GDR as a totalitarian surveillance state advanced by *The Lives of Others* and the idealised, nostalgic representations of the country found in so-called 'Ostalgie'<sup>17</sup> films such as *Sonnenallee (Sun Alley)* (dir. Leander Haußmann, 1999) and *Goodbye, Lenin!*, as film critic Fritz Göttler observes: "*Barbara* is the counterpart to the GDR films of Leander Haußmann and Florian Henckel von Donnersmark, which were monomaniacal, albeit in very different ways"<sup>cxxxiv</sup>. Debbie Pinford has argued that *Barbara* offers "a more

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<sup>15</sup> The GDR's Ministry for State Security, the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit or Stasi for short, was in charge of the surveillance, arrest, torture and psychological harassment of people who were suspected to be critical of the political regime or trying to escape to the West. By 1989, the Stasi had over 91,000 full-time employees and around 174,000 informants (Smith, 2014, p. 20), meaning that more than ten percent of the 16 million East German citizens acted as Stasi spies.

<sup>16</sup> *Yella*, by contrast, was seen by only 72,730 people in Germany (FFA, n.d.(f)).

<sup>17</sup> 'Ostalgie' is a neologism consisting of the German words for east, 'Ost', and nostalgia, 'Nostalgie', which describes the feeling of nostalgia for aspects of GDR life, everyday culture and products experienced by many eastern Germans.

nuanced image” (2014, p. 279) of the GDR than most previous films on the topic, and indeed the film contains two scenes that depict the raiding of Barbara’s flat and her being subjected to a strip search, demonstrating the intrusive, ruthless methods of the state security service, while at the same time the Stasi officer in charge of observing Barbara is humanised in a scene showing his despair over his wife’s terminal illness. Unlike Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe), the protagonist of *The Lives of Others*, “the Stasi officer in this film does not have to be ‘redeemed’ in order to be considered a human being” (ibid, p. 287).

Barbara’s choice to stay in the GDR at the end of the film is motivated by her determination to end Stella’s suffering at the work house, but the protagonist’s decision is alleviated by the prospect of both a fulfilling job and a caring partner. The figure of her West German lover Jörg, on the other hand, functions as a critique of West Germany’s capitalist ideology. Jörg is featured in two scenes. In the first, he meets Barbara in the forest and sleeps with her, before handing over a shopping bag containing cigarettes, perfume and stockings, urging her to “tell me [what you need], and I’ll get it for you”<sup>cxxxv</sup>. Jörg’s offering of luxury material items, which signals his rather mercenary understanding of romantic relationships as an exchange of goods and services, is contrasted with André’s courtship: he expresses his affection for Barbara through more practical, useful and wholesome gestures, such as sending her a piano tuner, offering to find an electrician to fix a broken socket in her flat, and cooking dinner for her, which demonstrates his valuing of non-material experiences such as playing music or enjoying a meal together.

In a later scene, Barbara meets Jörg in his hotel room, where he assures her that “once you’ve come over, you can always sleep in. [...] I earn enough for both of us, you don’t need to work anymore”<sup>cxxxvi</sup>, a statement which reveals that he completely fails to understand Barbara’s character, her aspirations and ambition, with previous scenes having shown Barbara carrying out her work at the hospital with great skill and diligence. Hoss’s reaction – a baffled facial expression and subsequent silence – communicate Barbara’s bewilderment at the prospect of giving up her work. Director Christian Petzold himself has identified Jörg’s comment as the film’s “Todessatz” (cited in Schirmer, Machowecz and Petzold, 2013), a statement that effectively kills Barbara’s affection for Jörg: “All eastern German viewers, all of them, will realise immediately: what a stupid thing to say! Many western Germans won’t even notice it. They’ve grown up with women staying at home and men going to work”<sup>cxxxvii</sup> (ibid). Employment statistics for the year 1980, in which *Barbara* is set, support Petzold’s observation, showing that 78.1 percent of East German women (Segert and Ziercke, 1998, p.

214) but only 50.2 percent of West German women (Lenz, 2008, p. 145) were in paid work at that time. *Barbara* thus highlights the pitfalls of the western capitalist system, such as its regressive gender politics and empty materialism through the character of Jörg.

While *Barbara* provides the elements of social critique that are common to all of Petzold's films, in this case highlighting the limitations of the GDR and West Germany in equal measure, the romance between Barbara and André contributes to the film's lighter tone. The relationship with André is central to Barbara's character trajectory. At the beginning of the film, her behaviour reflects the oppressive presence of the state security service. A number of shots of her looking at Schütz's car in front of her house demonstrate that she is aware of being under constant surveillance, her unsuccessful pleading not to be strip-searched suggesting her vulnerability and weariness brought on by the relentless observation. Resenting the surveillance and living with the constant fear of getting denounced, Barbara keeps to herself, repeatedly rejecting André's attempts to make contact. Hoss thus initially creates once more the type of haughty, inaccessible, self-sufficient and emotionally stunted character she played in the previous Petzold films. Catherine Wheatley observes that Petzold and Hoss

unfurl her character with magnificent delicacy. [...] Hoss's Barbara begins the film with a haughty demeanour and impassive visage [...] However, as circumstances conspire to draw Barbara into the community, there are snatched glimpses of compassion and warmth behind the icy defiance (2012, p. 75).

As Barbara and André begin to work together, treating the two critical teenage patients Stella and Mario (Jannik Schümann), Hoss's protagonist emerges not only as a kind and considerate doctor, but also becomes a mother figure to Stella: we see her reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to Stella in the hospital, the girl confides in her about being pregnant and asks for help, and finally Barbara organises Stella's escape from the GDR when she turns up at Barbara's doorstep. This constitutes a clear departure from Hoss's earlier films, none of which present her as a maternal figure, as she is either childless and concerned solely with her own economic survival (as in *Yella*) or personal pleasure (as in *We Are the Night*, in which she plays a hedonistic vampire), or her relationship with her child(ren) is destroyed in the course of the film (as in *Wolfsburg* or *The Heart is a Dark Forest*).

Numerous exchanges between André and Barbara, in which they seek each other's advice about diagnoses and expressing their concerns about Stella's and Mario's future (Mario attempted suicide and Stella is forced to return to the Werkhof, which Barbara calls an "extermination camp"<sup>cxxxviii</sup>), as well as their close relationship with the two patients,

present André and Barbara as surrogate parents to the teenagers, foreshadowing their romance and future family-building. The film also contains some humorous moments between Barbara and André, in which Hoss's performance is particularly noteworthy as she is required to change her acting style, altering her usual screen persona. The first of these moments occurs when Barbara goes looking for André on his day off, urging him to operate on Mario again since she is convinced that the boy has a previously undetected head injury. She explains that "he remembers everything apart from his feelings, they've gone"<sup>cxxxix</sup>, and adds after a pause that "I know what you think, I should have an operation too, because my feelings ..."<sup>cxl</sup>. During this monologue (in itself a self-conscious comment on Hoss's cold and distant screen persona) Barbara appears bashful and childish, contrasting with her haughty and composed demeanour at the beginning of the film. This is reinforced by Hoss's feeble voice, awkward hand gestures and body language (see fig. 32-34). Barbara is unable to finish her sentence, her ability to convey her diagnosis with confidence being undermined by her unacknowledged feelings for André, whereby she resembles the protagonist of a romantic comedy who behaves awkwardly in the presence of their paramour.



**Figures 32-34: Hoss's clumsy body language when encountering André makes Barbara appear bashful and childish, whereby she resembles the protagonist of a romantic comedy who behaves awkwardly in the presence of their paramour**

Similarly, an earlier exchange between Barbara and André is characterised by the fast repartee typical of conversations between the central couple in screwball comedies:

- Barbara: "If I need a piano tuner, I'll get one myself."  
 André: "That's right. If you need someone, find them yourself."  
 Barbara: "That's exactly what I'm going to do."  
 André: "I'm not going to help you."  
 Barbara: "I don't want help!"  
 André: "And the broken socket?"  
 Barbara: "What's that?"  
 André: "Found someone to fix it? Electricians are rare."

Barbara: “What’s it to you?”

André: “Nothing. You can pay him with the West German cigarettes from your pretty little red case.”<sup>cxli</sup>

[Both smile.]

This banter between the pair foreshadows Barbara’s decision in favour of André and against a life in West Germany at the end of the film.

Critics have argued that the happy ending in particular differentiates *Barbara* from both Petzold’s and Hoss’s earlier collaborations and other films set in the GDR. Wheatley describes Barbara’s decision to send Stella to Denmark in her place as “the ultimate, quasi-maternal sacrifice, which transforms the film in its dying moments from thriller to melodrama” (2012, p. 75), which suggests that Barbara’s softening in the course of the film mirrors that of Petzold, who replaces the acerbic social commentary of his earlier films with a more idealist and mellow look at the GDR. Pinford reads the ending rather differently, pointing out that a closer look at previous scenes suggests much more ambiguous prospects for Barbara’s future. While noting that “Barbara’s return to sit opposite André at Mario’s bedside suggests the romantic resolution that the foreground love story has conditioned the audience to hope for” (2014, p. 290), Pinford argues that the film leaves little doubt about the impact the ongoing observation through the Stasi will have on Barbara’s life:

Schütz has already visited Barbara’s empty flat and is convinced she has escaped never to return; and even her own return will surely not spare her questions and consequences arising from Stella’s escape. [...] Her personal and professional integrity may have been confirmed by the ending of the film – but at what cost? (ibid).

The film’s equivocal ending reflects its overall approach to portraying recent German history in a way that accounts for the virtues and vices of East and West Germany in equal measure. Barbara’s plan to escape, which she ardently prepares throughout the film, is driven by her desire for personal freedom and freedom from surveillance which she would enjoy in the democratic West Germany. However, by staying, Barbara validates the positive GDR values that André stands for, such as idealism, altruism and resourcefulness. The film thereby builds on the ‘Ostalgie’ comedies’ practice of “writ[ing] the validity of [...] east German experiences and memories into the normality of an all-German present, where they may find a place alongside those of the west” (Saunders, 2006, p. 102). This makes *Barbara* an example of a Berlin School film that attempts to formulate a new German identity which encompasses the legacies of both East and West after the fall of wall and the momentous social changes in its aftermath.



Like *Barbara*, Thomas Arslan's 2013 film *Gold* also replaces the typical contemporary setting associated with the Berlin School filmmakers with a period setting. Here, Hoss plays Emily, a German woman who in 1898 joins a group of compatriots on a horse trek to the Canadian city of Dawson to look for gold in the Klondike river. The group is led by Wilhelm Laser (Peter Kurth), who charges the participants handsomely for leading them along an untested land route across Canada, and includes the elderly couple Otto and Maria Dietz (Wolfgang Packhauser and Rosa Enskat), who are in charge of cooking, hot-headed journalist Gustav Müller (Uwe Bohm), timid family man Joseph Rossmann (Lars Rudolph) and packer Carl Boehmer (Marko Mandić), who bonds with Emily. The trek across the Canadian wilderness is cumbersome, and the group loses its members one by one: Laser is caught trying to run away with the money and is sent away by Emily in the night after Müller urged the group to hang him the next morning; the couple stay behind in a village when the husband is injured; Müller's leg gets caught in a bear trap and he dies after Boehmer amputates the leg, and Rossmann, overcome with despair, runs away into the forest. Exhausted, lacking food supplies and having lost their way, Emily and Boehmer are guided to a frontier town by a native, where they spend the night together and become a couple. Boehmer then gets shot, however, by one of two men who had been following him to avenge his murder of their brother. Boehmer manages to kill his opponent before being fatally wounded, and Emily shoots the other man. The final scene shows her continuing her ride to Dawson, leaving viewers uncertain as to whether she will reach her destination.

*Gold* employs a number of key motifs of the western genre, such as “the problem of progress, envisioned as a passing of frontiers” (Mitchell, 1996, p. 3), which is reflected in the representation of the harsh, inhospitable western landscape “as an antagonist that must be conquered” (Varner, 2009, p. xxviii), testing the protagonists' character and resilience along the way. Another defining feature of the western genre, “the problem of law or justice, enacted in a conflict of vengeance and social control” (Mitchell, 1996, p. 3) is taken up in the group's debate on how to punish Laser and by the two brothers' hunt for Boehmer.

However, the film counters the western genre's “persistent obsession with masculinity” (ibid, p. 3), typically featuring a male hero through whom masculine ideals or anxieties are explored while female characters are often sidelined, with a female protagonist whose resolve, physical resilience, independence, and social reclusion easily matches those of the male protagonists of classic Hollywood westerns such as Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in *The Searchers* (dir. John Ford, 1956). Critic Marcus Wessel observes that

it is clear that we are seeing an exceptional woman here, who is distant at first and all the more empathetic and determined later on. [...] This [...] makes *Gold* a women's western, but even more so a work that hides behind its historic decor a truly modern, emancipated woman<sup>cxliii</sup> (2013).

Emily is quickly identified as a loner, rarely partaking in the group's conversations, and rebuffing Müller's advances with the words "I would really like to be alone for a while"<sup>cxliii</sup>. In her review of the film, Alissa Simon notes that "Hoss [...] is ideally cast as the prickly, self-sufficient Emily, who is determined to move forward at all costs" (2013). Setting off together with five men and one other woman, Emily is the only character who still has a chance to reach the gold fields and thus be rewarded for the wearying journey by the end of the film. While her fellow travellers are stopped by greed, injuries or exhaustion or experience the ultimate punishment for their wrongdoing, Emily manages much of what Laser proclaims to be a 1.600 km ride through unwieldy territory, with exposure to the scorching sun and a limited supply of food and water. Embodying Emily, Nina Hoss thus takes her aloof, self-reliant screen persona to a new level, as the character suffers not only from social isolation, personal trauma and poverty, but in fact struggles for her very survival.

Emily's brief dialogues with Boehmer suggests that she draws her determination and resilience from previously experienced hardship similar to many of Hoss's previous characters such as Yella, Marie in *The Heart*, Anonyma, or Laura in *Jerichow*. Emily tells Boehmer that she sought to escape her dreary life as a housemaid in Chicago, where she worked for one dollar per day, and when Boehmer says he is sorry to hear her marriage failed, she replies "You needn't be. It wasn't a good time"<sup>cxliv</sup>. These lines, as well as Hoss's matter-of-fact delivery, belie the film's historical setting, as they appear more suited to an emancipated 21st-century woman than a late 19th-century character who would be likely to value the social status and stability associated with marriage more highly than personal happiness. Emily's dialogue in this scene illustrates an observation by film critic Nino Klingler, who points out that "the actors never quite lose themselves in the supposed 1898 setting. They are stuck in the here-and-now of contemporary [...] Germany"<sup>cxlv</sup> (2013).

This resonance of the contemporary period in Arslan's first historical film is also present in the narrative of *Gold*, which touches upon key themes<sup>18</sup> of Arslan's Berlin School

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<sup>18</sup> Himself the son of a Turkish father and having lived in Ankara for some time as a child, Arslan has frequently explored the experience of Turkish migrants in his films. The issue of migration was also what initially prompted the director to develop the film *Gold*, in which the Germans themselves are migrants, struggling to make a living in a foreign country. Arslan explained that seeing historical photographs of German gold seekers in the US, "these pictures wouldn't let me go [...] these old photos of Germans who

films such as the notion of stasis and inactivity on the one hand, and mobility and progress on the other. Marco Abel observes that Arslan's films frequently feature characters whose lives are marked by a "palpable sense of stasis" (2013, p. 37) and aimlessness. Abel argues that these characters resist the neoliberalist call for mobility in a similar way to the titular character in Petzold's *Yella*: their inactivity counteracts the "rhetoric of mobility [...]" promoted by the highest representatives of German politics in order to encourage Germans to get on board with neoliberal ideas and ideal of maximum workplace flexibility" (ibid). Arslan's crime genre film *Im Schatten (In the Shadows)* (2010), for example, features a protagonist who "gives us the impression that his main interest lies precisely in keeping things as uneventful as feasible" (ibid). *In the Shadows* echoes Arslan's graduation film *Im Sommer* (1992), which is "shot in a series of static long takes that [...] sketch the protagonist's drifting, purposeless life" (ibid, p. 34), and which Abel identifies as one of "Arslan's earliest efforts to depict the lives of those to whom hardly anything unusual happens" (ibid). *Gold* appears to break with this pattern: the group's journey has a clear purpose and goal, and features several unexpected events and moments of narrative tension, such as Laser's foiled attempt to run away with the money, Müller's injury, the amputation of his leg and his death, and the gunfight that constitutes the film's climax. However, the very incentive for the protagonists' journey and the situation they find themselves in – their desperate poverty and aspiration to get rich by finding gold – signals their materialism and 'every-man-for-himself'-mentality as they live in an early capitalist society with no social support or welfare system, having endorsed the very demand for mobility and self-reliance advocated again by today's neoliberal politics. *Gold* can thus be said to resonate as much with contemporary political and social misgivings as it depicts the fate of a group of 19th century German immigrants in Canada. Starting with the gradual disintegration of the group that denies six of its seven members the chance to even reach the gold fields, let alone to strike gold, the film suggests the futility of their quest in various ways, highlighting the characters' materialism, egotism, and naiveté, but also critiquing the social and economic circumstances they are faced with.

By having the group set off in the summer of 1898 (Boehmer's headstone notes the day of his death as 2nd September 1898), two years after gold had first been found in the

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had nothing, and nothing to lose" (cited in Nicodemus, 2013, p. 75). Arslan goes on to say that "today, Germany sees itself burdened by immigration [...] But the country once produced a large number of immigrants itself[...] Only it doesn't fit so nicely into the pattern of our history books" (ibid). Thus, in making *Gold*, Arslan sought to provide a new perspective on the migrant experience.

Klondike and months after the gold rush had already reached its peak in the spring of 1898 (Nobleman, 2006, p. 31), Arslan suggests that their already small chance of finding gold would have been further diminished by their late arrival, after only 40,000 of the 100,000 people making their way to Dawson actually arrived there, and only 4,000 of those succeeded in finding gold (ibid, p. 39).

Moreover, the film's mise-en-scène and camerawork also suggest the fruitlessness of the journey by using similar locations for a number of different scenes, which creates the impression that the group's movement is circular rather than goal-directed: Michael Meyns notes that "the story develops via a conscious repetition of moments"<sup>cxlvi</sup> (n.d.), and Carolin Ströbele points out that "the dusty gravel paths and dry forests"<sup>cxlvii</sup> through which the protagonists move "resemble one another in an almost uncanny way"<sup>cxlviii</sup> (2013), reflecting a central motif of the film: "the Sisyphus-like lack of progress despite continuous movement"<sup>cxlix</sup> (ibid). In this respect, *Gold* resembles Arslan's 1999 film *Dealer*, which is concerned with "space, movement and change on the one hand, and a narrative that shows only circular movement, no change, and no progress" (Stehle, 2012, p. 76), focusing on young drug dealer Can (Tamer Yigit), whose attempts to make a better life for himself and his family fail and who at the end of the film finds himself in prison. However, unlike Can, whose physical and social mobility is curtailed at the end of *Dealer*, Emily in *Gold* is able and adamant to continue her journey. The final scenes, which highlight Emily's determination to reach Dawson and thus pursue the chance for a better life, address the question of whether she indeed makes any genuine progress, that is, if she undergoes some kind of personal development, or whether her continuous physical movement is in the end futile.

The end section of the film, which depicts Emily's and Boehmer's stay at the frontier town, Boehmer's death and Emily's departure, suggest that the latter has indeed changed. While she is serious and taciturn for most of the journey, she appears happy and relieved once she and Boehmer reach the town, repeatedly bearing a broad smile on her face (see fig. 35&36). When Boehmer points out that "it's still a long way to Dawson"<sup>cli</sup>, Emily says she wants to "rest for a few days and then see what's next"<sup>cli</sup>, which indicates that her ambition to reach the gold fields has lost its priority as she is grateful to have survived the trek through the wilderness and is happy to have found a supportive partner in Boehmer. Mitchell explains that "the one aspect of the landscape celebrated consistently in the western is the opportunity for renewal, for self-transformation" (1998, p. 5), and *Gold* uses Emily's physical journey and character trajectory as a means to investigate these very "moments of change, of

transformation” (Abel, 2013, p. 44), which Abel identifies as also a central theme of Arslan’s oeuvre. While Emily is shown crying as she cradles Boehmer’s dead body, she appears serene, even somewhat cheerful when she later briefly stops at his freshly dug grave. Imitating a gesture Boehmer made earlier, Emily salutes him by raising two fingers to her temple, utters the words “Wish me luck, Carl Boehmer”<sup>cli</sup>, and smiles (see fig. 37&38) before riding out into the wilderness again.



**Figures 35&36: Emily’s frequent smiles demonstrate her relief to have reached the town and happiness to have found a partner in Boehmer, after she had been serious and taciturn throughout the journey**



**Figures 37&38: As Emily bids farewell to Boehmer, saluting to him at his grave, she appears serene and even somewhat cheerful**

This brief scene can be read in one of two ways, suggesting on the one hand Emily’s stoicism and detachment, as she is apparently unmoved by the death of a man she loved, whereby she resembles Clint Eastwood’s nameless protagonist in Sergio Leone’s *Dollars* trilogy<sup>19</sup> of spaghetti westerns – the epitome of the cold, egocentric anti-hero who has no need for any social or romantic ties. On the other hand, Emily’s dialogue with the dead

<sup>19</sup> This trilogy consists of *Per un pugno di dollari* (*A Fistful of Dollars*) (1964), *Per qualche dollaro in più* (*For a Few Dollars More*) (1965) and *Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo* (*The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*) (1966).

Boehmer can be understood as an indication of her transformation from bitter, materialist loner to a person who has a positive outlook on life as she is able to envision a future sustained not only by material wealth but, having been invigorated by her brief moments of intimacy with Boehmer, by the possibility of a fulfilled personal life with a future partner.

Regardless of whether one chooses to read Emily as cold and detached – a female version of the antisocial western hero, or as a person who does experience personal growth by acquiring the capacity for compassion, trust and affection, the film ends with a small personal triumph for her as the only character who could not be stopped by natural or human adversity. *Gold* thereby differs from a number of Hoss's previous films in which her characters are victimised to a greater or lesser extent, their achievement often consisting in their ability to retain their dignity or pride in the moment of defeat. While *Gold* is highly critical of the character's pursuit of material wealth and the economic circumstances that force them to risk their lives in order to secure their livelihood, it suggests that Emily is enriched by the experience of the journey during which she proved to herself both her strength and resilience, and her ability to bond with and build a relationship with another person.

Thus, alongside *Barbara*, *Gold* offers a variation or development in Hoss's screen persona; her character retains her usual independence and defiance but is afforded, if ever so briefly, the experience of a functional romantic relationship. Both films provide evidence of Hoss's ongoing pursuit of roles in films that do not only foreground female experience, but feature women characters seeking to reconcile personal and economic independence or professional ambition with a romantic relationship in which man and woman are mutually supportive and equal partners, thus making a valuable contribution to more positive and progressive gender images in contemporary German film.

## **Conclusion**

Nina Hoss occupies a pivotal role in a revived German cinema that engages with the country's contemporary social reality. Her collaborations with Berlin School director Christian Petzold, and the distinctly feminist *The Heart is a Dark Forest*, signal contemporary German cinema's interest in women's stories in which the female character's interests are not limited to romantic relationships. Instead, they focus on women's aspirations and the obstacles they encounter as they strive for personal and financial independence, negotiating the issue of equality in the workplace and in relationships, which has long been granted to

women by law but is effectively curtailed by obsolete conceptions of motherhood and the male breadwinner model engrained in (western) German society that the country has more trouble discarding than other European nations.

While Hoss's protagonists are often portrayed as victims of adverse economic conditions, social isolation and uncaring, deceptive or abusive male characters, they are also always agents who seek to take control of their own lives, proving their mobility and capacity for enduring suffering and hardship to eke out a living, or exploring and affirming their own sexuality. Hoss's characters struggle and often fail in their strife for a happy and secure life but the films create awareness for and demonstrate an interest in these women's experience, thereby counteracting the large majority of German and American commercial films telling men's stories.

Hoss's breakthrough film *A Girl Called Rosemarie* was not without pitfalls for the actress, although there was critical consensus about the quality of her acting. The press recognised as such the calculated publicity of the film and the conscious attempt of producer Bernd Eichinger to launch Hoss as a star, and there was agreement that the hype Eichinger had created around the film did not match its artistic quality. Consequently, media coverage on Hoss after the broadcast of *A Girl Called Rosemarie* insisted on the risk of her becoming an ineffectual celebrity, which demonstrates the persistent reservations about the figure of the film star in Germany. However, Hoss continued her acting training and became part of the ensemble of one of Germany's most prestigious theatres, whereby her public image shifted to that of a skilled performer. Since then, the media representation of Hoss has focused on the quality of her work, her films being used to present German cinema a locus of culture opposed to the star-making machine of Hollywood.

While occasionally acting in more high-budget, commercial films such as *The White Masai* or *A Woman in Berlin*, Hoss has chosen to commit herself first and foremost to the socially critical and narratively and aesthetically unorthodox Berlin School movement, seeking out films that put female experience in contemporary Germany centre-stage and continue to challenge her as a performer in the process. Having collaborated five times with Petzold, Hoss has come to represent the Berlin School movement like no other performer. Her characters' experience is characterised by alienation, disorientation and rootlessness as they are faced with the economic and social ramifications of German reunification, the advent of globalisation and a neoliberalist political and economic order. It is no accident that Hoss shares a distinct acting style with leading New German cinema actress Hanna

Schygulla. Both drawing on the Brechtian technique of the alienation effect that they were introduced to in their acting training, their detached screen personas representing their characters' emotional numbing, brought about in the case of Schygulla's Maria Braun by post-war Germany's excessive materialism and suppression of guilt, and in the case of Nina Hoss's characters by social uprooting due to the demands of neoliberal mobility, poverty, lack of equality or mistreatment on the hands of men, all of which are identified as unacceptable societal problems by the films. Hoss's minimalist, stilted performance style gives her characters an air of coldness, haughtiness and detachment, and, while often used as a self-defence mechanism, does imbue them with a sense of dignity and mastery and control even as they experience defeat, heartbreak, grief or despair. Hoss's most recent films *Barbara* and *Gold* feature supportive and caring partners for her characters and depicted a gradual softening of her protagonists that signals a maturation of the actress's screen persona, moving Hoss away from entirely cold, self-reliant loners and invite greater sympathy with her characters. This, as the success of *Barbara* demonstrates, has increased Hoss's appeal to mainstream audiences and thus bodes well for her future career.

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- lxxx "spielt Borderline-Existenzen in einer Borderline-Gesellschaft. Sie ist der Engel, die Sterntalerfrau eines Landes, welches in einem Stand-by-Modus der Depression und Verdrossenheit verharret."
- lxxxi "Gesicht [...] reduzier[t]"
- lxxxii "Recycling publikumswirksamer Stoffe, inszeniert von arrivierten Profis"
- lxxxiii "Konventionalität der Inszenierung"
- lxxxiv "ein leeres Hochglanzprodukt. Wäre da nicht die Hauptdarstellerin Nina Hoss"
- lxxxv "Eichinger hat ein Melodram gedreht, und Nina Hoss spielt jede Nuance davon aus: berechnend, geil, kalt, verzweifelt."
- lxxxvi "hält die Gesten so klein wie möglich, die Mimik kontrolliert"
- lxxxvii "Filmstar von morgen"
- lxxxviii "saß bereits in Talkshows, bevor sie auch nur eine Minute [...] zu sehen war"
- lxxxix "prasseln auf Nina Hoss Film-, Werbe-, Mode- und Moderationsangebote wie ein monsunartiger Dauerregen nieder."
- xc "am Theater hätte man mir keine Chance gegeben [...], da wäre ich das TV-Häschen gewesen. Durch die Ausbildung ist das Klischee an mir vorbeigegangen"
- xcii "die junge Hoss [...] ließ sich vom Erfolg weder verführen noch beirren, sondern machte ihre Ausbildung [...] weiter."
- xciii "sie fängt ganz oben an, lacht von allen Illustrierten-Titelbildern, und eigentlich hätte sie noch eine Weile komfortabel auf dem Eichinger-Eventmovie-Ticket weiterfahren können. Doch sie bringt lieber die Schauspielschule zu Ende und spielt dann am Theater [...] Koks-Partys und Fotosessions in der Karibik, das hätte irgendwie auch nicht zu Nina Hoss gepasst."
- xciv "'amerikanische Momente' von [...] Vollkommenheit"
- xcv "[in solchem Glamour] könnte sie längst verschwunden sein"
- xcvi "Gegenteil von method acting"
- xcvii "Handwerk. Manchmal vielleicht zu viel. Das emotionale, das musst du selber schauen, wie du es findest."
- xcviii "blühende Landschaften"



- 
- xcviii “selektive[] Abwanderung”
- xcix “Mir geht’s gut. Ich arbeite!”
- c “der Weg ins Andere des Wasserreichs – oder durch dieses Andere hindurch – wird in vielen Kulturen zudem mit einem anderen Übergang assoziiert: mit dem vom Leben in den Tod. Die Reise vom Diesseits ins Jenseits geht über den Totenfluss.”
- ci “selbst wer aus den Wasserreichen wiederkehrt, ist nicht mehr der, der er zuvor war. [...] Mit dem Wasser verbinden sich neben der Idee des Todes als Übergang ins Jenseits auch Wiedergeburtsvorstellungen. Wiedergeburt wird imaginiert als Durchgang durch ein symbolisches Reich des Todes [...] durch eine Phase der Todesnähe”
- cii “der spirituellen Wiedergeburt im Wasser”
- ciii “seit der deutschen Einheit erlebt Deutschland einen gesellschaftlichen und ökonomischen Zeitenwechsel mit einem ungewissen Ausgang. Das Land hat mit chronischer Wachstumsschwäche, struktureller Massenarbeitslosigkeit, hohen Lohnkosten, wachsenden Sozialausgaben, Steuerausfällen, Haushaltsdefiziten und ungebremster Staatsverschuldung zu kämpfen. Diese dramatische Lage geht auf unterlassene politische Anpassungen zurück, die weit bis in die Kohl-Ära zurückreichen”
- civ “Schlüsselprojekt einer wohlfahrtsstaatlichen Politikwende”
- cv “die Reformen zeigen zweifelsohne eine Schieflage zu Ungunsten von Beitragszahlern, Kranken, Arbeitslosen und älteren Lohn- und Gehaltsempfängern: dagegen sind die Interessen von Unternehmern und Selbständigen [...] weitgehend bei den Reformmassnahmen verschont geblieben.”
- cvi “irgendwo Wasser”
- cvi “Das war nich’ abgemacht! [...] [M]it deinem Vater im Wohnzimmer sitzen und versuchen, ein Gespräch im Gang zu halten. [...] Gefällt Ihnen die Arbeit? Was verdient man da so? Hat das ‘ne Zukunft? Wo und wie wollen Sie leben? Ein Haus mit Garage und grünem Jaguar? Versteh’ doch, genau das will ich nicht. Das interessiert mich nicht!”
- cvi “fehlt nun aber, wie so oft, ein Kinderbetreuungsplatz, muss ein Partner die Familie alleine ernähren. Ein Mann kann da noch so gerne zu Hause bei seinem Kind bleiben wollen, wenn die Partnerin in ihrem Job 1000 Euro weniger verdient, ist die Frage, wer arbeiten geht und wer die Kinder hütet, schnell beantwortet.”
- cix “jetzt kannst du dem Idioten in aller Ruhe dabei zusehen, wie er den Rest seines Lebens damit verbringt, für seinen Unterhalt zu schufteln.”
- cx toller Vorschlag”
- cx “Ich werde das gleiche Leben haben wie Mama. Ich werde genau wie sie deprimiert zuhause sitzen und meine Kinder terrorisieren.”
- cxii “du machst das doch ganz toll”
- cxiii “schaffen das doch auch”
- cxiv “Dann bin ich eben keine Frau”
- cxv “junge Schriftstellerinnen, Künstlerinnen und Regisseurinnen verarbeiten ihre Diskriminierung als Frauen und Mütter – und entwerfen ungewohnt ehrliche Weiblichkeitsbilder.”
- cxvi “moralingetränkt”
- cxvii “radikalfeministische[s] Weltbild”
- cxviii “allenfalls als Täter [...] nicht aber als Partner oder gar als Väter”
- cxix “in der Szene geht es nicht um meinen nackten Körper, es war einfach nur wichtig, dass es ästhetisch wie ein Gemälde wirkt.”
- cx “Würde”
- cxxi “Marie geht nackt durch das Ende des Films, und darum war es mir sehr wichtig, dass es eine Schauspielerin ist, bei der noch ganz viel ‘Mensch’ übrig bleibt, selbst wenn sie nackt ist.”
- cxii “Maries Fehler ist, dass sie das, wofür sie sich selbst entschieden hat, ihrem Mann zum Vorwurf macht. [...] Es ist so praktisch, wenn man sagen kann: ‘Ich musste ja meinen Beruf aufgeben.’ Aber vielleicht hatte sie auch Angst vor ihrer beruflichen Laufbahn.”
- cxiii “Frauen [...] halten [...] immer noch Ausschau nach dem Anführer und nicht nach dem, der sie in dem unterstützt, was von ihnen heute verlangt wird”
- cxiv “das feministische Denken, das wir heute brauchen, bemüht sich vielmehr um Formen des Umgangs, in denen Frauen und Männer [...] tatsächlich gleichberechtigt leben können. Dafür braucht es vor allem wieder mehr Solidarität – der Frauen untereinander, aber auch zwischen den Geschlechtern [...] Die Männer können dabei sein, das sollen sie sogar.”

- cxv “weil die Widersprüche in der Roten Armee enorm und nicht Hunderttausende Soldaten Schänder und Mörder waren”
- cxvi “wenn die Russen uns das antun, was wir ihnen angetan haben, dann geht es mit uns Deutschen schon bald zu Ende.”
- cxvii “die wenigen Tage Ende April 1945, die das verfilmte Tagebuch in der Hauptsache beschreibt, die Hektik, das Chaos, die Orientierungslosigkeit, die Gewalt und Atemlosigkeit erzählt Färberböck so statuarisch, dass im Kino der Eindruck von endlosen zähen Wochen entsteht.”
- cxviii “die Frauenfigur rückt so in eine [...] Distanz zu sich selbst”
- cxix “eine jener verschlossenen Nina-Hoss-Figuren”
- cxx “man sieht Artillerie-Einschläge, Häuserruinen, wild gestikulierende deutsche Soldaten und fliehende Zivilisten [...] Es ist ein von Eichingers „Untergang“ abgezwigter Erzählstrang, mit derselben Bild- und Tonsprache, [...] nur ohne Führerbunker. Sogar die Kellerkulisse, in der die Vorhut der russischen Eroberer über die deutschen Frauen herfällt, ist erkennbar nach Kinobedürfnissen geformt. Denn dieser Keller ist riesig, ein wahres Labyrinth – kein Vergleich zu den historischen Luftschutzräumen [...] Aber Färberböck braucht die Katakombe, um das Breitwandformat zu füllen, das er für seinen Film gewählt hat.”
- cxixi “Scham, Schuldgefühl und körperliches Glück sind [...] zu wenig – es muss gleich Liebe sein, wenn die Frau in Blau den Major empfängt. So übermalt er das historische Zeugnis in den Bonbonfarben des Melodrams.”
- cxixii “dass ich [ihn] kennenlernen durfte”
- cxixiii “Christian Petzolds erster Liebesfilm – einer der nicht nur das Unglück sieht und sich immer auch ein Stück Hoffnung wahr”
- cxixiv “*Barbara* ist das Gegenstück zu den DDR-Filmen von Leander Haußmann und Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, die [...] – wenn auch auf sehr unterschiedliche Arten – monomanisch waren.”
- cxixv “sag’ was, ich besorge’s dir”
- cxixvi “wenn du drüben bist dann kannst du immer ausschlafen [...] Ich verdien’ genug für uns beide, brauchst nich’ mehr arbeiten”
- cxixvii “Alle ostdeutschen Zuschauer, alle, merken sofort: Was für ein blöder Satz! Vielen im Westen fällt der gar nicht auf. Die sind damit aufgewachsen, dass die Frauen zu Hause blieben; die Männer gingen arbeiten.”
- cxixviii “Vernichtungslager”
- cxixix “er kann sich ja an alles erinnern, nur nich seine Gefühle, die sin’ weg!”
- cxli “Ich weiss, was Sie sagen wollen, da könnte ich mich ja auch gleich operieren lassen, weil meine Gefühle ja auch ...”
- cxlii Barbara: “Wenn ich einen Klavierstimmer brauche, dann besorge ich mir den selber!”
- André: “Wissen Sie was, Sie haben völlig recht. Wenn Sie jemanden brauchen, besorgen Sie sich den selbst.”
- Barbara: “Genau das mache ich.”
- André: “Ich werde Ihnen nicht helfen.”
- Barbara: “Das will ich auch nich’!”
- André: “Und die kaputte Steckdose?”
- Barbara: “Was soll das denn jetzt?”
- André: “Ha’m Sie da auch schon jemanden besorgt? Is schwer, ’n Elektriker zu kriegen.
- Barbara: “Ja das kann Ihnen ja egal sein!”
- André: “Ist es auch. Könn’ Se ja mit Ihren West-Zigaretten bezahlen, aus Ihrem tollen roten Köfferchen.”
- cxliii “sicher ist hingegen, dass wir hier einer ungewöhnlichen Frau zusehen, die erst unnahbar und später dann umso mitfühlender und entschlossener wirkt [...] *Gold* ist [...] deshalb ein Frauen-Western, noch mehr aber ist es ein Werk, das hinter seinem historischen Dekor eine wahrhaft moderne, emanzipierte Frauenfigur verbirgt.”
- cxliiii “Ich wär’ so gerne mal ’n bisschen für mich allein”
- cxliv “Braucht es nich’. War keine besonders gute Zeit.”
- cxlv “die Schauspieler wollen sich nie ganz verlieren in der behaupteten Filmzeit von 1898. Sie bleiben dem Jetztzustand, dem heutigen [...] Deutschland, verhaftet”.
- cxlvi “die Handlung entwickelt sich in bewusster Wiederholung von Momentaufnahmen”

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- exlvii “die staubigen Schotterwege und ausgetrockneten Wälder”  
exlviii “ähneln sich auf fast schon unheimliche Weise”  
exlix “das Sisyphos-artige, das Nicht-Vorankommen trotz Weiterziehen”  
cl “es is’ noch ein ganzes Stück bis Dawson”  
cli “für ein paar Tage erholen und dann sehen wir weiter”  
clii “Wünsch’ mir Glück, Carl Boehmer”





**Figure 39:**  
Sandra Hüller  
in *Above Us Only Sky* (2011)

## Chapter Four

### **Sandra Hüller: Performing Female Subjectivity in Contemporary German Art Film**

#### **‘The One for the Tough Parts’: Role Choices and Approach to Acting**

Sandra Hüller has established herself as an actress who excels at playing eccentric or uncompromising characters. Born in 1978 in Suhl, a small town in the former East Germany, Hüller trained from 1996 to 2000 at the Ernst-Busch-Schule in Berlin. Ever since then, she has been acting on the stage, performing at the Theaterhaus Jena from 1999 to 2000, followed by a one-year engagement at the Schauspiel Leipzig in 2001, before becoming a permanent ensemble member of the renowned Theater Basel in Switzerland in 2002, where she was awarded Best Newcomer by Germany’s leading theatre magazine *Theater heute* for her performance of Shakespeare’s Juliet. In 2006, Hüller joined the ensemble of the Munich Kammerspiele Theatre, where she has been working continuously, while also appearing on stage in other productions, playing Queen Elizabeth I and Courtney Love, among others. Since her film debut in *Requiem* (dir. Hans-Christian Schmid, 2006), Hüller has had leading roles in four other features: *Madonnen* (*Madonnas*) (dir. Maria Speth, 2007), *Fräulein Stinnes fährt um die Welt* (*Once Around the Globe*) (dir. Erica von Moeller, 2009), *Brownian Movement* (dir. Nanouk Leopold, 2010) and *Über uns das All* (*Above Us Only Sky*) (dir. Jan Schomburg, 2011).

Like Nina Hoss, Hüller fits Christine Geraghty’s category of the ‘star-as performer’

(2000, p. 188), whose public image is associated with the cultural value of stage performance and their distinguished acting skills. In articles about Hüller, journalists rarely fail to mention her “classic acting training”<sup>cliii</sup> (Zander, 2006) at Germany’s most prestigious drama school, and her continuous theatre engagements. Hüller’s first leading film role in *Requiem*, where she plays a young woman plagued by epilepsy and mental illness, introduced her to German and international audiences and shaped her reputation as a young performer actively seeking acting challenges. In an article for the magazine *Mis(y)*, Judith Liere (2009) characterises Hüller as “the woman for the tough parts”<sup>cliv</sup>. Gerhard Jörder describes her as “an extremist”<sup>clv</sup> “in full possession of her contradictions”<sup>clvi</sup> (2009), and Anne Peter observes that Hüller “specialises in ambiguous, contradictory characters. They do not crave the viewer’s sympathy, but remain stubborn”<sup>clvii</sup> (2010). Hüller’s film work is underpinned by her extensive stage acting experience, resulting in a physical, expressive acting style. Daniel Benedict aptly observes that many of her film characters share a rebellious spirit and a sense of self-empowerment: in her work, “the actress problematises the refusal to comply with given norms – and the escape into alternative realities”<sup>clviii</sup> (2011, p. 16). Before she played the delusional Michaela in *Requiem*, Hüller embodied the character of Rita in Maria Speth’s film *Madonnas* (2007). Rita has borne five children to different men and yet vigorously refuses her maternal role due to an unresolved conflict with her own mother. In Nanouk Leopold’s *Brownian Movement* (2010), she portrays an apparently happily married doctor who risks her professional and personal future by having affairs with older or physically disadvantaged men. And in Jan Schomburg’s *Above Us Only Sky (Über uns das All)* (2011), Hüller’s Martha reacts to the suicide of her husband by quickly taking a new partner, who comes to uncannily resemble her dead spouse. What all these characters have in common is that they are confronted with a set of expectations linked to their position in their family and society (dutiful daughter, loving mother, happily married professional, or a person in mourning), which they stubbornly and even proudly reject. A question applying to most of Hüller’s films, then, is whether the obstacles her characters face are indicative of social structures or problems that reflect the actual experience of women in Germany today, or are the characters individualised or even idiosyncratic to the point that they cease to be representative? In the attempt to address this, I will trace Hüller’s penchant for contradictory or unconventional characters by analysing *Madonnas*, *Brownian Movement* and *Above Us Only Sky* in order to determine whether they function primarily as vehicles to showcase Hüller’s acting skills and the extent to which the roles incorporate social critique or artistic expression

and experimentation. Exploring the first five years of Hüller's film career (from *Requiem* in 2006 to *Above Us Only Sky* in 2011) will also allow me to critically evaluate Hüller's career trajectory.

Before doing so however, it is worth considering Hüller's particular approach to acting. As a performer whose public persona is defined primarily by her acting skills, and who has extensive experience of both stage and film acting, Hüller is an ideal subject for the discussion of key issues relating to film performance. I have therefore interviewed her in order to gain deeper insights into her perspective on film acting. In this interview, offered a number of observations about the processes of both stage and film performance that contribute to a more differentiated, specific understanding of film acting shaped by her experiences of working on independent or art films.

As discussed previously in this thesis, film performance has long been decried by practitioners for being not so much an achievement of the actor him- or herself, but an act orchestrated and shaped by directors, cinematographers and editors. The various influences on film performance beyond the actor's control have fuelled the common belief expressed by both actors and scholars that film acting is somehow secondary and inferior to stage acting. Jean Benedetti argues that "in the theatre, [...] the actor is in overall control of his performance – pace, rhythm, timing, emotional level – and he has to be able to reproduce it night after night" (2005, p. 148), whereas on film "the overall performance, its shape and rhythm are dependent on the director and the editor, the final cut" (ibid). In the same vein, Michael Caine has suggested that "[I]f you're a movie actor, [...] you cannot control the stage. The director controls it" (cited in Carnevale, n. d.(a)). Stage acting on the other hand is idealised by many actors working both in the theatre and on film, such as Dominic Monaghan, who insists that "theatre acting for me is the true form. It's the real place where you learn, the place where you practice, where you can take risks and try things out" (cited in Plume and Monaghan, 2003). Sandra Hüller, however, rejects the common assumption that stage acting is more challenging and rewarding for the performer than film acting or that the film actor lacks control over their performance. In a 2006 interview, she expressed her preference for stage acting by saying that the "reactions of a live audience"<sup>clix</sup> and the "responsibility to offer a new experience to viewers again and again [are] irreplaceable"<sup>clx</sup> (cited in Berger, 2006). Hüller's responses in our interview, conducted in November 2012, on the other hand, suggests that this view has changed since gaining further acting experience

on both stage and screen. Her description of stage acting in our interview suggests that she has come to perceive it as a somewhat routine process:

So, at the theatre, I have a process, [...] during which my character can grow, and at the premiere we show an intermediate result of what we worked on, that continues to grow; I'm always with the same colleagues, I have the same dressing room, I put my things there in the evening, go to the canteen – what I mean is that there is a familiar environment, which is always the same<sup>clxi</sup> (cited in Hüller and von Eicken, 2012).

This suggests that Hüller considers the theatre as a safe space, where she benefits from the guidance given by the director and colleagues in terms of creating a character. In an article on Hüller, Jürgen Berger explains that “it is an invaluable experience [for the actress] to create a complex character in the protective space of the theatre” (2006). During rehearsals, Hüller is able to develop and slowly create fully rounded characters together through a joint experimentation, discussion or analysis of the characters and scenes by the cast. Discussing film acting, on the other hand, she explained that “the hardest part [about film performance] is that there isn't as much intensive preparation and rehearsal time as in the theatre” (cited in Bavaria Film, 2006). Due to the lack of rehearsals, Hüller's film performances are influenced much more strongly by non-verbal exchanges with her acting partners, the director and crew, and the often unfamiliar filming locations compared to a stage performance:

When I'm filming, I'm always away; I live in a hotel. I don't see my family, I have to have at least a rough idea of the character [I play] so as to be able to show it on the set every day, because I don't rehearse, the character has to be there. That means it's much more about the moment. Actually that's what's so nice about it, because you don't think about it so much. That means, I can prepare, theoretically, I can talk to people, I can read things and so on, but what [exactly] is going to happen with a partner, directly on the set, especially if you might have never seen him or her before, what's happening with the people around you, what's happening with the director, that's really about the moment. And that's great<sup>clxii</sup> (cited in Hüller and von Eicken, 2012).

Thus, Hüller associates film performance with spontaneity, insecurity and instability, but also a greater sense of responsibility in the creation of her character. This is because she has to develop the character very much by herself. It is not created through numerous rehearsals, rather she has to 'have it ready' before filming starts. At the same time, Hüller also highlights the strong mutual influence that she and her acting partner have on each other's performance. Since she often meets them for the first time on the set on the day of filming, as she says, their working relationship is more intuitive and more dependent on the rapport they are able to build or not build immediately. She commented on the dynamic of the working relationship with fellow film actors as follows:



My acting reflects – [...] it's always got something to do with what's happening there [on the set]. [...] So I go to work and I think: What's wrong, this is not working, or this is weird, or you don't get along with a colleague, and later [when you watch the film] you realise: that's exactly what this is about. For example, there is a line between me and a colleague that must not be crossed, and that means there is a line between the characters that must not be crossed. It's just right, you know? And that's something you can't come up with beforehand. And that's what I mean when I say filming is about the moment, which is something that almost doesn't exist in the theatre, except during the performance. It's not possible in rehearsals, because the process is too much in the foreground<sup>clxiii</sup> (ibid).

This suggests that Hüller appreciates acting for film precisely because it is more spontaneous and contingent than an extensive stage performance, which she is likely to repeat and develop throughout the season. So despite being primarily a stage actress, Hüller does not compare stage acting favourably to film acting. She makes no value judgements but characterises the experience of filming as opposed to rehearsing and enacting a play as two entirely different working processes with different virtues.

Hüller's account of film acting is also remarkable in that she concerns herself very little with the presence of the camera (and the fact that her acting is being recorded) or which part of her body is in shot. I asked her if she ever felt that an emotion or expression she enacted during the shoot came across differently in the finished film. She replied with a firm 'No', explaining that what is recorded on film is "still me, I did that"<sup>clxiv</sup> (ibid) and insisted that "something would have to have gone badly wrong"<sup>clxv</sup> (ibid) in the communication between her and the director if he understood or presented her performance in a way she did not intend it. Next to being a testament to her confidence as a film actress, this suggests that she has experienced her work with film directors as collaborative rather than hierarchical and has therefore no fears about her work being misrepresented, curtailed or distorted during the editing process.

Hüller thereby refutes a common complaint by film actors concerning their lack of control. Susan Sarandon for example, who has starred in more commercial, high-budget films than Hüller, has deplored that as an actress she cannot be sure of how much will ever be seen of her performance "because it depends on whether or not anyone else has the same aesthetic in terms of how it's edited" (cited in Hollinger, 2006, p. 122). Similarly, Robert De Niro has said that "you can disagree [with the director], you can try it your way, their way, ultimately they edit it and it's their film" (cited in King, 1991 [1985], p. 144). Hüller on the other hand explains that she is able to discuss her performance with the director after every take, and she sometimes also gets the chance to see the recording. During the shoot, she is

“in constant dialogue with the director [...] and [he] tells me what he saw and I tell him what I was acting and if these two things do not match, it has to be changed there and then”<sup>clxvi</sup> (cited in Hüller and von Eicken, 2012).

Comparing Hüller’s account with the statements of Sarandon and De Niro suggests that the sense of ownership actors have of their film performances is highly dependent on their working relationship with the director. This relationship in turn is determined by the level of creative freedom the director enjoys, which decreases with growing commercial pressures. An observation by Sandra Bullock about the difficulty to alter even a single line in the script during filming suggests how heavily the production of high-budget Hollywood films is controlled by the studio: “in my world [...] where it’s, you know, you have a script, and that’s the bible. If you want to change something, you have to go through a chain of command [...] of seventeen studio people [...], before: ‘okay, you can change this line’ ” (cited in King, 2013). In the independent, partially publicly funded films that Hüller has worked on on the other hand, she and her directors appear to have enjoyed greater artistic freedom, allowing them to adjust the scripts and performances during the filming process.

It is important to note that these are low budget German and European productions that received funding from various local, national and European film boards and that focused more on artistic expression and experimentation than commercial imperatives. *Requiem* for example received 450,000 euros of funding from the regional MFG Filmförderung Baden-Württemberg (MFG Medien- und Filmförderung Baden-Württemberg, 2004), 250,000 euros of funding from the Filmförderungsanstalt, the German Federal Film Fund (FFA, 2004), and a further 60,000 euros from the media fund Berlin-Brandenburg for distribution and sales (Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, 2006), as well as being supported by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media. The film was produced by its director Hans-Christian Schmid, who started his own production company, 23|5 Filmproduktion in April 2004 to realise the project independently. Schmid explains that producing the film made it easier for him to direct it, since he did not depend on a collaborator who might be answering to a major studio: “you retain more control, from the first draft that is handed in to the completion and marketing of the film. [...] In the end, it’s your film. That’s important to me”<sup>clxvii</sup> (cited in X-Verleih, 2006).

Thus bearing in mind that Hüller’s experiences of film acting are partly shaped by the greater creative freedom associated with directors and actors of independent film productions, I aim to contribute to the exploration of film acting by considering one of

Hüller's film performances from two angles: firstly, how did she experience the shoot and how much control did she have over her own performance? Given the various factors influencing film acting, the extent to which the actor is able to shape and author his own performance, and to which extent it is determined by the technical means of the medium must be one of the main concerns when discussing and analysing film acting. Secondly, which analytical tools can we use to give an account of the performance in the finished film that considers its various elements, such as the actor's play, the filmmaker's choices and the intended or unintended significance of the actor's physical attributes in equal measure?

### **Foregrounding Performance: Sandra Hüller in *Requiem* (2006)**

Sandra Hüller's performance in Hans-Christian Schmid's 2006 film *Requiem* is ideally suited for an examination of the process by which film performance is created in the interplay of the actor's work and the processes of framing and editing. *Requiem* earned Hüller critical recognition and prizes for her empathic and forceful portrayal of a character suffering from epilepsy and mental illness. The film relies very strongly on Hüller's performance, as Josef Lederle points out: "every take is dedicated to [the protagonist], there is no scene in which she is not present after a few moments"<sup>clxviii</sup> (2006, p. 9). Hüller has described her working on *Requiem* as a particularly challenging but also very rewarding process. In addition to winning her the Silver Bear for Best Actress at the Berlin International Film Festival and a prize by the German Film Critics Association, the film also gained her international critical attention: a BBC review by David Mattin praises her "stand-out performance" and "brilliant intensity" (2006), Philip French from the *Guardian* calls it a "heartrending performance" (2006) and Owen Gleiberman from *Entertainment Weekly* equally speaks of her "compelling" "intensity" (2006).

*Requiem* is based on a true story. In 1975, a young woman named Anneliese Michel from Klingenberg, a small town in Lower Bavaria, underwent an exorcism performed by two priests, as she believed that her epileptic fits and mental health problems were signs of a demonic possession. She subsequently died from dehydration and malnutrition at her parents' home in July 1976 after subjecting herself to sixty-seven exorcism sessions over the course of ten months. It is now generally accepted that Anneliese was suffering from a psychogenic psychosis, a serious psychic disorder in which the patient loses touch with reality and will often suffer from hallucinations or delusions, which in Anneliese's case was brought on by her epilepsy.

In *Requiem*, Hüller plays a version of Anneliese Michel, renamed 'Michaela Klingler'. One of the first things to note about *Requiem* is that unlike *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973), or *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (dir. Scott Derrickson, 2005), which is also based on Anneliese Michel's story, it is not a horror film. Indeed, it is not even primarily a film about an exorcism or about religion. The drama ends before the exorcism begins, and there are only two brief scenes in which we see Michaela haunted by demons, experiencing hallucinations or having seizures. Rather, *Requiem* is a film about a failed coming of age, about Michaela's inability to build her own life because her parents and friends are partly unable, and partly unwilling to support her in doing so. The depiction of the second seizure scene is one of many scenes in which *Requiem* establishes a direct causal link between Michaela's epileptic fits and hallucinations, and her conflict with her mother (Imogen Kogge) over issues of independence and control. It follows an argument between mother and daughter on Christmas Eve after the former has thrown away a new outfit that Michaela bought, saying that she does not want her daughter to "dress like a refugee child"<sup>clxix</sup>. After this incident, Michaela goes to church with her family as planned, but then storms out of the Christmas service and back to her room where she proceeds to have a seizure.

It is worth analysing this scene in detail in order to demonstrate how Hüller's performance contributes to the film's overall impact. The beginning of the hallucination is signalled by Michaela staring into the distance, a gesture captured in semi-profile (see fig. 40). We then cut to a shot of the mirror showing the wall opposite her establishing that Michaela is alone in the room and whatever visions she is experiencing exist only in her mind. The camera moves faster, producing an unstable shaky image as it follows Michaela's attempts to open the case that contains her rosary, moving from her face to her hands and vice versa, observing her futile attempts to pray. The camera gets so close that it ultimately shows only her hair and then her fingers, before we cut away to a high-angle shot of Michaela rolling around on the bed. Apparently pursued by an invisible threat, she gets up, runs across the room and crouches in a corner, where she is found by her parents. No special effects, such as horrific faces or voices, nor any music or sound effects are used in this scene. Thus, the force and credibility of Michaela's horror and panic are credible relies to a large extent on Hüller's acting.

The sequence from the moment we see Michaela at the bottom of the stairs, before running up to her room, to the cut away from her huddled up in the corner of her bedroom consists of 17 shots. The shortest is slightly longer than a second, the longest is 20 seconds,

and the average shot length is around 6.5 seconds. Of the 17 shots only four are 10 seconds or longer. The first one shows Michaela running up to her room and crying on the bed. The other three depict the beginning of the hallucinations and Michaela's reaction. These shots demand particular attention as they are the longest continuous units of Hüller's performance in this sequence and I will try to determine their function within the scene. Why did the director and editors (Hansjörg Weissbrich and Bernd Schlege) opt for these slightly longer takes, instead of cutting away, and how do they affect the interplay between Hüller's acting and the camerawork and editing?



**Figure 40: Michaela's staring into the distance signals the beginning of the hallucination**

The first of the long takes, which has the camera tracking Michaela as she runs to her room, functions as a build-up to her physical and emotional outburst to come. It is typical of *Requiem's* storytelling and filming style, being one of many takes in the film in which the camera literally follows Michaela's impulsive movements. "*Requiem* confronts us with a [...] protagonist that [...] effectively forces viewers to follow [her] every turn and every whim if they want to get closer to her"<sup>clxx</sup>, as Lederle explains (2006, p. 9). Andrew Higson reminds us that the way viewers connect to actors on screen is determined by "framing, angle and distance of shot and focus within the overall framework of the montage" (1991, p. 166). In other words, the viewer's impression of the film actor's performance is strongly dependent on the camera's selective eye, how close it gets to the actor, which part of his or her body we see and if we are looking down on them or encountering them at eye level. In *Requiem*, cinematographer Bogumil Godfrejow's camera stays close to Hüller, avoiding extreme angles. In the scene in question, the camera tracks Michaela as she runs to her room, and we

mostly see her back. Like her, we do not know what is coming, but rather than inviting audience identification, the camerawork forces us to witness what is happening to her as a bystander. The handheld documentary aesthetic of this sequence, seemingly renouncing any efforts at composition or stylisation and instead appearing spontaneous and unplanned, harks back to director Schmid's training as a documentary filmmaker. *Requiem* was shot on 16mm film (which was then blown up to the final 35mm print), and the seizure scenes, like most of the interior scenes, were filmed using a handheld camera, "which [...] gives the film a feel of a fly-on-the-wall documentary", as David Clarke observes (2010, p. 153). Schmid had already collaborated with Godfrey on his 2003 film *Lichter (Distant Lights)*, where they both "attempted to [...] react directly to what the actors are doing. We use the handheld camera for emotional, dynamic scenes; in static scenes, the camera remains static"<sup>clxxi</sup> (Schmid in X-Verleih, 2006). The same method appears to have been used in the seizure scene of *Requiem*.

The longest and most effective shots are those at eye-level and the close-ups of Hüller's face, hands and occasionally her whole upper body. The second and third long take especially foreground Hüller's performance. In two subsequent shots of 15 and 20 seconds, respectively, we see Hüller enact Michaela's terrified reaction to something only she can see, and her attempt to pray with the rosary while her hands and body are convulsing. What exactly does Sandra Hüller do to portray this? Barry King has proposed four useful categories to consider when studying acting performance: the facial, the gestural, the corporeal/postural and the vocal (Higson, 1991, p. 159), which can be applied to Hüller's performance in the scene in question. As the hallucination begins, Michaela/Hüller turns her head away and raises her hands as if to defend herself, but not all five fingers are stretched out and they point in different directions, giving an indication of the beginning spasms and the uncontrollable tensing up of her hands (see fig. 41). This is accompanied by her uttering the word "Nich' " ("Don't") twice in a high-pitched, shaky voice that suggests to the viewer her extreme fear and torment. She then cries "Leave me alone!"<sup>clxxii</sup>, which, in the absence of any visual or sound effects, is the only clear indication in the scene that she feels she is being attacked or overpowered by some evil force. After that she utters the first words of a prayer ("Hail Mary, full of grace"<sup>clxxiii</sup>) but is unable to continue when her body is hit by spasms. Her trembling voice when she utters the words 'Don't' and attempts to pray strongly contributes to the realism of the scene by foregrounding Michaela's fear and inner struggle rather than giving the viewer a clear idea of what exactly it is she sees.



**Figure 41: Hüller's hand movements suggest Michaela's beginning spasms**

When she screams, it is not the piercing, melodramatic scream typical for young female characters in horror films, often captured in close-up. Instead, Hüller utters a number of short, roaring sounds while being framed in a medium, high-angle shot showing her rolling around on the bed (see fig. 42). Thereby the screams are presented as an integral part of Michaela's mental and physical agony, as opposed to functioning as a recognisable element of the non-naturalistic, melodramatic performances found in many horror films.



**Figure 42: Michaela rolls around on the bed**

By the time Michaela reaches for the wallet with the rosary, Hüller's hands have already contracted into rigid fists, and so she brushes the case to the floor with one of her hands rather than pulling it towards her. When Michaela struggles to keep her hands folded around the rosary to pray, but cannot because her body is shaking uncontrollably and her hands are convulsing, Hüller's body is executing two opposing movements at the same time:



keeping her hands together and pulling them, and the rosary, apart (see fig. 43). She tenses up every muscle in her body, especially her hands, and then with this extreme tension, tries to do what Michaela wants to do, which is to pray. Hüller's ability to externalise this physical and mental tension is one of the reasons this scene is so believable as a depiction of someone who is struggling to control their own body. At the same time, the close-ups also show us her strained face, eyes squinting, nose wrinkled, teeth bare, and we can see the sinews and swollen blood vessels on her neck and throat (see fig. 44). While these facial expressions strongly contribute to the visible manifestation of Michaela's predicament, they are only partly in Hüller's control, and partly dictated by her physical make-up. They must be grouped with what Higson calls "physical type" (1991, p. 159) and what King refers to as "physiologically given qualities" (1991 [1985], p. 142) which still have a strong signifying power that must be taken into account when analysing the scene, as they reinforce the impression that Michaela in this moment is driven by raw, animalistic powers and incapable of rational thought.



**Figure 43: Michaela, unable to control her hands, rips the rosary apart**

The scene is also notable for the process by which acting and camerawork reinforce each other in their combined focus on Michaela's hands and the rosary, highlighting the symbolic power of the prayer beads for Michaela's character and the narrative. A biography of Anneliese Michel entitled *Der Teufel ist in mir (The Devil inside Me)* (Wolff, 2006 [1999]) that director Schmid and his actors were drawing on, explains how Anneliese was unable to touch the cross during seizures, which she saw as another indication of her possession. Hüller states that she accepted Michaela's inability to touch the cross and used it as such in her performance: "for her it was a matter of fact that she could not [touch the cross]. So for me



that means that I cannot [touch the cross]”<sup>clxxiv</sup> (cited in Hüller and von Eicken, 2012). Accepting Michaela’s faith and her belief in being possessed allowed Hüller to foreground the character’s fear and torment and make it palpable to the viewer. She also explained that an appointment with a doctor who was to show her videos of epilepsy patients had been arranged in preparation for the film, but it was cancelled (ibid). Therefore, Hüller could not mimic actual epilepsy patients. There is also very little dialogue that could have helped to structure her performance, nor did she receive detailed instructions from the director as to how to move around in the room: “Hans-Christian simply said: ‘Do it as you think it should be’. And the scene evolved totally out of instinct’ ” (Bavaria Film, 2006). Therefore, when enacting this epileptic seizure during which movement and gestures took precedence over verbal expression, Hüller had to rely heavily on improvisation. In doing so, Hüller was able to draw on her acting training at the Ernst Busch Academy that is based on the principles of Max Reinhardt. Echoing Reinhardt’s doctrine that performance should not be limited to reproductive delivery but rather be based on an “empathetic relationship between actor and role”<sup>clxxv</sup> (Gees, 2001, p. 32), Hüller explains that during her training, she was encouraged to “always [...] keep asking what the text means exactly, and not just to mouth the sentences any old way. The word is basically the last thing that you use on stage, since ultimately everything can be told through the body” (Bavaria Film, 2006).



**Figure 44: Hüller’s physical make-up also contributes to the overall impact of the scene**

The cross and the prayer beads provided an invaluable tool for Hüller to work with, helping her to express the battle between Michaela’s mind and body. In both scenes that show Michaela experiencing a seizure, the rosary is present and she is unable to touch it or hold it in her hands. In a later scene, she shows her boyfriend that she cannot touch a

crucifix on the wall as proof that medication or psychological treatment will not help her, and that she needs the help of a priest instead. The use of the crucifix and rosary in *Requiem* both as a prop and as a narrative symbol supports James Naremore's observation on how "objects [...] can become agents of narrative" (1988, p. 85). In *Requiem*, the two religious symbols are used as shorthand for Michaela's physical and psychological problems and doomed emancipatory efforts. The prayer beads are a gift from Michaela's mother and the film presents both her mother and her religion as negative influences that impose strict rules and trigger feelings of guilt and mistrust within Michaela as she strives for a new, independent life.

The scene during which Michaela struggles to hold the rosary and ultimately rips it apart inverts a process described by Naremore in which the prop becomes an extension of the performer's body as actor and object seem to merge into one (1988, p. 85). Functioning as an opponent of the protagonist and thereby almost becoming a character in and of itself, similar to the 'One Ring' in the *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003), which director Peter Jackson considered as such, the rosary is crucial in defining Michaela's character and directing the narrative of *Requiem*. Her literal struggle with the rosary represents the figurative struggle with the restrictive and stifling forces of the Catholic faith and her distrustful, unloving mother, which are conflated as they both work to prevent Michaela's coming of age. Michaela tries to please her mother and stay true to her faith by being pious and obedient but she ultimately finds them irreconcilable with the prospect of economic, emotional and sexual independence associated with living and studying in a city away from her parents. Correspondingly, her epileptic fits and supposed demonic possession are associated with her abandoning independence and adulthood and regressing into infancy: after the first seizure, when her father (Burkhard Klaußner) finds her, he lifts "his 21-year-old daughter up like a giant baby and presses her against his chest like an infant"<sup>clxxvi</sup> (Lederle, 2006, p. 13), and when she returns to her parents' home at the end of the film, just before undergoing the exorcism, we see Michaela being fed with a spoon and bathed like a child by her mother.

The camerawork and editing undoubtedly intensify the effect of the scene depicting Michaela's second seizure. The strong focus on Michaela's hands and the rosary reinforce their symbolic power, while the use of a mobile, handheld camera (see fig. 45), the reliance on close shots and rapid cuts all contribute to the disorienting, disquieting quality of the scene, aligning the viewer with Michaela's mental instability and loss of control. However, as

my analysis of the scene has shown, the cinematographer is also guided by Hüller's performance, and focussing on and capturing her facial expressions and gestures *as she enacts them*.



**Figure 45: The shaky images produced by a handheld camera contribute to the disorienting quality of the scene**

We can get a better idea of how much the camerawork and post-production foregrounds Hüller's performance of Michaela's second seizure by comparing it to a similar scene in *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, in which Emily experiences a seizure. This scene, like the film as a whole, remains deliberately ambiguous about whether Emily is suffering from epilepsy and psychosis or is possessed. However, it strongly suggests the possibility that Emily is indeed attacked by demons. It is a short 33-second scene, which starts with Emily looking out the window of her hospital room in the night and being terrified by a raging storm and lightning during which a demon face or skull briefly appears in the clouds (see fig. 46).

The camera rests on the window for a few seconds and the images are accompanied by a menacing sound that grows louder before Emily falls to the floor and is shaken by spasms. The camera is at eye level with her, circling her convulsing body, but keeps a distance so the empty red floor fills a large part of the frame (see fig. 47&48). The scene concludes with a close-up of Emily's screaming face, before zooming out and revealing that she is holding on to a trolley which she then knocks over. This brief scene, starting with the image of the skull in the sky, provides ample clues to suggest that the demonic threat to Emily is real. The film thereby follows the psychological realism of mainstream productions, which demands filmmakers to provide the audience with a clear representation of what the

protagonist is seeing (be it real or imagined). The camerawork heavily focuses on Emily's invisible attacker by leaving room for it in the frame, by showing her whole body rather than focusing primarily on Emily's face, which would link the 'attack' to her subjective perception, and by adding dissonant, ominous sounds that reinforce the visual hints to the invisible but tangible threat. This allows viewers to share Emily's experience by creating the types of thrills and suspense typical of the horror genre. Overall, the scene focuses on what the 'demon' or 'attacker' is doing to Emily. In *Requiem*, on the other hand, the focus is on what Michaela is doing, on her physical and mental efforts to resist the seizure and the hallucinations, and it therefore relies much more strongly on Hüller's performance. *Requiem* thereby differs decidedly from exorcism-themed horror films like *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* that primarily seek to thrill the viewer and are less concerned with developing the protagonist's character, which functions merely as a target of the demonic attack.



**Figure 46:** A demon face appearing in the clouds suggests that the threat to Emily is real



**Figures 47&48:** The empty space in the frame hints at the presence of Emily's invisible attacker

Hüller's account of the filming of *Requiem* suggests that the director's method facilitated the powerful performance that we see in the film. Hüller said that she experienced the handheld camera as very liberating – the mobility, and the fact that the set was always completely lit, allowed the actors to move around freely. As Naremore points out, the physical restrictions imposed on film actors when a fixed camera is used as opposed to a hand-held camera are considerable. Performing in front of a studio camera often requires the actor to move in ways that are counterintuitive and 'unnatural': Naremore reproduces an account by Hume Cronyn on his experiences of filming Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), which at one point required him to actually move towards a person from whom he was supposedly retreating in order to stay in the frame (1988, p. 41). Tight framing will often require "unusual stillness or restraint" (ibid, p. 40) on the actor's part and the positioning of cameras on a film set imposes what Hollywood directors call a "180-degree rule as the stage line" (ibid, p. 37). This stage line separates the space in which the actor can move in front of the cameras, but the actor cannot move freely within this space either. He can neither conceal his face from the camera for a substantial amount of time nor can he look directly into it. Therefore, actors are more commonly filmed in an open, three-quarter profile, which requires them to "act[ ] sideways, so that audiences are given a clear view of every encounter" (ibid). Given these constraints associated with studio cameras, we can gauge the additional freedom to the actor that the use of a mobile, hand-held camera can bring.

Hüller also explained that by renouncing 'hot rehearsals' – a complete, comprehensive rehearsal of the scene to be filmed – Schmid encouraged spontaneity and gave the actors freedom to interpret the scenes as they felt fit. Hüller said that the director "trusts the actors enough to get it right when the camera's running"<sup>clxxvii</sup> (cited in Hüller and von Eicken, 2012) and added that

[the fact that we didn't rehearse] meant that you never wasted anything beforehand, we did not try anything out [before], we tried it during filming. And I think that most of the time, [...] the first take was used, even if we did more takes [...] because [that first take] was very fresh and very powerful<sup>clxxviii</sup> (ibid).

Hüller's understanding of the professional relationship between actor and director as one based on mutual trust and equality is undoubtedly shaped by her experiences of the types of projects she has worked on. Hans-Christian Schmid could afford to give more freedom and scope to Hüller's performance because there was little pressure from the producer or the studio that the actress must be presented in a favourable light in terms of their physique or character, as would be the case with a major star. Despite *Requiem* gathering more than

100,000 viewers and Hüller's performance gaining a major prize at the Berlin Film Festival, she has not aspired to such stardom. Rather, her subsequent role choices were guided by the ambition to challenge herself as a performer, preferring unconventional characters in ambitious art films to raising her profile by appearing in more conventional mainstream productions aimed at large audiences. Hüller's 2007 film *Madonnas* is indicative of her penchant for such demanding roles, which was confirmed by her 2010 film *Brownian Movement*. Both films share a tendency to deny viewers complete access to the protagonist's feelings and motives, rely on observation and contemplation, lack a stringent linear narrative and are aesthetically ambitious or experimental.

### ***Madonnas* (2007): A Counterintuitive Performance**

*Madonnas* is Sandra Hüller's second feature film after *Requiem*. Although released in 2007, it was actually filmed before Hans-Christian Schmid's exorcism drama. Hüller plays Rita, a woman in her twenties who has five children but grapples with her maternal role, stubbornly refusing to acknowledge any commitments or responsibilities that limit her personal freedom. Rita rents an apartment after having served a prison sentence in a mother-and-child programme with her baby, and rents a flat for herself and her five children, four of whom had previously been living with their grandmother Isabella (Susanne Lothar). Rita's interactions, especially with the older children, are distant and even antagonistic, and it is her new boyfriend Marc (Coleman Orlando Swinton), an American soldier, who creates rare moments of joy and affection when playing with the children. But Rita's emotional austerity makes it difficult for Marc to connect with her, and he tells Rita that he must return to the US. The film ends with Rita's eldest daughter Fanny (Luisa Sappelt) and Marc sitting alone in the apartment after Rita has given up the care of the children once more, leaving them with their grandmother.

The role of Rita is the first to signal Hüller's preference for unconventional, defiant characters whose motives the films refuse to (fully) explain, as later seen in her roles in *Brownian Movement* and *Above Us Only Sky*. While Hüller's performance in *Madonnas* was widely praised, I want to argue that the film is less successful as an exploration of the fragile psyche of its female lead than *Requiem*. It does not fully succeed in its attempt to explore the challenges of motherhood in Germany today, offering a rather detached and unengaging portrayal of a woman that defies the ideal of the selflessly loving mother figure. I will explore the extent to which the film draws on or rejects key conventions of the melodrama genre,

situating the film within the tradition of using melodramatic tropes to illustrate conflicts faced by female protagonists that has been a staple of German cinema since the Weimar Street films of the 1920s.

The director's agenda to engage with iconic images or ideals of motherhood is encapsulated in its title. The motif of the Madonna (literally 'my lady' in Italian) or Virgin with Child is "one of the central images of Christian art" (O'Reilly, 2010, p. 76): during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,

the Madonna was an archetype<sup>20</sup> for the mother image [...] This archetype, which reflected the culture's preoccupation with the mother figure as all-nurturing and unconditionally self-sacrificing, is still central to many cultures' beliefs of the role of women as mothers (ibid).

This understanding of motherhood persists also in contemporary Germany, which looks back at a long tradition of defining women in relation to their role as mothers<sup>21</sup>. The "particular[] German ideal of the mother that is rooted deeply in [...] history" (Zoellner and Hedlund, 2010, p. 10) is evidenced in the German word 'Rabenmutter' (literally, 'raven mother') that has no equivalent in other European languages. It is used to describe a bad, uncaring mother who abandons her children in an empty nest while she goes away to work or egocentrically pursues her personal interests, which goes hand in hand with "a strong moral prejudice against putting [small] children [...] into institutionalised care" (ibid, p. 111), particularly in western Germany. East Germany on the other hand propagated female

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<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that the motif of the Madonna or Virgin Mary with Child was not originally "intended as an image of tender motherhood" (Murray and Murray, 1996, p. 313), but as a symbol of Christ's love for his earthly church that is represented by Mary.

<sup>21</sup> From Lutheran Protestantism onwards, which declared child-rearing a God-given motherly duty (Vinken, 2002, p. 10), "the underpinning of the German social structure has been the three Ks said to define where women belong: Küche, Kinder, Kirche (kitchen, children, church)" (Kunin, 2012, p. 37). Influential 19th century philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer or scientists such as Paul J. Möbius argued that "women were suited neither to significant physical nor intellectual work", and were thus "biologically destined for wife- and motherhood" (ibid, p. 216). After the Weimar Republic had seen a period of women's liberation, the conflation of the ideals of the 'German woman' with that of the 'mother' during the Third Reich continued to shape the self-perception of German women long after the end of the regime and World War II: "National-Socialist ideology [...] sought to reduce women to biological mothers and celebrate them as such" (Weedon, 2002, p. 217): Hitler famously declared the mother to be "the most important citizen in his state" (Vinken, 2002, p. 260), and the Nazi regime implemented "a rigid set of ideological norms which confined women to traditionally feminine roles. The reality of women's lives was, of course, very different, given the pressing need for women in the labour force and the demands of a war economy. If anything, the discrepancy between Nazi ideology and women's day-to-day experience [...] added to the attraction for women of traditional family life. Thus after the Second World War many women in West Germany embraced conservative ideas of the sexual division of labour and women's primary role as wife and mother" (ibid, p. 217), which would be contested by second wave feminists from the 1970s onwards.



equality as part of its Marxist-Leninist ideology, “the regime actively encourag[ing] women to take waged work” (Tipton, 2003, p. 526). In view of reports about low natality levels and the rapid ageing of German society, as well as insufficient childcare facilities in western Germany, the problematic German ideal of motherhood has been hotly debated again in the new millennium: the “Rabenmutter [...] debates of the 2000s pitted East German collective child care and working mothers against a declining birthrate and Western individualism and conservatism” (Roy, 2013, p. 53).

*Madonnas* explores this contested notion of the ‘Rabenmutter’. Knowing that “the image of a mother abandoning her children [...] still shocks” (ibid), director Maria Speth highlights the persistent cultural currency of the ‘Rabenmutter’ idea, which “create[s] social pressure to conform to traditional roles” (ibid) by confronting the audience with a mother who absolutely refuses to do so. Rita in *Madonnas* would be seen as a Rabenmutter by many because her interactions with her children are almost entirely devoid of warmth and displays of affection. Rather, they are characterised by alienation and distrust, epitomised by a scene in which the children line up at some distance from Rita’s bed, unsure of how to approach their mother (see fig. 49&50).



**Figures 49&50: Rita’s relationship with her children is marked by alienation and distrust, epitomised by a scene in which they line up in front of Rita’s bed, unsure of how to approach her**

Even ostensibly playful activities such as arm wrestling or a game of *Memory* quickly turn into hostile competitions between mother and children as they accuse each other of cheating. One night, Fanny approaches Rita and asks her to “please [...] stop making babies”<sup>clxxix</sup>, confronting her mother’s inability to care for her and her siblings. Thus, *Madonnas* casts an unflinching look at the dynamics of failing mother-daughter relationships, but does so in a way that provides little hope for any positive change or resolution. In her review of the film, Katja Nicodemus suggests that “Maria Speth’s *Madonnas* may be icons of



their time: women who, like Rita, her mother and possibly at some point also her little daughter, do not, or cannot do what has been expected from mothers for centuries”<sup>clxxx</sup> (2007).

Like *The Heart is a Dark Forest*, *Madonnas* addresses a key thematic concern of the melodrama genre, a female protagonist’s struggle with a socially sanctioned model of motherhood. As Cook notes, by privileging a female point of view, melodrama “produces a problem, an excess which the Hollywood narrative” (1991, p. 251) that is structured around the reaffirmation of a patriarchal order that posits women as caring, domesticated mother figures, “cannot contain” (ibid). The position of female subjectivity in *Madonnas* is an unusual and radical one, presenting in Rita a protagonist who frequently abandons her motherly responsibilities to exercise her personal and sexual independence and mobility. The film features several scenes in which Rita neglects cooking food for the children, taking them to school, or supervising them, leaving them alone at home when she goes out at night. Rita’s behaviour and actions are identified as divergent and transgressive by the people around her: her mother calls her “crazy”<sup>clxxxi</sup>, and Marc tells her that “I’ve ever met anyone like you before”. Engaging in behaviour that her social environment perceive as transgressive and indulging in activities that place her personal enjoyment above the care of her children, Rita resembles the protagonist of the classic Hollywood melodrama *All that Heaven Allows* (dir. Douglas Sirk, 1955). The film centres on Cary (Jane Wyman), a middle-aged widow and mother who has to decide between maintaining social respectability and pursuing personal happiness in the form of her love and desire for Ron (Rock Hudson), a younger man. Both *All that Heaven Allows* and *Madonnas* portray women who cannot reconcile the mother role assigned to them by their family and society with their own idea of how to live their lives, “put[ting] on display the conflicts at the heart of feminine identity between female desire and socially sanctioned femininity” (Hayward, 1996, p. 241): Cary is ostracised by the middle-class suburban community of her hometown for entering a union with a younger working-class man as opposed to devoting herself solely to her children; while Rita’s determination to take care of her five small children proves to be incompatible with her compulsion to go out and have casual sexual relationships.

A key difference between the two films, however, is the extent to which they provide insights into the protagonists’ feelings and encourage viewers to relate to them. Sirk’s narration and mise-en-scène strongly encourage viewers to identify with Cary, to experience her dilemma and her suffering. *All that Heaven Allows* features numerous long takes of Cary’s

sad or despondent face, for example in a shot in which her figure is reflected in a TV screen that “speaks of [her] entombment [...] in the still universe built by her late husband” (Gillain, 2013, p. 96). In this scene, Cary realises that it was wrong to give up Ron for the sake of her children since they are to leave her anyway to start their own lives. In such scenes resides the potential of melodrama to highlight the restrictive nature of patriarchal structures that limit female identity to that of the caring, domesticated mother by encouraging viewers to experience the unhappiness or suffering of the heroine (Cook, 1991, p. 251; Gledhill, 2007, p. 321). *Madonnas*, however, deliberately bars this identification with the protagonist and thereby forfeits much of its potential to function as an exploration and critique of conservative, restrictive conceptions of motherhood. Both Rita’s abrasive personality and irresponsible behaviour and Maria Speth’s detached, observational direction make it difficult for viewers to understand and relate to the character.

Speth insists that she deliberately renounced judging the characters or inviting the viewer to do so: “it was very important to me not to use the film for a moral judgement [...] I wanted to approach what happens as an observer”<sup>clxxxii</sup> (cited in Peripher Film, n.d.). This position is also reflected in the aesthetic of *Madonnas*: long and medium shots dominate, and the camera maintains a cool detachment from the characters to the extent that we occasionally see an empty room while hearing the characters speaking next door (see fig. 51-54). Brigitta B. Wagner explains that cinematographer Richard Vorschneider, who also photographed films by Angela Schanelec and Benjamin Heisenberg, two Berlin School filmmakers,

has defined an aesthetic of observation and duration. [He] excels at long takes, static, contemplative shots with an often handheld camera [...] [T]he camera has a ‘didactic frame’: viewers must pay unusually close attention. [...] Resisting classical conventions, the camera may or may not conform to the action before it (2010, p. 62).

*Madonnas* is thereby typical of films of the Berlin School Movement that Speth and Vorschneider are associated with, which offers astute observations of contemporary German life that often serve as starting points for social critique.

Speth is less adamant about exploring wider social problems than other Berlin School filmmakers, however, instead limiting herself to capturing a period of time in the life of its anti-heroine. The director insists that her aim was “not to describe a social prototype but a concrete and singular person”<sup>clxxxiii</sup> (cited in Peripher Film, n.d.). The ‘social prototype’ Speth refers to is that of the young, single, uneducated mother of low social standing who is ill-

equipped to care for her children financially and emotionally. Speth attempts to circumvent such stereotyping in two ways: Rita’s middle-class upbringing (evidenced by Isabella’s comfortable suburban house and her hotel manager job) suggests that irresponsible parenting and child neglect are not exclusive to families of low education or income. *Madonnas* also refrains from depicting any similarly irresponsible mothers either in the prison or in the tower block where Rita is staying, corresponding to the director’s agenda to focus on an individual as opposed to a social ‘type’. The film largely brackets out Rita’s social environment and instead focuses exclusively on her interactions with her children in order to provide insights into the dynamic of their fraught relationship. Such insights are obscured however, by the film’s observational aesthetic, which has the effect of distancing the viewer from the characters: “the camera [...] is often positioned slightly away from the action”<sup>clxxxiv</sup> (Nord, 2007), and Vorschneider frequently films characters through windows or glass doors, which “establishes a distance – we do not get close to the characters in terms of getting an insight into their psyche”<sup>clxxxv</sup> (ibid).



**Figures 51-54: The aesthetic of *Madonnas* is one of observation and distanciation: long shots dominate (above), a static camera captures characters moving in and out of the frame (below left), and we occasionally see an empty room as the characters speak next door (below right)**

This is particularly evident with respect to Hüller’s protagonist, as Christina Nord observes: “we hardly ever get access to [her] face, instead we see her in medium shots or

medium long shots”<sup>clxxxvi</sup> (2007). Speth confirms that this framing of Hüller was deliberate: “I made sure not to emotionalise [what we see] with the camera. This for example meant – quite banally – not doing a close-up of a face in a highly emotional moment. This interest in working more observationally was already present when the [...] script was developed”<sup>clxxxvii</sup> (cited in Peripher Film, n.d.). Hüller’s own comments on her role suggest that she approached her performance as a continuation of Speth’s focus on observation and detachment: “Rita should not emotionalise [the viewer] in any way. It was important for Maria Speth and me to simply show this woman” (cited in Göbel, 2007), which director and actress knew to be an accurate depiction of real women: “such women do exist – [...] we met them in Frankfurt at a prison with a mother-and-child programme when preparing for the film”<sup>clxxxviii</sup> (ibid, 2007). Hüller goes on to say that the role of Rita constituted a particular challenge for her as a performer: “I find [Rita’s lack of regret] very interesting, since at the theatre I often play characters who fight with their own guilt. Rita on the other hand has a certain unscrupulousness”<sup>clxxxix</sup> (ibid). This forced Hüller to play the character in a way that contradicted her own intuition: “the hardest thing for me was to accept Rita’s difficult personality and to resist all positive impulses towards the children”<sup>cx</sup> (ibid). Several reviewers commented positively on Hüller’s performance of this deeply conflicted character, whose coldness and brusqueness comes across as very unsympathetic. Katja Nicodemus for example comments: “Sandra Hüller plays Rita with a mixture of aggression and deafness, rejection and unacknowledged longing. In some scenes it is hard to bear how much her character is trapped inside herself”<sup>cxci</sup> (2007). Equally, Cristina Nord writes that “Hüller manages to play the character in a way that transcends all moral categories”<sup>cxcii</sup>, and Christina Tilmann insists that Hüller is “ideally cast in the role of Rita. A fragile figure, almost still a child herself, vulnerable and hurtful at the same time”<sup>cxci</sup> (2007).

Hannah Pilarczyk however, is more critical of Hüller’s performance in the film, describing Hüller’s acting style as one determined by reasoning rather than emotional identification, and points out that the performance of Rita is problematic because it prevents the viewer from sympathising with the character or giving an insight into her emotions: “Hüller’s rational performance is akin to the viewer’s experience: we comprehend and analyse. But we do not relate [to Rita]”<sup>cxci</sup> (2007). This is exacerbated by the fact that “Rita does not develop. Her motives remain unclear, her sentences short. ‘I need money.’ ‘I have to go’ ”<sup>cxci</sup> (ibid). Pilarczyk goes on to say that “unfortunately the storytelling of *Madonnas* is nowhere near as economical”<sup>cxci</sup> (ibid) as its protagonist’s conversation: “again and again it

depicts dysfunctional family constellations and yet finds no other metaphor than the dining table with a pizza box on it”<sup>cxvii</sup> (ibid). Thus failing to explore possible personal or social reasons for the fraught mother-child relationships it depicts, *Madonnas* diminishes its relevance and acuity as a social portrait of young single mothers in contemporary Germany. Instead it limits itself to capturing a moment in the life of a character who does not develop or change and whose thoughts and feelings viewers have little access to.

The film therefore ultimately falls short in its effort to provide an insight into family relationships that challenges the ideal of the selfless, caring mother in a meaningful way, since it neglects to suggest poignant arguments for Rita’s refusal to live up to this ideal or to show that even women who do not conform to this ideal can develop positive, fulfilling relationships with their children. As such, *Madonnas* risks reinforcing the very stereotypes about unemployed, uneducated single mothers that it seeks to avoid. The director’s insistence on detachment and observation allows viewers to see Rita as none other than a woman who is oblivious to her children’s needs.

Speth’s direction also had a defining influence on Hüller’s self-professed ‘counterintuitive’ performance, which is marked by coldness towards the children but also by a barely contained rage and defiance. The fact that Hüller allowed herself to be strongly guided by Speth’s direction is perhaps indicative of the actress’s lack of experience, *Madonnas* being Hüller’s first film. Unlike *Requiem*, in which the director heavily relied on Hüller’s performance for the credibility and acuity of the protagonist’s ordeal, in *Madonnas*, the director’s agenda to observe but not empathise does not make ideal use of Hüller’s skills. However, there is a consensus among critics that the actress excels at capturing Rita’s conflicted character and emotional dilemma, even if the film’s plot and dialogues are too minimalist or insufficiently developed for it to succeed as a character study, let alone a social commentary. Hüller’s performance can therefore be seen as *Madonnas*’ greatest strength.

### ***Brownian Movement* (2010): Performing Female Sexual Agency**

In the 2010 feature *Brownian Movement* by the Dutch director Nanouk Leopold, Sandra Hüller again embodies a character distinguished by eccentric behaviour and a disregard for social norms. Charlotte is an apparently happily married, professionally successful doctor who lives in Brussels with her architect husband Max (Dragan Bakema) and young son (Ryan Brodie). Early on in the film, however, Charlotte rents a furnished apartment where she then has sex with four men, all of whom are less attractive than her husband. One is middle-aged and

balding, one has a very hairy body, one is heavily overweight, and one is in his seventies or older. Charlotte's sexual encounters with them all occur in the first third of the film, which is formally separated into three parts of roughly equal length, each section announced by an intertitle. The first part ends with Charlotte running into one of her sexual partners at a building site, causing her to scream and attack him violently before she passes out, a confrontation that reveals Charlotte's sexual encounters to her husband. The second part of the film shows Charlotte attending therapy sessions, some of them in the presence of her husband. She also loses her license to practice medicine, since she selected her illicit sexual partners from her patients. In the third part of the film, the couple have moved to Ahmedabad in India, with Charlotte looking after their newly born twin boys. When Max finds out she sometimes goes out and spends the day alone, he decides to follow her, suggesting that the bond of trust has not been fully restored.

A Dutch-German-Belgian co-production, *Brownian Movement* is representative of a type of European art film that is well received at festivals but struggles to recoup its production costs. The film's 2.7 million euro budget was provided by numerous regional, national and European funding bodies<sup>22</sup> and broadcasters, but only made 15,420 euros in the Netherlands (Netherlands Film Fund, 2012), where it had its widest release. These box office figures are symptomatic of a 'difficult' film that places artistic expression over economic imperatives. Joachim Kurz observes: that "in its strict coldness, its elliptic and fragmented narrative style, [and] its clear images, which strive again and again towards abstraction, *Brownian Movement* is a film that is vaguely reminiscent of the Berlin School"<sup>excviii</sup> (n.d.).

The film focuses almost exclusively on Hüller's character, while at the same time denying the viewer access to her thoughts and feelings. Charlotte is portrayed not only as the initiator of the sexual encounters, but as someone almost immune to guilt feelings or punishment. I will examine the representation of Hüller's character by relating the film to a recent European trend, that of the sexually explicit art film. I will also highlight parallels between Hüller's character in *Brownian Movement* and her characters in *Requiem* and *Madonnas* in order to demonstrate her association with difficult, nonconformist female characters that has developed into a pattern of role choices that foreground her performance and challenge her acting skills.

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<sup>22</sup> The Netherlands Film Fund, Eurimages, Filmstiftung NRW, Flanders Audiovisual Fund, Deutscher Filmförderfonds, Rotterdam Media Fund, the MEDIA programme of the European Union, as well as the German public service broadcaster 3Sat.

With its uncompromising and unflinching look at the female protagonist's sexual desire and its gratification, *Brownian Movement* can be read as a feminist film, an exploration of female identity and sexuality that refuses to be limited to the role of wife and mother. In her book *Sex and The Cinema*, Tanya Krzywinska explains how films centring on adulterous women have been approached by feminist scholars:

many feminist theorists and critics [...] have argued that patriarchal, phallogocentric cultures polices women's desire and identity, and the images of such, to privilege male desire and power. Any desires or actions that are not related to child-rearing and husbandry are therefore coded as transgressive (2006, p. 122).

The reactions of critics and audiences to *Brownian Movement* during interviews and test screenings suggest that an adulterous woman is indeed perceived to be more transgressive than an adulterous man. Hüller explains that

I believe what is so disturbing about this film, and we've been told this again and again [...]: if it had been a male character [cheating on their spouse] and the woman would have found out, it would have been a completely different story [...] People would not have taken issue with it in the same way. And that's probably what makes it a political film<sup>excix</sup> (cited in Hüller and von Eicken, 2012).

It was director Nanouk Leopold's professed aim to probe the feelings and experiences of her female protagonist, and this is manifested in the frequent close-ups of Hüller's enigmatic face, enhanced by the minimal dialogue. In its refusal to provide an explanation of the protagonist's inner life, *Brownian Movement* resembles Luis Buñuel's 1967 film *Belle de Jour*, which according to Leopold served as an inspiration for her film (Kappert and Leopold, 2011). *Belle de Jour* is based on a novel by Joseph Kessel and focuses on Séverine (Catherine Deneuve), a young doctor's wife who rejects physical intimacy with her husband (Jean Sorel) but secretly starts to work as a prostitute. Both films are centred on female protagonists who seek sexual encounters outside of their marriages, choosing to sleep with men who lack sexual attractiveness and whom they have little emotional connection with. While Séverine's decision to prostitute herself is an act of rebellion against and personal and sexual liberation from her patronising husband, Charlotte's motivations remain more opaque.

The first section of *Brownian Movement* suggests that Charlotte enjoys a fulfilling professional life, family life and sex life with her husband. We see her surrounded by her students in a lecture theatre, laughing and complimenting a student on his ringtone when a mobile phone sounds. We see the family flying kites on the beach, and Charlotte reading a bedtime story to her son. Moreover, the first sex scene in the film involves Charlotte and Max, followed by a shot of a smiling and apparently content Charlotte lying next to her

husband. As Charlotte is a doctor and her husband an architect, the family apparently enjoy a prosperous, comfortable and secure life, evidenced by their tastefully furnished apartment. This has led some reviewers to read Charlotte's affairs as an attempt to escape her bourgeois ennui: Jutta Heeß for example notes that "the director shows the attempt to make a nice, boring life more exciting as well as – after this attempt has failed – the effort to regain said nice, but boring life"<sup>cc</sup>.

But a closer inspection of the depiction of Charlotte's extramarital affairs contradicts this simplistic reading of the film. Instead it offers a rare representation of female sexual subjectivity and agency frequently found in a group of films identified as 'sexually explicit art films'. First noted by Nick James in *Sight & Sound* in 2001, scholars began to comment on "the appearance of sexually explicit acts and images in aesthetically ambitious films" (Wheatley, 2008, p. 177) of the late 1990s and 2000s such as *Romance* (dir. Catherine Breillat, 1999), *Intimacy* (dir. Patrice Chéreau, 2001), *Irréversible (Irreversible)* (dir. Gaspar Noé, 2001), *Base-moi (Fuck me)* (dir. Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2001), *La Pianiste (The Piano Teacher)* (dir. Michael Haneke, 2001) and *Nine Songs* (dir. Michael Winterbottom, 2004). This trend has been continued in the 2010s with films such as *La Vie d'Adèle (Blue is the Warmest Colour)* (dir. Abdellatif Kekiche, 2013) and *Nymphomaniac* (dir. Lars von Trier, 2014). While Richard Falcon and Chris Darke believe that this "series of mainly arthouse movies which have included shots of sexual penetration" "have otherwise [...] little in common" (2001), most of them share a focus on female sexual experience that also characterises *Brownian Movement*. For example, Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* revolves around a sexually repressed woman, and *Fuck me* features a female revenge narrative and was written and directed by two women. Similarly, Catherine Breillat, the director of *Romance* "has single-mindedly explored women's sexuality [...] as both a writer and a filmmaker" (Williams, 2008, p. 275).

There are significant parallels between *Brownian Movement* and some of these 'sexually explicit art films', all of which depict sexual acts on screen not for the purpose of titillation, but to probe the characters' personalities and relationships. *Nine Songs* for example depicts an affair between a man (Matt, played by Kieran O'Brien) and a woman (Lisa, played by Margo Stilley) that is "presented and understood primarily through its many and varied acts of sex" (ibid, p. 265). The film "chronicles the male lover's recollections of the arc of a love affair that reaches its peak at about the fifth concert and that afterward fades" (ibid, p. 262) as Lisa loses interest. Williams argues that this is signalled by Lisa using a vibrator in front of Matt



who “forlornly looks on” (ibid, p. 263), suggesting that “Lisa no longer seems to find Matt fulfilling as a lover” (ibid). Similarly, *Brownian Movement* uses the sex scenes between Charlotte and her lovers, as well as those involving her husband, to explore the protagonists’ moods and the state of their relationships. Nanouk Leopold explains that she sought to portray the changing relationship of a married couple as one partner is forced to realise the limits of his knowledge of and intimacy with the other: “I was looking for [the] issue best suited to symbolise this change between them: that issue was sexuality”<sup>cci</sup> (cited in Kürten).

Charlotte’s sexual encounters with the four strangers are staged in a markedly different way to those with her husband, suggesting the characters’ mutual familiarity and distance, respectively. The tight framing of the actors’ heads and upper bodies in close-up and sometimes out of focus, as well as the fact that two sex scenes between Charlotte and her husband are much more darkly lit than the rest of the film, reinforce the sense of trust and intimacy between the couple, as does Charlotte’s body language after the sexual act, when she rests her head on Max’s shoulder or torso (see fig. 55&56).



**Figures 55&56: Low key lighting, tight framing and intimate gestures signal the mutual trust and familiarity between Charlotte and her husband**

Charlotte’s adulterous sex scenes, on the other hand are in keeping with the film’s overall aesthetic of observation and detachment: There are no attempts to imply a sense of urgent sexual desire through fast cuts, dialogue nor (extra-)diegetic music. The portrayal of Charlotte’s extramarital sex thus differs markedly from more conventional adultery-themed films such as *The Bridges of Madison County* (dir. Clint Eastwood, 1995) or *Unfaithful* (dir. Adrian Lyne, 2002), in which the consummation of an extramarital affair is presented as an act of uncontrollable passion. In *Brownian Movement*, the adulterous sex scenes are captured by a largely static camera and the characters move slowly, complimenting the atmosphere of calmness, orderliness and detachment established by the abundant long shots of bright, neat

and empty rooms, such as the hospital treatment room where Charlotte first meets her lovers, the flat she rents for the purpose, or later the psychiatrist's office (see fig. 57-59). Only one sexual act is pictured; while all other scenes between Charlotte and the men foreground her response to their distinct physical features, such as a hairy body, a pot belly or a flabby midriff, which are highlighted through close-ups or by being placed in the centre of the frame (see fig. 60-63). Charlotte carefully inspects the men's bodies, touching their backs, arms or stomachs, and her slow, considerate movements suggest that for her these encounters are akin to a scientific experiment, calling back to her profession of medical doctor and researcher and the clinical environment of the hospital she works in.

Leopold confirms the parallels between Charlotte's work and her sexual adventures: "Charlotte is a medical researcher at a teaching hospital. She works in a laboratory; she sees the world through a microscope. At the same time, she does research into her sexual urges – in an almost identical, uninvolved, scientific way, as an experiment" (cited in Berlinale Forum, 2011). Charlotte's exploration of men's bodies with her look and touch bears no signs of the apprehension, reservations or revolt that the flawed, unattractive bodies might inspire but is instead characterised by a quiet curiosity. As Lukas Foerster and Ekkehard Knörer observe,

the point of view offered by director Nanouk Leopold allows viewers (male or female) to almost understand: What Charlotte was doing, in the apartment, in the other room, was not cheating. Was something she only did for herself. Out of interest and curiosity. She gave room to her desires, quite literally<sup>ccii</sup> (2011).



**Figures 57-59: *Brownian Movement* features a number of shots of spacious, empty rooms that create an atmosphere of calmness, orderliness and detachment**

We can surmise that Charlotte is attracted to these men precisely because they are unfamiliar and physically different from her husband. Taken together, Charlotte’s adultery and her statements at the psychiatrist’s leave no doubt that her marriage and sex life, though harmonious and functional, does not provide complete personal and sexual fulfilment. The visual emphasis on the men’s distinct physical features suggests that Charlotte chose them precisely for their physical imperfections. This is confirmed during one of her sessions with the psychiatrist, when Charlotte explains that “I didn’t look at [the man’s] face. I was watching the hair on his arm”. And indeed, three of the four men Charlotte takes to the apartment remain faceless, whereby the film refuses to acknowledge them as individuals and denies the viewer any information about their emotions. The visual fragmentation of the men’s bodies, which are reduced to erotic objects, reverses the process by which women’s body parts are singled out and displayed in classic Hollywood films as an object of male scopophilic pleasure discussed by Laura Mulvey (1975, p. 14).



**Figures 60-63: The men’s distinct physical features, such as a hairy body, a pot belly or a flabby midriff, are foregrounded through close-ups or by being placed in the centre of the frame**

In privileging the perspective of a female character, *Brownian Movement* is akin to Catherine Breillat’s film *Romance*. Marie (Caroline Ducey), the film’s protagonist, has sex with a number of strangers to compensate her boyfriend’s lack of interest in her. In a voiceover at the end of the film, she reflects on a sexual experience as it is happening, refusing “to give herself up completely to the experience” (Williams, 2008, p. 278). Equally, Charlotte’s calmness and reserve while initiating and experiencing sexual acts demonstrate her

independence and agency, thereby opposing the reduction of the female body into a sexual object: in *Brownian Movement*, as in *Romance*, “for once the man is body, the woman is mind” (ibid, p. 277). Charlotte is the instigator of the sexual encounters, and the scenes in the secret apartment focus on her, rather than the men, experiencing sensual and sexual pleasure. The only sexual act that is pictured shows a man pleasuring Charlotte after she stretched herself out on the bed. We cut between a medium shot showing the characters from the side, and a close-up of Hüller’s face, her panting signalling Charlotte’s arousal. Other depictions of Charlotte’s sexual encounters similarly privilege her experience and satisfaction over the men’s. One scene for example has Charlotte entering the frame from the left, positioning an armchair in the middle of the room. The camera faces the back of the armchair. Charlotte puts a cushion on the floor in front of it and sits down on the chair. We then cut to a close-up of her face, bearing a serious but complaisant expression, intently watching an object off screen. The camera rests on her face for several seconds, while we hear the breathing and scuffling of a person approaching her, before a man’s head enters the frame. Showing Charlotte sitting down in the armchair and expectantly watching the man approach likens her to a spectator awaiting a stage performance. The film thereby presents her sexual encounters as events orchestrated and controlled by Charlotte, which are geared towards her experience and pleasure.

However, Charlotte’s breakdown and subsequent psychotherapy complicate the film’s status as a tale of female sexual liberation. Her violent reaction and breakdown when encountering one of her sexual partners in a different context calls her sanity into question, suggesting that she might be schizophrenic or otherwise mentally unstable: deeply disturbed by a person belonging to her ‘secret life’ entering her everyday life, she is unable to cope and collapses. Charlotte’s adultery subsequently becomes the object of moral and medical evaluation and judgement by a psychiatrist, her husband and her employer. According to film critic Rüdiger Suchsland, the fact the Charlotte attends therapy is indicative of the film’s critique of a repressive society that negates personal and sexual freedom:

the second part of the film centres on the (over)reaction of our society, which reacts to deviant, ‘inexplicable’ behaviour with treatment, regulation and control [...] Charlotte [...] is forced into therapy. She is put on medication and asked to explain the inexplicable she encountered. Because, such is the reasoning of the people around her, a person that does something like this must be sick<sup>cciii</sup> (n.d.(b)).

The question of whether Charlotte is a person refusing to be subject to the social rules of monogamy and marriage or whether her adultery is part of a psychiatric disorder is never

resolved. Charlotte's stoicism once her affairs are revealed instead cements the impression that she is largely independent of and not affected by social norms or regimentation. Kryzwinska explains that adultery-themed films, which have long been a staple of cinema, traditionally embraced a conservative morality that placed the preservation of the institution of marriage above the individual's happiness: "an unseen force [...] worked its morally-upright power by meting out extreme forms of punishment to those exhibiting transgressions of extra-marital desire (usually death)" (2006, p. 120), taking its cue from classical adultery-themed stories such as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877) or Theodor Fontane's *Effi Briest* (1894), all of which inflict the ultimate punishment on the adulterous woman. Kryzwinska observes that in more recent films, "the treatment of adultery has in formal and cinematic terms become more complex. Its transgressive status has become diluted and more ambiguous, yet [...] punishment is still in evidence" (ibid). In the 2002 film *Unfaithful* for example, a husband (Richard Gere) kills his wife's lover (Olivier Martinez), and the adulterous woman (Diane Lane) loses both men since her husband turns himself in and faces a prison sentence. It is remarkable therefore, that relatively little punishment is inflicted upon *Brownian Movement's* Charlotte. Though the loss of her medical licence is likely to be a deep incision, taking away her occupation and thus a key source of self-esteem and personal and financial independence, Charlotte's tears in the court room remain the only indication that she laments this. Nor does she lose her husband and children: on the contrary, the family is extended with the birth of twin boys. *Brownian Movement* thus refrains from passing any moral judgement on its protagonist by condemning Charlotte's adultery or showing her suffering for it. This constitutes the film's unusual or radical take on adultery: it awards its female protagonist a sexual liberty, even recklessness rarely granted to adulterers in films, refusing to endorse the socially sanctioned ideal of marriage or long-term monogamous relationships as the only fulfilling and morally correct way to live.

The scenes at the therapist further affirm Charlotte's inability or refusal to explain or justify her actions. As Michael Kienzl observes, "the conversations between Charlotte and her psychiatrist positively ask for an answer for all the questions raised, but here, too, the film leaves viewers stranded"<sup>cciv</sup> (2002). Charlotte's monologue during the first therapy session demonstrates her struggle to articulate her thoughts: "I [Pause] If I ... I'm not sure. It's just, it's very difficult for him. For me, too. But even worse for him of course, I understand that. [Pause] He doesn't trust me anymore. And of course, I know ... I think ... If

I ... If, if I ...” [She goes silent]. She tries and fails to acknowledge that her own behaviour was morally wrong and that she betrayed her husband’s trust, because this socially sanctioned view does not correspond to her actual feelings. Equally, when being asked how she selected the men, she replies: “I think I shouldn’t be saying it. I shouldn’t tell it all. It only makes it worse”. This suggests that while being aware of her husband’s suffering, Charlotte considers her sexuality as a part of life that cannot not be fully accommodated by marriage or a monogamous relationship, however attractive, kind or understanding her husband may be. Charlotte’s most revealing statement is her answer to the psychiatrist’s question what the difference is between her husband and her lovers: “They don’t have anything to do with each other”, she says calmly and matter-of-factly, and Hüller’s raised eyebrows effectively communicate Charlotte’s astonishment about what she seems to consider an entirely inappropriate and irrelevant question. This piece of dialogue demonstrates once more director and screenwriter Nanouk Leopold’s resolution to avoid any simple or straightforward explanations for Charlotte’s sexual exploits, and instead affirm once more the character’s right to sexual liberty and independence from bourgeois morality.

Hüller’s performance underscores the portrayal of Charlotte as an introverted, self-sufficient person who is removed from and independent not only of moral judgement but even of the understanding and empathy of other people, including the viewer. Various reviewers have commented on Hüller’s subtle, skilful performance in a film that places much greater importance on facial expressions than on dialogue or even body language. Ines Kappert observes that Leopold’s “camera is in love with Sandra Hüller’s face. Numerous close-ups show how Hüller is able to change her facial expression with minimal means, from naivety, to inscrutability, to someone simply enjoying life”<sup>ccv</sup> (2011). The film for example contains a three minute scene that shows Charlotte outdoors by herself, sitting on the edge of a large flower pot in what appears to be an abandoned industrial estate. As she raises her head to the sky, her complacent expression suddenly turns into a broad smile that lingers on her face for a long time, yet we never find out the reason for this moment of happiness. It is probably scenes like this one that attracted Sandra Hüller to the film: they challenge the performer to communicate mood and emotion and hold the viewer’s attention without the help of music, dialogue or interaction with fellow actor. They do not advance the narrative since Charlotte’s thoughts are never clarified.

The frequent close-ups of Hüller’s face, often bearing a serene, somewhat absent-minded expression (see fig. 64-67) that is difficult to read may prevent the viewer from



identifying with her, but they force us to follow Charlotte and constantly question what her thoughts and feelings might be. Kienzl points out that “the film [...] systematically denies access to the protagonist. Again and again the camera captures the look on Hüller’s face, which is often expressionless, sometimes also fearful or happy. But what really goes on inside her remains hidden”<sup>ccvi</sup> (2011). The use of close-ups in *Brownian Movement*, therefore, inverts the typical function of this type of shot, which is generally seen as “the most direct means a filmmaker has to create an emotional identification between a character and the viewer” (Hoyle, 2012, p. 69). In *Brownian Movement*, the close-ups of a face whose expressions and respective emotions we are unable to read instead create a distance between protagonist and spectator, and cement the film’s status as an experimental or art film by forsaking the strong emotional response often invited by melodrama or romance films for a more ambiguous intellectual response. The characteristic half-smile rests on Charlotte’s face even in situations of great emotional upheaval, such as when she is informed in court about losing her medical license (see fig. 65), or when she shows her husband the secret apartment (see fig. 66). As Willy Flemmer observes, “the character emanates an incredible, stoic calmness, as if she was completely at ease with herself. The quiet smile rarely leaves Sandra Hüller’s face”<sup>ccvii</sup> (n.d.).



**Figures 64-67: The characteristic half-smile rarely leaves Charlotte’s face: be it during her sexual encounters (above left), in court (above right), when showing her husband her secret apartment (below left) or at the psychiatrist’s (below right)**

Some reviewers find the inscrutability of Hüller's character problematic, since it prevents engagement with what they already see as a cryptic film. Lida Bach, for example, points out that "Sandra Hüller's subtle performance gives the ambivalent work a frosty sheen. But even her nuanced acting cannot fully fill out a character that is apparently supposed to remain inscrutable according to the director's will"<sup>ccviii</sup> (2011). *Brownian Movement* has therefore been dismissed in some quarters for its vague characterisation and inconclusive plot. Alexandra Distler for example calls the film an "exhausting interpretational marathon" (2011) and Christiane Peitz dismisses its "minimalism"<sup>ccix</sup> and "stasis"<sup>ccx</sup> as an "annoying stylistic affectation"<sup>ccxi</sup> (2011).

Thus, *Brownian Movement* is a film that ultimately divides critics and viewers, a consequence of its minimalist, cryptic plotting and inscrutable protagonist, whose motivations and state of mind are deliberately obscured. In the absence of a linear plot, substantial dialogues or a dramatic score to communicate the characters' emotions, the responsibility to hold the viewer's attention lies predominantly with the actors, and Sandra Hüller in particular. *Brownian Movement* is therefore similar to *Requiem* in that both films are structurally and formally geared completely towards Hüller's character, making them ideal vehicles for displays of her acting talent. But unlike Michaela in *Requiem*, whose profound pain and suffering, was communicated by Hüller through her expressive acting, Charlotte's reserve and composure make her a much more difficult to sympathise with. In this respect, *Brownian Movement* is more akin to *Madonnas*, whose formal and thematic abstraction have exposed both films to the same criticism: by refusing to provide an insight into the protagonist's thoughts and feelings, *Brownian Movement* and *Madonnas* limit their meaningfulness as a character study or social commentary, and thereby arguably diminish Hüller's skilful performance.

### ***Above Us Only Sky* (2011): The Self-conscious Performance and the Long Shadow of *Vertigo* (1958)**

*Above Us Only Sky* (2011) is Sandra Hüller's fourth major feature film, and is the directorial debut of filmmaker Jan Schomburg, who also cast Hüller in a supporting role in his subsequent production, *Vergiss Mein Ich (Lose My Self)* (2014). *Above Us Only Sky* attracted an audience of 33,217 in Germany (FFA, n.d.(g)), making it Hüller's third most commercially successful film after *Requiem* and 2013's *Finsterworld* (dir. Frauke Finsterwalder) (69,686 viewers (FFA, n.d.(h))). The film was even more popular in France, where it was seen by



42.574 viewers (JP's Box Office, n.d.), as well as being shown at various film festivals (including Berlin, Seattle and Leiden). While the film's multiple festival screenings suggest that it is targeted at select art film audiences, the marketing actually highlighted its thriller or mystery element with the logline "Who was the man Martha loved and lived with for years? After her husband disappears, [...] she meets another man who unwittingly keeps her bound to the past ...".

Hüller plays Martha, a schoolteacher who lives in Cologne together with her husband Paul (Felix Schmidt-Knopp), a PhD student. When Paul commits suicide, Martha discovers that he was not the man he pretended to be: he had not completed or even worked on a doctoral thesis, let alone secured a job at the University of Marseille, where the couple planned to move and where Paul took his life before Martha's arrival. Still grieving, Martha enters into a relationship with Alexander (Georg Friedrich), an Austrian history professor, and soon experiences several moments with him that eerily resemble those she previously shared with Paul. Alexander's suggestion they move to Marseille (he is unaware of Paul's suicide) lends further weight to the viewer's suspicion that history will repeat itself and that either he or Martha will die. However, the film's ending confounds this expectation by showing a pregnant, smiling Martha in Marseille.

Despite its skilfully created suspense, *Above Us Only Sky* is lighter in tone than most of Hüller's previous films; the happy ending, occasional comedic moments between Martha, Alexander and his friends, as well as Hüller's performance, distinguish it from both the documentary aesthetic of *Requiem*, and the detached, observational style of *Madonnas* and *Brownian Movement*. Unlike the insecure, restless Michaela or the reserved and inaccessible Rita and Charlotte, Martha is portrayed as a well-adjusted, practical, and cheerful young woman, who seems to quickly recover from the shock of her husband's suicide and betrayal. Indeed, so swiftly does she resume her life that the question of whether she has overcome the loss of her husband or is merely disavowing it, emerges as a key issue in the film, highlighted by the identical staging of several scenes that show Martha with Paul and with Alexander. In the following analysis, I will consider Hüller's performance and discuss *Above Us Only Sky* as a homage to Alfred Hitchcock's celebrated thriller *Vertigo* in order to demonstrate that in making this film, Hüller has moved towards mainstream or genre cinema while continuing to challenge herself as an actress.

One scene in particular stands out in that it foregrounds a performance-within-a performance, deliberately calling attention to the actor's craft and the act of performing itself

while at the same time Hüller fleshes out her character and advances the narrative. The scene begins with Martha and Alexander walking home from a bar after having met with Alexander’s friends. In reference to a prior conversation in the bar, Alexander suggests he doubts that Martha ever gets really angry. Martha objects, insisting that she “jump[s] out of [her] skin pretty quickly”<sup>ccxiii</sup> – which in German means ‘to become enraged’, rather than to be surprised or shocked. Proceeding to give Alexander an impression of this angry self, she walks a few steps, turns away from him and then back towards him to signal that the performance has begun. Fiercely and aggressively, using dramatic hand gestures, she delivers the following lines:

So you want to know what it looks like when I’m incensed [literally, “when I jump out of my skin”]? I should have guessed. You want to know why? Because you’re incapable of real emotions, all you do is flash your stupid grin, that’s all you can do! So reveal yourself to me, show me what’s going on with you! You’re such a coward! [pause] Like this? [smiles] Was that good?<sup>ccxiii</sup>

This scene operates on multiple performative and narrative levels. Martha/Hüller clearly signals to Alexander and thus to the viewer that is it put on rather than real, a performance rather than an expression of a genuine emotion by marking its beginning (turning around to face Alexander) and end (asking Alexander to judge the quality of her performance) (see fig. 68-73).



**Figures 68-73: Martha’s angry outburst in front of Alexander constitutes a performance-within-the-performance**

At the same time, during Martha's monologue, the screen time is evenly divided between a close shot of her, and a reaction shot of Alexander, whose serious, somewhat confounded expression signals his confusion at her sudden forceful, angry outbreak. Although he diffuses the tension with a laconic joke (he tells Martha that her performance "didn't really convince"<sup>ccxiv</sup> him) and a conciliatory smile, his initial puzzled reaction shows that he recognises Martha's speech as an expression of genuine emotion rather than a mere performance of an angry person. As viewers, we too suspect that Martha's rage is genuine, because we know that her angry words express precisely those thoughts and feelings she might have addressed to Paul if she had had the chance to confront him: it was Paul who concealed his 'real emotions' from her, hiding behind a 'stupid grin', and who 'cowardly' took his own life in a place far away from home rather than facing up to Martha and admitting his betrayal. Thus, despite taking the risk of taking the viewer out of the fictional universe of the film, the scene nonetheless succeeds on a narrative level. It reinforces the viewer's suspicion that Martha is channelling her grief over Paul's death in her relationship with Alexander, and it heightens the suspense by highlighting the difference in knowledge between the unsuspecting Alexander and the viewer, who has come to suspect that Martha's relationship with Alexander is equally doomed as the one with Paul.

It is in this way that *Above Us Only Sky* toys with the audience's emotions and expectations, recalling Alfred Hitchcock's acclaimed thriller *Vertigo* (1958). *Above Us Only Sky* evokes a number of key plot points, motifs and themes of *Vertigo*. In the first half of both films, the somewhat enigmatic and troubled love interest of the protagonist commits (or appears to commit) suicide. While in *Vertigo*, Madeleine's (Kim Novak) ostensible suicidal tendencies are known well before her death, the extent of Paul's despair is revealed to Martha only after his suicide, when she learns that he had lied to her about his occupation for years, and is able to gauge how heavily the constant fear of detection must have weighed on him. Yet both Scottie (James Stuart) in *Vertigo* and Martha in *Above Us Only Sky* struggle to accept their loss, and proceed to recreate the relationship with a new partner. Gestures, actions, conversations and visits to locations that were significant for the initial relationship repeat themselves: the protagonists seem to compulsively relive moments that preceded the impending loss of their beloved partner. In *Vertigo*, Scottie first mistakes a number of women for Madeleine because they wear clothes similar to hers or appear in Madeleine's favourite places; then he meets Judy (Kim Novak), and a number of déjà-vu moments occur: for example, both Madeleine and Judy open a window while Scottie looks on from outside the

house and Scottie says certain lines to Judy he had previously said to Madeleine. Scottie's makeover of Judy brings Madeleine back to him (by this point the audience have learned that Judy and Madeleine were the same woman all along), but only briefly: Scottie is punished in his manic drive to regain the dead Madeleine when, at the end of the film, Judy actually dies in a way that reproduces Madeleine's staged/faked death.

*Above Us Only Sky* ends with no such tragedy, but a number of recognisable scenes or plot points relating to Paul are repeated<sup>23</sup> or mirrored in the second part of the film, imbuing it with a sense of fatalism similar to that of *Vertigo*. The first of these occurs when Martha first meets Alexander in a lift. Noticing that he brushes back his hair with two fingers in the same way as Paul, she asks him "where [he] picked that up"<sup>ccxv</sup>. Thus, it is this hand gesture that piques Martha's interest in Alexander, causing her to strike up a conversation with him – she finds him compelling precisely because of his apparent likeness to Paul. The scene suggests that Martha is interested not in Alexander himself, but only in his function as a surrogate for Paul in order to restore a relationship that she perceived as perfect and fulfilling before Paul's suicide and the revelation of his fraudulent identity shattered this illusion. This reflection on the role of idealisation and fantasy in romantic relationships is another aspect that *Above Us Only Sky* shares with *Vertigo*. As Rüdiger Suchsland points out,

Jan Schomburg, who also wrote the script, asks, as does the Brit [Hitchcock] about the functions of projection and displacement, the fine line between facts and fantasy. And he asks: how important is the truth, really? Or, put differently: is a love that is pretended necessarily the worse one? Or is love not always directed at an image of the other person, rather than the actual person?<sup>ccxvi</sup> (n.d.(c)).

There is a scene in *Vertigo* that demonstrates that Scottie's love of Madeleine, who is beautiful, sophisticated, and mysterious<sup>24</sup>, is also the love of an (ultimately unattainable) ideal of a woman rather than an actual person: having dinner with Judy (the 'real' but less perfect, more ordinary Madeleine) at Ernie's restaurant, his eyes still wander to a far corner of the

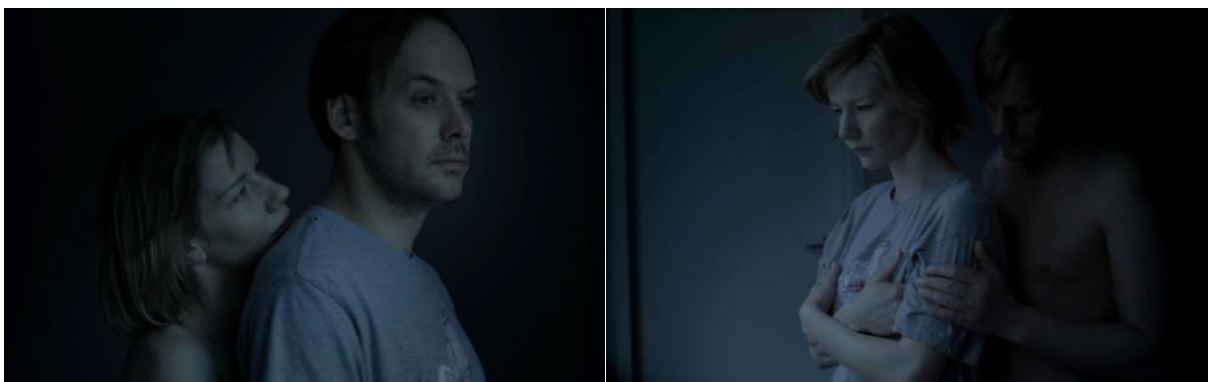
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<sup>23</sup> Repetitions include (1) Martha preparing the same dish (a salt-crusted fish) with Alexander that she had previously prepared with Paul. Notably, in the second scene, Martha takes on the task of breaking the crust with a hammer and chisel – the task that had fallen to Paul in the initial scene; (2) two sex scenes between Martha and the men being framed identically, with the characters in the same positions; (3) Martha's reaction when hearing that Paul successfully completed his thesis paralleling her reaction upon hearing that Alexander's request to be transferred to Marseille was granted: she grabs the men's shoulders and exclaims "That's great!". Also, in both scenes she is wearing the same clothes and hairdo.

<sup>24</sup> The air of mystery surrounding Madeleine is enhanced by her ability to suddenly vanish from Scottie's sight (which she does twice). Similarly, in *Above Us Only Sky* Paul disappears from Martha's sight when she wants to say a final goodbye before he departs to France: a tram briefly obscures Martha's view of his car, which is only metres away; when the tram is gone, so is the car, nowhere to be seen even as Martha looks up and down the street.

room, where he has spotted a woman whose figure, movements and dress resemble Madeleine's. As Robin Wood puts it, "the irony of the scene in Ernie's brings home to us that Scottie has not been in love with a woman so much as [...] an Idea" (2002 [1989], p. 127). In *Above Us Only Sky* the protagonist equally seems to fail to recognise and appreciate the new love interest for their own sake, and instead uses him to recreate the idea, or idealised version of the initial relationship.

While the lift scene draws a parallel between Paul and Alexander, further 'mirror scenes' function to draw parallels between Paul and Martha, suggesting that she is taking on his role in the new relationship. This is most obvious in the most portentous mirror scene, which shows Martha standing pensively by the window at night and being joined by Alexander, who asks her to come back to bed – it is a repeat of an earlier scene in which Paul was standing by the window and Martha asked him to return to bed (see fig. 74&75). Both scenes are illuminated in the same hazy, cold blue light that makes the characters appear ghost-like. In the initial scene, Paul's gloominess and inability to sleep and his admitting to Martha that he is scared (ostensibly of the new job, in fact scared of death) prefigure his suicide. In the mirror scene (as in an earlier cooking scene), it is Martha who takes Paul's position. She is wearing the same T-shirt that Paul was wearing in the initial scene, underlining the impression that she has effectively become Paul, somebody who cannot sleep at night and who keeps secrets from their partner. This scene effectively conflates Paul and Martha and suggests that the film will end with her suicide.



**Figures 74&75: *Above Us Only Sky* features two near-identical scenes between Martha and Paul and Martha and Alexander**

The fact that Martha, concealing Paul's suicide from Alexander, uses her new partner to return to a warped kind of 'status quo' before Paul's suicide suggests that instead of entering into a life-affirming new relationship, Martha shares with Scottie a death wish that

ties them strongly to their initial partners (Paul and Madeleine, respectively). Scottie had narrowly escaped death at the beginning of *Vertigo*, when he slipped while pursuing a criminal across the rooftops and, dangling off a gutter, had helplessly watched a fellow policeman fall to his death. He then meets Madeleine, who “is continually associated with death, and the fascination she exerts is the fascination of death, a drawing toward oblivion and final release” (Wood, 2002 [1989], p. 114). After Madeleine’s ‘death’, Scottie has a dream in which it becomes apparent that “he wants to die in her place, or to join her in death; but looking back we can see his whole attraction to her as a matter of identification – the desire for annihilation” (ibid). Equally, Martha’s apparent compulsion to take on Paul’s role in the relationship with Alexander and adopt his habits by wearing his clothes and repeating his actions suggests that she becomes more and more aligned with his death wish and is willing to kill herself in order to join him in death.

Alexander’s suggestion to move to Marseille, the very place where Paul died, becomes the ultimate signpost for the impending repetition of the fateful event. But at this point the film takes an unexpected turn. Alexander confronts Martha about Paul’s death and later manages to reconcile with her. The final scene, showing a pregnant Martha in a French town, presumably Marseille, confirms this power of fantasy and anticipation. *Above Us Only Sky*’s unexpected happy ending subverts viewer expectations. In *Vertigo*, the recreation of the lost partner and the doomed relationship is taken to its logical, destructive end: since Madeleine dies, Judy must die also. *Above Us Only Sky* equally derives much of its dramatic momentum from having Alexander and Martha take Paul’s place, and thereby suggesting that either of them may be doomed to die, too. The happy ending may therefore be dismissed as a cheap trick or gimmick that knowingly leads viewers astray only to have them leave the cinema confused by an anti-climactic ending that is ostensibly positive, but actually ambiguous: while Martha is visibly happy and pregnant (presumably with Alexander’s child), we do not see Alexander. Thus, viewers neither get the confirmation that Alexander is alive and well and that history has not repeated itself, nor do we get a dramatic, impactful finale in the mould of *Vertigo*.

However, the ending is consistent with the film’s portrayal of Martha as a strong, independent, and well-adjusted character. It suggests that she is able to endure and overcome her husband’s suicide and profound betrayal, affirming her right to happiness. Moreover, by sparing Martha from having to relive the boundless pain and grief over losing her partner (an experience Scottie is unlikely to ever recover from), the ending rejects the Romanticist idea

entertained in *Vertigo* that we cannot go on living after the death of a loved one and offers a resolution that is in tune with the pragmatism associated with Martha's character from the beginning of the film. A comparison of the 'mirror scenes' as well as the overall structure of both films reveals some crucial differences between *Vertigo* and *Above Us Only Sky*, and underlines the consistency of the latter's unexpected happy ending. In terms of structure, the two films differ notably in that Madeleine's 'death' occurs after one hour and sixteen minutes of screen time, whereas Paul's death is announced to Martha after just eighteen minutes. In both films the suicide is followed by a period of time in which the protagonist remains alone before they meet the new partner: roughly fifteen minutes in *Vertigo*, and twenty-five minutes in *Above Us Only Sky*. This means that Martha is seen spending significantly more time coming to terms with Paul's death. The protagonists also occupy themselves in markedly different ways while alone: after having been cruelly blamed for Madeleine's death by the chair of the inquest, Scottie spends some time in a psychiatric institution, so grief-stricken and apathetic that he is unable to speak. He then visits a number of places Madeleine used to frequent, which only serves to augment his grief. Scottie's silent suffering and his initial subconscious attempts to conjure up Madeleine's ghost suggest that he is unable to let go of her and accept her death. Martha's process of mourning, on the other hand, is more confrontational and arguably more productive. She initially refuses to believe that Paul's death was a suicide and angrily confronts the police inspector ("I want you to do your job properly"<sup>ccxvii</sup>), only to hear that the police found in Paul's wallet a receipt for the tube and tape he used to asphyxiate himself in his car. After finding out about Paul's deception from the professor who allegedly supervised his thesis, Martha manages to contact the author of the dissertation Paul presented as his own, then abruptly ends a phone call with him in a moment of shock. Finally, she confronts a common friend of hers and Paul's, demanding to know whether the friend knew about Paul's double life.

This scene further underlines the parallels between *Above Us Only Sky* and Hüller's earlier films in that it once again foregrounds her performance. It begins as a calm conversation but culminates as Martha breaks down screaming and crying: "I want to know what's going on here! Nobody tells me anything! [...] I'm all alone with this"<sup>ccxviii</sup>. Martha's emotional outburst, from quiet anger to a monologue in which she vents her rage and despair, is captured in a single take, the static camera resting on Martha/Hüller as her friend (Kathrin Wehlisch) moves in and out of the frame (see fig. 76-79). Although Jan Schomburg uses a different technique, it has the same effect as Bogumil Godfrejow's camerawork in



*Requiem*: it relies primarily on Hüller’s performance to carry the scene, rather than enhancing it through close-ups.



**Figures 76-79: Martha’s emotional outburst is captured in one single take, the static camera resting on Hüller while another character moves in and out of the frame**

This scene is cited by Hüller as an example of how characters continue to be developed during filming by the director and actress. Hüller said that when filming this scene, she and Schomburg realised that they needed to diverge from the script so as to “not lose the character”<sup>ccxix</sup>, that is, for Martha to remain relatable to viewers:

[in] the kitchen scene [...], where it suddenly gets so loud and intense; it wasn’t intended to be like that. We just realised [...] that if we don’t do this now, people will think she really is insane. If she doesn’t care, it doesn’t work; and so it was an organic process that ultimately prompted us to go for the more intense version<sup>ccxx</sup> (2012).

Hüller’s account of the filming process once again demonstrates her crucial role as an actor in developing the character. The scene was changed based on her performance, and she was given room to improvise as the enactment of the scene diverged from the script, while the minimalist camerawork further foregrounds her performance. Narratively, Martha’s emotional breakdown in the kitchen scene complements the other scenes between Paul’s death and Alexander’s first appearance: they all depict the painful, sobering process during which Martha realises that the life Paul pretended to live, and consequently, their seemingly



stable, happy marriage, was merely an illusion.

Moreover, this section contains two other scenes that constitute a rare showcasing of the physical realities and the bureaucratic, unemotional administration of death and mourning in western societies: Martha is shown selecting a coffin at the undertaker's, taken aback by his uninvolved delivery and lack of empathy ("How can you talk like this? Have you never lost someone?"<sup>ccxxi</sup>), and she requests to be present at and is seen attending the washing and dressing up of Paul's body for the funeral. The happy ending, which has Martha restored to her cheerful, carefree self casts these scenes in a different light, suggesting that Martha mourns Paul's death in a way that allow her to go on with her life, even if this is contradicted by most of the second half of the film, which seems to anticipate a calamitous ending.

With *Above Us Only Sky*, Sandra Hüller has made a film that is, if not targeting a mainstream audience, more broadly accessible than most of her previous films. With its apparently simple, but effective narrative premise, *Above Us Only Sky* functions as a mystery thriller as much as a drama that explores the protagonist's state of mind; while the *Vertigo* references that pay homage to Hitchcock's masterpiece must be seen as an effort on the part of first-time director Jan Schomburg's to recommend himself to a cine-literate audience.

*Above Us Only Sky* examines the role of self-betrayal, projection and idealisation of the partner in romantic relationships, but this exploration remains somewhat underdeveloped since the question of whether Martha appreciates Alexander for himself or merely uses him as a surrogate for Paul is never fully answered. However, the depiction of Martha's mourning in the middle section of the film effectively portray the process of coming to terms with her partner's death, providing some interesting observations on the process of grieving in contemporary Western societies and the ways it is affected by the rationalisation and institutionalisation of death. Thus, while the film is not without flaws, it confirms Hüller's interest in films that focus strongly on character development which she, as an actress, is actively able to shape.

## **Conclusion**

Sandra Hüller's work is distinguished by her refusal to compromise on role choices, selecting film parts almost entirely based on what she considers most challenging to her as a performer (as opposed to the film's possible commercial appeal or social relevance). As a film actress, Hüller has found her niche in independently produced, publicly funded art films.

Both her individual performances and her career development as a whole have heavily benefited from the greater creative freedom afforded by these productions. This freedom has allowed her directors to foreground and rely on Hüller's performance more strongly than mainstream films that employ formulaic narrative elements, familiar character types or striking visual effects to maximise viewing figures.

My analysis of Sandra Hüller's performances and her approach to film acting in relation to the study of film acting generally suggests that the dominant view of film performance underestimates the agency of the film actor and does not sufficiently account for the artistic and economic conditions of film production, which are highly diverse. Hüller associates film performance with freedom and improvisation, whereas she perceives the staging of a play as a familiar, routine process during which extensive rehearsals give her great confidence in her own performance. Hüller's description of stage acting as a more routine experience is understandable, given that she has acted on stage continuously for more than ten years and had been part of two theatre ensembles for extended periods (the Theater Basel and the Müncher Kammerspiele for four and six years, respectively). Her experiences suggest that film performance, conversely, may be defined not so much by the distancing, selective eye of the camera, but more by the nature of the preparation and actual enactment of film scenes. While Hollywood actors' complaints about their lack of control are likely to be owed to the imperatives of major US studios that place economic viability over artistic experimentation or expression, *Requiem* is an example of a European independent film whose production conditions worked in favour of its lead actress giving the energetic performance we see in the finished film. Her training and stage experience had equipped her with the acting skills necessary to carry a film about a character in an extreme mental and emotional state without the need for enhanced visual or sound effects or even much dialogue.

The fact that Hüller won a Silver Bear for her performance in a film that focuses not on wider social or historical events but rather chronicles one woman's descent into mental illness, confirms *Requiem's* status as an actors' film that complements the renaissance of German cinema in the 2000s. Hüller's interest in demanding roles continued to drive her towards unusual or idiosyncratic characters, such as Rita in *Madonnas* and Charlotte in *Brownian Movement*, whose feelings and emotions are deliberately concealed from the viewer. Since the character's situation or personal struggle is either very particular or even unlikely (e.g. Charlotte's collapse that reveals her affairs and forces her to attend therapy) or is

depicted outside of a narrative or wider social context (e.g. Rita's struggle to connect with her children), neither Rita nor Charlotte are representative of young German women today generally.

Thus, while Hüller repeatedly chooses characters that question or undermine social norms, their deviant or rebellious behaviour exemplifies less an attempt at social commentary or critique; they are instead indicative of Hüller's quest for a particular acting challenge. Issues relating to personal fulfilment or social structures that affect many German women, such as the economic and political situation that impacts on them, the ability to reconcile work and child-raising, or the dynamics of romantic relationships (which are for example explored in Nina Hoss's films *Yella* and *The Heart is a Dark Forest*) are hinted at in *Madonnas* and *Brownian Movement*, but remain underdeveloped because the respective directors limit themselves to observing the circumstances of a particular character, whose experience cannot be generalised. Both films are very similar stylistically and in the way they approach their protagonist, and both have been criticised for the detachment and inscrutability that characterises the films themselves and Hüller's characters. Many critics found the films too cryptic to be able to provide meaningful insights into the protagonists' lives and minds, a common criticism levelled at Berlin School films (even if neither Speth nor the Dutch Leopold are part of the central circle of Berlin School filmmakers, their films very much reproduce the movement's distinct aesthetic).

Given the middling reviews of *Madonnas* and *Brownian Movement*, it is notable that these roles have not proven at all detrimental to Hüller's career. On the contrary, they have allowed her to demonstrate her versatility by allowing her to play characters of widely different social standing, and her performances were universally praised, with reviewers singling out her nuanced, but forceful acting style. While Hüller's acting is not generally characterised by the same stiltedness and detachment as Nina Hoss's, her performance in *Brownian Movement* does recall this non-naturalistic acting style. This underlines once more Hüller's rootedness in an art cinema tradition that foregrounds artistic expression and performance rather than demanding that the actor disappear into their role in the service of a self-contained cinematic fantasy frequently evoked by Hollywood films, for example. In this respect, Hüller's films are akin to Nina Hoss's collaborations with Christian Petzold and Sibel Kekilli's films *Head-On* and *When We Leave*, all of which were largely free from commercial imperatives and instead shaped by the director's authorial vision and collaboration with the lead actors.

My examination of four of Sandra Hüller's leading roles demonstrates that most of her characters emerge as single-minded, independent women who are in charge of their own lives or at least attempt to be so. Thus, while neither claiming to represent 'typical' German women or even Germany itself as some of Hildegard Knef's, Romy Schneider's, Hanna Schygulla's or Nina Hoss's characters have done, nor representing a particular social or ethnic group – as with Sibel Kekilli's characters in *Head-On* and *When We Leave* – the work of Sandra Hüller nonetheless represents a significant and valuable contribution to contemporary German cinema. Equipped with occupations or desires that go beyond romance and domesticity, Hüller's characters challenge gender representations typical of mainstream films in which female characters are often secondary to the male hero and/or exclusively focused on romantic relationships: even the final scene of *Above Us Only Sky* does not show Martha with her new partner and thereby highlights once again her independence. Hüller's work is therefore indicative of a growing interest within German and European art films of the early 2000s in female subjectivity, be it in relation to coming of age and generational conflict (*Requiem*), the persistent stifling ideal of the caring, selfless mother (*Madonnas*), the strife for sexual liberty and experience (*Brownian Movement*) or the dynamics of romantic relationships between two equal partners (*Above Us Only Sky*), and the actress's forceful performances are likely to secure her more such roles as multifaceted female characters in the future.

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cliii “klassische Ausbildung”

cliv “Frau für harte Rollen”

clv “eine Extremistin”

clvi “im Vollbesitz ihrer Widersprüche”

clvii “zerrissene, widersprüchliche Figuren sind ihre Spezialität. Sie heischen nicht vorschnell nach Sympathie, bleiben sperrig.”

clviii “die Schauspielerin thematisiert verweigerete Normerfüllung – und Auswege in alternative Wirklichkeiten”

clix “Publikumsreaktionen”

clx “dem Zuschauer immer wieder einen neuen Abend zu bieten, ist unersetzbar”

clxi “Also [...] am Theater [habe ich] einen Prozess, [...] in dem meine Figur wachsen kann, und wir zeigen in der Premiere einen Zwischenstand von dem, was wir erarbeitet haben, was dann immer weiterwächst; bin immer mit denselben Kollegen zusammen, hab dieselbe Garderobe, hänge abends meine Sachen auf, gehe in die Kanti-, also so, es gibt ein vertrautes Umfeld, was immer gleich is’.”

clxii “Im Film, bin ich immer an ’nem anderen Ort; ich wohne im Hotel, ich sehe meine Familie nicht, ich muss mir eine Figur vorher wenigstens schon halbwegs ausgedacht haben damit ich sie morgens am Set jeden Tag zeigen kann, weil ich ja nich’ übe, sondern die muss ja da sein. Das heisst es is’ viel momenthafter. Das is’ eigentlich auch toll, weil [...] man sich einfach nicht so viele Gedanken macht. Das heisst, ich kann mich vorbereiten, theoretisch, ich kann mit Leuten sprechen, ich kann Sachen lesen, und so, aber das was da passiert, mit ’nem Partner, dort direkt am Set, gerade wenn man ihn vielleicht noch nie gesehen hat, was mit den Leuten drumherum passiert, was mit dem Regisseur passiert, das is’ wirklich immer dieser Moment. Und das is’ ganz toll.”

- clxiii “Im Spiel ref-, also es hat immer etwas damit zu tun was da passiert. [...] Ich geh’ dann zur Arbeit und denke: Mann, was is’ denn nur, irgendwie, das haut nich hin, oder irgendwie is’ das komisch, oder man versteht sich mit ’nem Kollegen nich’, und irgendwann später, im Film merkt man, das is genau das, worum’s da geht. Es gibt ’ne Grenze zum Beispiel zwischen mir und dem Kollegen, die nich überschritten werden darf, und dann gibt es ’ne Grenze zwischen den Figuren, die nich überschritten werden darf. Es stimmt einfach, ja? Und das is’ etwas, was man sich nicht ausdenken kann. Und das mein’ ich mit Momenthaftigkeit, was es am Theater fast in dem Sinne so nich’ gibt, das [...] kann ich mir erst dann erarbeiten, wenn die Vorstellung läuft. Das geht nich in der Arbeit, dadurch is’, da is’ der Prozess zu sehr im Vordergrund.”
- clxiv “trotzdem ich. Das hab ich ja gemacht”
- clxv “da müsste während der Arbeit schon ganz schön was schief gelaufen sein”
- clxvi “mit dem Regisseur [...] permanent im Dialog [...], der sagt mir ja was er gesehen hat, und ich sag ihm, was ich gespielt habe; und wenn das nicht übereinstimmt, dann müssen wir das in dem Moment verändern”
- clxvii “[M]an behält mehr Kontrolle, vom ersten eingereichten Ideenentwurf bis hin zur Fertigstellung und Vermarktung des Films. [...] Am Ende ist es dann aber so, dass einem der Film gehört. Das ist mir wichtig.”
- clxviii “ihr ist jede einzelne Einstellung des Films gewidmet; es gibt keine Szene, in der sie nicht nach wenigen Augenblicken präsent ist.”
- clxix “rumläufst wie ein Flüchtlingskind”
- clxx “*Requiem* konfrontiert mit einer [...] Figur, die [...] die Zuschauenden quasi zwingt, jede Wendung und jeden Anflug geduldig mitzugehen, wenn sie ihr näher kommen wollen”
- clxxi “versucht, sehr direkt auf das zu reagieren, was die Schauspieler vorgeben. In emotionalen, bewegten Szenen arbeiten wir mit Handkamera, in ruhigen Szenen bleibt die Kamera ruhig.”
- clxxii “Lasst mich!”
- clxxiii “Gegrüßet seist du Maria voll der Gnade”
- clxxiv “Für sie war das so, dass sie das nicht konnte. Und dann kann ich das auch nicht.”
- clxxv “empathisch-einfühlende Beziehung zu seiner Rolle”
- clxxvi “seine 21-jährige Tochter wie ein großes Baby vom Boden auf und drückt sie wie einen Säugling an die Schulter”
- clxxvii “vertraut den Schauspielern so sehr, dass sie das können wenn die Kamera läuft”
- clxxviii “deswegen hatte man sich [...] vorher [...] nie verschwendet, es wurde nichts ausprobiert [...], es wurde dann beim Dreh ausprobiert. Und meistens [...] der Ersttake, wurde auch immer genommen [...], weil das dann sehr frisch war und sehr kraftvoll”.
- clxxix “bitte damit [...] aufhören [...] Kinder zu machen”
- clxxx “Maria Speths *Madonnen* sind vielleicht Ikonen ihrer Zeit: Frauen, die wie Rita, ihre Mutter und irgendwann womöglich auch ihre kleine Tochter nicht tun oder tun können, was man seit Jahrtausenden von Müttern erwartet.”
- clxxxi “verrückt”
- clxxxii “mir war sehr wichtig, [nicht] mit dem Film [...] moralisch zu werten [...] Ich wollte eher beobachtend auf das Geschehen blicken.”
- clxxxiii “nicht einen sozialen Prototyp sondern eine konkrete und singuläre Person zu beschreiben”
- clxxxiv “die Kamera [...] positioniert sich oft etwas abseits vom Geschehen”
- clxxxv eine Distanz [wird] eingezogen [...] – nahe im Sinne einer psychologischen Einfühlung kommt man den Figuren nicht”
- clxxxvi “das Gesicht Sandra Hüllers wird kaum je zugänglich gemacht, eher kann man sie in halbnahen oder amerikanischen Einstellungen beobachten”
- clxxxvii “Ich habe darauf geachtet mit den Einstellungen nicht zu emotionalisieren. Das heißt zum Beispiel – ganz banal – bei emotional aufgeladenen Momenten nicht unbedingt eine Großaufnahme eines Gesichts zu machen. Aber dieses Interesse eher beobachtend zu arbeiten, hat es schon bei der Entwicklung [...] auf Drehbuchebeene gegeben.”
- clxxxviii “solche Frauen gibt es – die haben wir auch während unserer Vorbereitung im Mutter-Kind-Vollzug in Frankfurt kennengelernt.”

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clxxxix “Ich finde es aber mutig, dass Rita nicht so etwas wie Reue empfindet. Das interessiert mich sehr, da ich am Theater oft Figuren spiele, die mit ihrer eigenen Schuld zu kämpfen haben. Rita hat dagegen etwas Gewissenloses.”

cx “das Schwierigste war, mich auf Ritas sperrigen Charakter einzulassen und allen positiven Impulsen gegenüber den Kindern zu widerstehen”

cxci “Sandra Hüller spielt Rita mit einer Mischung aus Aggressivität und Taubheit, Abweisung und uneingestandener Sehnsucht. In manchen Szenen ist kaum zu ertragen, wie sehr ihre Figur in sich gefangen ist.”

cxcii “Hüller [...] gelingt [es], ihre Figur an allen moralischen Kategorien vorbei zu spielen.”

cxci “für Rita die Idealbesetzung. Eine fragile Gestalt, fast selbst noch Kind, verletzlich und verletzend zugleich”

cxci “Hüller’s rationale Darstellung überträgt sich auch auf den Zuschauer: man beieft und analysiert. Nur nachempfinden, das tut man nicht.”

cxci “Rita entwickelt sich nicht. Ihre Motive bleiben unklar, ihre Sätze knapp. ‘Ich brauch’ Geld.’ ‘Ich muss weg.’”

cxci “leider ist die Erzählweise von *Madonnen* nicht annähernd so ökonomisch”

cxci “Immer wieder erzählt er von der Dysfunktionalität von Familienkonstellationen und findet doch keine andere Metapher dafür als den Esstisch, auf dem Pizza aus dem Karton steht.”

cxci “in seiner strengen Kühle, seiner elliptischen und fragmentarisierten Erzählweise, seinen klaren Bildern, die immer wieder in Richtung Abstraktion streben, ist *Brownian Movement* ein Film, der entfernt an die so genannte Berliner Schule erinnert.”

cxci “Ich glaub das verstörende an diesem Film is’, und das is’ uns auch immer wieder gesagt worden, [...]: wenn das eine männliche Figur gewesen wäre, und die Frau das rausgefunden hätte, wäre das eine komplett andere Geschichte gewesen. Man hätte nicht so ein Problem damit gehabt. Und deswegen, das is wahrscheinlich deswegen auch ’n politischer Film.”

cxci “inszeniert die Regisseurin den Versuch, ein schönes, aber langweiliges Leben aufregender zu gestalten sowie – nach dem Scheitern dieses Versuchs – das Bemühen, das schöne, aber langweilige Leben zurückzugewinnen”

cxci “Ich habe [das] Thema gesucht, das diese Veränderung zwischen den Beiden am besten symbolisiert: Das war die Sexualität.”

cxci “Nanouk Leopold richtet die Perspektive des Films so ein, dass wir als Zuschauer (Mann oder Frau) beinahe begreifen: Was Charlotte da tat, im Apartment, im anderen Raum, war kein Betrug. War nur etwas, das sie für sich tat. Aus Neugier und Interesse. Sie hat ihrem Begehren Raum gegeben, ganz buchstäblich.”

cxci “der zweite Teil des Films [...], in dem vor allem die (Über-)Reaktion unserer Gesellschaft ins Zentrum gestellt wird, die auf abweichendes, ‘unerklärliches’ Verhalten mit Behandlung, Normierung und Kontrolle reagiert [...] Charlotte wird [...] zur Therapie gezwungen. Sie bekommt Medikamente und sie soll das Unerklärliche, das ihr begegnet ist, erläutern. Denn wer so etwas tut, so glaubt ihre Umwelt, der muss doch krank sein.”

cxci “die Gespräche zwischen Charlotte und ihrer Psychiaterin provozieren gerade eine Antwort auf all die aufgeworfenen Fragen, doch Leopold lässt den Zuschauer auch hier auflaufen.”

cxci “Kamera ist verliebt in das Gesicht von Sandra Hüller. Zahllose Close-ups zeigen, wie Hüller mit minimalen Mitteln ihren Gesichtsausdruck zwischen Naivität, Abgründigkeit und schlichter Lebensfreude pendeln lassen kann.”

cxci “der Film [...] versperrt [...] konsequent den Zugang zu seiner Hauptfigur. Immer wieder fängt die Kamera Sandra Hüllers oft ausdrucksloses, manchmal auch ängstliches oder fröhliches Gesicht ein. Was wirklich in ihr vorgeht, bleibt aber im Verborgenen.”

cxci “eine ungeheure stoische Ruhe geht von dieser Figur aus, als wäre sie mit sich völlig im Reinen. Das leise Lächeln verlässt nur selten das Gesicht von Sandra Hüller.”

cxci “Sandra Hüllers subtile Darstellung verleiht dem ambivalenten Werk einen frostigen Glanz. Doch auch ihr nuanciertes Spiel kann eine Figur nicht gänzlich ausfüllen, die nach dem Willen der Regisseurin scheinbar unergründlich bleiben soll.”

cxci “Minimalismus”

cxci “Statuarik”

cxci “nervigen Stil-Attitüde”

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ccxii “[fährt] ziemlich schnell aus der Haut”

ccxiii “Das willst du also sehen, wie das is’, wenn ich aus der Haut fahr’, ja? Des interessiert dich, ne? Das kann ich mir vorstellen, weisste warum? Weil du zu ’ner offenen Emotion nämlich überhaupt nich’ fähig bist, weil du mehr als dein blödes Grinsen überhaupt nicht drauf hast, mehr kannst du gar nicht! Dann zeig dich doch mal, zeig’ mir doch mal was mit dir is’! Du bist feige! [...] So?! War das gut?”

ccxiv “hat [...] eigentlich nicht so überzeugt”

ccxv “wo ha[t er sich] das angewöhnt”

ccxvi “Jan Schomburg, der auch das Drehbuch schrieb, fragt ähnlich wie der Brite nach der Rolle von Projektion und Verdrängung, der feinen Grenze zwischen Fakten und Phantasie. Und er fragt danach, wie wichtig eigentlich die Wahrheit ist? Anders gesagt: Ist eine Liebe die vorgespielt ist, notwendig die schlechtere? Oder meint Liebe nicht am Ende immer eher ein Bild des Anderen, als diesen selbst?”

ccxvii “Ich möchte, dass Sie hier gewissenhaft ihre Arbeit erledigen”

ccxviii “Ich will überhaupt mal wissen was hier los is’! Mir sagt überhaupt niemand irgendwas! [...] Ich bin ganz alleine mit [dieser Scheisse]!”

ccxix “die Figur nicht verlieren”

ccxx “diese Küchenszene [...] wo es da so laut wird, und so heftig, [...] das war eigentlich gar nicht so gedacht; wir ha’m nur [...] gemerkt, wenn wir das jetzt nich’ machen, dann glauben die Leute die is wirklich verrückt. Also wenn es sie nichts angeht, dann geht das nich’; also es war ’n ganz organischer Prozess, dass dann zum Beispiel da die heftige Variante gewählt wurde.”

ccxxi “Wie reden Sie denn? Is’ in Ihrem Umfeld schonmal jemand gestorben?”







Figure 80: Sibel Kekilli in *Head-On* (2005)

## Chapter Five

### Sibel Kekilli: Between Otherness and Normalcy – Turkish-German Identity on Film

#### **Kekilli's Public Persona: Embodying 'Otherness'?**

The work of and media discourse around Sibel Kekilli, lead actress of Fatih Akin's art film hit *Head-On* (2004), lend themselves very usefully to an exploration of Germany's attitudes towards its Turkish community, which constitutes its largest immigrant group. Kekilli was born in 1980 in Heilbronn, after her parents had immigrated to Germany in 1977. She had been working as a clerk for Heilbronn City Council when she was approached by a casting director looking for an actress to fill the part of a young Turkish-German woman from Hamburg who rebels against her oppressive male relatives and must endure great emotional and physical violations before emancipating herself from her family. The resulting film, *Head-On*, was an unexpected success, the first German feature in 18 years to win the Golden Bear for Best Film at the 2004 Berlin International Film Festival, a box office hit that attracted more than 750,000 viewers in Germany alone (FFA, n.d.(i)) and was universally lauded for its poignant portrayal of second-generation Turkish immigrants.

Kekilli's powerful performance in *Head-On* was a promising start to her career. She won the German Film Award for Best Actress and received rave reviews from both German and international critics. In his review for the magazine *Spiegel*, for example, Oliver Hüttmann

highlights Kekilli's charisma and versatility, "which [...] includes everything from acerbity to gentleness"<sup>ccxxii</sup>. Similarly, Matthew Leyland speaks in his BBC review of the actress's "committed performance", and Kenneth Turan writes in his review for the LA Times that "Kekilli [...] gives a bravura performance that is especially astonishing because it is her feature acting debut" (2005). But this enthusiastic reception was subsequently overshadowed by revelations in *Bild*, Germany's biggest tabloid newspaper that Kekilli's had previously appeared in a number of porn films. Two days after *Head-On* had won the Golden Bear, *Bild* ran the headline 'Film-Diva in Wahrheit Porno-Star' ('Film Diva Actually a Porn Star') (see Wahba, 2010), printing stills from these films next to images from *Head-On*. Another headline read 'Eltern verstoßen sündige Filmdiva' ('Parents reject sinful film diva') (see Kogelbloom and Nolte, 2004). *Bild's* use of Biblical, Old-testament language in calling Kekilli 'sinful' suggest the paper's effort to conjure up a scandal, further fuelled by the fact that Kekilli's parents are pious Muslims and were unaware of their daughter's porn film career.

Also notable about *Bild's* coverage was the way it highlighted Kekilli's (and Akin's) Turkish descent. While ostensibly acknowledging the director's contribution to mutual understanding and friendship between Germans and Turks, columnist Franz Josef Wagner resorted to a language of racist stereotyping, suggesting that Akin's dark hair and olive skin unmistakably identifies him as a Turk or Mediterranean person<sup>25</sup> (see Nicodemus, 2004). Similarly, Kekilli was described as "racy" ("rassig") (ibid) – in other words, fiery and passionate – in the context of her acting in porn films, but was also referred to as "the beautiful German-Turk", foregrounding her foreign descent. The language used by Wagner and others to describe Akin and Kekilli echoes 19th century racist and Orientalist conceptions of non-Europeans as "racialised, sexually exotic others" (Nagel, 2003, p. 91). As Edward Said has argued, Europeans confronted with Asian or African cultures tended to project certain characteristics onto the 'Other' in order to affirm their own superiority. Orientalism evokes a number of binarisms between the 'West' and the 'Orient': "the Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), [...] 'different', thus the European is [...] virtuous, mature, 'normal' " (1978, p. 40). The Oriental is identified as the European's ultimate 'Other': exotically beautiful, but also subordinate. In this way Kekilli and Akin were explicitly identified as 'Others' by *Bild*: Wagner cannot see past the apparent contradiction between

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<sup>25</sup> He described Akin as having "wehendes, drahtiges Schwarzhaar und eine wunderbare olivenfarbene Haut" ("wafting, wiry black-hair and lovely olive skin") (cited in Nicodemus, 2004) while speaking the same dialect as famous Hamburg actor Hans Albers.

Akin's 'exotic' appearance and his speaking in a local German dialect, and the tabloid's coverage of Kekilli reproduces the stereotypes of the beautiful, but depraved Oriental woman.

In this chapter I will explore Sibel Kekilli's significance as a contemporary German actress, considering in particular the ways in which her perceived 'otherness' or non-Germanness has determined her screen persona, the roles she has been given, and whether her directors have resorted to stereotypes or have attempted to provide a more serious preoccupation with Turkish-German identity. I will begin with a detailed analysis of *Head-On* that examines the film's complex and layered portrayal of the formation of its heroine's identity, which is shaped by a resistance against social and cultural conventions that involves much physical and emotional suffering. Kekilli's character Sibel is equally influenced by German and Turkish culture, and I will demonstrate how Sibel negotiates questions of home and belonging as she moves between Hamburg and Istanbul.

I will then discuss the media discourse on Kekilli, which for several years was dominated by a conflation of Kekilli's own person and her characters in *Head-On* and the 2010 film *Die Fremde (When We Leave)* (dir. Feo Aladag), both of which are Turkish-German women subjected to patriarchal oppression. Finally, I will examine to which extent her roles in the popular police procedural *Tatort (Crime Scene)* (1970-) and the romantic comedy *What a Man* (dir. Matthias Schweighöfer, 2011) have allowed Kekilli to move away from being typecast as a suffering German-Turk. Furthermore, I will argue that Kekilli's character in the film testifies to the conservative gender images of German mainstream films, in that *What a Man* offers rather one-dimensional representations of young German women today, showing them to be either domineering and career-oriented or overly naive and dependent.

### **Turkish-German Cinema: Negotiating Questions of Home and Belonging**

The high profile success of *Head On* – in German, *Gegen die Wand*, literally 'Against the wall' – is representative of a development that has seen films by directors with a Turkish background gain a firm place in German cinema. Another prominent example is the work of independent filmmaker Thomas Arslan, a member of the Berlin School art film movement. His films *Geschwister (Siblings)* (1996) and *Der schöne Tag (A Fine Day)* (2001) deal with the day-to-day lives of young Turkish women who are very much at home in the urban settings of Berlin or Hamburg, the German metropolises that they grew up in. Moreover, there have

been a number of comedy<sup>26</sup> films and TV shows featuring Turkish-German characters that are indicative of a shift in the representations of German-Turks in the German media: stereotypical images such as the “Turkish woman with a headscarf or the patriarch anxious to guard his family’s honour” (Neubauer, 2011, p. 131) are increasingly replaced by representations foregrounding the normalcy of Turkish-German life (ibid, p. 223).

It is perhaps no coincidence that one of the first and most influential films addressing the situation of Turkish immigrants in Germany, *40 Quadratmeter Deutschland (40 Square Metres of Germany)* (dir. Tevfik Başer, 1986), also deals with a young woman’s fate in the story of Turna (Özay Fecht), who, after her arrival in Hamburg from Turkey, is imprisoned in her own apartment by her husband. *Yasemin* (dir. Hark Bohm, 1988), other the other hand, has its heroine (Ayse Romey) achieve independence and liberation from her despotic father by escaping with her German boyfriend and severing all ties with her family. The filmmakers who addressed the experiences of Turkish immigrants in the 1970s and 1980s often focused on Turkish-German girls and women at the centre of the conflict between their families’ allegedly archaic and oppressively patriarchal structures and the more liberal German society in which they lived. These films are key representatives of what Rob Burns has termed ‘cinema of the affected’ (2006, p. 148), which often took a patronising stance towards the immigrant cultures it was portraying, showing them to be backward, narrow-minded and cruel towards their inferior female members and offering “narratives of rescue, liberation and Westernisation” (Göktürk, 2000, p. 66). *Head-On* offers an infinitely more complex portrait of its young Turkish-German heroine, who is very strong-willed and actively shapes the course of her own life, despite encountering various obstacles. Unlike the characters associated with the ‘cinema of the affected’, Akin’s film, as Stephen Brockmann explains, “treat[s] its protagonists as self-directed individuals trying to negotiate their own personal and social problems” (2010, p. 480).

Set in Hamburg, the film tells the story of Sibel (Sibel Kekilli), a woman in her twenties and a daughter of Turkish immigrants. Unable to endure her life being controlled by her strict and overbearing father, she attempts suicide. In a psychiatric clinic, she meets 44-year old Cahit (Biol Ünel), who also sought to end his life. Sibel convinces him to marry her,

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<sup>26</sup> Examples include the films *Ich Chef, du Turnschuh (Me Boss, You Sneakers!)*, 1998, dir. Hussi Kutlucan) and *Kebab Connection* (2004, dir. Anno Saul), the TV comedy show *Was guckst du?! (What are you lookin’ at?!)* (2001-05), in which comedian Kaya Yanar playfully debunked national and ethnic stereotypes, and Bora Dağtekin’s successful comedy-drama series *Türkisch für Anfänger (Turkish for Beginners)*, which follows the lives of a Turkish-German patchwork family. These productions “testify to the arrival of Turkish-Germans in mainstream entertainment” (Neubauer, 2011, p. 167).

since his Turkish background would satisfy her parents yet give her independence. Despite it being a marriage of convenience, the couple initially finds comfort in each other's company. However, their fiery temperaments and self-destructive tendencies ultimately lead to their separation and at the end of the film, both start new lives in Turkey.

Various scholars have pointed out Akin's use of melodramatic tropes and narrative structures in his films, with *Head-On* being a key example. Thomas Elsaesser for example observes that the film's "exaggerated storyline"<sup>ccxxiii</sup> (2011, p. 54) "continues the genealogy from Rainer Werner Fassbinder to Douglas Sirk and Hollywood"<sup>ccxxiv</sup> (ibid), and Margarete Landwehr notes that "the lovers' violent behaviour [in *Head-On*], their plunge into disaster, and the plot of betrayal and reconciliation, loss and redemption, constitute all the trappings of a Hollywood melodrama" (2009, p. 85). Drawing on these readings of the film, my discussion of *Head-On* will demonstrate the ways in which melodramatic elements are employed to allow viewers to partake in both Sibel's experience of oppression and suffering, and her journey towards a self-governed life.

*Head-On* provides a more confrontational and complex perspective on the conflicts faced by Germans of Turkish descent than many earlier films, in that it portrays its protagonists not as passive victims, but instead shows them to be individuals who at times resort to excessive and foolish behaviour in their efforts to find their place in German or Turkish culture and yet not be subsumed by it. The film offers a fresh perspective on the Turkish diaspora that constitutes the biggest group of what German policy makers have come to term 'people with a migration background'. A 2011 survey of the Federal Board of Statistics found that 19.5 percent of the German population (around 16 million people in total) have a migration background (BPB, 2012). About 2.5 million of them are of Turkish origin, constituting 3.1 percent of the country's total population (Hanrath, 2011, p. 16).

In his article 'Bitter Homeland', Maximilian Popp dismisses the concept of integration, which dominates the debate on Turkish migrants and their descendants in Germany, as misleading: "it is no longer about adopting foreigners, strangers into German society. The boys and girls of the second generation are a part of Germany, because they grew up here and are part of German reality"<sup>ccxxv</sup> (2011). Similarly, in her review of *Head-On* for the weekly magazine *Die Zeit*, Katja Nicodemus observes that the film offers an accurate picture of this contemporary Germany of which German-Turks are an integral part: "that Germany, for which [...] directors like Fatih Akin [...] and actresses like Sibel Kekilli stand, does not need to be constructed by the cinema anymore. One can refuse to recognise it, just

as one can ignore Cologne Cathedral or the Siegessäule<sup>ccxxvi</sup> – two of the most important German landmarks – but it “is there, it is the only possible one”<sup>ccxxvii</sup> (2007).

The film’s matter-of-fact portrayal of German-Turks in Hamburg prompts Nicodemus to suggest that in *Head-On*, “the balancing act between familial constraint and urban socialisation [...] has been moved into the background”<sup>ccxxviii</sup> (ibid). However, his is an assessment with which I do not fully agree, because the pressure and ultimately, complete rejection and disavowal Sibel experiences for not meeting her family’s expectation to be obedient and docile is the reason for her extreme distress and rebellion, and it is key to understanding her identity formation that is at the heart of the film.

The origins of the first generation of the ‘guest workers’ still contribute to the illiberal outlook of some Turkish-German families today. 2011 marked the fiftieth anniversary of migration from Turkey to Germany, which began in 1961, when the German government signed labour recruitment agreements with Turkey (Göktürk, Gramling and Kaes, 2007, p. 10). Many of the men recruited were unskilled workers, since the jobs they were hired for such as operating machines, assembly line work and other factory jobs did not require specific skills (ibid, p. 9). Psychologist Ferah Aksoy points out that “most families who came in the sixties came from traditionally conservative rural regions”, and her conversations with young Muslim women in Germany suggest that “many have hardly budged from their values” (cited in Göktürk, Gramling and Kaes, 2007, p. 172) until the present day. Many Muslims regard the family as the most important social unit, its honour and reputation being central. Controlling and violent behaviour of Turkish men towards their wives, daughters and sisters is the result of a code of honour, which demands that the man acts if the woman’s honour is compromised (Königseder and Schulze, 2006). The woman’s honour is related to the protection of her virginity, forbidding her to speak to men outside the family circle and require her to dress appropriately. Failure to adhere to these principles not only damages her honour, but also that of the family. As Angelika Königseder and Birgit Schulze explain,

the first generation of labour migrants, whose stay in Germany was supposed to be temporary, clung to this value system. Opening up to German society seemed unnecessary and was difficult, because the majority of migrants did not come from big cities with a strong Western influence, but from rural Anatolia, in which old traditions has remained valid for centuries<sup>ccxxix</sup> (2006).

It is the persistence of these traditions and family structures that Sibel suffers from in *Head-On*. However, as I mentioned earlier, she is portrayed throughout the film as proactive and in

charge of her own life despite the strictures and the denigration she experiences on the hands of her brother and father.

Therefore, I want to argue that *Head-On* offers a progressive and empowering representation of a young Turkish-German woman. I will demonstrate how, through a complex process of personal development, Sibel achieves independence and a self-chosen identity, which she does through role-play and a performance of gender, namely different versions femininity as well as of masculinity. At times consciously, and at times without knowing, Sibel adopts stereotypical female and male roles such as the seductive femme fatale, the caring housewife or the rough young man, which she uses as blueprints for behaviour and appearance. Sibel takes on this excessive identity defined by promiscuity, rebellion and a body that is able to endure extreme pain inflicted upon it by herself and others in order to counteract her experiences of suppression and confinement. Moreover, I will demonstrate that Akin's representation of Turkey in the film renounces an idealisation of the country as a lost homeland and instead uses the Istanbul location to explore his protagonists' problematic relationship with their country of origin, as well as to illustrate Sibel's journey towards independence.

### **Turkish-German Femininity in *Head-On*: Transgressing Cultural and Gender Boundaries**

We first encounter Sibel in a sexually suggestive pose (see fig. 81). Wearing a tight red top, black eyeliner and red lipstick, she sits with her elbows resting on her knees, showing her décolleté, and confidently reciprocates Cahit's gaze with a knowing half-smile. A close shot of her bandaged wrists (see fig. 82) reminds us of her attempted suicide that stands in stark contrast to the vivacity and strength Kekilli communicates through her look and pose. But this is not a serious decision to end her life: as Burgerová points out, Sibel's "suicide attempt in its ambivalence must be seen as an outcry against the strictures imposed by her father and brother, as well as an attempt to communicate to her family the strong attachment especially to her mother [Aysel Iscan]"<sup>ccxxx</sup> (2008, p. 97), the only family member who is sympathetic to her plight. Sibel finds it unbearable to be controlled and policed for doing what would be completely acceptable in for the German girls whose company she grew up in. Yet she must suffer brutal chastisement, explaining to Cahit that when her brother (Cem Akin) caught her holding hands with a boy, he broke her nose. Rather than wanting to die, Sibel craves experience. In one of the most quoted lines from the film, she states: "I want to live, Cahit. To live, to dance, to fuck. And not just one guy"<sup>ccxxxi</sup>. Burgerová observes that in her open

pursuit of sexual adventures and in her manner of speaking, using a rough, vulgar language that degrades women, Sibel “acts like a man”<sup>ccxxxii</sup> (2008, p. 97). She assumes an identity and demeanour that negate her experiences as a woman and verbally perpetuate the abusive mindset of the men around her. At the same time, she opts for a markedly feminine appearance in order to attract men. At this point, she is unable to develop a conception of self for example based on her abilities or the achievement of economic independence. Instead, Sibel takes on an identity based on rejecting and rebelling against everything her parents and her culture are demanding of her. As Polona Petek observes, “Sibel’s desire for freedom from the constraints and expectations of her atavistic family appears to be directed towards a singular goal – unbridled promiscuity rather than emancipation or acquisition of social, economic and/or cultural capital” (2007, p. 181).



**Figures 81&82: *Head-On*'s first shot of Sibel shows her in a sexually suggestive pose, her bandaged wrists being the only reminder of her attempted suicide**

Her fake marriage to Cahit gives Sibel the freedom she longed for, and in the following months, she and Cahit enjoy a life of partying, drugs and sex with different partners. Asuman Suner comments favourably on *Head-On*'s “non-judgemental attitude to its female protagonist’s appetite for hedonism”, which is

rendered [...] as a sincere and naive passion for living life to the full. The film conveys the sheer enjoyment Sibel derives from having her belly-button pierced, putting on sexy clothes, dancing at clubs, and sleeping with men she likes the look of (2005).

This is most apparent in a slow-motion shot showing Sibel walking down an empty street in her wedding dress in the early morning, the blissful smile on her face suggesting that she enjoyed her first sexual encounter with a barman she was seen with in the previous scene.



Thus, *Head-On* does not condemn Sibel's excessive lifestyle and promiscuity as depraved or immoral, but presents it as a part of her triumphant liberation from her family.

Sibel's libidinous lifestyle in this part of the film is offset, however, by a scene in which she prepares a traditional Turkish meal for Cahit. Maha El Hissy comments on Sibel's process of self-discovery and of finding her own identity that is informed both by her Turkish background and the German surroundings. El Hissy recognises the importance of role play for the character as a means of dealing with her instable identity, pointing out that Sibel is in a 'liminal phase', in which she shifts "between conformist and non-conformist identities"<sup>ccxxxiii</sup> (2009, pp. 173-174). For Sibel, trying out different identities through masquerade and role play is a means of negotiating between the identity her parents assigned to her, that of the dutiful daughter and future housewife, and the life she wants to live, emotionally and sexually independent. This process of role playing and the oscillation between expected and rebellious behaviour is epitomised by a dinner scene. In a montage sequence accompanied by Turkish vocal music, Sibel buys food and drinks, and we see her preparing stuffed peppers. There are close shots of her hands cutting vegetables, stuffing the peppers, preparing a red sauce and laying out a colourful tablecloth with Cahit's help.

The strong colours of the food – greens, reds and oranges – and the fact that we see Sibel blending the filling with her hands make the sequence a very visceral experience, and one that is very positively coded. The preparation of food has a life-affirming quality, conveying a warmth and comfort that contrasts with the images of squalor in Cahit's apartment, the grimy interiors of the bars and pubs the couple frequents, and the cold, clinical environment of the psychiatric clinic. The scene thereby suggests that the characters do not experience Turkish traditions and customs solely as restrictive and stifling, but that they also function to provide a sense of home and belonging: "Cahit and Sibel [...] develop a genuine, and *not* disabling, appreciation for their culture of descent", which is "encapsulated in culinary delights" (Petek, 2007, p. 183).

The sequence also includes a shot of Cahit approvingly watching Sibel's efforts. It captures the moment in which his affection for her, which we saw growing in previous scenes, is cemented. Yet by the end of the scene, Cahit will be storming out of the apartment in anger. What happens between these two moments? Significantly, Cahit's feelings for Sibel culminate in a moment in which she assumes the role of a Turkish housewife, emulating a traditional way of life that Cahit has so far vehemently rejected. Now he praises Sibel's cooking and her performance of the 'wife' role by saying that "Marrying you was not a bad

idea”<sup>ccxxxiv</sup>. Sibel declares that she learned the recipe from her mother, which further underlines that in cooking this meal, she conforms to the behaviour expected of a Turkish woman, continuing a family custom that is passed on from generation to the next. She then goes on to say that her mother asked her about children, prompting Cahit, in his enthusiasm, to respond: “Let’s make some [babies], then”<sup>ccxxxv</sup>. At this point, Sibel abruptly breaks with the housewife role and reasserts her desire for absolute independence by bluntly rejecting this proposition. She explains that should her mother get too insistent, she could always say that Cahit was impotent, which would also be a good reason for a divorce. She then insults Cahit’s feelings further by asking if they will go to their local club that night, implying that there she will meet someone for casual sex, which we have seen her do before. Thus, this sequence illustrates how Sibel temporarily assumes an identity and behaviour that she has learned from her family, but only as long as this does not conflict with her demand for complete personal and sexual independence that is key to her new, chosen identity. Her changeful behaviour suggests that rather than being clear about who she is and how she wants to live, she is very much in a state of transition, which, as El Hissy point out, is “marked by a certain ambiguity and shows how the characters exhibit characteristics of the old, as well as the new phase”<sup>ccxxxvi</sup> (2009, p. 173). Sibel wilfully ignores Cahit’s feelings for her and hurts him by making clear that she prefers the company of other men to his. Her defensiveness suggests the fragility of the new identity that she has chosen for herself, and that she feels is endangered even by committing to a caring partner who has proven that he will not curtail her freedom.

The pair’s shared life ends abruptly when Cahit smashes one of Sibel’s lovers over the head with an ashtray in a bar, thereby killing him. Having fallen in love with Sibel, Cahit could not contain his jealousy when being provoked by the rival. Sibel’s reaction to the murder (she enters the bar seconds after it took place) is represented in a sequence which is characterised by a typically melodramatic *mise-en-scène*. It shows Sibel in her and Cahit’s flat, where she puts on a melancholic Turkish song (‘Ağla Sevdam’ (‘Cry My Love’), written by Aysel Gürel and performed by Yusuf Taşkın), which “matches her grieving mood and the impossible love relationship she has with Cahit” (Siewert, 2008, p. 203). Mine Eren notes that

the song [...] becomes part of the narrative space and echoes the heroine’s inner world. [...] The words as well as the diegetic sound parallel Sibel’s situation, and in presenting her in tears, the film conveys her emotions of separation, powerlessness, pain and sadness (2012, p. 183).

The soundtrack consists only of the diegetic music, allowing viewers to be fully immersed in the melody and lyrics, undisturbed by the sound of Sibel's crying or other noises. Sibel cuts her wrist, before sinking down on the bathroom floor, wrapping up her arm in a towel to stop the bleeding, and repeatedly slaps herself while crying uncontrollably. This scene bears all the trappings of melodrama, which

use[s] [...] the potential of the *mise-en-scène* [...] to create a closed, hysterical world [...] in which the protagonists, unable to act upon their social environment, suffer severe psychological and emotional symptoms ([...] masochism, hysteria) which are displaced onto the expressive codes of the films themselves (Cook, 1991, p. 249).

Depicting the heroine as she gives herself up to her boundless pain and suffering, and abandoning realist representative conventions to fully engulf Sibel (and the viewer) in the mood of the song, the sequence illustrates how “the ‘unsaid’ and ‘unspeakable’ find cinematic expression in the [melodramatic] *mise-en-scène*” (Mulvey, 2006, p. 146), which functions as “an extra-diegetic mode of address, reaching out to the spectator” (ibid, p. 147). The song continues to play over a montage sequence depicting Sibel's arm being stitched up, her brother learning about the murder from the newspaper, and a scene in which Sibel's parents burn photos of her. This scene, as Eren notes, “signals the heroine's permanent separation from her family” (2012, p. 183) and with its emotional impact allows viewers to partake in “the catharsis [that] [...] occurs in Sibel's character” (ibid). Sibel is now cut off from her family and lives in fear of them avenging what they see as her guilt and shameful behaviour. The following morning, Sibel spots her brother in the street and runs away from him as soon as their eyes meet, narrowly escaping him as he follows her. He had threatened her already in the beginning of the film after her suicide attempt, saying that if anything happened to their father (Demir Gökgöl) because of his grief and worry over her, he would “wipe [her] out”<sup>ccxxxvii</sup>. The murder Cahit commits places Sibel in a situation where she is not only deprived of any support or comfort from her family, but has to expect physical violence or worse from her own brother. The identity of dutiful Turkish daughter, which she performed in front of her parents in marrying Cahit, and which she re-enacted in the diner scene, is now irredeemably lost to her.

Sibel takes up her cousin Selma's (Meltem Cumbul) offer to live with her in Istanbul. However, she soon condemns Selma's lifestyle and moves out, making it clear that she would not find a work-intensive job and career fulfilling: “[Stay here so] I can be like you? Work, sleep, work? [...] That's why your husband divorced you!”<sup>ccxxxviii</sup>. The independent and successful Selma who takes pride in her responsibilities as a hotel manager is a valuable

addition to the narrative, functioning as an interesting counterpoint to the Turkish-German women in Hamburg, all of whom appear to be housewives.

Once in Istanbul, Sibel abandons her markedly feminine appearance from the Hamburg scenes, in which she had long hair and wore either short skirts or tight jeans that highlighted her female curves. She now looks very masculine, having her hair cut short and wearing baggy trousers and a bomber jacket (see fig. 83). Soon, she is no longer imitating Cahit merely by adopting a masculine appearance, but also by taking on the self-destructive lifestyle Cahit exhibited at the beginning of the film. As Ortrud Gutjahr observes,

in migrating to Turkey, Sibel did not simply leave her old life behind, but repeats it as a distorted imitation [...] In a process of psychosocial mimicry, [Sibel] attempts to match [Cahit's] gestures and habits and roams the streets of Istanbul at night looking for alcohol and drugs<sup>cxviii</sup> (2010, p. 254).

The parallels between Cahit's life before he met Sibel and Sibel's life in Istanbul are most explicit in a scene which shows a heavily drunk Sibel dance in a bar. A bottle in her hand, swirling around with her arms stretched out, Kekilli portrays her as being totally oblivious to her surroundings. In this scene, we hear the same melancholic song by the band Depeche Mode ('I feel you') that had played during Cahit's nighttime car ride at the beginning of the film, which ends with him driving the car against a wall. Also, the colour schemes in the two scenes are identical. Both are dominated by the dark colours of their clothing and background, which are interspersed with flashing red and white lights (traffic lights and street lamps in the driving scene, disco lights in the bar scene) that serve to underline Sibel's and Cahit's despair and inner turmoil: in both scenes, the characters are literally and figuratively in a 'dark place'. Such scenes illustrate Akin's tendency to "infuse melodrama with a high degree of artificiality" (Berghahn, 2010, p. 253), epitomised by the "Sirikian camp use of colour" (ibid) and "the architectonic symmetry of mirror-image scenes, through which Cahit's and Sibel's lives are connected" (ibid). In both scenes, the characters are literally and figuratively in a 'dark place'. Suner (2005) and Berghahn (2011, p. 252-53) have observed that the love story of Sibel and Cahit, next to borrowing from western melodramatic traditions, also references the Turkish Arabesk tradition of 1970s music and cinema, in which the concept of 'kara sevda' (dark passion) is central. An experience of excessive passionate love, kara sevda is "an overwhelming condition experienced almost like an incurable illness" (Suner, 2005) which, once overcome, lends the sufferer "wisdom and deeper insight" (ibid). By imitating Cahit's life in Hamburg, Sibel puts herself into a "purgatory" (Berghahn, 2006, p. 153) to attenuate her own sense of guilt, feeling complicit in

the killing of the barman that shamed her family and put Cahit into prison by provoking his jealousy. In a voiceover, Sibel explicitly states that she is “not living”<sup>ccxl</sup>, but merely “surviv[ing]”<sup>ccxli</sup> in Istanbul, and likens her life to Cahit’s experiences in prison: “you pulled the short straw, but jail is the only thing I can compare my life to here”<sup>ccxlii</sup>.



**Figure 83: Having arrived in Istanbul, Sibel looks very masculine, wearing short hair, baggy trousers and a bomber jacket**

The depiction of the city in the early Istanbul scenes underscores Sibel’s feelings of alienation and isolation. Most of these scenes take place at night, and show Sibel moving either through empty streets or walking past other people who take no notice of her and whom she does not interact with. El Hissy observes that Akin here repeatedly uses wide, high-angle shots, “which show Sibel in a crowd of people, evoking a sense of anonymity”<sup>ccxliii</sup> (2009, p. 177). The depiction of Istanbul as anonymous and of Sibel as isolated demonstrate that she is in exile in Turkey, “banished from her diasporic home as well as from her ethnic homeland”, as Petek points out (2007, p. 183). She is often pictured walking alone in dark back alleys of Istanbul, which are portrayed in the film as a male-dominated territory in which women are vulnerable to sexual assaults.

These back streets provide the setting for one of the most striking scenes of the film, in which Sibel gets into a fight with a group of men (see fig. 84-87). Müller-Richter comments on this scene by saying that “it is particularly noticeable that Akin opts to have scenes of excessive violence always set in [...] so-called ‘backstages’, and also in moments that primarily concern the breach of spatial boundaries or the breach of [...] masculine territoriality”<sup>ccxliv</sup> (2007, p. 186). Sibel finds herself in a liminal space populated by hotel and service staff as they leave work through the back door, but also by thugs and drug dealers. It

is a liminal space also in the sense that here she undergoes a temporary transformation from a female to a male persona, in order to be able to meet the men she encounters as an equal. This scene is fascinating in that it challenges the idea of clear-cut gender boundaries. The previous sequences showed Sibel taking opium with a bartender, who then rapes her after she has passed out. When she leaves the bar and encounters a group of men in a back alley who proposition her, Sibel's reaction is somewhat unexpected. In an outburst of rage that seems disproportionate to the provocation, Sibel stops, turns around and shouts at one of the men: "Why don't you go fuck your mothers?"<sup>ccxlv</sup>. She then runs towards him, knees him in the groin and kicks him as he lies on the ground. The other two men rally to his defence, beating and kicking Sibel to the ground. The men then walk away, but Sibel gets up and shouts more insults at them, upon which the man she first attacked walks towards her again. She attacks him a second time, and is again beaten up by his friends. Although she is now severely injured, her face covered in blood, her eyes swollen up and her nose broken, Sibel gets up and provokes the men a third time, only for one of them to stab her with a knife. Müller-Richter reads this scene as a display of melodramatic excess, noting that "the excessiveness [lying] in the drasticness of the unmediated representation. The spectacle of a suffering, highly emotionalised body, which is being increasingly deformed and destroyed, is set in scene"<sup>ccxlvii</sup> (2007, p. 187). This leads to a "breakdown of the emotional and physical distance between the viewer and the event portrayed"<sup>ccxlviii</sup> (ibid), inviting a strong emotional identification of the viewer with the suffering protagonist that is typical of melodrama, once again demonstrating the director's indebtedness to melodramatic forms. At the same time, the scene goes beyond portraying Sibel as a passive sufferer: not only did she provoke the fight, but she is able to hold her own against three physically superior adversaries.

Being easily provoked and answering a verbal provocation with physical violence, Sibel emulates characteristics of a dominant masculinity that is associated with "physical control, aggression, conquering and competition" (Hanlon, 2012, p. 61). Kekilli's body language – she first reacts to the men's calls by smashing her sports bag on the ground and turning around with her fists clenched and her shoulders rounded like a wrestler (see fig. 85) – and her ruthless fighting style, is also stereotypically masculine rather than feminine. As Burgerová observes, Sibel "denies [...] her own female boundaries and fragility in an unconscious suicidal drive"<sup>ccxlviii</sup> (2008, p. 101). However, explaining her behaviour as merely self-destructive or suicidal does not do justice to Sibel's motives in this scene. First and foremost she seeks to avenge the violence and humiliation she suffered at the hands of men;

her unbridled rage and defiance exemplified by her overreaction to being provoked and her repeated taunting of the men. Even though she is acting irrationally and self-destructively, as viewers we are struck by Sibel's extraordinary courage and resilience, so forcefully conveyed by Kekilli in this scene.



**Figures 84-87: Sibel provokes and attacks a group of men several times, continuing to taunt them even when she is severely injured**

Sibel's "gender-crossing masquerade"<sup>ccxlix</sup> (Gutjahr, 2010, p. 245) corresponds to an understanding of gender as performative as contended by queer theory. Judith Butler has argued that the gender categories of 'male' and 'female' are socially learned rather than innate. Butler states that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (1990, p. 25). Thus, in Butler's view, it is our acquired and internalised behaviour and appearance that codes us as distinctly male or female:

consider that a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a 'natural sex' or a 'real woman' [...], and that this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which [...] appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another (1990, p. 240).

Sibel's performance of masculinity draws attention to the constructedness of gender by breaking up this male-female binary.

Gender identity in this scene is ambiguous: Sibel fully inhabits a male demeanour and appearance, but her opponents are well aware that she is a woman. The confrontation is started by a man who addresses her by saying “Hey baby? What are you doing out so late? [...] You need a man?”<sup>ccl</sup>. Later, the men call her a “fucking bitch”<sup>ccli</sup> and tell her: “Mind your own business, girl”<sup>ccli</sup>. At the same time, Sibel’s appropriation of a typically masculine brand of verbal and physical aggression prompts the men to treat her as they would treat a male adversary. Their reaction suggests that our perception of gender is influenced as much by a person’s behaviour as it is by their biological make-up. Butler proposes to consider gender as an “ ‘act’, as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (1990, p. 139). Sibel’s performance of masculinity has the purpose of holding up a mirror to the abusive forms of hyper-masculinity she has encountered. As Gutjahr notes, the violent confrontation between Sibel and the men is a re-enactment of “unspeakable”<sup>ccli</sup> physical violations such as the rape that immediately preceded it, but also of Sibel’s mistreatment through her male relatives back in Hamburg (2010, p. 246). Her verbal provocations, which are less pronounced in the finished film than in the script (which has her say “I fuck your mothers, I fuck your fathers, I fuck your children, I fuck your families”<sup>ccliv</sup> (Akin, 2004, p. 156)) are the culmination of her “rebellion against traditional gender roles and ways of life”<sup>cclv</sup> (Gutjahr, (2010, p. 246). She performs ‘maleness’ in an attempt to create a new identity for herself as she refuses to be dominated, ordered about and humiliated by men any longer. Behaving like a man herself allows her to face the men as an equal. Although severely injured, she survives and starts a new life, thus ultimately emerging triumphant. When Cahit come to meet Sibel in Istanbul after having served his sentence, he finds her transformed. In Berghahn’s words, she “has traded the role of femme fatale for that of mother” (2011, p. 247). She has renounced the excessive and promiscuous lifestyle that she practised in Hamburg for a more secure, conventional life with a boyfriend and daughter. Although they spend a few days and nights together, Cahit cannot convince Sibel to stay with him, so he finally embarks on the journey to his birthplace alone.

Cahit’s plan to relocate to Mersin and Sibel’s decision not to join him suggest the different ways in which first and second generation immigrants relate to the place of their ethnic origin. Sibel’s motivation to go to Turkey is not about her longing for a lost homeland, but rather the need to escape from her family. Cahit on the other hand, despite rejecting Turkish customs and even the Turkish language while living in Hamburg, ultimately



proves to be more nostalgic about Turkey. Earlier on in the film, Cahit had replied to Sibel's statement that "Mersin is supposed to be beautiful"<sup>cclvi</sup> by saying "I know. I was born there"<sup>cclvii</sup>. His decision to return to his birthplace after having been released from prison indicates that he idealises his birthplace as an idyllic location in which he can start a new life. Mersin is a place which is vivid in Cahit's memory but which he has not been to for decades, leaving "viewers [...] to wonder how comfortable he will be there", as Brockmann points out (2010, p. 487). Müller-Richter observes that the village of Mersin is "named again and again"<sup>cclviii</sup> but never shown, thereby "becom[ing] a sign that has permanently already been removed, or a sign of an absence"<sup>cclix</sup> (2007, p. 179). By showing the beginning of Cahit's journey to his birthplace, but not his arrival there, Mersin remains a remembered and imagined place rather an actual, physical location, and Cahit's future remains uncertain at the end of the film.

Throughout the film, Akin complicates the concept of homeland or *Heimat*, which is a central theme not only in *Head-On*, but in several of his other films such as *Solino* (2002) and *Auf der anderen Seite* (*The Edge of Heaven* (2007) that also feature home-seeking journeys (Berghahn, 2006, p. 145). It is noteworthy that by indirectly addressing the idea of 'Heimat', Akin has taken up a "quintessentially German theme" (ibid, p. 144), which gained prominence in German cinema during the 1950s with the proliferation of the *Heimat*film. The concept of 'Heimat', which resists any simple definition, involves a deep feeling of belonging to one's place of origin and its community that is often tinged with nostalgic longing, because one has left it behind or because it has been transformed in some process of modernisation. The work of exilic filmmakers often contains a similarly idealised vision of the lost homeland. In his analysis of exilic and diasporic cinema, Naficy uses the concept of the 'chronotopes', which are "specific temporal and spatial settings" (2001, p. 153) used to depict the homeland and the place of exile. While the homeland is typically presented as a utopian idyll and is associated with open spaces, boundlessness and timelessness, the life in exile has a contemporary setting that is presented as a dystopian, claustrophobic closed space (ibid, p. 5; pp. 152-53). The depiction of the lost homeland is marked by "fetishisation and nostalgic longing for [its] natural landscape" (ibid, p. 5). *Head-On* refuses to simply reproduce such an idyllic rendering of the lost homeland, which is evidenced by the depiction of the urban space of Istanbul in the film.

The only idealising visual representation of Istanbul in the film occurs in the six musical interludes, which show the actress Idil Üner in a long red dress, singing melancholic

songs about unrequited love. These inserts frame and interrupt the narrative flow and comment on the protagonists' feelings via the melodramatic lyrics ('Have all those who love and have lost their lovers lost their senses like me? [...] I have lost my mind. May the mountains rejoice in my stead'<sup>cclx</sup>). Akin states that he chose the songs to demonstrate how classical Turkish music addresses heartbreak and excessive passion in a similar way to the Western punk music used elsewhere in the film (Mitchell, 2005). Üner is accompanied by the Roma clarinetist Selim Sesler and his ensemble; the ground they stand on is covered with Oriental rugs, the majestic Süleymaniye Mosque and the Golden Horn towering in the background. This panorama is the only setting in *Head-On* that reproduces the open chronotopes of the homeland, "its [...] landscape, landmarks and ancient monuments" (Naficy, 2001, p. 153) which Naficy associates with exilic and diasporic filmmaking. However, it does so in a knowing and distancing way. As Margarete Landwehr comments, the musical interludes constitute a postmodern rendering of Turkish history that reduces it to "stereotyped images" (2009, p. 84): it "can be regarded as a self-referential statement on the role of the media, particularly film, to alter or even create the images" by which people remember a specific time and place (ibid). The static shots of the musicians and the mosque quote other idealised depictions of the city, namely those directed at tourists. Akin himself states that he included them in order to "break the Western, realistic look of the film with a kitschy postcard element" (cited in Mitchell, 2005). Thus, Akin uses the musical interludes to expose idealised representations of Turkey, while at the same time they demonstrate the filmmaker's tendency to merge elements of eastern and Western culture.

The multifaceted and changing representations of Istanbul throughout *Head-On* reflect Akin's status as a second-generation immigrant who is influenced by both German and Turkish culture. Born in Germany in 1973 to Turkish parents, Akin is not an exilic or diasporic filmmaker; instead he fits Naficy's category of 'postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmaker'. Their films, Naficy writes, centre on "the conflict between descent relations, emphasising [...] ethnicity, and consent relations, stressing self-made, contractual affiliations" (2001, p 15), they are "concerned with becoming" (ibid), that is, the individual's identity formation in their new country. *Head-On* blurs the boundaries between home and host country – neither Germany nor Turkey are clearly one or the other – but at the same time it emphasises Sibel's self-chosen affiliation with Istanbul, her new home: she initially feels like a stranger in the city, but by the end of the film, is settled there.

This process is mirrored in the film's changing representation of Istanbul. During

Sibel's initial 'exile', that is, from the time she is taken in by Selma until she is found by a taxi driver after the climactic fight with the three men, the city is portrayed as anonymous, dark and hostile (see fig. 88). But the scenes showing Sibel and Cahit in Istanbul after he has served his sentence portray the city in a much friendlier light. The characters often enjoy panoramic views of Istanbul from a comfortable distance: when Cahit meets Selma at one of the top floors of the Marmara Hotel to enquire after Sibel, his gaze shifts to the windows overlooking the Bosphorus. Later, Selma, Sibel and her baby are pictured in brightly lit, spacious flat overlooking the city and Sibel and Cahit are seen sitting on a balcony on a sunny afternoon, looking at buildings and the sea below (see fig. 89). The fact that the protagonists are frequently shown looking down on the city visualises the degree of mastery over their own lives that they have achieved. Cahit has overcome his alcoholism, which played a part in the murder he committed, and he seems much calmer, even if he is still in search for a place to settle down in. Sibel's situation is mirrored in the two opposing representations of Istanbul in the middle and end sections of the film. She is no longer at risk of being swallowed by its dark streets, but is able to look back at her former, self-destructive actions from a spatial and emotional distance. *Head-On* thus renounces any simplistic rendering of Turkey as an idyllic homeland. Instead, it uses the Istanbul locations to mirror the characters' conflicted and changing feelings or to knowingly comment on romanticised or clichéd representations of (life in) Turkey.



**Figures 88&89: Sibel's personal development is mirrored in the changing representations of Istanbul: initially at risk of being swallowed by its dark streets, she later enjoys panoramic views of the city, visualising the degree of mastery over her life she has achieved**

At the same time, the fact that both protagonists settle down in Turkey at the end of the film is highly unusual “for naturalised Turkish subjects in Germany” (Petek, 2007, p. 180): both Cahit and Sibel are German citizens who had lived in the country for decades.

However, the film's ending questions whether Germany ever became a home for its protagonists by suggesting that while Sibel was unable to achieve a fulfilling life in Hamburg, she does so in Istanbul. Indeed Sibel's relationship to Turkey and Istanbul is marked by contradictions that the film never fully resolves. On the one hand, she moved to Istanbul to escape her family, initially has little connection to the city and is very isolated there. On the other hand, Istanbul is the place where Sibel's identity formation culminates with her "symbolic death" (Landwehr, 2009, p. 81) after her fight with the men, and the beginning of her new life as she meets her new partner and has a daughter that marks "the birth of [her] new self" (ibid). While the Istanbul setting of these climactic scenes point to the redemptive qualities of Sibel's ethnic homeland Turkey, one might conversely argue that she could lead a life very similar to that in Istanbul in Germany or any other country once she is no longer being controlled by her male relatives and has found a partner who offers her both independence and support.

Akin himself strongly opposes a reading of the ending as an endorsement of Turkey as a lost homeland where German-Turks may find redemption. He states that what interested him was not where Sibel lives at the end of the film, but her

situation. She has a man and she has a child. But she is not happy with that. I think [...] [that] all my characters are searching for something. Searching for a better life [...] [But] whether they find it remains unclear. And in their country of origin they look for redemption. But they do not find redemption<sup>cclxi</sup> (cited in Suchsland and Akin, 2004).

Thus, for Akin the return to the country of origin alone does not provide a simple solution to his protagonists' problems. This is exemplified by the ending of *Head-On*, which sees Sibel forced to choose between freedom and security. As Landwehr points out, "Sibel realises at the film's conclusion [that] complete freedom doesn't exist as she must choose between her child and her lover" (2009, p. 86); she has to decide whether to stay with her partner or follow Cahit to Mersin.

It is notable that the audience is not asked to judge Sibel's nights with Cahit in Istanbul in any way or condemn them as morally reprehensible. We do not see her having to answer to her boyfriend about where she is going; not even her cousin Selma, whom she leaves her daughter with, reprimands her for what she is about to do. In fact, Selma gives Sibel her blessing, telling her "I wish you all the best"<sup>cclxii</sup> as Sibel leaves. Rather, the film stresses Sibel's decision-making process. When she is with Cahit, we see her looking out of the window several times, deep in thought, while back home, we see her packing her suitcase

and then having second thoughts as she hears her boyfriend and daughter playing next door. So, how should we evaluate Sibel's decision to stay?

In the later Istanbul scenes, Kekilli's speech and body language indicate that Sibel has changed. She appears more calm and serene, suggesting that the character has achieved a degree of stability and contentment that she was completely lacking earlier in the film, when she was compulsively striving to live in a way that contradicted everything demanded by her parents and their cultural tradition. *Head-On* depicts Sibel's struggle not only to liberate herself from her oppressive family but also to relinquish the reckless and self-destructive lifestyle she had adopted as a result of this oppression. By the end of the film, she is able to define herself not against her family background, but independently from it, having started a family of her own. One scene shows Sibel in her apartment with her daughter Pamuk. Sibel casts the child an affectionate look, which suggests that Pamuk gives her happiness and a new responsibility to care not only for herself, but for the child that is dependent on her (see fig. 90&91).



**Figures 90&91: Sibel casts her daughter an affectionate look, suggesting that Pamuk gives her happiness and a new responsibility to care not only for herself, but for the child that is dependent on her**

Scholars differ in their opinions on the degree of fulfilment Sibel has achieved. Brockmann reads the ending as evidence for Sibel's failure "to emancipate herself from the patriarchal power of Turkish traditionalism" (2010, p. 486), since her life is now defined by precisely the role of housewife and mother that her parents would have envisioned for her. Equally, Berghahn notes that in turning down the relationship with Cahit, which we know would be more passionate and excessive, "Sibel forsakes her sensuality and egocentric pursuit of pleasure for the kind of stable and conventional life she abhorred" (2006, p. 155). However, as Berghahn goes on to stress, "the mediocrity of Sibel's new life back in Turkey provides the structure and stability that will keep her alive. And in this sense her

homecoming [also] brings about her redemption” (ibid). Similarly, El Hissy interprets Sibel’s “decision not as a sign of her imprisonment, but as a commitment to a civil and familial life and her obligations in Istanbul”<sup>cclxiii</sup> (2009, p. 179). I agree with this reading, firstly because Sibel is given the opportunity to decide freely and independently whether to go or to stay (a choice she did not have when escaping from her family), and secondly since she appears to be much more settled in and in control of her life even before making this decision. This suggests that the film is more optimistic about Sibel’s situation than Akin is ready to admit.

Although Sibel ultimately chooses to live in Turkey rather than in Germany, *Head-On* does not so much proclaim the failure of migration as portray the challenges and opportunities faced by people growing up or living with both Turkish and German culture. The confrontation of her family’s oppressive patriarchal outlook with the female equality Sibel experiences in Germany is the basis for her rebellion against her father and brother. Through the character of Sibel, *Head-On* problematises the persistence of archaic family structures, which is a recurring phenomenon in migrant communities within Western societies. Sibel’s family is representative of a number of Turkish families who have lived in Germany for decades but, in an effort to preserve their cultural integrity, have ignored the liberalisation of German society and female emancipation and are therefore more conservative than many families that live in Turkey. By the end of the film, Sibel has both liberated herself from this familial oppression, and achieved a sense of belonging, having built a new life in Istanbul. With its affirmative ending, *Head-On* is a poignant tale of empowerment of its heroine that portrays her throughout as a self-directed person rather than a mere victim without denying the problem of lingering patriarchal structures within Turkish-German communities.

### **Conflating Actress and Character: from *Head-On* to *When We Leave* (2010)**

A central issue in the media discourse around Sibel Kekilli are the repeated attempts of journalists and film-makers to draw parallels between the actress’s (fictional) screen roles and her own biography. Rather than appreciating her work as an actress, this response has tended to foreground dramatic or tragic moments that occurred either during filming, or in Kekilli’s private life, or both. Fatih Akin for example has pointed out that during the filming of *Head-On*, one day after his crew had filmed a scene in which Kekilli’s character gets stabbed in the gut with a knife, Kekilli herself was diagnosed with appendicitis and had to be treated in hospital. As Akin puts it, “her body was getting ill exactly where she was hit with the fake

knife. She believed what she was acting so much. It was almost like there was witchcraft on this movie shoot about things coming true after we had shot them” (cited in Mitchell, 2005). Akin appears to be constructing a near-mythical tale of fateful events in which the character of Sibel Güner and the actress Sibel Kekilli effectively became one person. Indeed, Akin himself encouraged this merging of actress and character when filming *Head-On*: he changed the character’s name to Sibel to make it easier for Kekilli to identify with the role (Wahba, 2010), and decided to shoot the film chronologically. As Andrea Wiene and Holger Twele explain, this “encouraged a more ‘real’ development of the characters. It helped amateur actress Sibel Kekilli in particular in developing her role”<sup>cclxiv</sup> (2004, p. 12). When the subsequent revelations about Kekilli’s appearance in porn films caused her parents to break off contact with her, life once more seemed to imitate art. When asked “which scene in *Head-On* was taken directly from your biography?”<sup>cclxv</sup> (von Uslar, 2004, p. 18), Kekilli replied “in hindsight, the one in which my parents reject me. What is strange, uncanny even about this film is that some scenes later came true”<sup>cclxvi</sup> (cited in von Uslar, 2004, p. 18). Akin recounts that “Sibel’s real parents found out her adult films from reading the newspapers. And her sister told Sibel that the same thing also happened as in the film, that her father was burning the pictures of Sibel” (cited in Mitchell, 2005). These statements represent the actress’s own life as a tragic tale of the clash between first and second generation immigrants, failed integration of Turks in Germany and alienation between parents and child.

In his analysis of Turkish and German media coverage after the *Bild* scoop, Savaş Arslan points out how public statements by Kekilli’s father illustrated the chasm between first and second generation Turkish immigrants:

above all, he explained that he wanted his daughter to get out of the dirt he believed she lived in. Moreover, he compared her life to dolphins found dead on shore after an environmental disaster. This tabloid restoration of a patriarchal regime through a masculine melodrama constructed around the figure of the father who has lost his prodigal daughter recounts one side of the diasporic generational gap (2008, p. 63).

Arslan goes on to note that

the identity issues faced by the second, third and fourth generations are utterly different from those of their parents. For the first-generation migrants, the home is restored and controlled by the father figure, who serves as the guarantor of the home country’s mores in the host country (ibid).

Kekilli’s account of how she experienced growing up in Germany as a daughter of Turkish parents confirms this view. She insists that her parents are “quite modern and open”<sup>cclxvii</sup> (cited in Adorján, 2004a), but also states that her teenage years were overshadowed by the

urge to have to maintain “secrecy”<sup>cclxviii</sup> (Kekilli in von Uslar, 2004, p. 19): “I often had to lie in order to hide something [...] I had to make sure not to be seen with my boyfriend. [When I was] at a club, I thought: I can only hope there aren’t any friends of my father’s here”<sup>cclxix</sup> (ibid). Like her character in *Head-On*, Sibel Kekilli felt compelled to break out of oppressive patriarchal family structures perceived to be deeply unfulfilling by a young woman who grew up in the more permissive German society. In this sense, the parallels between character and actress underline the poignancy and relevance of the film.

At the same time, the wider media discourse on Kekilli has served to conflate the actress and her character in *Head-On* to such an extent that this has arguably foreclosed the possibility of a more objective evaluation of her work as a performer. Akin’s intimation that the reason Kekilli embodied the role so convincingly is because she is largely playing herself is, given her lack of acting training and experience, plausible and does not diminish *Head-On*’s achievements. However, this merging of Kekilli with her character in the film that introduced her to a wider public has arguably been detrimental to her career. The conflation of Kekilli and her role due to her ethnic background suggests the persistence of a negative stereotype of (German-)Turkish women in German society and culture assuming that the majority, if not all, women of Turkish descent must be oppressed within their patriarchal Muslim families. This not only disregards the multiplicity of families of Turkish descent in Germany, but also undercuts *Head-On*’s optimistic account of a Turkish-German woman’s self-empowerment.

Six years after the successes of *Head-On*, Kekilli starred in *When we Leave* (2010), another film focussing on Turkish immigrants in Germany, this time dealing with the difficult issue of honour killings. Directed by Austrian filmmaker Feo Aladag, *When We Leave* is a bleaker film than Akin’s and takes a more didactic approach to its subject matter than the irreverent and vibrant *Head-On*. Kekilli plays Umay, a young woman who grew up in Berlin and subsequently moved to Turkey after entering an arranged marriage. When she escapes from her violent husband and returns to her parents in Germany, their disapproval of her new lifestyle prompt her family to cast Umay out and then later attempt to take her life, an honour killing that instead inadvertently kills Umay’s young son Cem (Nizam Schiller).

The plot of *When We Leave* is closely modelled on a real case that received widespread media coverage and caused great public debate in Germany: the murder of 23 year-old Hatun Sürücü in 2005. Born in Germany, Hatun was forced by her family to marry a cousin in Turkey at the age of sixteen, but returned to Berlin shortly after where she raised her son.



Hatun lived by herself and was about to finish her training as an electrician when she was shot in the street by her younger brother Ayhan. During the subsequent trial, it became apparent that Ayhan had planned the murder together with his two elder brothers. Later, there was a public outcry when it was revealed that the murder was not an isolated act of an extremely traditionalist family. Some members of the Turkish community in Berlin openly sympathised with the perpetrators: during a discussion at their Berlin college, three teenage boys of Turkish origin were reported applauding the crime, stating that the victim “got what she deserved”<sup>cclxxx</sup> since she had “lived like a German”<sup>cclxxxi</sup> (cited in Schiffauer, 2005).

Feo Aladag seeks to explore the complexities behind this controversial issue in her portrayal of Turkish-German families in *When We Leave*. On the one hand, the film shows Umay’s family as one plagued by miscommunication and silence – the symptoms of rigid patriarchal and traditionalist structures that forbid an exchange of opinions, empathy and understanding for the other person. On the other hand, the director seeks to give a nuanced, multi-faceted portrayal of the different family members. The film shows events not only from Umay’s perspective but also illustrates the repercussions of her behaviour for the family and depicts the men’s – the perpetrators’ – inner conflicts and dilemma as they struggle to decide whether or not to punish Umay for her perceived transgression. Aladag is convinced that the distrust and rejection Turkish immigrants and their descendants have often experienced in Germany can cause them to stay among themselves, building communities consisting solely of others from their own country and culture. As she puts it,

in a society that does not welcome minorities in their midst and allows them to become a ‘part’ [of it], such minorities cannot free themselves from the way that are looked at. They are dependent on their small community and that then is placed above all else – because it’s so important, because they are not presented with alternatives<sup>cclxxxii</sup> (cited in Rams and Aladag, n.d.).

Andrea Naica-Loebell explains how young second- or third-generation immigrants often find themselves caught between two value systems, a conflict also faced by Umay’s brothers in *When We Leave*:

migrants often experience an increased social pressure to respect the rules and norms of their country of origin in order not to lose their own cultural identity. Families try to protect themselves by returning to the traditions and value systems of their former home country<sup>cclxxxiii</sup> (2006).

Umay’s brothers ultimately subject themselves to the value system by which their father and the community are living, feeling obliged to kill their own sister to restore the family honour.

It is notable that *When We Leave* begins and ends with the moment of the killing. The

first scene shows Cem, Umay and her younger brother Acar (Serhad Can) walking alongside a busy road. Suddenly Acar stops and points a gun at Umay. We then cut to a shot of him running away. The last scene revisits this moment, but this time we see that Acar cannot bring himself to kill his sister and so he drops the gun and runs away. Her older brother Mehmet (Tamer Yigit) then appears behind Umay with the intention of stabbing her with a knife. But just at that moment she turns around with Cem in her arms and the child is killed instead. By framing the story with the attempt on Umay's life, the plot simultaneously prefigures it and moves towards it, imbuing the film with a sense of fatalism. It prompts the viewer to consider the unfolding events as inevitably leading to her death, suggesting that her fate was sealed from the moment she left her husband and thereby stepped out of her prescribed role in the family and community. Thus, *When We Leave* leaves the viewer speculating if her brothers' violence against Umay could have been prevented by her severing all ties with her family – a solution typically proposed in films of the 'cinema of the affected', such as *Yasemin*. This suggests that German cinema still grapples with the challenge of doing justice to migrant communities. On the one hand, *When We Leave* must be credited for highlighting the dilemma of both the victims and perpetrators who resort to the rules of their native culture because they experience hostility and exclusion from the host country. On the other hand, the film risks reinforcing xenophobic prejudices by presenting escape from their hopelessly conservative or 'backward' Turkish communities as the only possible option for young women, despite the large majority of these communities being well integrated into German society.

The impression that Umay does not have a future outside her family and that she is in fact expecting retaliation for her transgression is sustained by Kekilli's performance in the climactic scene. When Acar points the gun at Umay, the look on Kekilli's face is not one of shock or fear, but sadness, exhaustion and resignation (see fig. 92), suggesting that Umay perceives it merely as the culmination of a long history of suffering. Unlike Sibel in *Head-On*, Umay submits to her role as victim. The ending is unambiguous in its message: the pressure to restore a skewed conception of family 'honour' brings great suffering upon all family members and places them in an unbearable moral and personal dilemma. Most detrimentally, the innocent child suffers. Cem dies by his uncle's hand, his death forcefully demonstrating that the irrational pursuit of 'family honour' benefits no-one, but rather damages the family unit irreversibly.



**Figure 92: Kekilli's facial expression communicates her character's exhaustion and resignation**

Feo Aladag has stated that the fundamental difference between her film and *Head-On* is that in the latter film, the female protagonist seeks to escape from her family, whereas in *When We Leave*, she returns to her family and asks for their acceptance (Meyer, 2010). The film chronicles Umay's repeated desperate attempts to reconcile with them and these – at times irrational and ambivalent – interactions demonstrate her inner conflict. Umay calls the police in order to escape her parents' apartment, but then turns up at her sister's wedding and is thrown out not once, but twice, by her brothers. Later she takes sweets to her parents' house for the festival at the end of Ramadan, only to have her father close the door in front of her. Umay experiences considerable violence from the hands of her father, brother and even mother, and the moments of silence, coldness and violence far outweigh moments of affection and solidarity in the family. This is a notable weakness of the film, since it makes Umay's unwavering efforts to be accepted back into the family very difficult to understand from a Western liberal perspective that values personal freedom and safety from physical violence more highly than family integrity. However, by demonstrating that the loss of her family would be too high a price to pay for Umay's independence, *When We Leave* highlights the dilemma of a number of girls and young women of Turkish descent in Germany whose relatives cling to a misguided conception of family 'honour'.

Shortly after *When We Leave* was released, Annabel Wahba wrote an extensive article on Kekilli for the weekly magazine *Die Zeit* in which she evokes once more the problematic issue of similarities between Kekilli's performance and her private life. It not only reiterates how the *Bild* smear campaign six years earlier affected Kekilli, but also highlights parallels between Kekilli and her character in *When We Leave*, detecting a contradiction between

Kekilli's declared aversion to being typecast as a Turk in German films and her pursuit of the lead role in a film that exposed the suffering of young Turkish-German women at the hands of their oppressive and misogynist fathers and brothers:

there is a scene in *When We Leave* that seems like a déjà-vu. Sibel alias Umay appears at her sister's wedding uninvited. The guests look at her in bewilderment when she steps onto the stage and asks what she did [wrong] that made them reject her. Tears are flowing, the nose is running. Kekilli recounts that this moment was so real that the extras were offering her handkerchiefs. This scene immediately reminds you of [...] Kekilli's appearance at the German Film Awards ceremony. There too, she was standing on a stage, crying and calling out to her parents, with whom there was still no reconciliation: 'Mum, dad, you can be proud of me'<sup>cclxxiv</sup> (2010).

Kekilli was very keen to play Umay, as Aladag confirms. The director suggests this was crucial in the casting decision, the original intention having been to use an unknown actress (Aladag, 2010). As Aladag notes, Kekilli "read [the script], [then] she called me and [...] she was really moved and she was very keen to play the role, and this absolute determination to tell this story was a good basis to work from"<sup>cclxxv</sup> (ibid). Discussing Kekilli's heartfelt performance of Umay's repeated, desperate efforts to reconnect with her family, Wahba asks polemically:

[filming this], can Kekilli [really] block out her own experiences? And why did she take the role in the first place, if she wants to avoid having to constantly talk about what happened in the past? [...] Isn't this precisely the label [Kekilli] wants to avoid: the young Turkish woman, torn between two cultures<sup>cclxxvi</sup> (2010).

Wahba concludes that "she can't seem to let go of this topic. [She] plays Umay with so much energy than one can't help seeing Kekilli herself in the role"<sup>cclxxvii</sup> (ibid). Thus, Kekilli's acting is presented not so much as a craft but more as a kind of psychotherapy in which the actress works through her personal issues. Moreover, while Wahba's suggestion that Kekilli pursued the role of Umay because some of the character's experiences of violence and oppression resonate with her own life may be plausible, this could still have been placed in the context of an actress using their profile to campaign for a worthy cause.

Wahba neglects to mention that Kekilli is also an ambassador for the German women's rights organisation *Terre des Femmes*, which campaigns against domestic violence, female genital mutilation and honour killings. The actress caused controversy in 2006 when appearing at a public discussion in Berlin that was part of a campaign against domestic violence organised by the Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet*, where she declared that "many Muslims don't know all too much about the rules of their religion, but all the more about their dominance over women [...] most rules are not divine laws [...] they are made by

men”<sup>cclxxviii</sup> (cited in Tibudd, 2006). Kekilli’s speech caused Ahmet Nazif Alpman, Turkish consul general in Berlin, to leave the room in protest, while other audience members accused her of “bringing shame on Turkish families”<sup>cclxxix</sup> (ibid). Thus, campaigning for Muslim women’s rights indicate Kekilli’s conscious efforts to vanquish their oppression and abuse, and her determination to be a part of *When We Leave* can be seen as part of this effort.

Most of the newspaper coverage of Kekilli continued to relate Kekilli’s film roles to her personal life, tending to discuss either the *Bild* headline (recounting Kekilli’s personal ordeal (see Adorján, 2004a), condemning the tabloid’s bad journalistic practice (Illies, 2004, Adorján, 2004b), updating readers about the pending court case filed by Kekilli against the newspaper (*Tagespiegel*, 2004, *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 2004)) or asking Kekilli’s opinion on the situation of Turkish immigrants in Germany (Kogebloom and Nolte, 2004). But in almost every case they persist in constructing Kekilli as a Turkish-German woman, not as an actress, and consequently her performances and professional status continue to be overshadowed by the personal problems she experienced as a second-generation Turkish immigrant. This in turn is a reminder of the wider and persistent problem of normalisation in terms of the identities and experiences of German-Turks that prevent them being simply ordinary members of German society.

Sibel Kekilli herself has lamented that many roles offered to her since *Head-On* were Turkish (or rather, Turkish-German) characters. In an interview in 2004 she explained that “I got many offers, but mostly they wanted me to play Turks. I didn’t want that”<sup>cclxxx</sup> (cited in Kogebloom and Nolte, 2004). The fact that Wahba’s article was written on the occasion of the release of *When We Leave*, six years after *Head-On*, suggests the critical and public neglect of the films Kekilli made between these two films. In 2006 she had starred in the film *Eve Dönüş* (*Home Coming*) (dir. Ömer Uğur) that chronicles the Turkish coup d’état in 1980, as well as in *Der letzte Zug* (*The Last Train*) (dir. Joseph Vilsmaier and Dana Vávrová) which depicts the ordeal of a group of Berlin Jews deported to Auschwitz in 1943. In the same year, Kekilli also appeared in the film *Winterreise* (*Winter Journey*) (dir. Hans Steinbichler), a drama set in contemporary Germany that is inspired by Franz Schubert’s song cycle *Winter Journey*. In 2010, she had a part in the two-part TV drama *Gier* (*Greed*), made by the popular director and producer Dieter Wedel. However, as mentioned above, Kekilli’s performances in these films went largely unnoticed by critics, cementing the impression that her career was stalling after the success of *Head-On*.

In April 2010 the actress took matters into her own hands, turning her acceptance

speech at the German Film Awards ceremony (where she won the award for Best Actress for the second time for *When We Leave*) into a plea for more interesting roles, declaring that “I’m an actress, [I can play] characters aged between 23 and 30, and I’m looking for good parts! I want to work!”<sup>cclxxxix</sup> (cited in Keil, 2010). Kekilli’s call was heard and she was subsequently offered parts in a number of high-profile film and TV productions later that year, securing a leading role in the romantic comedy *What a Man*, as well as substantial parts in the high profile American TV series *Game of Thrones* (2011-), and in the iconic German TV serial *Tatort*<sup>27</sup>, which shows several teams of police detectives in different cities at work. In the latter series, Kekilli gives a strong performance as ambitious junior detective Sarah Brandt, whose IT skills are vital to solving murder cases. Brandt’s impulsiveness is contrasted with the more traditional methods of her older male superior Klaus Borowski (Axel Milberg), while her struggle with epilepsy, which she conceals from her employer, adds more depth to the character. Being interviewed on her role, Kekilli welcomed the opportunity to play a German, rather than a Turkish-German character: “I play a character called Sarah Brandt, not Ayse Yilmaz. I think that’s great”<sup>cclxxxii</sup> (cited in Ehringfeld, 2010).

Securing the role in *Tatort*, Kekilli seemed to have finally overcome the problem of being typecast due to her ethnic background. Looking at her character in *Game of Thrones*, however, suggests that her screen persona is still associated with foreignness. Kekilli plays Shae, a prostitute who becomes the mistress of nobleman Tyrion Lannister (Peter Dinklage). Producers David Benioff and D.B. Weiss state that they were adamant for Kekilli to play the role after they had seen her in *Head-On* (Ryan, 2011), and indeed there are similarities between the two characters, both of whom are defiant, promiscuous and frequently pictured in nude or sex scenes. It is notable that Shae is identified as foreign in her very first appearance, during which she meets Tyrion. Ironically, however, this time it is her German accent when speaking English that identifies her as such: she has not spoken more than two sentences when Tyrion asks her: “What kind of accent is that?”, and she replies “foreign”. This dialogue swiftly and effectively explains Kekilli’s accent, and settles the question of her character’s origins. It appears to have been written specifically for Kekilli, since Benioff and Weiss explain that they initially planned to cast an English actress in the role (Ryan, 2011). Thus, in her first English-speaking role, Kekilli is once again marked by her

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<sup>27</sup> The *Tatort* series has been running for over 40 years and is extremely popular, being broadcast on the highly coveted 8.15 pm slot on Sunday night and regularly attracting between eight and ten million viewers.

foreignness<sup>28</sup>, although this time not as a victim of oppressive religious rules but instead as an uninhibited, sexualised Other. This suggests that, seven years after her breakthrough in *Head-On*, Kekilli still found herself confronted with typecasting.

### **Moving Beyond Ethnic Stereotyping? – Kekilli in *What a Man* (2011)**

Next to her ongoing role in *Tatort*, Kekilli's part in the romantic comedy *What a Man* had the potential to take the actress beyond the trap of ethnic stereotyping. *What a Man* is a romantic comedy that recasts the battle between the sexes as a confrontation between a domineering woman and a man plagued by an identity crisis. The film warrants closer inspection, since it marks an interesting shift in Kekilli's screen persona. It is her first high-profile role in which she embodies a version of German, rather than Turkish-German, femininity, and she does so in a film that draws on highly stereotypical representations of gender. The directorial debut of popular actor Matthias Schweighöfer, *What a Man* was heavily publicised and became a box office success, attracting more than 1.78 million viewers (FFA, n.d.(g)) and was the second most watched German film in Germany in 2011 after *Kokowääb*, a film by actor-cum-director Til Schweiger, whose popular romantic comedies Schweighöfer seeks to emulate. The film follows in the footsteps<sup>29</sup> of the German 'relationship comedies', which Eric Rentschler dismissed as the epitome of 1990s German 'cinema of consensus'. These comedies focus on the romantic relationships of young, urban and affluent men and women, dissecting and reproducing dominant gender images in equal measure.

*What a Man* centres on schoolteacher Alex (Schweighöfer) who is ditched by his domineering girlfriend Karolin (Mavie Hörbiger) after she decides that Alex's muscly neighbour Jens (Thomas Kretschmann) is better suited to her sexual needs. This greatly

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<sup>28</sup> It should be noted that this is somewhat relativised by the fact that *Game of Thrones* features other female characters (such as Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey), who has an incestuous affair with her brother despite being married) that are equally promiscuous, as well as by the show's approach to national and ethnic difference, which is much more irreverent than Kekilli's German films: *Game of Thrones* is set in a fictitious medieval world with its own kingdoms, tribes and cultures different from those of medieval Europe, and has actors of various nationalities with different accents play members of the same family.

<sup>29</sup> *What a Man* is part of a group of popular films suggesting that German mainstream comedies coexist with, rather than being replaced by, internationally successful historical dramas and the Berlin School art film movement. While big-budget productions engaging with the dark chapters of German history such as *The Lives of Others* only account for occasional German box-office hits, a string of romantic comedies such as *Keinohrhasen* (*Rabbit without Ears*) (dir. Til Schweiger, 2007), *Kokowääb* (dir. Til Schweiger, 2011) and their respective sequels *Zweiobrküken* (*Rabbit without Ears 2*) (dir. Til Schweiger, 2009) and *Kokowääb 2* (dir. Til Schweiger, 2013) have guaranteed consistently high box office takings. They were directed by Til Schweiger, who had starred in *Maybe, Maybe not*, the most popular relationship comedy of the 1990s, and began to make similar romantic comedies in the 2000s.

affects Alex's self-esteem and causes him to question his manhood, prompting his best friend Okke (Elyas M'Barek) to engage Alex in a number of supposedly 'masculine' activities. Alex also moves in with his childhood friend Nele (Kekilli), a waitress and animal rights activist. Various romantic complications ensue before Alex finally realises his feelings for Nele and on a plane to China (where she is travelling to participate in a panda rescue project) he declares his love for her, which she reciprocates.

There is no indication that Nele is of Turkish or any other foreign descent; she has no last name that would provide clues as to her nationality and her given name is a short form of Cornelia, a common girl's name in Germany. Flashbacks showing her and Alex attending primary school together suggest that Nele was born in Germany. Securing the part of a German character in a mainstream romantic comedy confirmed the impression that Kekilli had finally left ethnic stereotyping behind. However, *What a Man* still evokes ethnic difference – in this case via the striking visual contrast between Nele and Karolin, her rival for Alex's affection. While Nele has long black hair and a darker complexion, Karolin sports short, light blond hair (see fig. 93&94). The contrast in appearance between Kekilli and the blonde, Austrian-German actress Mavie Hörbiger creates an interesting sub-text, all the more so since Karolin is latently xenophobic while Nele has strong ties to the Turkish-German community, embodied by Alex's best friend Okke. This is evident during a scene at the beginning of the film that shows Karolin and Alex at Okke's birthday party. Karolin complains that "they only have Turkish food"<sup>cclxxxiii</sup> and shortly after tells Alex she wants to leave the party because she cannot stand being surrounded by the "thirty relatives of your weird friend"<sup>cclxxxiv</sup>, thereby employing the stereotype of the extended, overbearing Turkish family. When Alex returns to the party alone, Nele tells him and Okke: "she [Karolin] just doesn't like us"<sup>cclxxxv</sup>. Karolin's suspicion and rejection of the Turkish-German community characterise her as intolerant and unsympathetic, quickly identifying her as the antagonist. The contrasting female characters also invite a number of questions regarding images of German women and femininity. Nele's curly, long black hair, which loosely falls over her shoulders, and Karolin's platinum blonde hair, which is arranged in an immaculate bob cut, correspond to their personalities: Nele is kind and gentle, while Karolin is cold and uncompromising.





**Figures 93&94: Opposing representations of femininity in *What a Man*: Nele/Sibel Kekilli (left) and Karolin/Mavie Hörbiger (right)**

Ralf Junkerjürgen highlights the importance of a person’s hair in judging their appearance and character, noting that “hair has a higher status in the conventions of describing [a person] than most other body parts”<sup>cclxxxvi</sup> (2009, p. 181), “dominating other features in perception and representation due to its visibility and constituting a reductionist uber-symbol”<sup>cclxxxvii</sup> (ibid). Hair colour has long been employed by racist ideologies to determine a woman’s moral and intellectual worth, European medieval literature frequently presenting dark-haired women as less inhibited, and more sexed and depraved than blonde women (ibid, p. 220). With the translation of the *Arabian Nights* or *One Thousand and One Nights* stories into French and English in 1704 and 1706, respectively, and into German in 1823, the figure of the sensual, dark-haired oriental woman was popularised in Europe (ibid, p. 221). Many literary works influenced by the *Arabian Nights* present oriental women “as ‘passive’ and ‘surrendering’ ”<sup>cclxxxviii</sup> (Neubauer, 2011, p. 144), but possessing unique seductive powers. Neubauer explains that contemporary representations of Turks only sporadically employ “the image of the exotic-erotic oriental woman”<sup>cclxxxix</sup> (ibid, p. 161): it has been largely replaced by a discourse that represents Muslim women as victims of religious strictures imposed by men. Neither of these stereotypical representations applies to Kekilli’s character in *What a Man*, however. Indeed, in view of the long tradition of presenting dark-haired women of Turkish or Arabic descent as sexualised seductresses, it is notable that *What a Man* largely rejects this approach. There is one scene which does associate Nele’s hair with her sensuality or sexual attractiveness: she gets dressed after having spent the night with Alex and there is a brief shot of her long black hair falling over her bare

back (see fig. 95). When Alex averts his gaze, she declares that “there’s nothing you haven’t already seen”<sup>ccxc</sup>. However, the main focus of this scene is Alex’s embarrassment about his nakedness rather than Nele’s lack of embarrassment about hers, and Nele is portrayed throughout the film as gentle and demure compared to the sex-craving Karolin. Also, as mentioned above, the film leaves Nele’s origins or ethnicity deliberately unclear by not giving her a last name. Kekilli’s character in the film is thus neither exoticised as Kekilli herself was exoticised by *Bild* six years earlier, nor is Nele victimised like Kekilli’s character Umay in *When We Leave*.



**Figure 95: As Nele gets changed, her long black hair falls over her bare back, highlighting her sensuality or erotic allure**

In order to better understand the function of Kekilli’s character in *What a Man* – that of the protagonist’s love interest and thus an ideal of femininity created by (male) screenwriters – it is worth considering Kekilli’s/Nele’s antagonist Karolin in more detail. Karolin’s dominant personality threatens the male protagonist and is represented as very unlikeable. *What a Man* juxtaposes the two female characters, casting Karolin as the opposite of the sweet and caring Nele, and thereby illustrates that identity is always partly defined in relation to and by its opposite. In the same way as Nele fails to correspond to stereotypes relating to ethnic, black-haired women, Karolin’s overbearing and heartless character subverts a common conception of the *blonde* woman, whose hair colour is traditionally seen as “the physical embodiment of a gentle, angelic, moral and basically desexualised type of woman, who places virtue and duty higher than romantic fulfilment”<sup>ccxcii</sup> (Junkerjürgen, 2009, p. 211). Karolin’s personality is more reminiscent of a type of woman found in 20th-century

cinema: the 'icy blonde'<sup>30</sup>, popularised by Alfred Hitchcock, who is

conceited and aloof [and] [...] withholds sex and love. She is exquisitely beautiful, but frigid, snooty, uncaring. [...] To destroy her complacency and emotional detachment, the blonde is punished, subjected to excruciating physical and psychological ordeals (Shelley, 2009, pp. 16-17).

Karolin is also punished for her insolence, albeit not as radically as Hitchcock's 'icy blondes': after some reflection, she ruefully asks Alex for forgiveness but is rejected in favour of Nele. This is representative of a general tendency in the film to vilify the overly sexually and economically independent woman.

The figure of the blonde woman has been popular in Western art, literature and film throughout the centuries, but has an added significance in German history. The tradition of depicting blond hair as an intrinsic feature of German womanhood goes back to the early 19th century, when the figure of Germania<sup>31</sup> (see fig. 96), an allegory for the German people, became popular in painting, music, prose, poetry and caricatures. Often surrounded by German symbols such as the colours black, red and gold, the double-headed eagle, and oak leaves, Germania's "characteristic feature [is] her long blonde hair"<sup>ccxcii</sup> (Wilhelms, 1995, p. 38). This conflation of 'blondness' and Germanness' subsequently acquired a more sinister meaning during the Third Reich, one that still resonates until the present day. The figure of the blond German woman was a key trope of Nazi propaganda, which implemented an ideology based on the scientifically unfounded concept of a physically and mentally superior 'Aryan race' that constituted the national community: 'Aryans' were seen as "the authentic Germans", "typically represented as tall, blue-eyed blondes" (Garner, 2010, pp. 175-76). The "shiny Nordic blonde" (Guenther, 2004, p. 105) was the most common female figure most

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<sup>30</sup> Typical 'icy blondes' in Hitchcock's films are Madeleine (Kim Novak) in *Vertigo* (1958) and Tippi Hedren's characters in *The Birds* (1963) and *Marnie* (1964). Other iconic 'icy blondes' are Catherine Deneuve's character Séverine in *Belle de jour* (dir. Luis Buñuel, 1967) and Sharon Stone as Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct*, who "visually referenced Hitchcock's women but had none of their sexual repression" (White, 2007, p. 107).

<sup>31</sup> 19th century depictions of Germania employed the allegorical figure to express the growing desire for a unified German nation that would replace the German confederation of thirty-nine states, and end their political and economic instability. The most famous one of these is Philip Veit's 1948 monumental painting *Germania*, which shows the 'mother of Germany' as "a double life-size figure" (Wolf, 1999, p. 56) with golden blond hair. Towards the end of the long 19th century Germania was portrayed as increasingly forceful and belligerent: Friedrich August von Kaulbach's rendering of the allegorical figure, *Deutschland August 1914* (see fig. 96) is imbued with all the misguided nationalism that gripped Germany and Europe before the First World War. It depicts Germania as a grim warrior wearing a knight's armour and a long black skirt, sword in the right hand, shield in the left. Her head and upper body are framed by her billowing, long golden hair which stands out against the black background and corresponds to the red flames behind her that refer to the destruction the German troops would cause wherever they went.

commonly pictured on Third Reich propaganda posters (see fig. 97&98). Given this abuse<sup>32</sup> of the blonde German woman figure and the fraught meaning associated with hair colours in German history and culture, *What a Man's* juxtaposition of a blonde woman that is embodied by an actress of German descent, and a black-haired woman embodied by an actress of Turkish descent risks evoking racist stereotypes. Yet the film actually subverts the (stereotypical and) fraught ideal of the blonde German woman by vilifying Karolin. Moreover, *What a Man* neither equates 'blondeness' with 'Germanness', nor identifies Kekilli's character as exotic or un-German.



Figures 96-98: Friedrich August von Kaulbach's painting *Deutschland August 1914* (1914) foregrounds the allegorical figure's blond hair (left); Nazi propaganda posters perpetuating the ideal of the blonde German woman (centre and right)

### Femininities in *What a Man*: the 'Businesswoman', the 'Bimbo' and the 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl'

Despite circumventing certain problematic representations of German femininity, *What a Man* still uncritically reproduces certain gender images dominant in contemporary Germany. The film explores what it means to be a man or a woman in 21st century Germany by playing with stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity: Karolin exhibits traits commonly associated with masculinity, while Nele is more conventionally feminine, and Alex's masculinity is called into question. Not only does Alex have difficulties asserting

<sup>32</sup> The Nazi party under Adolf Hitler relied on the pseudoscientific theories of 19th century eugenicists and social Darwinists, who correlated a person's physical appearance with their intelligence and character, using "hair-raising methodical acrobatics whose end justified the means: proving the superiority of blond people" (Junkerjürgen, 2009, p. 289). Nazi ideology fused this racist equation of physiognomy and character with a violent anti-Semitism that led to the discrimination against, social exclusion and ultimately genocide of German and European Jews.

himself vis-à-vis the domineering Karolin, whose affair with Alex's neighbour is an open attack on his sexual prowess. The visits to gyms, boxing rings and bars ordered by his friend Okke also suggest that Alex needs to improve both his physical strength and his seductive powers in order to meet the generally accepted image of masculinity.

Susan Faludi was one of the first writers to discuss the idea of a 'masculinity crisis' in her 1999 book *Stiffed. The Betrayal of Modern Man*. In this she argues that male authority in Western societies has become undermined since the end of the Second World War due to a number of social and economic changes. Key developments associated with the crisis in masculinity include changes of the labour market, such as the decline of heavy industries and hard physical labour, which was associated with masculine identities; changes in family and private life such as the rise of single-parent families and same-sex relationships, which undermine the patriarchal family model, and the increased presence of women in the labour market, challenging male dominance in this sphere (Morgan, 2006, pp. 111-112).

Social surveys confirm that these developments also affected German men: a 2007 study by the Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (BMFSFJ) (Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth) revealed a profound sense of self-doubt and confusion among young men regarding their own position in society and their relation to women. The study noted that "[the] men [...] are extremely insecure and on the defensive: this is because they perceive a sense of dynamism, power and self-confidence only among women"<sup>ccxciii</sup> (2007, p. 11). The men themselves on the other hand, are lacking a "positive vision for their role as men"<sup>ccxciv</sup> (ibid, p. 11). They recognise the merits of female equality, and they are aware that traditional gender images (i.e. the housewife and the male breadwinner) are no longer tenable, but they have not been presented with more progressive ones. This is partly due to their socialisation; the 20-year olds questioned for the study, like *What a Man's* screenwriter Doron Wisotzky<sup>33</sup> (who was 27 in 2007, when the study was published), grew up in West Germany in the 1980s, a decade in which only fifty percent of West German women aged between 15 and 65 were in employment (Lenz, 2008, p. 145), while most men would work full time and provide for the family. The number of working women increased steadily in the following decade, from 52.2 percent in 1990 to 58.1 percent in the year 2000, and to 63.2 percent in 2007 (OECD Factbook 2005 and 2009).

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<sup>33</sup> Director Matthias Schweighöfer on the other hand was born and raised in East Germany, which propagated female equality as part of its Marxist-Leninist ideology, thus encouraging women to take paid work.

Being confronted with women of their own age, who are extremely confident and demand complete equality, the men questioned for the BMFSFJ study were understandably unsure about appropriate male and female roles in contemporary society. Alex's and Karolin's relationship in *What a Man* reflects this disparity between young men and women with respect to their ideas of gender roles. The opening sequence, in which she attempts to force Alex into an overseas holiday trip despite his fear of flying, suggests that Karolin does not refrain from emotionally manipulating him to get what she wants, and shows no gratitude when her requests are being met. Alex suffers the ultimate humiliation at the hands of Karolin when she asks him to pick her up from the hospital after she has injured herself while having sex with his neighbour, causing Alex to be ridiculed by a group of doctors. Critics agree that Karolin is a "caricature of a girlfriend" (Nordine, 2012) rather than a realistic depiction of a contemporary German woman. Nino Klingler scorns the film for its predictable narrative and regressive gender politics:

quickly it becomes clear where the sympathies lie; the director identifies himself as a tragic everybody's darling and the career- and sex-crazed egotistic woman is duly punished (since female emancipation ultimately cannot be taken seriously, or is something to be feared)<sup>ccxcv</sup> (2011).

However, upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that *What a Man* does not merely reproduce reactionary gender roles, but actually reflects the changing and conflicting gender images prevalent among young Germans today<sup>34</sup>. Karolin is the personification of young men's fears and stereotypes relating to women of their own age. The BMFSFJ study revealed that a common female stereotype named by men with a lower or intermediate level of education is that of the 'Businessfrau' or 'businesswoman': an educated woman who has the ambition to succeed in formerly male-dominated lines of work (2007, p. 36). These women are seen to "act 'masculine', they have to be strong, brave, confident, strong-willed and tough"<sup>ccxcvi</sup> (ibid). Counteracting traditional female roles, they are perceived as a threat: the men feel inferior to them (ibid, p. 10). Despite being a model – a profession associated with

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<sup>34</sup> In this respect, it resembles Til Schweiger's hit comedy *Rabbit Without Ears*. Anke Ascheid points out that "its entertaining escapism" (2013, p. 255) notwithstanding, *Rabbit Without Ears* does "respond to fantasies and desires rooted in the social real" (ibid), the initial enmity between its socially awkward heroine Anna (Nora Tschirner) and the cocky, womanising hero Ludo (Til Schweiger) "acknowledging fundamental social conflict" (ibid). This conflict is resolved through a 'reorient[ation of] male identities and motivations' (ibid, p. 256): "Ludo needs to learn how not to be an 'asshole', and over the course of the plot he is taught how to give women sexual pleasure, how to be a caring father figure, and finally, how to love" (ibid, p. 254). A comparable process takes place in *What a Man*: Alex learns that a desirable version of masculinity is not founded on physical strength and a macho attitude (as suggested by Okke) or sexual aggressiveness (as represented by Jens) but rather a healthy dose of self-confidence.



appearance and objectification rather than intellect or responsibility – Karolin, who is the face of a DIY chain’s marketing campaign, is identified as a ‘businesswoman’ due to the central role of work in her life and her professional ambition. One of her first lines in the film is a complaint to Alex that she is “so stressed with the campaign”<sup>ccxcvii</sup>, and she rushes off to work before the couple has finished their breakfast. Through her character, a completely independent, callous woman who dominates the kind and defenceless male protagonist, *What a Man* explores the “diffuse fears”<sup>ccxcviii</sup> (ibid, p. 40) of young men regarding gender equality revealed by the BMFSFJ study, evidenced in their “concern that their self-image and the (power) relations between genders ‘spirals out of control’ due to an ‘extreme drive for emancipation’ ”<sup>ccxcix</sup> (ibid).

Although Karolin’s interactions with Alex show her to be aggressive and dominant, she is not averse to feigning a tearful emotional breakdown or throwing a tantrum to force Alex to do what she wants. In that respect, her character reproduces another female stereotype identified by young men questioned for the BMFSFJ study: that of the ‘Tussi’ or ‘Zicke’, perhaps best translated as ‘bimbo’. These women are perceived as unpredictable, “at times fall[ing] back into traditional female roles and expecting a strong, protective, [...] charming man by their side [...]”. At other times, they manipulate the men, unscrupulously using their feminine ways to get what they want<sup>ccc</sup> (2007, p. 36).

However, since Karolin also exhibits negative traits associated with men, such as being competitive, aggressive and sex-crazed<sup>35</sup>, she unites within her person the worst stereotypes of both genders: those of the emotionally manipulative, hysterical woman and those of the egoistic, unfeeling male sexual predator. The very characteristics that might render a male character strong and successful – being single-minded, autonomous and promiscuous – are used in *What a Man* to identify Karolin as a deeply unsympathetic character, thereby painting a rather unflattering picture of an emotionally and financially independent woman and suggesting that it is detrimental for women to step out of traditional gender roles.

Kekilli’s Nele is equally problematic, in that she is largely reduced to her function as the protagonist’s love interest. Nele’s kind and gentle nature mark her out as being more

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<sup>35</sup> Karolin exhibits behaviours and attitudes typically associated with what Robert Connell has called ‘hegemonic masculinity’. The term “describe[s] those white, heterosexual, competitive, individualist and aggressive men who [...] derive[ their] self-esteem from the public sphere” (Feasey, 2008, pp. 2-3). Karolin’s high-powered job and her presence on numerous billboards associate her with the public sphere of work, and her rampant affair with the neighbour highlights her unbridled promiscuity, another trait associated with masculinity.

conventionally feminine than the domineering and irascible Karolin, who is effectively masculinised. While Nele is shown only briefly in the café where she works as a waitress, she is much more frequently pictured in her flat, where she prepares food for Alex, placing her in the domestic sphere that is associated with femininity. Nele also embodies many other characteristics commonly associated with femininity, which are said to include – by way of generalisation and a gender-determinism that many feminists oppose – being emotional, intuitive, caring, relational, dependent and childish (Bates et al., 2005, p. 66, p. 416). As I will discuss below, her naivety about the animal rights movement that she is involved with make her appear more like a child than a sensible adult. Also, Nele takes Alex in and consoles him after his separation from Karolin, and she stays with her boyfriend Etienne (Pasquale Aleardi) even when he proves to be a very unreliable partner, demonstrating her valuing of relationships and her dependence.

What is more, the Nele character exemplifies director Matthias Schweighöfer's desire to emulate the timeless appeal of American romantic comedies, in particular Zach Braff's 2004 film *Garden State*. *Garden State* is a coming-of-age film centring on Andrew Largeman (Braff), who awakens from his medication-induced haze when, upon returning home for the funeral of his mother, he meets and falls in love with a local girl (Natalie Portman). Schweighöfer has said that he "watched *Garden State* a lot"<sup>ccci</sup> (2011) and was very impressed with the film's visual style<sup>36</sup>. There are also strong parallels between the protagonists' respective love interests, *Garden State*'s Sam and *What a Man*'s Nele. Film critic Nathan Rabin coined the term 'manic pixie dream girl' to describe Portman's and Kirsten Dunst's childishly cheerful characters in *Garden State* and *Elizabethtown* (2005), respectively<sup>37</sup>. Rabin writes that "the manic pixie dream girl exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures" (2007), suggesting that she is more of a narrative ploy than a fully rounded

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<sup>36</sup> Indeed there are two scenes in *What a Man* that seem to be directly modelled on similar sequences in Braff's film: like *Garden State*, *What a Man* opens with the main character sitting in a plane experiencing the moments before a fatal crash (Braff's Andrew remains unusually calm while Schweighöfer's Alex panics), which then turns out to be only a nightmare. Also, both films contain a short sequence in which the protagonist, waking up in a place away from home, watches a person in a full body suit (a knight and a panda costume, respectively) walking into the room. The fact that the camera is turned at a 90° angle, adopting the point of view of the protagonist who is in a horizontal position, adds to the surrealism of the moment.

<sup>37</sup> Feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian (2011) has pointed out that Zoëy Deschanel's character in *500 Days of Summer* (2009), Kate Winslet's character in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), Kate Hudson's character in *Almost Famous* (2000), Winona Ryder's character in *Autumn in New York* (2000) and Meg Ryan's character in *Joe Versus The Volcano* (1990) also fit the definition of the 'manic pixie dream girl'.



character. The term has since been adopted by scholars who analyse the gender politics that determine the representation of romantic relationships on film and television. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker for example point out that ‘chick flicks’, commercial films appealing primarily to female audiences, frequently feature manic pixie dream girls. This type of female character is ideally suited to the chick flick’s narrative structure, within which “the achievement of romantic intimacy forecloses all other concerns” (Negra and Tasker, 2013, p. 351). The manic pixie dream girl’s “exuberance, vibrancy and light-hearted relation to life counterbalances a serious, burdened male protagonist” (ibid), and her sole concern in life appears to be a romantic relationship with said protagonist. Thus, the manic pixie dream girl is a problematic female lead since she is essentially a muse, whose only function it is to pull the male protagonist out of his existential crisis. She has few aspirations or interests of her own, and therefore fails to represent the realities of contemporary women’s lives.

Nele, too, is largely reduced to her function as Alex’s future partner, and her quirky and irreverent nature further identifies her as a ‘manic pixie dream girl’. She for example writes little notes addressed not only to Alex but also to herself, and she surprises Alex by asking him to dance with her in the middle of a city square, rather than at the party they just left. But it is her involvement with the animal rights movement that makes it most obvious that rather than being a fully fleshed-out character, she functions as a narrative motor to advance Alex’s process of self-realisation and to generate humour. Nele’s participation in the panda rescue organisation, instead of being portrayed as a worthwhile pursuit, is played for laughs, for example when she surprises a sleeping Alex in a full-body panda suit, or in a scene in which Alex first pursues a person in a panda costume through the streets and then addresses a group of animal rights activists rendered unrecognisable by their costumes. Also, upon being denied permission to go to China to take part in an animal rights protest because this might be dangerous, Nele asks: “What could possibly be dangerous about that?”<sup>ccci</sup>. This suggests her immense naivety about a project she is supposedly interested and invested in, and presents her less as a sensible adult, and more like a wide-eyed child.

Kekilli’s performance in the film received mixed reviews: while Frank Scheck commented positively on the chemistry between the Kekilli and Schweighöfer (2012), Mira Wild observes that “Kekilli’s comedy debut is not entirely successful: you don’t buy all of her jokes”<sup>ccciii</sup>. Similarly, American critic Aaron Coleman describes Kekilli as “mousy” (2012). These reviews suggest that the role of Nele gave Kekilli little scope for a charismatic performance. Unlike her characters in *Head-On* and *When We Leave* that explored the complex

and conflicted feelings of their female protagonist, Nele is sweet and unassuming, an overall rather bland female character whose function it is to aid the male protagonist's journey of self-realisation.

The way *What a Man* offers up Nele and Karolin as two opposing representations of contemporary German women leaves much to be desired. Like the 'relationship comedies' from two decades earlier, the film reproduces gender images dominant in German society rather than counteracting or deconstructing them. While indicating changes in masculine identities and self-image through its insecure, self-effacing protagonist<sup>38</sup>, who is a far cry from the male chauvinists of its 1990s' predecessors, such as *Maybe... Maybe not's* Axel, *What a Man's* focus on the protagonist's masculinity crisis is detrimental to its representation of the female leads. Karolin embodies stereotypes common among young men, who feel threatened by women of their own age that seem to be overly confident and dominant. Kekilli's Nele on the other hand, is childish, caring and selfless – a 'manic pixie dream girl', whose function it is to help Alex out of his masculinity crisis and boost his self-esteem. *What a Man's* exploration of the male psyche therefore comes at the expense of three-dimensional, independent female characters that capture the experiences, aspirations and struggles of young women in Germany today.

## Conclusion

Sibel Kekilli occupies a significant position within German cinema as the first Turkish-German actress to establish herself within its film industry. Starring in *Head-On*, Kekilli has been part of a film that has enriched representations of femininity in German cinema. The film gave a new voice to young women who are part of the Turkish minority that forms Germany biggest immigrant group, departing from the stereotypical representation of Turkish-German women as helpless victims of a patriarchal culture. *Head-On* was the first German film in 18 years to win the Golden Bear, a circumstance generally regarded as one of

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<sup>38</sup> Marco Abel has argued that this shift in men's self-image has been problematised in a number of recent German films centring on romantic relationships. Abel and Antje Ascheid (2013) have introduced the concept of the 'postromance' to situate these films in their socio-historical context. Abel uses the term postromance to describe a group of recent international films centring on love, sex and romance that have "an essentially pessimistic outlook on romantic relationships" (2010, p. 77), informed by the generation of 1968 and the tenets of second wave feminism. The characters in these films share "the awareness that marriage is neither the necessary nor the 'normal' framework one needs in postadolescent life, as well as the post-1968 scepticism of the traditional 'ideal' of lifelong, monogamous relationships" (ibid). Abel observes that the films of German director Oskar Roehler for example, which he considers as emblematic of the postromance genre, "all depict [...] male characters who experience great anxieties from the imposing demands of modern romantic relationships" (ibid).

the signposts of a revival of German film in the 2000s, affirming its relevance beyond the borders of Germany. Addressing the issues of immigration and assimilation, the mixing of different cultures and shifting definitions of home and belonging, the film explores central questions arising in an ever more globalised world and increasingly ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse Western societies.

The other ingredient to the film's success was Kekilli's strong performance of an unbalanced, hedonistic, self-destructive young woman in search of an identity that reconciles her Turkish roots with her experience of life in Germany. Kekilli's forceful portrayal of the radical confronting and overcoming of the obstacles that curtail her character's independence contributed to making Sibel one of the most complex and interesting female figures in recent German film. Kekilli's performance style differs markedly from those of other renowned German actresses such as Marlene Dietrich, Hanna Schygulla or Nina Hoss, whose stylised or self-conscious acting style frequently highlights a distance between actress and character, drawing attention to their giving a performance of femininity or 'Germanness' rather than expressing an individual's genuine emotions. Kekilli's acting in *Head-On* and *When We Leave*, by contrast, is less unrefined and more naturalistic, reflecting her lack of formal acting training and the fact that her acting was closely related to her own experience and reinforcing the film's claim to providing a particularly acute or authentic representation of Turkish-German life.

While the undeniable parallels between Kekilli's own life and her character's experiences highlight the ongoing struggles of young Turkish-German women negotiating between two cultures as well as underlining the acuity of Akin's film, Kekilli's personal background has had a disproportionately large influence on her actor persona and career. The German media presented Kekilli as a tragic second-generation immigrant rejected by her parents, prompting German producers and directors to offer her only similar parts. Comparing Kekilli to Nina Hoss and Sandra Hüller, two actresses of the same generation who are of German descent, but who equally gained fame for starring in a female-centred independent or art film shows that while media discourse around Hoss and Hüller honours their acting skills and craftsmanship, Kekilli's actor persona was long defined almost exclusively by her ethnic background.

Kekilli's strategy of choosing roles and media communication after her breakthrough role in *Head-On* that brought her heavy publicity and also numerous offers for parts, was contradictory and ambiguous: she insisted not to be reduced to her 'Turkishness', but avidly

pursued the *When We Leave* in which she plays precisely the role of a victim of Turkish patriarchal violence and oppression. This illustrates Kekilli's dilemma as an actress: on the one hand, she rightly protested against being typecast, on the other hand, her interest in *When We Leave* reasserted the importance of her own cultural background in shaping her role choices and career.

*When We Leave* seeks to provide a nuanced account of the familial and social circumstances leading to honour killings in Germany. However, being an independent film that did not see a wide release, many members of the German public are likely to merely have heard *about* the film and once more associated Kekilli with negative aspects of Turkish, Muslim or immigrant cultures. *Head-On* and *When We Leave* show the possibilities and limitations of films depicting the struggles of migrants adjusting to life in a new country: even if they attempt to give a more nuanced account of individuals negotiating cultural differences and values, they always run the risk of reaffirming these very cultural differences.

Her roles in *Head-On* and *When We Leave*, Kekilli's most heavily publicised films before *What a Man*, have made Kekilli a stand-in for young Turkish-German women, who are part of a large ethnic minority in Germany, but whose life experience is identified as being fundamentally different from those of German women *without* a migration background. Kekilli's signifying function in these films is therefore opposed to the one of actresses who, in their most acclaimed roles, came to represent a 'typical' German woman or Germany itself in periods of social change or upheaval, such as Romy Schneider, Hanna Schygulla or Nina Hoss. Despite their providing nuanced, multifaceted representations of immigrant families, Kekilli's early films and the media discourse generated around them caused the actress to be identified not as a 'typical' or average German woman but as a member of a migrant community that is its 'Other', that is, reactionary and repressive compared to German society at large, which supposedly endorses gender equality and personal freedom.

Perhaps more significant than her readjusting the picture of young female German-Turks through her performance in *Head-On* is that Kekilli was ultimately able to dissociate her actor persona from her personal cultural background by appearing in German films and TV shows in which her characters are not defined by their ethnicity or otherness. In her role in the US programme *Game of Thrones*, which she was given on the merits of her performance in *Head-On*, Kekilli appears once more as a rebellious and promiscuous 'Other', thus demonstrating the long shadow *Head-On* cast over her career. But by securing parts in *What a Man* and in the iconic TV crime series *Tatort*, a programme which regularly attracts millions

of viewers, Kekilli has gained a firm place within German mainstream TV and cinema entertainment in a way no actress or actor of Turkish descent has done before her, testifying to the prospect of Turkish-Germans finally being fully accepted into German society more than fifty years after the beginning of organised Turkish migration to Germany.

The change in Kekilli's screen persona from being one of Germany's 'most famous German-Turks' to embodying 'ordinary' German women has not been wholly positive for her career, however. While her role in *Tatort* gives her a welcome opportunity to play a smart, independent and capable policewoman, her character in *What a Man* highlights the scarcity of potent female characters in German mainstream cinema. *What a Man* shows that alongside the revival of German cinema in the 2000s that produced films of international interest, the highly conventional and conservative relationship comedies typical of 1990s German film continue to be made, generating the highest box office takings of German films in Germany and thus widely spreading skewed images of female characters such as the domineering businesswoman or the dependent child-woman which fail to adequately capture the reality of German women's lives today.

Securing a part in the film was a mixed blessing for Kekilli: on the one hand, she was able to play a character unburdened by ethnic stereotypes in a popular mainstream film, which greatly raised her profile. On the other hand, Kekilli struggled to make the rather one-dimensional, unremarkable character stand out. While receiving mixed reviews for her performance in *What a Man*, Kekilli won several prizes for her performances in both *Head-On* and *When We Leave*, suggesting that these films with their multifaceted female characters and focus on female subjectivity allowed Kekilli to realise her potential as an actress more fully. It thus remains to be seen if Sibel Kekilli will be able to obtain roles in films that allow her to portray fully rounded female characters and challenge gender stereotypes, such as the role of Sibel in *Head-On*, yet which do not define the actress exclusively in terms of her ethnic background that overshadowed Kekilli's career for too long.

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ccxxiii "die [...] von Schärfe bis zur Sanftmut alles einschließt"

ccxxiii "überbordende Handlung"

ccxxiv "die Genealogie von Rainer Werner Fassbinder zu Douglas Sirk und Hollywood fortsetzt"

ccxxv "[U]m die Aufnahme von Ausländern, von Fremden in die deutsche Gesellschaft geht es längst nicht mehr. Die Jungen und Mädchen der zweiten und dritten Generation sind ein Teil von Deutschland, weil sie hier aufgewachsen sind und zur deutschen Wirklichkeit gehören."

ccxxvi "jenes Deutschland, für das [...] Regisseure wie Fatih Akin [...] und Schauspielerinnen wie Sibel Kekilli stehen, [muss] vom Kino nicht mehr gemacht werden. Man kann sich weigern, es zur Kenntnis zu nehmen, doch genauso könnte man den Kölner Dom oder die Siegessäule ignorieren"

- ccxxvii "ist da, es ist das einzig mögliche"
- ccxxviii "der Spagat zwischen familiärer Eingebundenheit und Großstadtsozialisation [...] rückt[] allerdings in den Hintergrund."
- ccxxix "die erste Generation der Arbeitsmigranten, deren Aufenthalt in Deutschland nicht auf Dauer angelegt war, hielt an diesem Wertesystem fest. Eine Annäherung an die deutsche Gesellschaft schien nicht erforderlich und war zudem schwierig, weil ein Großteil der Zuwanderer nicht aus den westlich orientierten türkischen Großstädten kam, sondern meist aus dem ländlich geprägten Anatolien, wo die jahrhundertalten Traditionen weiterhin ihre Gültigkeit behielten."
- ccxxx "Selbsttötungsversuch ist in seiner Ambivalenz sowohl ein Aufschrei gegen die erlebten Einschränkungen, zugemutet durch Vater und Bruder, als auch ein Versuch, dem Elternhaus ihre Verbundenheit insbesondere mit ihrer Mutter laut mitzuteilen"
- ccxxxi "Ich will leben, Cahit. Ich will leben, ich will tanzen, ich will ficken! Und nich' nur mit einem Typen."
- ccxxxii "gebärdet [...] sich wie ein Mann"
- ccxxxiii "zwischen konformen und nonkonformen Identitäten"
- ccxxxiv "War keine schlechte Idee dich zu heiraten"
- ccxxxv "Lass uns doch welche machen"
- ccxxxvi "durch eine gewisse Ambiguität gekennzeichnet und zeigt, wie die Charaktere Züge der abgeschlossenen, aber auch der neuen Phase in sich vereinen"
- ccxxxvii "wisch ich [sie] weg"
- ccxxxviii "Senin gibi mi olayım? İşe git, eve gel, işe git, eve gel. [...] Kocan seni onun için boşadı zaten!"
- ccxxxix "Sibel hat durch die Migration in die Türkei ihr altes Leben nicht einfach hinter sich gelassen, sondern wiederholt es in entstellter Ähnlichkeit. [...] [Sie] sucht sich [...] in einer psychosozialen Mimikry [Cahits] Gestus und Habitus anzugleichen und zieht auf der Suche nach Alkohol und Drogen nachts durch die Straßen von Istanbul."
- ccxl "nicht lebt"
- ccxli "überleben"
- ccxlii "Du hast das härtere Los gezogen, doch Gefängnis is' das einzige, was mir einfällt, wenn ich an mein Leben hier denke"
- ccxliii "die Sibel oft in der Masse zeigen, was den Eindruck einer gewissen Anonymität vermittelt"
- ccxliv "Es ist überaus auffällig, dass Akin Szenen exzessiver Gewalt stets in [...] so genannten backstages spielen lässt; in Moment, in denen es vorrangig um die Verletzung von Raumgrenzen oder um Verletzungen [...] maskuliner Territorialität geht."
- ccxlv "Niye defolup ananızı sikmiyorsunuz?"
- ccxlvi "die Exzessivität [...] [besteht] [...] in der Drastik ihrer unmittelbaren Darstellung: Inszeniert wird das Spektakel eine leidenden, hoch emotionalisierten Körpers, der zusehends deformiert und zerstört wird"
- ccxlvii "Zusammenbruch der emotionalen und körperlichen Distanz des Zuschauers zum Dargestellten"
- ccxlviii "leugnet in unbewusster suizidaler Absicht [...] die eigene weibliche Grenze und Fragilität"
- ccxlix "'Gender-Crossing Maskerade'"
- cc "Güzelim, yavrum sen n'apıyorsun gecenin bu saatinde sokaklarda ha? [...] Canım, güzelim erkek mi istiyorsun ha?"
- ccli "pis orospu"
- cclii "Ya kızım, gitsene sen işine ya"
- ccliii "unaussprechlich[]"
- ccliv "Ich fick' eure Mütter, ich fick' eure Väter, ich fick' eure Kinder, ich fick' eure Sippen."
- cclv "Auflehnung gegen tradierte Geschlechtervorstellungen und Lebensprinzipien"
- cclvi "Mersin soll schön sein"
- cclvii "Ich weiss. Ich bin da geboren."
- cclviii "immer wieder genannt"
- cclix "wird zum immer schon entzogenen Zeichen; oder zum Zeichen einer Abwesenheit"
- cc "Herkes sevdiğine böyle mi yanar? [...] Ben perişan oldum, efendim, aman. Dağlar şen olsun."
- cccl "Zustand: Sie hat nen Typen und sie hat ein Kind. Sie ist aber nicht glücklich damit. Ich denke [...] [dass] alle meine Figuren [...] auf der Suche [sind]. Auf der Suche nach einem besseren Leben. [...] [Aber] es bleibt offen, ob sie das bessere Leben finden. Und im Ursprungsland suchen sie Erlösung. Aber die Erlösung finden sie nicht."
- ccclii "Hayırlısı olsun"

- cclxiii “Entscheidung [...] nicht [...] Ausdruck der Gefangenschaft [...], sondern als Bekenntnis zu ihrem bürgerlichen und familiären Leben und ihren Verpflichtungen in Istanbul”
- cclxiv “eine ‘reale’ Entwicklung der Filmfiguren begünstigt. Dies half vor allem auch der Laiendarstellerin Sibel Kekilli, ihre Rolle zu entwickeln.”
- cclxv “welche Szene in *Gegen die Wand* kam eins zu eins aus ihrer Biographie?”
- cclxvi “im Nachhinein, die Szene in der mich meine Eltern verstossen. Das Komische, ja Unheimliche bei diesem Film ist doch, dass sich einige Szenen im nachhinein bewahrheitet haben.”
- cclxvii “ziemlich modern und offen”
- cclxviii “Heimlichkeiten”
- cclxix “Ich musste [...] oft [...] lügen um etwas zu verstecken. [...] Ich durfte nicht zuammen mit meinem Freund gesehen werden. In der Disco dachte man: hoffentlich sitzt da nicht ein Freund meines Vaters.”
- cclxx “hat doch selber Schuld”
- cclxxi “lief rum wie eine Deutsche”
- cclxxii “in einer [G]esellschaft, die ihre Minderheiten nicht ankommen und zum „Teil“ werden lässt, [wird] es ihnen [...] nicht ermöglicht [...], sich frei zu machen vom Blick von außen. Sie sind abhängig von ihrer kleinen Gemeinschaft und dann wird das über alles andere gestellt – weil es ja so wichtig ist, da ja kein Gegenentwurf da ist.”
- cclxxiii “in der Migration verstärkt sich oft der soziale Druck, Regeln und Normen des Herkunftslandes zu respektieren, um die eigene kulturelle Identität nicht zu verlieren. Familien versuchen sich durch den Rückzug auf Traditionen und Wertvorstellungen der alten Heimat zu schützen.”
- cclxxiv “es gibt eine Szene in *Die Fremde*, die wie ein Déjà-vu erscheint. Sibel alias Umay taucht darin uneingeladen auf der Hochzeit ihrer Schwester auf. Die Gäste blicken sie entsetzt an, als sie auf die Bühne tritt und fragt, was sie getan habe, dass man sie verstoße. Die Tränen strömen, die Nase läuft. Kekilli erzählt, dass dieser Moment so echt war, dass ihr die Komparsen Taschentücher reichten. Man denkt bei dieser Szene sofort an [...] Kekillis Auftritt beim Deutschen Filmpreis. Auch da stand sie weinend auf einer Bühne und rief ihren Eltern, mit denen es noch immer keine Versöhnung gab, zu: ‘Mama, Papa, ihr könnt stolz auf mich sein.’”
- cclxxv “[hat] das [Drehbuch] [...] gelesen, hat mich angerufen und [...] sie war sehr berührt und sie wollte diese Rolle unbedingt spielen, und dieser unbedingte Wille, diese Geschichte zu erzählen, war schon mal ‘ne gute Arbeitsgrundlage”
- cclxxvi “kann Kekilli da ihre eigene Geschichte einfach ausblenden? Und warum hat sie die Rolle angenommen, wenn sie vermeiden will, ständig darüber zu reden, was früher war? [...] Dabei will sie doch eigentlich genau dieses Etikett vermeiden: die junge Türkin, zerrissen zwischen zwei Kulturen.”
- cclxxvii “Das Thema scheint sie nicht loszulassen. Kekilli spielt Umay mit so viel Energie, dass man nicht umhin kann, sie selbst darin zu sehen.”
- cclxxviii “viele Muslime wissen nicht allzu viel über die Vorschriften ihrer Religion, aber umso mehr von ihrer Vormacht gegenüber den Frauen [...] Die meisten Gesetze sind keine göttlich gegebenen Gesetze [...] sondern von Männern gemacht”
- cclxxix “ bringst Schande über türkische Familien”
- cclxxx “Ich habe viele Angebote, aber meistens soll ich Türkinnen spielen. Das wollte ich nicht”
- cclxxxi “Ich, Schauspielerin, Spielalter: 23 bis 30, bin an guten Stoffen interessiert. Ich will arbeiten!”
- cclxxxii “Ich habe eine Rolle, die Sarah Brandt heisst und nicht Ayse Yilmaz. Das finde ich klasse.”
- cclxxxiii “die ha’m nur türkisches Essen”
- cclxxxiv “dreissig Familienangehörige von deinem komischen Freund”
- cclxxxv “die mag uns einfach nich!”
- cclxxxvi “Haare haben in den Beschreibungskonventionen eines höheren Status als die meisten anderen Körperteile”
- cclxxxvii “dominieren sie in Wahrnehmung und Darstellung aufgrund ihrer Sichtbarkeit leicht andere Merkmale und bilden ein reduktionistisches Über-Symbol”
- cclxxxviii “als ‘passiv’ und ‘hingegen’ ”
- cclxxxix “das Bild der exotisch-erotischen Orientalin”
- ccxc “da is’ nichts, was du nich’ schon gesehen hast”
- ccxci “körperliche[] Ausgestaltung eines sanften, engelsgleichen, moralischen und quasi entsexualisierten Frauentypus, der Tugend und Pflichten über Liebesglück stellt”
- ccxcii “besondere Merkmale: langes blondes Haar”

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ccxciii “Männer fühlen sich [...] massiv verunsichert und in der Defensive: Denn sie nehmen die Dynamik, die Power und das offensive Selbstbewusstsein allein auf Seiten der Frauen wahr.”

ccxciv “positive Vision für ihre Rolle als Mann”

ccxcv “ziemlich schnell werden die Sympathiewerte ganz klar verteilt; der Regisseur kürt sich selbst zum tragischen Liebling und die karriere- und sexgeile Egotussi (denn weibliche Emanzipation kann man letztlich doch nicht wirklich ernst nehmen, oder man hat eben Angst davor) wird ordentlich abgewatscht.”

ccxcvi “agieren Frauen oft ‘männlich’; müssen stark, mutig, selbstbewusst, durchsetzungsstark, taff sein”

ccxcvii “so anstrengend wegen der Kampagne”

ccxcviii “diffuse Ängste”

ccxcix “Sorge, dass das Selbstbild und auch das (Macht-)Gefüge der Geschlechter durch ‘extreme Emanzipationsbestrebungen’ [...] ‘aus den Fugen gerät’ ”

ccc “fallen in traditionelle Frauenrollen zurück und erwarten einen starken, beschützenden, [...] Mann an ihrer Seite, der [...] sie auch in heftigen Gefühlsschwankungen versteht. Dann wieder manipulieren diese die Männer, setzen ungehemmt ihre weiblichen Mittel ein, um an ihr Ziel zu kommen.”

ccci “ha[t] viel *Garden State* [...] geguckt”

cccii “Was soll denn daran gefährlich sein?”

ccciii “Kekillis Komödien-Debüt ist [...] nur mittelmäßig erfolgreich: Einige Witze nimmt man ihr nicht ab”





Figure 99: Diane Kruger in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009)

## Chapter Six

### Diane Kruger: International Stardom and the Diffusion of National Identity

#### Career Trajectory: From Ex-model to International Film Star

Born Diane Heidkrüger in 1976 in the village of Algermissen near Hanover, Diane Kruger is one of the internationally best-known German actresses and has been singled out by the German press as “currently the only German Hollywood star”<sup>ccciv</sup> (Sturm, 2011). However, she has also risen to prominence in spite of, or perhaps *because* of, never having acted in a German film, which makes her an intriguing comparison with the other actresses examined in this thesis.

Kruger was introduced to a worldwide cinema-going public through the role of Helen in Wolfgang Petersen’s historical epic *Troy* in 2004. At the age of sixteen, she had won a competition of the leading modelling agency Elite, and moved to Paris to work as a model. After a five-year career during which she represented high-end designers and brands, Kruger decided the profession was “boring” (cited in Friedlander, 2009, p. 29) and unfulfilling and successfully auditioned at the Cours Florent, one of France’s most prestigious drama schools. Having completed her acting training, which leaned heavily towards classic French theatre, Kruger won the Classic Libre award for best actor in her year. She subsequently made her screen debut in the 2002 TV film *The Piano Player* (dir. Jean-Pierre Roux), acting opposite Dennis Hopper and Christopher Lambert, followed by her first substantial film role in *Mon*

*Idole (Whatever You Say)* (2002), the directorial debut of her then-husband, French actor Guillaume Canet. While filming *Wicker Park* (McGuigan, 2004), a US romantic comedy in which Kruger acted opposite Josh Hartnett, she auditioned for *Troy*, and secured the role of Helen. Since then, Kruger has appeared in more than twenty-five French and American films, among them Quentin Tarantino's heavily advertised *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), and more recently has played a lead role in the US cable TV series *The Bridge* (2013-14).

The majority of Kruger's films have been either action adventures or thrillers set in the present day, or historical dramas. While her characters in the action-driven films have often remained somewhat underdeveloped, a number of the historical films reflect Kruger's pursuit of more multi-faceted or complex roles, which she believes are still scarce, pointing out that "there are only about five really good roles for women per year and there are 200 actresses going after the same part" (Kruger in de Bertodano, 2014). Kruger's decisive move from modelling to acting by undergoing training at a distinguished acting school and her repeatedly asserted ambition to play empowered and empowering female roles prompts the question to which extent she has been able to assume active agency over her career and star persona. In her analysis of the career and star image of Hollywood actress Drew Barrymore, Rebecca Williams argues that "star agency is best thought of 'as performed agency: it foregrounds the representation of the celebrity as sole author of their star persona (their ability to select roles)" (2007, p. 120) while downplaying the ideological and economic influence of the film business and "the multi-faceted publicity industries" (ibid) on the star's career, an observation which, as my analysis will demonstrate, is equally applicable to Diane Kruger. Her acting career, and the media discourse around her star persona provide compelling insights into the position of film actors with the industry, the construction of star images in Kruger's native Germany, as well as France and the US, and the links between film stardom and (German) national identity.

In *Stars* (1979), his influential examination of film stardom, Richard Dyer has approached film stars not so much as actors or people of public interest whose life and work is presented in objective or factual terms, but "as images in media texts" (1998 [1979], p. 10) consisting of the star's films, the surrounding promotional material, publicity in press and magazines, and film criticism (ibid, p. 60). Dyer defined the star image as a "structured polysemy" (ibid, p. 3), that is, a composite picture of the star persona, in which certain themes, meanings and interpretations "are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced" (ibid) in a way that reflects and sustains the prevalent ideology of the society

in which the stars operate. Sean Redmond and Su Holmes explain that

[i]n reading a star [...] image one is hoping to get to the political matters of class, gender, race and sexuality that circulate in and through the public and private persona of the star [...]. When one reads a star image one is attempting to suggest that they have something to say about the world they/we live in, and the power relationships that exist there (2007, p. 257).

As Karen Hollinger puts it, “stars function as emblematic types that render individual and personal what is really social and as exciting and extraordinary what is really ordinary” (2006, p. 28).

The image of the star, an amalgamation of filmic appearance and publicity, involves a constant reconciliation or bridging of an inherent duality or contradiction: that of the extraordinarily charismatic, beautiful or heroic personality seen in films and magazine photo shoots, and that of the ‘real’ person behind the star image (exemplified by paparazzi photos of stars in casual clothing, carrying out mundane tasks such as food shopping), who has a home and love life and who experiences personal or romantic problems that ordinary people can relate to or identify with. Thus, stars are, on the one hand, icons, mythical figures whose “larger-than-life quality on the screen” gives them “a sense of charisma, an aura of exceptionality” setting them “apart from the ordinary person” (Hollinger, 2006, p. 31), and who, in promotional material and publicity, are frequently presented as “extraordinarily gifted screen idols endowed with exceptional even magic talent” (ibid). On the other hand, “stars represent figures of audience identification, articulating aspects of contemporary life and offering themselves as role models of appropriate social behaviour” (ibid, p. 28).

Analysing the ways in which media discourse narrates an actor’s ascension to success and stardom, Dyer highlights the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the construction of star images:

[t]he success myth tries to orchestrate several contradictory elements: that ordinariness is the hallmark of the star; that the system rewards talent and ‘specialness’, that luck, ‘breaks’, which may happen to anyone typify the career of the star; and that hard work and professionalism are necessary for stardom (1998 [1979], p. 42).

This can be applied to the publicity around Diane Kruger, which frequently juxtaposes her ‘ordinariness’, non-American origins and professional work ethic with her extraordinary career as a Hollywood star and beauty icon. This makes her an ideal object for the study of star images as a reflection of predominant ideological constructions. As I will demonstrate below, Kruger’s star image is tied both to a conception of femininity defined primarily by

beauty, appearance and romance as opposed to work or (acting) skill, and an insistence on social mobility and the validity of the American Dream. However, in keeping with the overall focus of this thesis, Kruger will also be considered as an actress and agent within the film industry, who has assumed responsibility for her role choices and career. I will thereby aim to address also those aspects of stardom which star studies has been accused of “directing interest away from” (Lovell and Krämer, 1999, p. 4): issues of acting and performance, and the dimension of “stars as workers within the film industry” (Hollinger, 2006, p. 33).

### **Kruger’s Star Image: Beauty, Fashion, and the American Dream**

The representation of Diane Kruger in newspaper articles, women and fashion magazines has been remarkably consistent ever since she shot to fame following her appearance in *Troy*. Recurring themes include her modest origins and ‘fairytale’ career, her love life (notably her marriage to and divorce from Guillaume Canet and subsequent long-term relationship with actor Joshua Jackson) and her exquisite fashion and dress sense. Kruger’s star image has been shaped to a great extent by her regular appearances on the covers of fashion and women’s magazines. An article in the UK edition of *In Style* entitled ‘Designs on Diane’ testifies to her status as beauty icon, describing in detail the clothes she is wearing during the interview, her “daring” (Coulson, 2008, p. 98) red carpet outfits, her favourite designers, and her continuous attachment to the Chanel brand and designer Karl Lagerfeld.

Moreover, articles on Kruger in fashion magazines frequently include photo shoots showcasing designer fashion with individual items of clothing listed in captions, so that Kruger continues to function as a model rather than an actress. Such articles often contain a wealth of images competing with, or even eclipsing, the text: the September 2013 issue of the South American *Marie Claire* (Bhattacharya, 2013), for example, combined a two-page article on Kruger with seven pages of pictures, five of which were the product of an LA photo shoot for the magazine’s fashion section. An editorial for the February 2011 issue of *Madame Figaro* entitled ‘Diane enchanteresse’ associates Kruger even more strongly with the glamour and sophistication of French designer fashion: it consists of twenty-two pages of images of Kruger posing in various elaborate ball gowns and other designer clothes in an elegant Parisian hotel (see fig. 100-103) followed by a two-page article. These ubiquitous representations of Kruger’s image in glossy magazines in which she is made up, dressed and photographed to her greatest advantage as well as her attachments to perfumes and beauty products mean that Kruger is still associated with appearance and surface as opposed to

acting skill or intellect more than ten years after she gave up modelling to become an actress.



Figures 100-103: In a 2011 issue of the French fashion magazine *Madame Figaro*, Kruger appears once again as a model, posing in various elaborate ball gowns and other designer clothes in a 24-page feature consisting of 22 pages of pictures and only two pages of text

Kruger's image has in fact been displayed in magazines and on billboards since the mid-1990s: she was the face of the Armani perfume 'Aqua di Giò' in 1995, represented Chanel's 'Allure' fragrance in 1996, and has maintained her association with designers and beauty products while working as an actress. In 2004, she was photographed for a Louis Vuitton campaign, in 2010 she represented the Calvin Klein perfume 'Beauty', and in 2013 she became the new face of Chanel's line of beauty products. Kruger' functioning as a representative of beauty products and perfumes is emblematic of the way stars' "idealised bodies are attached to consumer goods [...], and are put on display [...] through the media coverage which comments on and constructs the corporeal perfection they encapsulate" (Redmond and Holmes, 2006, p. 122). Discussing the involvement of French actors in advertising cosmetics, Ginette Vincendeau notes that

the process of advertising cosmetics has become as important in the formation of the star as the films themselves. It might be argued, in fact, that the process works more in reverse, the glamour from Saint-Laurent and Dior reflecting back on the filmic image, because the products are far more widely available throughout the world (as images in magazines and as commodities) than the films (2000, pp. 37-38).

This mutual influence of the image invoked by advertising campaigns and the filmic image is also visible with regard to Kruger. Throughout her acting career, she has played exquisitely beautiful women who embody images of physical perfection or sophistication akin to those presented in advertisements for fashion and beauty products, setting them apart from 'ordinary' women. The beauty or appearance of her characters in *Troy* (2004), *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) and *The Host* (2013) is closely related to their power or influence within the

films' narrative: Helen of Troy's spellbinding beauty sends two countries to war (albeit inadvertently, in Petersen's version), Bridget von Hammersmark's star status and glamour give her access to the Nazi ruling elite which she seeks to eliminate, and the cold, immaculate beauty of Kruger's alien Seeker in *The Host* is representative of her ruthlessness and perfectionism as she strives to eliminate the last remaining humans on Earth. This illustrates how "the body of the star also functions narratively[,] their encoded bodies [...] help[ing] to define the characters they play" (Redmond and Holmes, 2006, p. 122).

Both Kruger's on-screen persona and her star image have thus been consistently associated with beauty, fashion and appearance. Other key themes within media coverage include the narrative of a fairytale rise to stardom and the American Dream. Kruger's rise to stardom from modest origins has been recounted not only in magazine articles written shortly after the launch of her career, but also as recently as 2013 (see Bhattacharya, *Marie Claire* UK and South Africa). Kruger was born in a small village in rural northern Germany, her mother, a bank clerk, left the father when Kruger was thirteen, unable to cope with his alcoholism. This aspect of her biography, freely divulged in early interviews, has played into the hands of journalists, who have used it to represent Kruger's career as an unlikely success story akin to a fairytale, drawing on the "rags-to riches motif" (Dyer, 1998 [1979], p. 47) associated with the American Dream. By describing Kruger's childhood as difficult and her hometown as drab and confining, journalists present her career as a dream-like tale of self-realisation against the odds: Dan Davies and Shaun Philips describe the young Diane Kruger as "a teenager desperate to escape the parochial confines of her rural upbringing" (*Esquire*, 2008, p. 48), and an article in the American *Allure* magazine similarly stresses Kruger's provincial origins by singling out a quote from Kruger herself, which is printed in a larger font at the centre of the page. It reads: "When Josh visited my hometown, he said: 'How did you get out of here?'" (Kruger in Newman, 2008, p. 116). At times descriptions of Kruger's career are formulated as questions, further underlining the puzzling nature of her success: "How did a failed ballerina from smalltown Germany become a Lagerfeld favourite and a Tarantino Siren?" (Chamberlain, *Tatler*, 2009, p. 131).

Other articles explicitly use the words 'fairytale' or 'dream' in relation to Kruger's career: Sam Eden notes that Kruger's "own story sounds [...] like a fairytale. Born Diane Heidkruger in rural Algermissen, Germany, she had a resolutely unstarry upbringing" (*Daily Telegraph* Australia, 2009). Similarly, in an article on Kruger, Sanjiv Bhattacharya writes that "on the face of it, Kruger's story has a fairy-tale quality: a young girl from the little village of

Algermissen in Germany, population 20,000, dreams of escape” (2013, p. 81). By accounting for Kruger’s success in such terms, newspapers and magazines invite readers to simultaneously identify with and look up to Kruger, an ordinary small-town girl turned Hollywood star, and perpetuate the “myth of success” associated with film stardom according to which “American society is sufficiently open for anyone to get to the top, regardless of rank” (Dyer, 1998 [1979], p. 42).

An article in the French magazine *Psychologies* demonstrates that the representation of Kruger’s career as a dream come true is part of a general tendency towards narrativisation and dramatisation that is central to media discourse surrounding stars. Anne Laure Gannac writes that

[Kruger’s] story makes us dream: a young girl of 13 years leaves her home village [...], becomes a successful model and actress. Her story makes us cry: a dazzlingly beautiful young woman, ignored by her father, unlucky in love, liberates herself with the help of the stage<sup>cccv</sup> (2012).

This melodramatic account of Kruger’s early life exemplifies a process by which, as Barry King notes, “as written or interviewed, the stars become characters in the drama of their own biographies” (2003, p. 51). This process is also visible in a 2010 article for the British edition of the women’s magazine *Marie Claire*, in which interviewer Harvey Marcus explicitly contrasts the image of herself Kruger generates via her appearance and her answers to his questions, and an allegedly more authentic, behind-the-scenes impression that Marcus himself is able to relate:

I could tell you how she looks every inch the movie star. Which she does. [...] Yet that’s not quite the story (2010, p. 173).  
[T]here is a negligible, though not insignificant, difference between how much she is prepared to reveal of her personal life once the dictaphone is switched on [...] Her father’s leaving has had an obvious impact on her life (ibid, p. 179).

Thus highlighting the tragic elements of Kruger’s childhood by declaring it to be an experience which continues to affect her life, these articles offer readers a more intimate connection with or immediate access to the star by looking beyond their glamorous appearance and dazzling lifestyle to reveal their problems or fears. As Hollinger points out, “the proliferation of celebrity gossip, constantly providing new revelations about stars’ personal lives, reinforces the idea that star information can ultimately reveal an authentic self behind the star image” (2006, pp. 30-31).

Media discourse has not only frequently foregrounded Kruger’s problematic childhood. Her current personal life, next to her association with beauty and fashion, also

dominates newspaper and magazine coverage. Recurring topics are her marriage with and divorce from French actor Guillaume Canet, and her subsequent relationship with Canadian actor Joshua Jackson. A 2007 article in the *Evening Standard* magazine entitled 'The Gay Divorcée' for example blames Kruger's professional success for her failed marriage: "it was her selection from 3,000 other women [...] to play Helen in *Troy* that made her famous and, in the end, it seems, destroyed her relationship" (Slater, 2007). The author thus relativises the actress's professional success by indicating that her Hollywood career might be irreconcilable with a functioning marriage. Kruger is judged according to her ability to maintain this socially sanctioned personal relationship in a way that ties female success and status to marriage rather than to Kruger's acting skills or film projects.

Kruger's subsequent relationship with Joshua Jackson is discussed in similar terms, with journalists discussing the couple's diverging attitudes towards marriage and speculating on their engagement. In an article for the American *Allure* Magazine, Judith Newman for example writes: "Jackson and Kruger do not appear to have their stories straight. He says he sees marriage in their future; Kruger, on the other hand, says, [...] 'I believe in commitment. But [...] if that goes away, no paper you have signed will keep you around' " (2010, p. 118). Similarly, a 2009 article for *Tatler* magazine states that Kruger and Jackson "look good together – pretty and neat – but her career might end up eclipsing his [...] So will they marry?" (Chamberlain, 2009, p. 135). Both articles confirm a finding by Dyer, who analysed fan magazines and concludes that "what these articles are really doing is endlessly raking over the problems posed by notions of romance and passion within the institution of compulsory heterosexual monogamy" (1998 [1979], p. 46). The *Allure* and *Tatler* articles testify to the lingering conception of marriage as 'compulsory' by positing it as the ultimate goal of Kruger's and Jackson's relationship, while the *Tatler* piece also suggests that Kruger's Hollywood career success poses a risk to her relationship with Jackson, a TV actor known for starring in the teen drama series *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003) and the science fiction series *Fringe* (2008-2013). This supports Dyer's reading of media discourse on the love lives of stars as a reflection of prevalent social attitudes and aspirations regarding love and marriage, the *Tatler* article being indicative of the persistence of socially conservative and reactionary viewpoints perpetuated by fashion and life-style magazines as it suggests that marriage is threatened by female professional success and independence.

A 2013 interview with Kruger for the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* demonstrates that her personal relationships and her physique or appearance continue



to be of greater interest to journalists than her position as an established film actress. While interviewer Bettina Aust asks about the imbalance of power between men and women in the film business, the majority of the questions relates either to Kruger's relationship with Jackson or her eating and cooking habits, with Aust asking Kruger whether she "count[s] calories" (Aust and Kruger, 2013) in order to maintain her slim figure. Kruger's physical beauty or appearance thus continue to be the dominant themes of media coverage on Kruger even as she has made films that garnered critical acclaim such as *Inglourious Basterds* and *Farewell, My Queen*.

### **Star Discourse in the USA and Britain, France and Germany: Stardom Through a National Lens**

Having left Germany in 1992, Diane Kruger has never acted in a German film, the majority of her films being French or American. It is worth enquiring, therefore, to what extent her German nationality is part of her star image, and how the issues of 'Germanness' and 'stardom' inform media coverage of Kruger in her native country as well as in France and in the US. There are notable differences between the discourse on Kruger in the British, American, French and German press, which are indicative of the countries' prevalent understanding of or approach to stardom. They can be broadly described in terms of the aspirational/The American Dream (USA/UK), idealisation/endorsement (France) and scepticism/caution (Germany).

German journalists writing about Kruger in 2004 when the release of *Troy* marked the beginning of her international career, implied that 'stardom' and 'Germanness' are virtually incompatible, even pointing out that Kruger would have to hide or disavow her German origins in order to succeed in Hollywood. In reference to Kruger's change of name, Andreas Conrad notes that "a German umlaut is fatal for a career in Hollywood"<sup>cccvi</sup> (Conrad, *Tagespiegel*, 2004), while Nina Rehfeld writes that "before you get a lead role in Hollywood as a German actor, there is one thing you have to do: make producers and directors forget that you are a German actor. The label has to go"<sup>cccvii</sup> (*Die Welt*, 2004).

Other articles are equally indicative of Germany's fraught relationship with film stardom, which is grounded in the "widespread" belief "that a star is a shallow individual chasing after (transitory) fame, while a 'true' actor is a soul-searching artist longing for eternal truth" (Hagener, 2002, p. 100). This distinction becomes apparent when comparing the public images of Nina Hoss and Sandra Hüller, who are celebrated as accomplished

performers, with the image of Diane Kruger, who continues to be perceived as a rather ineffectual celebrity. This is reflected in an article on Kruger for weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*. Writer Moritz von Uslar introduces Kruger as “the blonde German, our star in Hollywood”<sup>cccviii</sup>, only to snidely remark that “one can tell that Kruger is a real star [...] because it’s hard to think of any [...] films she has been in and it still feels as though we know her”<sup>cccix</sup> (2012). Von Uslar thereby implies that Kruger’s fame is based on her presence in glossy magazines, celebrity gossip pages and advertisements, rather than her acting abilities.

Diane Kruger is the latest of a very small group of German actresses who have enjoyed enduring international success, Marlene Dietrich and Romy Schneider, whose careers I discussed earlier, being two other prominent examples. Both Dietrich and Schneider experienced the full force of Germany’s antagonistic attitude towards its stars when their departures to the US and France, respectively, were read by the German public as acts of abandonment and betrayal. The reactions to Kruger’s international career by the German media and public have been less forceful, arguably because German audiences have not related to Kruger in the same way they related to Dietrich and Schneider, who had both achieved fame in successful German films (Dietrich in *The Blue Angel* and Schneider in the *Sissi* trilogy) before making films abroad. Kruger on the other hand, started her film career in France. While journalists single her out as “the only internationally successful German actress” today (Rest, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2011), thus recognising her ability to replicate Dietrich’s and Schneider’s rare success, German press discourse on Kruger nonetheless indicates a predominantly sceptical and cautious attitude towards film stardom. Rather than celebrating Kruger’s success, newspaper and magazine articles frequently point out that her performances receive negative reviews, or use the actress as an example of the pitfalls of stardom. In an article for the German film magazine *Cinema*, Roland Huschke portrays the film industry as a merciless business in which the actress (i.e. Kruger) must constantly prove “her own market value”<sup>cccix</sup> (2005, p. 32) if she wants to survive professionally. Huschke recounts attending an hour-long interview with the principal cast of *Troy* that was part of the film’s publicity campaign, during which a nervous and intimidated Kruger was present but did not speak at all: “one feels a little sorry for her at that moment. All the valid optimism aside, Hollywood’s brutal pecking order demonstrates what a long way away Kruger [...] is from the upper echelons of its hierarchy”<sup>cccxi</sup> (ibid). Even the upmarket German women’s magazine *Gala*, which specialises in glossy red carpet photos and home stories that idealise and celebrate celebrity culture, repeatedly points out Kruger’s lack of credibility as a

performer, noting that “critics accuse her of being as bland as she is beautiful”<sup>cccxi</sup> and that “her achievements as an actress are highly disputed”<sup>cccxi</sup> (Stilcken, 2009).

While the German media discourse on Kruger reflects the country’s critical attitude towards stars and stardom, French media coverage is much more complimentary, suggesting that France has embraced Kruger in a way typical of its celebration and endorsement of French film stars. In an article for the magazine *L’Officiel* for example, Thierry Cheze utters nothing but the highest praise:

Diane Kruger lives her profession with intensity and passion [...] As her career took off, she never lost track of the path she took as she fought for the title role in [Fabienne Barthaud’s low-budget film *Frankie*] [...] Since then, she has been taken more seriously [...] As if we had finally realised that next to being perfectly photogenic, next to her dignified charm worthy Hitchcockian heroines of the fifties, she is an actress of flesh, blood and fire<sup>cccxi</sup> (2008).

Moreover, French newspapers and magazines frequently introduce Kruger as the “German who is French at heart”<sup>cccxi</sup> (Augustin, *Glamour France*, 2009, p. 73), “la Françallemande” (Le Vaillant, *Libération*, 2012), or simply as “Diane Kruger: French at heart”<sup>cccxi</sup> (*Closer*, 2012), which indicates the extent to which she has been embraced as one of France’s own, having acted in more than ten French films since 2002. Kruger was also asked to be the Maitresse de Cérémonie at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007, hosting the opening and closing ceremonies at the country’s prestigious international festival, and articles on the actress frequently nominate her as a valid heir to Romy Schneider. Florence Besson and Nathalie Dupuis for example write that “in France, [Kruger] made a name for herself with a filmography of demanding and popular roles that is reminiscent of Romy Schneider”<sup>cccxi</sup> (*Elle France*, 2013). Thus, French media discourse foregrounds Kruger’s achievements and status as an actress to a much greater extent than in the case in the German media.

Accounts of Kruger’s career in the English-speaking press are different yet again, in that they focus heavily on Kruger’s personal life in a way that negotiates the tension between ‘ordinariness’ and ‘stardom’ that is integral to American understanding of film stars. As discussed above, coverage of Kruger’s career in the British and American press is structured around the ‘American Dream’ motif, according to which Kruger achieved a transformation from ‘ordinary small-town girl’ to glamorous, successful Hollywood star. Correspondingly, the drabness and hopelessness of her place of origin is highlighted to reinforce her dream-like ascension to stardom, and rural Germany is imbued with wholly negative connotations: Marianne MacDonald writes of Kruger’s “precocious adolescence in a dull German village”

(2004), and Geordie Greig explains that Kruger “escaped her native country as soon as she could” (2006, p. 89). The contrast between Kruger’s modest origins in Germany and her current glamorous and cosmopolitan lifestyle reinforce the aspirational quality of Kruger’s biography:

she was at Louis Vuitton’s glamorous dinner for his new shop opening in Paris, and a few days later hopped on a plane to be fêted at the Fashion Rocks charity extravaganza in Monte Carlo. She [...] will then be on a worldwide tour for *Merry Christmas*. Looks like she has put the small-town life behind her (Greig, 2006, p. 89).

British and American magazines articles on Kruger unsurprisingly also invoke stereotypes relating to Germans and Germanness, such as punctuality, reliability, and practicality: Giles Hattersley wonders whether “perhaps she prefers a certain German efficiency about proceedings?” (*Elle UK*, 2009), and Annabel Rivkin describes Kruger as “quite German and practical. She works hard, she sees results or she moves on to the next thing” (*Evening Standard Magazine*, 2009, p. 32). Kruger’s practicality and level-headedness is also contrasted with the vanity and caprice typically associated with American Hollywood stars: “She’s punctual and alone, both things unusual for a Hollywood star” (Friedlander, *The Sunday Telegraph Stella*, 2009, p. 26), “To the outside eye, she doesn’t fit the Hollywood mould at all. Gamine, playful and decidedly German, there is nothing constructed about her” (Haynes, *In Style*, 2011). Similar references to German national stereotypes are found in French articles on Kruger: “The phone interview is set for five pm, and with a very German precision, she calls us at one minute past five”<sup>cccxviii</sup> (Charbon, *Têtu*, 2012, p. 24).

French, British and American press coverage of Kruger thus identifies the actress’s ‘Germanness’ as a defining feature of her star image. This raises the question to which extent her German origins also inform the screen persona she has developed within a decade of acting in numerous French, American and international film productions: Was Kruger’s ‘Germanness’ downplayed in these films, or did it inform the representation of her characters? Is Kruger’s success as an international film star based on adapting her screen persona to the national film industries she was working in, or did she obtain parts precisely because of her ‘foreignness’? In the following, I will discuss a number of films Kruger made between 2004 and 2012, tracing her career trajectory and development as an actress, highlighting her changing position within the American and French film industries as well as considering the representations of German history, culture and national identity provided by Kruger’s films and characters.

### **The Face that Failed to Launch a Thousand Ships: Kruger's International Breakthrough**

*Troy* (2004) was the film that introduced Diane Kruger to a large American and international cinema-going public. Loosely based on Homer's *Iliad*, *Troy* depicts Paris's abduction of Helen, but focuses mainly on the character of Achilles (Brad Pitt) and his rivalry with the Trojan prince Hector (Erica Bana), and on the Greek infiltration of Troy with the help of the Trojan horse. The film was directed by Wolfgang Petersen, the German filmmaker who had established himself as one of Hollywood's top directors in the 1990s with high-budget, action-packed thrillers and disaster films<sup>39</sup>. *Troy's* star-studded cast included Brad Pitt and Peter O'Toole, as well as Orlando Bloom, Sean Bean, Brian Cox, Brendan Gleeson and Julie Christie. The film grossed nearly 500 million dollars worldwide (Box Office Mojo, n.d.(b)), thus comfortably recouping its 175 million dollar budget, but was not as popular with critics as its makers had hoped. However, *Troy* was the sixth most watched film in Germany in 2004 (FFA, n.d.(i)), seen by more than 4.4 million people (ibid), which means that by acting in an American mainstream film, Diane Kruger was introduced to more German viewers than most actresses and actors starring in German films in the same year.

*Troy* had a lukewarm critical reception, with reviewers acknowledging its "great production values" (McCarthy, 2004) and entertainment value, but criticising its clunky script, melodramatic dialogue and uneven performances. Reviewing the film for the German magazine *Spiegel*, Andreas Borcholte writes that "*Troy* is an entertaining and solid popcorn event, which you're willing to forgive its occasional slow passages and pathos-laden dialogues"<sup>cccix</sup>. Richard Kelly in his review for *Sight & Sound*, on the other hand, laments that "dramatic scene after dramatic scene fails to take flight: too many face-to-face quarrels, flatly blocked and bluntly written" (2004).

Kruger's performance was subjected to particular critical scrutiny and disdain. Playing Helen of Troy (see fig. 104), according to Homer and "antique mythological tradition [...] the most beautiful woman in the world" (Johnson, 2011, p. 27), Kruger was going to be judged equally on her appearance and charisma. Both reviews of the film and early articles on Kruger frequently cite the well-known line from Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus*, which describes Helen's as "the face that launched a thousand ships" (see Donn, 2004, p. 23, Marcus, 2010, p. 176), only to point out that Kruger does not live up to this expectation: in his review for the trade paper *Empire*, Will Lawrence for example states that "while Diane

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<sup>39</sup> These include the disaster film *Outbreak* (1995) and the action thriller *Air Force One* (1997), following Petersen's 1981 breakthrough film *Das Boot*, a German war film.

Kruger's Helen could launch a dinghy or two, she is far too insipid to launch a thousand ships" (n.d.). Critics widely agreed that Kruger's performance was unremarkable, bland, or even "wooden" (Newman, 2010, p. 116), her previous modelling career further undermining her credibility as an actress: Peter Travers in his *Rolling Stone* review for example notes that "Helen (Kruger, a German model), is beautiful but bland" (2004). Todd McCarthy in a review for *Variety* points out that her "high-strung, tremulous anxiety makes [Kruger's Helen] less than appealing" (2004). Equally, Jens Jessen, in reference to a scene in which Helen announces to Hector that she intends to give herself up to the Greeks, suggests that "Helen [...] comes across as stupid when she pretends to be remorseful, or smiles shamefully into the camera: "This is all my fault, I know, hand me back over, and Troy and the Greeks will be even'. We've rarely seen so much feigned naivety in the cinema"<sup>cccxx</sup> (2007). The two latter reviews, while scathing, do reflect Kruger's own approach to the role. Kruger repeatedly stressed in interviews her intention to portray Helen not as an "aloof beauty, but a [...] very real"<sup>cccxxi</sup> (cited in *Stern*, 2004), "vulnerable and sensitive [...] woman trapped between the desires of two ambitious men" (cited in Sinclair, 2005, p. 87): "I tried to give her as much humanity and intensity as I could. On paper, she is not very likeable: she sacrificed a whole country for love. But I tried [...] to show her unhappiness in the golden cage"<sup>cccxxii</sup> (cited in Mancini, 2004, p. 94).



**Figure 104: Playing Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world, Kruger was judged both on her appearance and charisma**

Kruger herself has since acknowledged that she secured the role primarily on the merit of her looks rather than her acting abilities ("In the end, it was not about acting talent, but about appearance"<sup>cccxxiii</sup> (Kruger in *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, 2004)), and that her performance suffered because she was somewhat overwhelmed with the scale of the

production and her high-profile co-stars. She admits that at the time, she was very “green and inexperienced” (cited in Elfman, 2009), and explains that “when you think of *Troy* [2004], my third or fourth film, and how overexposed I was for the little experience that I had, it was [...] uncomfortable because I felt like I was just starting out. I didn’t even know what I was doing” (cited in Blanks and Kruger, n.d.). Thus, Kruger’s lack of acting experience when faced with this large-scale, star-studded production and the fact that she worked from a script that characterises Helen as insecure, fickle and melancholic were equally detrimental to her portrayal of Helen in *Troy*. However, her participation in the film was, for better or for worse, vital for the formation of her star image, which centres on her beauty and immaculate appearance rather than her acting skill or craft. In her *New York Times* review of Kruger’s 2006 film *Copying Beethoven*, Manohla Dargis somewhat polemically claims that “the young German actress Diane Kruger, who had the misfortune to play Helen in Wolfgang Petersen’s *Troy* [...] looks too beautiful to play a role of any substance” (2006).

But despite the harsh reviews, Kruger maintains that *Troy* “put [her] on the map” (cited in Coulson, 2008, p. 96) and was “a great springboard”<sup>ccccxiv</sup> for her career (cited in Aust, 2013) and explains that having acted in the film, she was offered the part of Abigail Chase in *National Treasure* (dir. Jon Turteltaub, 2004) opposite Nicholas Cage without having to audition for it (in Vadnal, 2010, p. 315). At the same time, Kruger has expressed an ambition to raise her profile as a serious actress who is cast on the basis of her acting skills: “I want to be a respected actress and I hope to be offered other challenging roles. Under no circumstances do I want to be the pretty cinema It-Girl”<sup>ccccxv</sup> (cited in *Stern*, 2004).

### **Becoming American: *National Treasure* (2004) and *Unknown* (2011)**

Kruger’s ambition to prove herself as a performer notwithstanding, her role in *National Treasure* amounts to little more than that of the pretty female companion, who accompanies the hero on his mission. Kruger’s character in the film also mirrors her position in US mainstream cinema: the actress’s German origins are acknowledged, but subsumed within the film’s patriotic message. Set in the present day, *National Treasure* centres on Benjamin Franklin Gates (Nicholas Cage), who has dedicated himself to the discovery of a gigantic treasure of ancient Egyptian, Roman and medieval gold brought to America by the Freemasons. Upon finding out that an invisible map leading to the treasure is drawn on the back of the Declaration of Independence, Gates ventures to steal the Declaration in order to protect it from greedy British treasure hunter Ian (Sean Bean). Kruger plays Abigail Chase, a

historian working at the National Archives, where the Declaration is displayed, and although she initially tries to prevent Gates from taking the document, she eventually sides with him to defeat the villainous Ian. The treasure is found and distributed to museums around the world, and the Declaration is returned to the National Archives. The film mentions the German roots of Kruger's character, but does so merely to explain away her slight accent, as well as to make a point about the US as an immigration country or melting pot, as demonstrated by Chase's initial dialogue with Gates and his assistant, Riley Poole (Justin Bartha):

Benjamin Gates: "Your accent! Pennsylvania Dutch?"

Abigail Chase: "Saxony, German."

Riley Poole: "You're not an American?"

Abigail Chase: "Oh, I am an American, I just wasn't born here."

Kruger's character, whose American name further belies her German origins, thus serves to underline the film's patriotism and idealised understanding of American national identity as self-chosen and adopted by those who believe in American ideals and values. They are embodied by Gates, who in a climactic scene of the film experiences a solemn moment upon having brought back the Declaration to Liberty Hall in Philadelphia, where it was first signed: "this performative rebirth of the nation opens Ben's eyes to the real treasure 'hidden' in the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are the immaterial goods underwriting America's promise" (Hamscha, 2013, p. 61).

Chase's German origins have no further relevance for the character or the plot (apart from cursing in German once, she speaks English with an American accent). Instead, the film showcases her good looks and presents her as a sexual object lusted after by the film's male characters: a male colleague stares at her bottom for several seconds without Chase noticing (see fig. 105&106); she wears a low-cut, revealing evening dress for a large part of the film (see fig. 107&108), and Poole, communicating with Gates via an earpiece, recognises Chase's voice and asks "Is that that hot girl? How does she look?".

Kruger's acceptance of the part of Abigail Chase is indicative of her pragmatic approach to choosing parts, taking roles in American mainstream films to further her Hollywood career next to parts in small or medium-sized French and European productions, which allow her to showcase her acting abilities. Kruger expresses an equal appreciation of commercial Hollywood filmmaking and European art film, pointing out that while she "love[s] working in America" since "there's a certain lightness about it" that allows her "to go and work on a film, have a good time and not think about it too much", she "also like[s]



the other side, something that is intellectual and intense, as you have in France” (cited in Haynes, 2011, p. 141).



Figures 105-108: *National Treasure* showcases Kruger’s good looks and repeatedly presents her character as a sexual object: a male colleague stares at her bottom for several seconds, and she wears a low-cut evening dress revealing her cleavage for a large part of the film

Despite the part of Abigail Chase being a rather insubstantial supporting role suffering from the film’s questionable sexual politics, *National Treasure* affirmed Kruger’s ambition to become a fixture in bankable US mainstream films in which she acts next to established star actors: Produced for Disney Pictures by Jerry Bruckheimer, *National Treasure* was a box-office success, grossing 347.512,318 dollars worldwide (Box Office Mojo , n.d.(c)) and thus easily recouping its 100 million dollar budget. *National Treasure* attracted just fewer than 1.6 million viewers in Germany (FFA, n.d.(i)), making it the second 2004 film featuring Diane Kruger which surpassed the one million viewer mark in her native country, a viewing figure which remains an absolute exception for other German actresses of her generation: Nina Hoss and Sibel Kekilli have only made one film each that attracted more than one million viewers in Germany (*The White Masai* with 2.1 million and *What a Man* with around 1.7 million viewers, respectively), while the majority of Hoss’s and Sandra Hüller’s films struggle to reach the 100.000 viewer mark. The commercial success of *National Treasure* prompted the release of a sequel three years later, and *National Treasure 2: Book of Secrets* (dir. Jon Turteltaub, 2007), again featuring Cage and Kruger, surpassed all expectations by earning

a sensational 457.364,600 dollars worldwide (Box Office Mojo, n.d.(d)), that exceeded its 130 million dollar budget by far.

The 2011 action thriller *Unknown* (dir. Jaume Collet-Serra), in which Kruger also had a supporting role, was a similar box office success, its 130 million dollar gross more than quadrupling the film's 30 million dollar budget (Box Office Mojo, n.d.(e)). Kruger's role in *Unknown* is similar to the part of Abigail Chase in the *National Treasure* films, as once again she plays a female character supporting the male hero. Like *National Treasure*, the international co-production *Unknown* also presents North American identity as a valuable alternative to European nationality, while identifying Kruger's character, a Bosnian immigrant, as broadly 'European' (rather than German) opposite the American protagonist, Dr Martin Harris (Liam Neeson). Harris must reclaim his stolen identity, while being pursued by a group of hit men. Kruger plays Gina, an illegal immigrant working as a taxi driver in Berlin. Harris steps into her taxi and their car is run off a bridge as they are being pursued. The car plunges into a river, Gina manages to save Harris but then disappears. Suffering from memory loss after the accident and realising that Gina is the only person he can trust, Harris finds her and she invites him to stay at her place, a shabby attic apartment. Gina tells Harris that she is saving up money to "buy papers" and "get out of this place" as soon as she no longer has to hide from the authorities. In a climactic fight sequence, Harris manages to kill the hit men and recover his identity. The final scene shows Harris and Gina leaving Berlin together, their new Canadian passports identifying them as 'Mr and Mrs Taylor'.

Being instrumental to the hero's safety and success, Gina is decidedly more active and independent than *National Treasure's* Abigail Chase, but the character remains equally underdeveloped. While at one point a tearful Gina tells Harris that her whole family was killed in Bosnia, this experience of violence and turmoil merely serves as an explanation for her streetwise ways, as she bravely and ruthlessly loses or dispatches their pursuers in numerous car chases. Thus, the nationality of Kruger's character is once again a footnote in a film that swiftly drives forward a plot replete with action scenes and chase sequences. Gina's life in Berlin having been plagued by poverty, isolation and fear of discovery, the Canadian passport she receives at the end of the film is a well-earned reward for helping Harris and a chance to start a carefree new life in North America after she was denied this opportunity in Germany.

The *National Treasure* films and *Unknown* are representative of the majority of

Kruger's English-speaking films to date, which also include *Wicker Park*, the 2010 thriller *Inhale* (dir. Baltasar Kormákur, 2010) and the science fiction film *The Host*, in which the actress's German nationality is central to neither her character nor the plot. In that respect, Kruger's filmography confirms a finding by Peter Krämer, who concludes his account of the careers of German film personnel in the US film industry with the observation that "Hollywood's German [...] migrants were most successful when they managed to blend into the society and culture they encountered" (2002, p. 234), rather than seeking out roles which relate specifically to their German origins.

### **Kruger's Period Dramas: Exploring National and Feminine Identities**

Kruger's 2005 film *Joyeux Noël (Merry Christmas)* (2005), a European co-production helmed by French director Christian Carion on the other hand, foregrounds precisely those issues of clashing national and cultural specificities. Kruger's role in the film demonstrates the heterogeneity of the actress's on-screen persona, simultaneously relying on the familiar components of beauty, appearance and star quality, as well as on Kruger's German and European roots in a film with a humanist and decidedly pro-European message. *Merry Christmas* is set during World War I and centres on the 1914 Christmas truce, which had French, German and Scottish soldiers on the western front put down their weapons and come together for a Christmas service. Kruger plays Anna Sörensen, a Danish opera singer who follows her German partner (Benno Fürmann), a tenor, to the front and during the Christmas service performs for the soldiers.

*Merry Christmas* is the first film in Kruger's career to notably draw on and problematise the national identity of the actress and her character. Sörensen's ambiguous national identity, which hovers between Danish and German, is indicative of both Kruger's identification as a 'European', rather than a 'German' actress, and of *Merry Christmas*'s pro-European message, which identifies it as a so-called 'Euro-pudding'. Euro-puddings are typically sweeping epics or historical films with high production costs such as *Enemy at the Gates* (dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud, 2001), which tells the (fictitious) story of a shootout between Russian and German snipers during the battle of Stalingrad in 1942. *Merry Christmas* was named a 'Euro-pudding' by several reviewers (Kirschbaum, 2005; Frey, 2006; Tourmakine, n.d.), although they agreed that it largely avoided the pitfalls associated with this type of film. As Randall Halle points out, Euro-puddings are generally considered "well-intentioned films", yet are often seen as failures in that they "replace national conflicts with a

sweet but ultimately bland narrative that can only appeal to a least common denominator of culture” (2008, p. 48). The films are typically made in English for easy access not only to the European, but also the US market, which has frequently led to an accumulation of characters speaking in different or inauthentic accents that threatens the films’ credibility, as famous actors are regularly cast to play characters with a nationality different from their own. *Merry Christmas’s* director Christian Carion, however, insisted on a multinational cast consisting of French, German, Scottish and English actors all of whom spoke their native language so as to offer a more authentic depiction of the historical events. In her analysis of the film, Bélen Vidal argues that this casting decision is indicative of *Merry Christmas’s* attempt to recognise “national identities [...] in a transnational context” (2012, p. 79): as the soldiers from the different nations come together in no man’s land and in the trenches, these locations become

a communicative space mediated through linguistic and iconographic clichés. Bagpipes, champagne and opera work as discursive shortcuts to national identities, while colloquial language draws attention to deep-seated prejudices. Signs on the trenches point toward ‘Rosbif’ land (on the French side) and ‘Froggy land’ (on the British side), thereby extending, in a humorous fashion, the predictable use of pejorative nicknames used to refer to the German enemy (‘Jerries’, ‘Krauts’, ‘Boches’) (ibid, p. 84).

The film’s multinational, self-conscious perspective allows it to engage in a process described by Thomas Elsaesser as ‘self-othering’, “presenting the Self (one’s own national culture) through the look of the other” (ibid, p. 85), and thereby refuting or invalidating prejudiced and hostile views of other nations. *Merry Christmas* thus aims to advocate European integration through highlighting a shared memory of war, an agenda which mirrors Randall Halle’s contention that “the future of the European Union” rests precisely in such “contemporary productions of its past” (2008, p. 90). The film pays tribute to the casualties of the First World War and advocates European integration in various ways. The Christmas truce not only allows the soldiers from the three countries to bury their dead, whose bodies had previously been out of reach in no man’s land, but brings together a number of characters embodying humanist values and the project of European integration rather than nationalism and warfare: French Lieutenant Audebert (Guillaume Canet), German Lieutenant Horstmayer (Daniel Brühl) and Scottish Father Palmer (Gary Lewis), who are instrumental in organising the truce, are contrasted with ruthless, warmongering superiors (a French army general, the German crown prince and an English bishop), who punish them harshly at the end of the film. *Merry Christmas* thereby “investigate[s] a shared (popular)

memory 'from below' as opposed to an official European history 'from above' founded on belligerent values of hatred towards the cultural Other" (Vidal, 2012, p. 81).

Kruger's character equally functions to underline *Merry Christmas's* pro-European message. Like Horstmayer, who has a French wife, Anna Sörensen is part of a bi-national couple, and shares with her German partner an affiliation with the opera. Both sing in Italian and Latin, which is the foundation of various European languages. At the end of the film, the couple requests to be taken as prisoners of war by the French in order to be able to stay together instead of Sprink returning to the front. Moreover, as Peter Bradshaw points out, the couple provides the very impetus for the temporary European reconciliation at the centre of the film: "the soul of the uprising resides in Anna and Sprink, and the truce emerges almost from their love itself" (2005). Sprink initiates the truce by carrying a Christmas tree into no man's land while singing 'Silent Night', and Sörensen's performance of 'Ave Maria' during the Christmas service unites the soldiers in silent reverence.

The character's ambiguous national identity indicates the extent to which, already in 2005, Kruger was identified not so much as a German, but rather a 'European' actress, having acted in French and American, as opposed to German films. Sörensen's Danish nationality remains rather undefined: we never hear her speak Danish, we learn nothing about Denmark's role in the war and no reference is made to Danish customs or national specificities, idiosyncrasies or traditions in the way the film does with respect to France, Scotland and Germany. At the same time, Sörensen is partly identified as German rather than Danish, speaking only German in the film and being played by Kruger. This is reflected in articles on and interviews with Kruger discussing the film, in which either the journalist or Kruger herself call Sörensen a "German opera singer"<sup>cccxxvi</sup> (cited in Rehfeld, 2004; see also Cheze, 2006, p. 64; Greig, 2006, p. 89), conflating the nationality of actress and character because Sörensen speaks German in the film. Kruger was one of the first performers approached by the makers of *Merry Christmas* (Keefe, 2006), bringing to the project both her German language skills and the international recognition established through her role in *Troy*.

Kruger, while confirming that her nationality was key to her being cast in the film, has explained that she strongly identified with the her character in *Merry Christmas* also for other reasons:

When I read the screenplay, I was convinced that I was the only one who could play her and not just because [...] I was German. It was as if the part had been written for me [...] I could identify with everything she did, her determination, her stubbornness. [...] I could see myself doing what she did<sup>cccxxvii</sup> (cited in Trouillet, 2005, p. 64).

This statement provides a useful insight into Kruger's role choices and performance style. In the discussion of film acting, a distinction is commonly made between 'impersonation', meaning that the actor disappears into the character, and 'personification', meaning that the actor effectively plays him/herself, due to their range being "limited to parts consonant with his or her personality" (King, 1991 [1985], p. 168). Favouring roles that are akin to her own personality rather than challenging herself to play a character she does not immediately relate to, indicates that Kruger's acting style is one of personification rather than impersonation. While King points out that personification is generally seen to constitute 'poor' acting (ibid, p. 168), Hollinger points out that "more recently [...] scholars have begun to question the validity of the distinction between personification and impersonation" (2006, p. 48), especially with regard to star acting, which is best described as a mixture of the two: it "always involves a mixture of role, actor and image" (ibid, p. 49). Stars are expected to demonstrate their acting skill in their performance, but at the same time their star image is central in attracting viewers to the film, and is therefore "expected to shine through in every performance" (ibid). Kruger had not achieved the star status of leading Hollywood actors after her performances in *Troy* and *National Treasure*, but *Merry Christmas* clearly plays on and manifests her star image. While Kruger herself related to Sørensen's bravery and resolve, the film draws strongly on Kruger's image as a glamorous Hollywood actress by likening her opera singer character to that of a (film) actress: Sørensen/Kruger is first seen performing an aria on a theatre stage to a mesmerised audience, bird's eye shots of her face being used to communicate the intensity of her singing, her concentration and skill, while also showcasing her beautiful face and golden hair (see fig. 109).

Moreover, Sørensen uses her influence as a popular artist to perform for the crown prince in his lodgings near the front and thus meet her fiancé, and her performance for the soldiers parallels those of actresses Marlene Dietrich or Marilyn Monroe, who entertained the US troops during World War II and in Korea, respectively. Sørensen's exceptional status as a celebrated and admired star among the soldiers is also signalled through her glamorous dress and accessories. Arriving at the trenches still dressed for her performance for the crown prince, she wears a sequined dress, pearl earrings, and a full-length red velvet cape with fur trimming, which stands out both from the muted green uniforms of the soldiers, and from the snowy ground (see fig. 110&111). As Sarah-Mai Dang observes, "the soprano is presented as if she was the Virgin Mary. Her golden hair and red velvet cape are the only highlights in the barren, snow-covered landscape"<sup>cccxviii</sup> (2005).



**Figure 109: High-angle shots communicate the intensity of Sörensen’s singing, while also showcasing Kruger’s beauty**



**Figure 110: Sörensen/Kruger’s red robe stands out among the soldiers’ uniforms**



**Figure 111: The figure of Sörensen is highlighted against the background of the white snowy field and candlelit Christmas trees**

The framing of Sörensen’s performance at the impromptu Christmas service equally elevates the character. Medium shots and close-ups of Sörensen/Kruger against the background of the white snowy field and twinkling candlelit Christmas trees alternate with wide tracking shots of her large audience, the soldiers, who are surrounded by a nightly darkness akin to the one in a cinema auditorium (see fig. 112). Close-ups of individual soldiers’ faces suggest that they are as enraptured and moved by Sörensen’s angelic appearance as they are by her singing (see fig. 113). The Sörensen character thus constitutes an effective “fictional extension” (Hollinger, 2006, p. 50) of Kruger’s star image that centres on her exquisite beauty and appearance, “allowing the part and the actor to be seen as one” (ibid), and affording the viewer the “pleasure [of] feeling that the star-actor is doing something remarkable on the screen” (ibid).





**Figures 112&113: Sörensen’s audience is surrounded by darkness akin to the one in a cinema auditorium, while close-ups of individual soldiers’ faces suggest that they are as enraptured by Sörensen’s angelic appearance as they are by her singing**

While her characters in *Troy* and *Merry Christmas* owed much to Kruger’s beautiful and glamorous persona dating from her modelling career, Kruger’s next film, *Copying Beethoven* (2006) centred on a character that is not a glamorous ideal of femininity. Instead, the US produced film, directed by Polish filmmaker Agnieszka Holland, explores the obstacles to female agency and creativity in its 19th century setting. Kruger plays music student Anna Holtz who in 1824 starts to work as a copyist for Ludwig van Beethoven (Ed Harris), supporting the composer as he struggles with growing deafness while completing his Ninth Symphony. Anna Holtz is a fictitious character based on a number of male copyists who worked for Beethoven in his later life. Although quiet and humble, Anna does at times assert her position as musician and composer in her own right, spelling out the film’s feminist agenda. When meeting Beethoven’s nephew Karl (Joe Anderson) for example, who mistakes her for a maid and makes lewd comments, Anna protests:

Anna: “Since I started this job, I’ve been mistaken for a nurse, a maid and now a prostitute! No more!”

Karl: “Then who the hell are you?”

Anna: “I’m his copyist!”

However, Anna’s first encounters with Beethoven already suggest that she aspires to be more than a copyist: She changes a key in the very first transcript she delivers to the composer, declaring in a matter-of-fact way that she “corrected it” because she was certain that Beethoven “did not intend to keep [the movement] in B major”.

Thus suggesting that an unknown female character had a decisive influence on a significant artwork generally associated with the genius of a celebrated male artist, *Copying Beethoven* resembles *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (dir. Peter Webber, 2003), which focuses on the model for Jan Vermeer’s 1665 painting of the same name and presents the creation of the



painting as “an intriguing tale of female intervention” (Vidal, 2012, p. 110). Both films “explore[ ] the meanings of the artwork in order to offer a popular reworking of history ‘from below’ with an emphasis on issues of gender [...] and creativity” (ibid, p. 118). As Vidal points out, *Copying Beethoven*’s director Agnieszka Holland employs the female protagonist “as a modern lens in the tunnel vision of historical reconstruction” (ibid, p. 113). The young and ambitious, but inexperienced Anna “provides a narrative site of identification for the spectator” (ibid, p. 111), functioning as a counterpoint to the “impenetrable and larger-than-life figure” (ibid) of Beethoven.

While Beethoven initially mocks Anna for both her hubris as she tried to improve his work, and for her own compositions (suggesting that a tune she composed sounds like farting noises), she soon becomes indispensable to him not only as his copyist, but also as his assistant and work partner. Being unable to conduct an orchestra due to his partial hearing loss, Beethoven has to rely on Anna’s guidance, who conducts from a hidden spot in the orchestra pit during the film’s climactic 12-minute sequence in which Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony is performed in front of an audience for the first time. Wide shots of Beethoven surrounded by the orchestra and the audience, in which Holtz is also frequently visible among the musicians, alternate with close shots and close-ups of Beethoven’s and Holtz’s faces and hands, which show that the composer looks to Anna for guidance. Beethoven’s gestures repeatedly mirror Holtz’s, whereby the camerawork communicates her vital role in the concert’s success (see fig. 114-119). While the camera focuses on Beethoven during the final culminating seconds of the concert, Anna leaves the orchestra pit once the audience have risen in frenetic applause and standing ovations, joins Beethoven on the stage and turns him around towards the audience to alert him to their enthusiastic reaction. Thus, it is Anna who “enables Beethoven’s genius through the public performance of his work” (Vidal, 2012, p. 112). The sequence “stress[es] the performativity of the artwork as a historic event open to re-enactment and re-interpretation” (ibid) and thereby shifts “the focus on heroic male creativity to a narrative of female emancipation” (ibid).



**Figures 114-119:** In the concert sequence, close shots and close-ups of Beethoven's and Holtz's faces and hands show that the composer looks to Anna for guidance, and Beethoven's gestures repeatedly mirror Holtz's, communicating her vital role in the concert's success

Anna's close working relationship with the composer also endangers her engagement after the irascible Beethoven destroyed her fiancé's model for a bridge which he entered into an architecture competition. Her fiancé Martin Bauer (Matthew Goode) then sets Holtz an ultimatum, asking her to stop working for Beethoven, or else he would break off the engagement. Beethoven's dislike of Bauer's work is founded on his conviction that Bauer is an uninspired engineer and technician who does not share the passion for and insight into the sublime, elevating power of music which, as the film suggests, unites Holtz and Beethoven. Holtz's conscious decision against Bauer and in favour of Beethoven must therefore be read as her choice to pursue a career as a composer (her work is ultimately approved of by Beethoven) as opposed to reconciling herself to the role of housewife and mother. Thus highlighting the consequences Anna's professional ambition has for her personal life, *Copying Beethoven* suggests that the protagonist has to pay a heavy price for her emancipatory drive. However, it is not only her fiancé who threatens to confine Holtz to a more traditional female role. Anna's interactions with Beethoven equally highlight her

ambiguous position as a skilled musician and copyist on the one hand, and personal assistant and carer for the increasingly frail and incapacitated composer on the other hand. As Vidal points out, the film’s “mise-en-scène places artistic creation next to forms of work associated with women’s traditionally subservient roles. In the course of the film, Anna cleans, runs errands, bathes and nurses Beethoven” (2012, p. 112).

One of the film’s primary concerns being the female lead’s struggle for equality, *Copying Beethoven* refrains from idealising the historic setting and costumes. It thereby differs markedly from those period dramas identified by Andrew Higson as ‘heritage films’, in which elaborate costumes and lavish interiors are key attractions that tend to undermine the films’ social critique by idealising their upper class settings: “heritage films display their self-conscious artistry, their landscapes, their properties, their actors [...], their clothes” (1993, p. 118). Kruger’s costuming in *Copying Beethoven* on the other hand, deliberately undercuts the actress’s good looks. Unlike Kruger’s characters in *Troy*, *National Treasure* and *Merry Christmas*, who are dressed in elaborate, glamorous gowns that highlight her beauty, Anna wears simple, unshowy dresses in muted colours during most scenes (see fig. 120&121), and her hair is either demurely tied in a tight bun, or, when she is transcribing music, it looks unkempt and messy, with lanky strands of hair hanging down from her head (see fig. 122), as if to emphasise that the character is focused more on her musical skills than her appearance.



**Figures 120-122: Anna wears simple, unshowy dresses in muted colours, and her hair is either tied in a tight bun, or, when she is transcribing music, it looks unkempt and messy, suggesting that the character is focused more on her musical skills than her appearance**

While many of the British period dramas Higson refers to showcase lavish English country houses, much of *Copying Beethoven* takes place in the composer’s chaotic and dilapidated attic studio, and the Vienna setting is presented as “rainy, dirty, rat-infested, and full of piss pots” (Thompson, 2006). Chronicling the physical deterioration of the composer, *Copying Beethoven* also lacks the romanticisation of the artist found in the “strand of biopics

marketed as romantic period dramas” (Vidal, 2012, p. 119) such as *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, *Finding Neverland* (dir. Marc Forster, 2004, focusing on J. M. Barrie), *Miss Potter* (dir. Chris Noonan, 2006, focusing on Beatrix Potter) and *Becoming Jane* (dir. Julian Jarrold, 2007, focusing on Jane Austen): the film portrays Beethoven as a difficult and flawed figure, who is at times ebullient and choleric, at other times quietly despairing over his condition. While the abovementioned biopics focus on the artist’s romantic involvements with a muse, love interest or future partner, *Copying Beethoven* instead highlights Anna’s independence. After she has noted down Beethoven’s last compositions by his deathbed, the final images of the film show Anna not in Vienna, but in a country house. She gets up from her desk, walks out of the house and into a field illuminated by the setting sun, as we hear a triumphant choral piece from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, suggesting that while Anna cherishes the memory of the composer, she will both literally and figuratively find her own path.

Critical opinion on the film was divided, but most reviewers agreed that Kruger faced a particular challenge in portraying the caring, diligent copyist opposite Harris’s “tour-de-force performance” (Vidal, 2012, p. 111) as Beethoven. Some critics suggested that the film suffered from an “extremely dull” (Turner, 2007) script that peaks too early with the premiere of the Ninth Symphony “while nothing much happens afterward – a major structural misstep” (Thompson, 2006), and that the film does not sufficiently flesh out the personality and motivations of the Anna Holtz character. German critic Christoph Petersen for example writes that

the film lacks the strong female character required to fully support its ode to feminism. The Anna Holtz character, which borders on cliché, remains pale and insubstantial [...] The fault is entirely with the uninspired script [...] and not with Kruger, [...] [who] gives the strongest performance of her [...] career to date<sup>cccxxix</sup> (n.d.).

In her review for *Sight & Sound*, Kate Stables equally praised Kruger’s unshowy performance, noting that the actress “brings a demure, cat-like containment to their scenes together, and her damped-down underplaying interlocks nicely with Harris’ cheerful boorishness” (2007). Brooke Holgerson in her review for the *Boston Phoenix* on the other hand laments “Kruger’s blankness” (2006), and Jason Clark states that the actress “has yet to prove why she scores major parts in movies”, since “the picture is continually stopped in its tracks by her inability to show any range as a performer” (2006). This mixed reception of Kruger’s performance in *Copying Beethoven* demonstrates that the actress struggled to discard the accusations of amateurism and of being cast based on her looks rather than her acting abilities attached to

her since her US breakthrough with *Troy*. Moreover, the criticisms of the script and the characterisation of Anna Holtz suggest that *Copying Beethoven* was not ideally suited for Kruger to showcase her acting skills since she was required to play a character that is ardent and demure opposite an effervescent musical genius. Kruger has insisted that “you don’t make films like *Copying Beethoven* [...] for the money”<sup>ccccxxx</sup> (ibid, 2007), suggesting that she chose the project to challenge herself as an actress in a female-centred film with a distinct feminist agenda. The critical and box office failure of *Copying Beethoven* despite Kruger’s strong investment in the project supports an observation by Williams, who points out that although the actor “constructs and circulates in secondary materials” (2007, p. 121) a narrative according to which they are “able to control their star persona and select [their] own roles” (ibid), the star’s agency is curtailed “by the constraints of [...] studios, publicists and agents, and the involvement of writers/directors” (ibid), demonstrating that it is “the economics of the industry” (ibid) that ultimately determines the success or failure of a film project.

The critical panning of her performance by US critics noticeably contradicts Kruger’s own account of acting in the film, which she found to be a particularly rewarding and instructive experience. She explained that making *Copying Beethoven* was “a revelation to me because [Ed Harris] really took me under his wing” (cited in Blanks and Kruger, n.d.), and even goes so far as to say that “I became an actor on that movie” (cited in Vadnal, 2010, p. 315). Kruger has stressed the particular effort that she herself and Harris put into the rehearsals, explaining that they met every day for two months, “analys[ing] every line”<sup>ccccxxxi</sup> and “conduct[ing] together for hours and hours” (cited in Moreno, 2007). Kruger’s account of making *Copying Beethoven* is thus indicative of her ambition to develop her own craft by working with acclaimed actors, and of her interest in independent films with a greater cultural or artistic value despite their limited potential for commercial success.

### **Bridget von Hammersmark, a Feminist Film Star?**

#### **– Performing Stardom and National Identity in *Inglourious Basterds***

Kruger’s most heavily publicised film after *Troy* was *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), directed by Quentin Tarantino. The film follows a number of American, French, German and English characters plotting a successful assassination of the Nazi leadership in a French cinema, envisioning an alternative history in which World War II ended in 1944 rather than 1945. The film’s title, in itself a reference to the English title of the 1978 Italian war film *Quel*

*maledetto treno blindato* (*The Inglorious Bastards*) (dir. Enzo Castellari), refers to a group of US soldiers led by Lt. Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt) that sets out to execute as many Nazi soldiers as possible in order to demoralise and intimidate the enemy. Featuring a number of well known American and European actors such as Brad Pitt, Michael Fassbender and Daniel Brühl, *Inglourious Basterds* was Tarantino's most ambitious project to date<sup>40</sup>, after he had established a reputation as an auteur director able to please mainstream audiences and art film critics alike with films such as *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Kill Bill Vol.I* (2003) and *Vol.II* (2004).

*Inglourious Basterds* was also significant for Kruger's career. Made on a modest 70 million dollar budget, the film grossed more than 320 million dollars worldwide (Box Office Mojo, n.d.(f)), reaffirming Kruger's movie star status in the process. But the film also highlights the changing relationship between her star image and her German nationality, serving as an interesting meta-commentary on Kruger's own star status, since her character is herself a German film star. Kruger plays fictitious German actress Bridget von Hammersmark, an agent for the British who is part of a plan to kill Adolf Hitler and his leading officers through an explosion during a film premiere. In interviews, Kruger frequently stressed that "it took a lot of convincing" (cited in Freydkin, 2010) to persuade the director to give her the part, since Tarantino initially refused to believe that she was German due to her convincing American accent, and only offered her the role after she had flown in from the US to audition in Berlin (see Elfman, 2009; Shoard, 2009; Freydkin, 2010).

Tarantino's apprehensions are indicative of Kruger's complex position as a German actress within the US film industry. On the one hand, she feels a strong need to assimilate in order to be on a par with American actors and convincingly play American characters, on the other hand, her nationality and language skills can be beneficial in obtaining certain roles, but also put her in danger of being typecast. Kruger had regularly been offered parts in World War II films since appearing in *Troy* and turned them down because she did not want to be associated exclusively with Nazi villain characters: "I didn't want to be put into that box" (cited in Blanks and Kruger, n.d.; see also Freydkin, 2010, von Uslar, 2012). But she believes that *Inglourious Basterds* diverged from such oversimplified characterisations, and, as was the case with *Merry Christmas*, felt a strong affinity with the character: "And then this came along and very, very few times you read a script and you go: 'Oh my god, he actually wrote this for

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<sup>40</sup> It has since been trumped by Tarantino's 2012 film *Django Unchained*, which cost 100 million dollars to make and took more than 425 million dollars worldwide (Box Office Mojo, n.d.(g)).

me! [...] I just really thought I could bring something to this character” (cited in Carnevale, n.d.(b)). Kruger’s endorsement of Tarantino’s writing mirrors a process in which a performer assumes agency and authorship of her star persona by aligning herself with a director, as Rebecca Williams observes: “by aligning herself closely with the directors of various projects and emphasising the reciprocal nature of their relationship, [the actress] discursively constructs herself as active and able to control the parts she is playing” (2007, pp. 113-114).

Kruger’s passion for the role and identification with the character may appear puzzling on a first viewing on the film, since Bridget von Hammersmark is a supporting character (she is on screen for just under forty minutes of the film’s 154-minute running time) and for a large part of her screen time is defined by her appearance, gestures and mannerisms rather than interiority. However, von Hammersmark does show genuine emotion in her later scenes, especially in her final appearance, in which her air of confidence and coquetry is replaced by fear and despair as she anticipates her impending death. Overall however, the character is defined not so much by her emotions or motivations as by a performance marked by exuberance and worldliness, as well as her brave and ruthless actions.

Von Hammersmark is introduced in the extensive, 30-minute tavern scene. Initially in the company of a group of German soldiers, she welcomes British Lt. Archie Hicox (Michael Fassbender), and two of Raine’s men, Hugo Stiglitz (Til Schweiger) and Wilhelm Wicki (Gedeon Burkhard), all of whom enter the bar dressed in Nazi uniforms. They sit down at a table next to the soldiers and von Hammersmark attempts to talk them through the planned assassination of the Nazi leaders. She is interrupted however, firstly by an inebriated soldier, Sergeant Wilhelm (Alexander Fehling) who is an ardent admirer and asks for her autograph, then by Major Dieter Hellstrom (August Diehl). Sitting in a corner of the room unnoticed, Hellstrom had picked up on Hicox’s unusual accent which Hicox explains away by stating that he grew up in a village near the Swiss Piz Palü mountain, demonstrating his knowledge of German cinema (and Tarantino’s foible for intertextuality) by referring to the 1929 German silent film *Die weisse Hölle vom Piz Palü* (*The White Hell of Pitz Palu*) (dir. G. W. Pabst and Arnold Fanck). Although Hellstrom seems to accept Hicox’s explanation, he refuses to leave the group and suggests they play a round of the game the soldiers are engaged in, in which the players have a card with a celebrity’s name stuck to their forehead, which they then have to guess. The scene is dominated by Hellstrom’s false friendliness and joviality, and the underlying enmity between him and Hicox that becomes apparent when Hicox tells

Hellstrom that he is “intrud[ing]”<sup>cccxxxii</sup> on him and his friends. Hellstrom agrees to leave after one last drink, but Hicox gives himself away, ordering three glasses of scotch by raising his index, middle and ring fingers, as is common in Britain, as opposed to raising his thumb, index and middle finger in the German fashion. The atmosphere of tension culminates when Hellstrom tells Hicox that he is “no more German than that scotch”<sup>cccxxxiii</sup>, and Hicox and Hellstrom hold each other at gunpoint under the table. A gunfight ensues from which only a wounded von Hammersmark and Wilhelm, armed with a shotgun, emerge as survivors.

The sequence is marked by an elaborate game of false or performed identities, in which ethnicity, nationality and language are the defining factors. This is exemplified both by the guessing game in which each player adopts a different identity (in another intertextual reference, the chosen personalities are German film stars Brigitte Horney and Brigitte Helm, director G.W. Pabst, but also dancer and German spy Mata Hari), and Hicox’s, Stiglitz’s and Wicki’s guises as members of the German military. Hicox’s knowing performance of national identities becomes most obvious in his reaction to being found out by Hellstrom. Switching back to English, he comments coolly: “well, if this is it, old boy, I hope you don’t mind if I go out speaking the King’s”, changing his German persona to that of a stereotypical, stiff-upper-lipped Englishman in the blink of an eye. As Srikanth Srinivasan observes,

the characters in *Inglourious Basterds* keep assuming different nationalities and ethnicities. Faking accents, speaking multiple languages, feigning papers and changing appearances seems to be the order of the day. Characters are recognised using ethnic slurs and covers are blown with the minutest of faux pas (2012, p. 6).

The theme of an adopted, performed or double identity is also central to Kruger and her character in this scene. Kruger, a German actress, plays von Hammersmark, a German actress who is also a British spy. Kruger’s portrayal of the star actress is dominated by frequent smiling, a loud, proclamatory delivery and sweeping hand gestures (see fig. 123& 124). Kruger’s costume and expressive body language equally reinforce the scene’s focus on appearance and performance as opposed to interiority. Von Hammersmark wears a fashionable beige suit, a fedora with a large feather, prominent earrings and red nail polish. She is constantly smoking and repeatedly surrounded by cigarette smoke. She uses a cigarette holder, which elongates her cigarette and makes it appear even more prominent, and she frequently raises her champagne glass for a toast or to drink from it (see fig. 125&126). In some shots, only her hand with the cigarette or her glass is visible, affirming her presence at the table while the camera focuses on the conversation between Hicox and Hellstrom. These



props function as a shorthand for communicating von Hammersmark's sophistication and film star persona, but they also work as a shield or disguise, denying both the other characters and the viewer access to her genuine thoughts and feelings. The feathered hat, the cigarette (smoking) and the large champagne glass are integral to Kruger's/von Hammersmark's performance of a celebrated film star and entertainer, and she initially is defined by these props more than by her conversation or actions.



**Figures 123-126: Kruger's sweeping hand gestures and her use of props reinforce the scene's focus on appearance and performance as opposed to interiority**

Von Hammersmark's film star credentials are also affirmed by Wilhelm, who, during a toast, proclaims: "There is no Dietrich, there is no Riefenstahl, there is only [...] [Bridget] von Hammersmark"<sup>cccxxxiv</sup>, thus suggesting that she outshines two of German cinema's most celebrated actresses. However, *Inglourious Basterds* does not show any excerpts of von Hammersmark's film performances, which is all the more notable given that it does include footage of *Nation's Pride*, a fictitious film-within-the-film featuring soldier Frederick Zoller (Daniel Brühl) as himself. Thus, as viewers we never see von Hammersmark performing in a film, whereby her star persona remains rather non-distinct and strangely abstract. Von Hammersmark's charisma and star status are established exclusively on the basis of her beauty and appearance and the reactions of the people around her, rather than on her film performances. Thereby Tarantino's initial characterisation of von Hammersmark, foregrounding her beauty and fashion sense, draws and comments on the actress's own star image in a self-reflexive gesture typical of the director's films, rather than giving Kruger the

opportunity to offer a nuanced performance.

American critics, however, universally appreciated Kruger's deliberately exalted and theatrical performance, suggesting that it constitutes a decisive improvement from her earlier work. Todd McCarthy in his review for *Variety* for example writes that "Kruger is far more engaging and animated than she's heretofore been in her big international pictures" (2009b), and Mick LaSalle notes that "Kruger brings an élan, a passion and a bitter humour to this role that she's previously showed only in her European films" [sic] (2009). By contrast, German reviewers either failed to comment on Kruger altogether, or discussed her performance in the same negative terms previously employed to describe her acting in other films. Reviews of *Inglourious Basterds* in leading national newspapers and weekly magazines such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Seidl, 2009), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Kniebe, 2010), *Der Spiegel* (Seeblen, 2009, Kleingers, 2009) and *Die Zeit* (Jessen, 2009) all focus on the film's irreverent approach to history, its excessive violence and references to genre films, and a number of them also highlight Christoph Waltz's excellent portrayal of SS Officer Hans Landa (Kleingers, 2009, Seidl, 2009, Kniebe, 2010), whereas Kruger is not discussed. In his review for the magazine *Freitag*, one of the few to mention Kruger, Matthias Dell writes: "considering the shine and pride female characters have brought to Tarantino's male-centred films, you'll be thinking you're in the wrong film in view of Kruger's blankness"<sup>cccxv</sup> (2009). Similarly, Christoph Petersen notes that "Diane Kruger's [...] acting is rather wooden at times, which is especially problematic since the German Hollywood export plays a star actress of all people"<sup>cccxvi</sup>. Given that in the tavern sequence, which is Kruger's most extensive scene, her character exhibits a deliberately extravagant, stylised behaviour, the critics' reactions arguably reflect a wider acceptance of theatrical, comically exaggerated acting styles in the US, whereas in German cinema, more nuanced, naturalistic acting is the norm. Moreover, Kruger's delivery of her German dialogue arguably contributed to the negative reception of her performance by German critics. In a forum discussion of a German website on film dubbing, one commentator pointed out that Kruger's German sounds "artificial"<sup>cccxvii</sup> and "stilted"<sup>cccxviii</sup>, while others suggested that she has "an unmistakable American accent"<sup>cccxix</sup> (Synchron-Forum, 2009). This suggests that in Germany, Kruger's stilted delivery of German dialogue identified her as a 'bad' actress at best, or as 'American' at worst.

Conversely, the reception of Kruger performance in the US is likely to have benefited from her speaking German. Dana Stevens for example comments that "Diane Kruger, the

German beauty who's always struck me as mousy in her English-speaking roles [...] plays her double-or-possibly-triple-crossing character with sexy verve" (2009). Stevens thus links Kruger's improved performance more or less directly to the fact that she speaks in her mother tongue for the first time in an American film. Thus, whereas Kruger's delivery of her German dialogue may have played a part in the panning her performance received from German critics, since it sounds somewhat forced and unnatural to German ears, in the opinion of US critics, Kruger speaking German enhanced the perceived quality and authenticity of her performance. This supports a finding by Petra Rau, who, when discussing the widespread criticism of casting English actors as Nazis, observes an agreement among critics that "it either takes exceptional acting to inhabit [Germanness] or that only a German could do it" (2013, p. 139). The reactions to her first German-speaking role in a US film thus highlight not only the different acting conventions in Kruger's home and host country but also the extent to which Kruger is able to utilise her German nationality in her American films, while increasingly being identified as 'American' in Germany.

The US critics' praise notwithstanding, the tavern scene largely reduces von Hammersmark to an eye-catching side character or visual accessory to a group of men. She is not at the centre of the action, which is instead dominated by Hellstrom. After the firefight however, the focus shifts towards her character, and her fearless shooting of Wilhelm, her subsequent exchange with Raine and interaction with Landa at the film premiere have prompted Kruger herself, as well as numerous critics, to read von Hammersmark as a "powerful" (cited in Blanks and Kruger, n.d.) and well-rounded female character typical of Tarantino's films such as Uma Thurman's character in the *Kill Bill* films and Pam Grier's eponymous character in *Jackie Brown* (1997). Kruger states that she appreciates Tarantino's writing and direction since "as a woman [...] you're not just being treated as an accessory to whatever male story is happening in the movie [...]. He empowers women [...] [through] the parts he writes for them" (cited in Elfman, 2009).

Von Hammersmark's killing of Wilhelm supports Kruger's reading of the character: von Hammersmark unexpectedly takes control and violently resolves a situation that appears to be dominated by a confrontation between two men. As the smoke settles after the firefight, Raine, who is out of sight at the top of the stairs, begins to negotiate with Wilhelm. When he asks if there are any survivors on his side, von Hammersmark, lying on the floor, raises her hand and proclaims "I'm alive!", to Wilhelm's surprise. Wilhelm comments that he and Raine find themselves in a "Mexican standoff", with neither side having an advantage in

attacking first, but Raine convinces Wilhelm to drop his gun so they can all leave the tavern alive. With Wilhelm now unarmed, von Hammersmark shoots him unexpectedly. Robert von Dassanowsky argues that this sequence illustrates the feminist underpinning of the character, pointing out that von Hammersmark “is the one who icily kills [Wilhelm] – not in response to his nationalist anger regarding her treason, but to his invective against her as a woman” (2012, p. x), presumably referring to the dialogue in the German dubbed version, in which Wilhelm calls von Hammersmark a “traitorous whore”<sup>ccccxl</sup>. Von Dassanowsky’s point does not hold up to scrutiny when considering the original dialogue, in which Wilhelm calls von Hammersmark a “fucking traitor”, which illustrates once more the importance of language and multilingualism for both the narrative universe and any interpretation of *Inglourious Basterds*. However, I would argue that von Dassanowsky’s reading is nonetheless appropriate, since the killing of Wilhelm characterises von Hammersmark as determined and fearless, which is underlined further in the subsequent scene. Raine questions von Hammersmark, who, having been shot in the leg, is laying on a veterinarian’s operating table. Raine literally puts his finger in the wound in order to find out if she has led his men into a trap, but von Hammersmark succeeds in convincing him that she is on his side by explaining in detail the plan to infiltrate the film premiere. This scene differs markedly from the tavern sequence in that von Hammersmark is no longer defined by her glamorous appearance and a secondary role in the unfolding action. Instead, she dominates the scene, the camera being either focused on her or keeping her within the frame even when Raine is speaking. Her appearance is changed drastically, her hair is wet and dishevelled, her dress is blood-stained and her leg is equally covered in blood (see fig. 127&128).



**Figures 127&128: During the interrogation scene, von Hammersmark is the dominant character both visually and verbally: the camera is either focused on her, or keeps her within the frame as Raine is speaking**

Although physically inferior and writhing in pain, von Hammersmark nonetheless controls the situation since she has the information Raine and his men need to proceed with

the assassination, and in her exchange with Raine offers an equally sarcastic and eloquent assessment of their situation before providing an additional incentive for the Basterds to proceed with the plan:

Raine: "You still get us into that premiere?"  
von Hammersmark: "You speak German<sup>41</sup> better than your friends? No. Have I been shot? Yes! I don't see me tripping the light fantastique up at a red carpet anytime soon. Least of all by tomorrow night. However, there's something you don't know. There have been two recent developments regarding Operation Kino. [...] The venue has been changed from the Ritz to a much smaller venue [...] [and] der Führer is attending the premiere."

The scene thus assigns von Hammersmark a key role in preparing the attack on the Nazi leaders that drives the plot forward.

At the film premiere, SS Colonel Landa proceeds to confirm his suspicions about von Hammersmark: having visited the scene of the tavern shooting, he discovered a lady's shoe as well as the autograph von Hammersmark wrote for Wilhelm, revealing her cooperation with the Basterds. He guides her to an office next to the cinema lobby, and asks her to "reach into the right pocket"<sup>ccccli</sup> of his coat that hangs over her chair "and give me what you find in there"<sup>ccccli</sup>. A visibly fearful von Hammersmark pulls her shoe out of the pocket and hands it over; Landa asks her to stretch out her foot and puts on the shoe. Landa, smugly satisfied, switches to English: "Voilà! What's that American expression? If the shoe fits, you must wear it". Von Hammersmark, although in tears, does not attempt to plead with Landa, but instead asks wryly: "What now, Colonel?"<sup>ccccli</sup>. In response, Landa suddenly charges forward, casts her down to the floor and strangles her with his bare hands in a fit of wild rage. Shots of von Hammersmark's face as she gasps for air and begins to lose consciousness make her death struggle tangible, before a shot of her limp legs and arms shows that she has suffocated.

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<sup>41</sup> Highlighting that von Hammersmark is fluent in English next to her native German while Raine is monolingual (which can also be linked to Kruger's fluency in English and French that is crucial to her obtaining substantial parts in international films), this monologue provides a tongue-in-cheek critique of Americans' alleged inability to speak other languages, as opposed to most of the Europeans portrayed in the film, who are at least bilingual. Tarantino deliberately challenges the patience of subtitle-averse US viewers by having German, French and Italian next to English dialogue, and Landa's mastery of no less than four languages gives him an advantage over all other characters for most of the film: Landa uses his ability to speak multiple languages as a "weapon" (Seeßlen, 2010, p. 197), while at the same time his effortless switching between French, English and Italian demonstrates a sophistication and intelligence that makes him a compelling character despite his merciless persecution a Jewish family at the start of the film and his complete lack of morality.

Critics have argued that the reference to the Cinderella<sup>42</sup> story in this scene exposes excessive male violence towards and dominance over women, citing it as further evidence of the film's feminist leanings. As von Dassanowsky notes, "Colonel Landa [...] uncovers the misogynistic side of fairytales, in particular the Cinderella myth, as the Nazi prince links shoe to woman and strangles her to death for daring to be his equal" (2012, p. x). Equally, Imke Meyer points out that this scene is notable for being the first and only occasion in the film in which Landa loses his self-control: "arguably [...], it is misogyny that turns Landa from an elegant, wordly sadist into a brutish monster who resorts to the most primitive type of physical violence to subdue the female who dared to stand up to him" (2012, p. 29).

Next to being the only character able to provoke the film's self-controlled and seemingly invincible arch-villain, von Hammersmark also stands out in this scene for keeping her countenance and dignity in the face of death, a circumstance which requires Kruger to offer up a more naturalistic performance and display of emotion that contrasts with the character's showmanship in the tavern scene. Von Hammersmark's slow, hesitant movements as well as frequent close-ups of her anxious face that show her tear-filled eyes communicate her profound fear and despair (see fig. 129-131). The representation of the character in this scene thus signals "a clear identification of the director with the pathos of the victim, and with the victim herself" (von Dassanowsky, 2012, pp. ix-x). It becomes even more apparent that von Hammersmark is on the brink of crying when, prior to uttering her final line, Kruger snivels audibly, which makes the character's reactions appear particularly authentic and unmediated. However, she also briefly raises her hands (see fig. 132) and snorts dismissively, simultaneously admitting defeat and signalling that she is not willing to negotiate with Landa or plead for her release. She has finally dropped the masquerade enacted for Landa in the cinema foyer and for the Germans (and Hellstrom in particular) in the tavern. This is a particularly poignant moment in a film revolving around disguises and the use of false identities, in that von Hammersmark refuses to play along any longer and accepts the consequences of having sided with the Allies. Her proud acceptance of defeat is designed to inspire particular respect for and sympathy with the character among viewers, and Bridget von Hammersmark further underscores Tarantino's reputation for creating

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<sup>42</sup> In this fairytale, the prince determines the identity of his bride with the help of her shoe, two of the most popular versions of the story being Charles Perrault's 1697 *Cendrillon* and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Aschenputtel*, which was part of their 1812 fairytale collection *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. The Cinderella motif in *Inglorious Basterds* complements other references to fairytales, most notably a caption in the opening shot that reads 'Once upon a time in Nazi-occupied France', whereby Tarantino acknowledges the use of invention in and historical inaccuracy of his film.

female characters that are as brave and ruthless as his male characters. Thus, despite being only a supporting character, von Hammersmark could function as an important identificatory figure for viewers, and perhaps for German audiences in particular, being an (albeit fictitious) German film star who stood up against the Nazis. Tarantino has stated that von Hammersmark “is meant to be ‘the Dietrich that stayed’ ” (Rau, 2013, p. 165), that is, an influential public figure who unlike Dietrich, did not communicate her disdain for the regime by going abroad, but who actively fights it at great personal risk.



**Figures 129-132: Frequent close-ups of von Hammersmark’s anxious face communicate her profound fear and despair, but she also briefly raises her hands, admitting defeat while signalling that she is not willing to plead with Landa for her release**

The reception of *Inglourious Basterds* in Germany however, suggests that the character failed to fulfil this function, with German reviewers largely neglecting to discuss Kruger’s performance or even the von Hammersmark character, as discussed above. The lack of resonance of Kruger’s character in her native country despite the decidedly positive reception of the film is also indicative of the extent to which the cultural significance of *Inglourious Basterds* dominated the discussion of the film in Germany. *Inglourious Basterds* has been praised by leading German film critics Georg Seeßlen<sup>43</sup> and Rüdiger Suchsland for

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<sup>43</sup> As Seeßlen points out in his book-length study of the film, Hitler continues to haunt German society and culture in the double incarnation of “the Hitler within us”<sup>43</sup> (2010, p. 194), that is, the idea that fascism is an inherently ‘German’ character trait (this was one of the positions taken by left-wing historians such as Jürgen Habermas, who implied that “Nazi crimes were unique, a legacy of evil in a class by themselves, irreparably burdening any concept of German nationhood” (Maier, [1988], p. 1) in the German Historikerstreit (historians’ debate) of the 1980s, while their opponents, revisionist historians



avoiding the inadvertent glorification of Hitler that afflicts other films<sup>44</sup> set during the time of the Third Reich. Suchsland praises *Inglourious Basterds* by pointing out that “this film does what German cinema has not dared to do until the present day: show the dead Hitler, blemish his face and thus blemish the myth itself, allow history’s returning undead to die”<sup>cccxliv</sup> (n.d.(d)). Seeßlen’s and Suchsland’s responses are emblematic of the reception of *Inglourious Basterds* in Germany, which was primarily concerned with the film’s cultural significance as an innovative and radical retelling of the most difficult period of the country’s history, and therefore focused on the representation of actual historical characters, namely the Nazi ruling elite. The fictitious supporting character of Bridget von Hammersmark and Diane Kruger’s portrayal of her the other hand, were seen to be of lesser interest. In Germany, *Inglourious Basterds* thus resonated strongly with ongoing reflections about how to adequately approach and represent the country’s problematic past, which outweighed any recognition for Kruger as the internationally successful German star actress as whom the film identified her.

Kruger’s pursuit of the part of Bridget von Hammersmark marked a growing interest in roles that go beyond that of a male hero’s love interest or partner. Working with an acclaimed director and co-stars also raised her profile in the US and paved the way to roles in other US mainstream films such as *The Host* or the lead role in the TV series *The Bridge* (FX, 2013-14). A remake of the Danish-Swedish *Bron/Broen* (2011-), this follows US police detective Sonya Cross (Kruger) and Mexican homicide detective Marco Ruiz (Demián

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such as Ernst Nolte and Michael Stürmer contended that German fascism was a product of specific historical circumstances and its practices were comparable to those of other totalitarian states), and that of Hitler as an indestructible monster or ghost: “the image became an obsession: [...] an incomplete picture, which post-fascist society is simultaneously afraid of and obsessed with. German culture in particular is and has been inexplicably ‘addicted to Hitler’ ” (2010, p. 194). *Inglourious Basterds* has been embraced by German critics for radically breaking with this fraught image, and thereby “liberating cinematic representations of the Holocaust from the oppressive mores that have constrained them for decades” (Herzog, 2012, p. 282). Seeßlen makes a point echoed by Suchsland, noting that, “at the end of *Inglourious Basterds*, the representatives of absolute evil are more than dead. Hitler is shot to death, burnt and dismembered. And the film doesn’t even afford him a great exit, a fade-out, a freeze frame, no last look into the camera, no insert and no melodramatic music” (2010, p. 194).

<sup>44</sup> A frequently named example in this context is the German-American co-production *Valkyrie* (dir. Bryan Singer, 2009), which depicts the failed assassination of Hitler by Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg, played by Tom Cruise. Seeßlen has criticised the film for mystifying the power of the Nazi regime rather than deconstructing it, noting that “one can only wonder how Hitler escapes the assassination in *Valkyrie* [...]. The failed attack makes the narrative appear completely clueless, history is on the Nazis’ side, evil cannot be stopped through the sacrifice of the subject” (2010, p. 210). Similarly, Petra Rau observes that the cinematography of *Valkyrie* presents Hitler as virtually invincible: “what is left after the failed assassination attempt is pure Hitler myth, pure aura: Hitler’s disembodied voice on the phone [...] and finally on a radio broadcast defying the plotters – precisely because we don’t see him he’s alive” (2013, pp. 147-48).



Bichir), who cooperate to solve a case involving the discovery of a dead body on the border line between the USA and Mexico. Cross has Asperger syndrome<sup>45</sup>, a mild form of autism which limits a person's social competence. This means that the series not only gave Kruger the opportunity to develop a character over the course of (at least) thirteen hour-long episodes but also provided a new challenge to her as an actress.

### **Recognition as an Actress: *Farewell, My Queen* (2012)**

Diane Kruger's interest in more demanding and complex female roles is also reflected in the 2012 French film *Les adieux à la reine* (*Farewell, My Queen*) (dir. Benoît Jacquot, 2012), in which she plays the Austrian-born Queen Marie Antoinette (1755-1792). *Farewell, My Queen* constitutes an exception in the canon of Kruger's French films in that director Benoît Jacquot deliberately cast her because she shares the character's German(-speaking) origins, whereas in her previous French films such as the thriller *Anything for Her*, the romantic comedy *Un Plan Parfait* (*A Perfect Plan*) (dir. Pascal Chaumeil, 2012) and the war drama *Forces spéciales* (*Special Forces*) (dir. Stéphane Rybojad, 2012), she had played French characters. *Farewell, My Queen* is indicative of Kruger's status in French cinema, while also illustrating that she continues to be cast in roles that draw on her German nationality. Both director Benoît Jacquot and Kruger herself have pointed to parallels between the actress and Queen Marie Antoinette which they believe make Kruger particularly suitable for the role. When asked why the director selected her to play the role, Kruger stated that "I think the fact that I was of German descent and I live in France so I speak fluent French. I guess that little accent was very interesting for the part" (cited in Smith, 2012). Similarly, Jacquot has stated that "Diane has the same origins and the exact same age as the character. Marie-Antoinette, that's her, it's obvious"<sup>cccxliv</sup> (cited in Le Vaillant, 2012).

*Farewell, My Queen* depicts three days inside the Versailles palace at the time of the storming of the Bastille on 14th July 1789. The film is mostly observational rather than plot-

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<sup>45</sup> There is thus a notable parallel between Kruger and Sibel Kekilli (who plays a policewoman suffering from epilepsy in the German *Tatort* series), both actresses playing police detectives in TV crime dramas who are affected by a medical condition, which functions to add a further dimension to the character and to provide additional narrative tension as the their condition interferes with their work. Further research should be done to determine whether these afflictions are used by screenwriters to compromise the characters' otherwise independent and confident personalities and thus undercut their function as positive female representations. A second, 13-episode series of *The Bridge* was broadcast in 2014, while Kekilli continues to star in further *Tatort* episodes, confirming a general trend in which established film actors increasingly accept leading roles in high-profile television series featuring complex narratives and character development.

driven, capturing the atmosphere of increasing confusion and dread among the nobility and servants as they learn about the revolutionaries' advance and demands. It provides a fictitious account of events witnessed from the point of view of Sidonie Laborde (Lea Seydoux), the queen's reader, who is deeply loyal to the monarch, while also harbouring romantic feelings for her. Marie Antoinette herself, meanwhile, is not only alarmed at the revolutionaries' calls for decapitating her alongside 285 other members of the aristocracy, but is also infatuated with her confidante, the Duchess of Polignac (Virginie Ledoyen), whereby the film takes on board allegations circulating during the queen's lifetime according to which she had a relationship with Polignac. The queen is keen to organise the duchess's safe passage to Switzerland once it is decided that the royal family will stay in Versailles. She asks Laborde to accompany the duchess and her husband, wearing Polignac's clothes and taking on her identity while travelling and thus effectively serving as bait should they be captured by rioters. Polignac's carriage is then indeed stopped by soldiers, but eventually allowed to pass, and Laborde explains in a voiceover that she is an orphan who derived her identity and status from being the queen's reader.

Although a supporting role secondary to the servant character, Marie Antoinette is portrayed as a complex and deeply contradictory person, allowing Kruger to enact a range of emotions rarely required for any of Kruger's previous roles. Aside from two brief appearances with the king, there are four scenes in which Marie Antoinette alternately appears naive and cheerful, cold and authoritative or dependent and despairing. She is introduced as Laborde meets her in a private room for an early morning reading session. In this scene, Kruger portrays the queen – still in her dressing gown and sitting on the bed – as cheerful, energetic, attentive to Laborde (she asks for rose oil to soothe Laborde's itching mosquito bites on her arm) and even flirtatious, inching closer to Laborde as she reads a suggestive passage from a novel (see fig. 133-136).

At the beginning of the scene, the camera, which is initially positioned behind Seydoux/Laborde, slowly zooms in on Kruger until we see a close-up of her face, thereby aligning the viewer's gaze with that of Laborde. Like the protagonist, we observe the queen closely without ever fully understanding her conflicted situation, feelings and thoughts. Kruger's expressive hand gestures and body language as she rolls around on the bed (see fig. 134&135), suggest that Marie Antoinette is at ease in her surroundings, while her interest in fashion magazines that she asks Laborde to read from, and her reverent leafing through a

booklet of fabric samples, present her as vain, childish, and wholly disconnected from the broiling civic unrest outside the palace.

In her next scene, she appears much more fragile, burdened not only by the news of the storming of the Bastille, but also by heartache. Sitting by the fireplace at night in a lushly decorated room, the queen confides in Laborde, telling her about her feelings for Polignac and her anxiousness over the duchess's refusal to see her. Laborde goes to fetch the duchess, only to find upon her return that Marie Antoinette appears to be a different person yet again. Coordinating the packing of her belongings for her departure to Metz, she is authoritative, domineering and irascible. She orders her servants around, angrily commanding Laborde to help her take off a bracelet, before condescendingly asking her: "What are you crying for? [...] I'll return soon"<sup>cccxlvi</sup>.



**Figures 133-136: In the reading scene, Kruger uses Kruger's expressive hand gestures and body language to portray the queen as cheerful, energetic, and flirtatious, inching closer to Laborde as she reads a suggestive passage from a novel**

Kruger's third key scene centres on Marie Antoinette's despair upon hearing the king's decision to stay in Versailles, and an encounter with Polignac during which the queen reluctantly and tearfully asks Polignac to leave France for her own safety. The scene begins with a manservant taking off the queen's large wig (see fig. 137), revealing her own flat and unkempt hair underneath and thereby anticipating that Marie Antoinette is about to drop the facade of composure, orderliness and control she had previously maintained in front of strangers. She is filmed through a doorframe (see fig. 137), whereby the viewer takes on the perspective of the observing servants and ladies in waiting in the adjacent room, and

seemingly talks to herself (“I longed so much for my departure. I never wanted something this much. I suffered a humiliation that is unprecedented”<sup>cccxlvi</sup>), while wiping off her make-up and lipstick. The perspective changes and we realise that Marie Antoinette is speaking to Polignac, whom she asks to leave France, only to run after her and tearfully embrace her. Once the duchess is gone, Marie Antoinette breaks down in tears, sobs and screams at the attending servants and ladies in waiting: “I don’t need anything! Or anyone! Leave me alone!”<sup>cccxlvi</sup>. At that moment, Kruger staggers and squirms, seemingly kept on her feet solely by the stiff, ample folds of her dress, before she sinks into a chair (see fig. 138&139). Critic Nino Klingler argues that Kruger’s theatrical and hyperbolic performance of the controversial historical figure is ideally suited to the role, noting that “Marie Antoinette is the melodramatic heroine par excellence. And that’s exactly how the German is playing her: expressive, theatrical, striking poses. Her performance is fantastic, intense and full of ulterior meaning”<sup>cccxli</sup> (2012).



**Figure 137: A manservant taking off the queen’s large wig functions as an indication that Marie Antoinette is about to drop her facade of composure, orderliness and control she previously maintained in front of strangers**



**Figures 138&139: Once Polignac is gone, Marie Antoinette breaks down in tears, staggers and squirms, before sinking into a chair**

The character's breakdown in this scene markedly contrasts with Marie Antoinette's composure and haughtiness in her final scene, in which she asks Laborde to travel with Polignac and orders her to undress in front of her and put on the duchess's dress. Through her commanding tone and condescending looks at the naked Laborde, Kruger signals a shift in the dynamics of looking and thus the power relations between Marie Antoinette and the servant. While in their first scene, the queen's behaviour was childish and playful and her gaze at Laborde admiring or desiring, her look in this scene could be described as disdainful, but equally as intrusive or leering (see fig. 140&141): the naked, exposed and vulnerable Laborde is at the queen's disposal, Marie Antoinette reaffirms her superiority over a servant whom she can order to do as she pleases, putting Laborde's life at risk in order to protect Polignac. This scene illustrates the film's nuanced, female-centred perspective that challenges traditional historical narratives, which are often male-dominated. As Klingler points out, "the French Revolution from a female, proletarian point of view within the apparatus of Versailles: Jacquot's premise in itself brings together a number of discourses of power, sexuality and representation"<sup>cccl</sup> (2012). *Farewell, My Queen* comments on the fraught power structures of pre-revolutionary France not in terms of a male-female imbalance, but in terms of class and sexuality. In the final scene between Marie Antoinette and Laborde, the queen asserts her power through a sexualised gaze that belies both her apparent state of vulnerability and despair, and her earlier fraternisation with Laborde, thus depicting the deep rift between the social classes in pre-revolutionary France through the relationship between Marie Antoinette and her reader, who is of humble origins.



**Figures 140&141: Through her condescending yet curious gaze at the naked Laborde, Kruger's Marie Antoinette signals a shift in the dynamics of looking and thus in the power relations between the queen and her servant**

Having been executed during the French Revolution, a defining moment of French national identity, Marie Antoinette holds a central place within the country's cultural

imaginary. Reviled during her lifetime for her extravagant lifestyle and alleged immorality and seen as a symbol of the decadence of the royalty, the queen has since been constantly discussed and reassessed in France until the present day. As Antoine de Baecque observes in an article for *Le Monde*, “this person is completely ours: she is the queen whose resurgence we witnessed in the last fifteen years in a flurry of publications<sup>46</sup>, films, exhibitions, imagery and gadgets”<sup>cccli</sup> (2012). Playing the (in)famous queen in a French film, Kruger’s performance was the object of particular public scrutiny in France, yet unlike her portrayal of Helen eight years previously, Kruger’s performance in *Farewell, My Queen* was met with praise by both French and international critics, who agreed that her portrayal of the monarch was one of the film’s great strengths. In her review for *Écran large* for example, Laure Beaudonnet notes that “Diane Kruger is brilliant as the charismatic, broken queen”<sup>cccli</sup> (2012). Similarly, Christophe Narbonne in his review for *Première* writes that “Kruger portrays the perverse narcissist with brio, in all her splendour ... and all her horror”<sup>cccliii</sup> (n.d.). Reviewing the film for the *Wallstreet Journal*, Joe Morgenstern singles out the quality of Kruger’s performance in what he calls an otherwise “strangely unsatisfying combination of bloodless observations and unresolved sexuality”: “Diane Kruger’s queen, a mature beauty mourning the loss of her youth, is a vivid portrait of willfulness, childishness and genuine neediness” (2012).

Other critics praised the “realist prism” (Chang, 2012) through which *Farewell, My Queen* portrays life at Versailles on the eve of the revolution, which allows the film to expose the vanity and literal decadence of life at the court rather than succumbing to the temptation to idealise the historical period with the help of the lush costumes and setting (the palace scenes being filmed at Versailles). As Kenneth Turan points out, “the royal court is portrayed as a hotbed of self-interested pettiness and jealous rivalries, not to mention a spot where mosquito bites were fierce and unavoidable and dead rats not hard to find” (2012). The film was nominated in thirteen categories at the Césars, the French national film awards, losing out to Michael Haneke’s highly regarded *Amour* in the Best Film category but winning prizes for best cinematography, costume design and production design. The positive reception of the film itself and the rave reviews of Kruger’s performance of a famous French historical figure indicates that Kruger enjoys a level of recognition as an actress in France that exceeds her reputation in the US and Germany, and gives credence to Kruger’s own assessment that

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<sup>46</sup> These include Cécile Berly’s *La Reine scandaleuse: idées reçues sur Marie-Antoinette* (2012) and *Marie-Antoinette et ses biographes. Histoire d’une écriture de la Révolution* (2006), Antonia Fraser’s *Marie-Antoinette. The Journey* (2001), which was the basis for Sofia Coppola’s 2006 film *Marie Antoinette*, and Chantal Thomas’s *Les Adieux à la reine* (2002), on which Jacquot’s film is based.



“the best films I’ve made, I’ve made [...] in France”<sup>cccliv</sup> (cited in Charbon, 2012, p. 24).

## Conclusion

One of the most internationally successful German actresses since Marlene Dietrich and Romy Schneider, Diane Kruger has made her career in big and medium budget American and French films. She therefore provides an interesting counterpoint to actresses such as Nina Hoss and Sandra Hüller, who have primarily acted in German independent films. Kruger’s career abroad began at the same time German film was experiencing a renaissance with the dual success of mainstream films centring on the German past and the Berlin School art film movement on the other. The commercial success of her films arguably validates Kruger’s approach. She has appeared in around twenty-five films since her debut in 2002, more than any of the other actresses examined in this thesis. Moreover, her career is marked by a level of consistency in terms of presence on cinema screens and high box-office returns that is much harder to maintain for actresses working primarily within the German film industry such as Nina Hoss, Sandra Hüller and Sibel Kekilli.

Kruger’s extensive filmography has been dominated by thrillers and action-adventure films on the one hand, and by historical or costume dramas on the other. In the English-speaking action-adventure films *National Treasure* and *Unknown*, she has played characters that neglect rather than foreground her German roots in order to further her international film career. These films are very much plot-driven and focused on the unveiling of a central puzzle or secret, causing Kruger’s characters to remain rather undeveloped as they are limited to the role of assistant to or helper of the male hero. But as her career progressed, Kruger has become more adamant in the pursuit of more complex and challenging female roles, the scarcity of which the actress has repeatedly lamented. And it were historical or period films like *Copying Beethoven*, *Inglourious Basterds* and *Farewell, My Queen* that allowed Kruger to portray more multifaceted characters and thereby hone her acting skills.

There is a contradiction between Kruger’s ambition to be seen as a serious actress and her continued association with the realm of modelling, fashion and beauty products that is commonly perceived as anti-intellectual, superficial and vain – a contradiction that is a defining feature of her career and screen persona. Kruger’s breakthrough film *Troy*, which largely limited itself to showcasing the actress’s beauty rather than providing Helen with a notable character arc, proved to be a fraught start to Kruger’s Hollywood career, giving the actress the reputation of a pretty, but untalented ex-model. *Merry Christmas* deliberately draws

on and showcases Kruger's existing image associated with beauty and glamour: rather than disappearing into her role, Kruger portrays not only Sørensen, but also Diane Kruger, glamorous star actress, but her character is largely reduced to a fragile, anxious bystander while the male characters take momentous decisions in the dangerous, tense battlefield setting. Kruger's film roles and public image thus highlight a systemic problem in the production of mainstream entertainment films featuring attractive young female characters, forcing young actresses striving for a Hollywood career to accept parts which are largely defined by and reduced to physical appearance while being granted very little story arc or agency.

Meanwhile, Kruger herself contributed to her own image as an ineffectual celebrity by continuously appearing in fashion magazines as a model showcasing designer fashion. Her completion of a formal acting training at one of France's most prestigious drama schools was eclipsed by her modelling career and endorsement of beauty products, which involved displays of her impeccable face and body on billboards around the world. Kruger's determination to be present and visible within the public sphere to attract the attention of casting agents, directors and film audiences implies her tacit agreement with the way she is represented in adverts and as a model – as an idealised image, an embodiment of physical beauty and perfection that is unattainable to ordinary women, which is at odds with her avowed intention to embody empowered female characters whose qualities are not reducible to their appearance. Her roles in numerous high-budget Hollywood films have prompted a wealth of coverage on Kruger in women's and fashion magazines that present her as a beauty or fashion icon and 'film star' with an extravagant lifestyle, rather than in her capacity as a performer.

Articles on Kruger in women's magazines and newspapers supplements discuss the actress's private life in relation to the themes of romance, marriage and domesticity in a way that confirms Richard's Dyer's observation on star discourse. Media discourse on Kruger has highlighted the star's 'ordinariness' in order to allow readers and fans to connect with her, and it is indicative of underlying values and morals of the society that produces it, revealing persisting patriarchal and socially conservative attitudes towards romantic relationships by presenting Kruger's professional success (which outshines her partner's) as a threat to her relationship. While in the US and Britain, Kruger's career is narrativised according to the 'American Dream' motif, tracking her ascent from humble, foreign origins to Hollywood stardom, German press coverage confirms the country's sceptical and cautious attitude



towards film stars that has a long tradition. The very concept of stardom is presented as an 'un-German' or American phenomenon, its pitfalls such as merciless competition for roles and a strict hierarchy within the film business are highlighted, and journalists maintain a dichotomy between gifted actors and untalented celebrities, with Kruger frequently being placed in the latter category. Kruger is perceived in her native country as a 'German Hollywood actress' whose success the German media take pride in, but who, as her US career progresses, is identified less and less as German, but increasingly as American.

The casting of Kruger in *Inglourious Basterds* indicates the extent to which the perception and understanding of Kruger's nationality becomes increasingly fluid and instable. When pursuing the role, Kruger had assimilated into American culture and language to such an extent that director Quentin Tarantino refused to believe her German origins, demonstrating that Kruger is variably identified as American, German, or, in *Merry Christmas* and *Unknown*, as 'European'. Kruger's career trajectory thus suggests that the key to success of Germany's current most internationally successful actress is, next to her generic good looks, her very lack of national or cultural specificity, having largely renounced distinctly German themes or characters.

Having never appeared in a German film, Kruger has not become part of German cinema's cultural imaginary. She therefore does not resonate with German viewers in the way other popular actresses such as Marlene Dietrich and Romy Schneider have done in the past or her contemporaries like Nina Hoss continue to do. While actresses associated with a specific kind of national (art) cinema such as Nina Hoss or Hanna Schygulla often embody characters whose experiences represent the aspirations and challenges of people in that country at the time they are made, Kruger's characters have been, if at all, sketchy and perfunctory incarnations of 'Germanness'. Instead Kruger has primarily embodied glamorous, ideal types of women, who befitted the non-realistic, at times even fairytale-like qualities of some of her films such as *Troy*, *National Treasure* and *Merry Christmas*. Kruger can thus be identified as a German actress only in terms of her origins, the fact she is continuously cast as, and able to credibly embody, characters of different nationalities being central to her international film career.

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<sup>ccciv</sup> "derzeit einzige[r] deutsche[r] Hollywoodstar"

- cccv “[Son] histoire nous fait rêver: une jeune fille de 13 ans qui quitte son village natal, en Allemagne, devient mannequin et comédienne à succès. Son histoire nous fait pleurer: une adolescente d’une beauté éblouissante, ignorée par son père, malheureuse en amour, qui se libère grâce à la scène.”
- cccvii “für die Karriere in Hollywood ist ein deutscher Umlaut fatal”
- cccviii “bevor man als deutsche Schauspielerin in Hollywood eine Hauptrolle bekommt, muss man vor allem eines schaffen: Produzenten und Regisseure vergessen lassen, dass man eine Schauspielerin aus Deutschland ist. Das Etikett muss weg.”
- cccix “die blonde Deutsche, unser Star in Hollywood”
- cccix “dass sie ein echter Star ist, merkt man [...] daran, dass einem sonst kaum Filme mit ihr einfallen [...] und man sie trotzdem zu kennen glaubt”
- cccix “de[n] eigenen Marktwert[ ]”
- cccxi “sie kann einem in diesem Moment ein wenig Leid tun. In Hollywoods brutaler Hackordnung ist bei allem berechtigtem Optimismus offenkundig, wie weit Diane Krüger [...] davon entfernt ist, einen der oberen Ränge in der Hierarchie zu bekleiden.”
- cccxi “Kritiker [...] werfen [ihr vor], sie sei ebenso schön wie farblos”
- cccxi “ihre Leistungen als Aktrice [sind] alles andere als unumstritten”
- cccxi “Diane Kruger vit son métier avec intensité et passion [...] Alors que sa carrière décollait, elle n’a jamais abandonné en chemin celle qui s’était battue pour en faire le rôle titre de son film. [...] Depuis, est-elle davantage prise au sérieux. [...] Comme si on avait enfin compris que derrière sa cinégenie parfaite, son charme digne des héroïnes hitchcockiennes des années cinquante, il y avait une actrice de chair, de sang et de feu.”
- cccxi “?Allemande française de coeur”
- cccxi “Diane Kruger: française de cœur”
- cccxi “Côté Hexagone, elle a réussi à se faire un nom grâce à une filmographie exigeante et populaire, qui rappelle celle de Romy Schneider.”
- cccxi “Rendez-vous pris pour 17 heures, c’est avec une précision toute germanique qu’elle nous appelle à 17h01”
- cccxi “Troja [...] ist ein unterhaltsames und handfestes Popcorn-Event, dem man einige Längen und Pathos-schwangere Dialoge gerne verzeiht.”
- cccxi “blöd wirkt [...] diese [...] Helena, wenn sie zerknirscht tut, wenn sie verschämt in die Kamera lächelt: ‘Alles ist meine Schuld nur, ich weiß es ja, gebt mich zurück, dann ist Troja schnell wieder quitt mit den Griechen’. So viel geheuchelte Naivität war selten im Kino.”
- cccxi hochmütige Schöne, sondern als [...] ganz reale”
- cccxi “Je lui ai donné ce que j’ai pu d’humanité en d’intensité. Sur le papier, elle n’est past très sympathique: elle a quand même sacrifié tout son peuple par amour. J’ai essayé de [...] la montrer malheureuse dans sa cage dorée.”
- cccxi “am Ende ging es nicht [...] um das schauspielerische Talent, sondern um das Aussehen”
- cccxi “ein super Sprungbrett”
- cccxi “Ich möchte eine respektierte Schauspielerin sein und hoffe, dass ich weitere herausfordernde Rollen bekomme. Auf keinen Fall will ich das hübsch anzusehende Kino-Girl sein.”
- cccxi “deutsche Opernsängerin”
- cccxi “Quand j’ai lu le scénario, j’étais persuadée qu’il n’y avait que moi qui pouvait l’incarner et pas seulement [...] parce que je suis Allemande. [...] C’était comme s’il avait été écrit pour moi [...] Je pouvais m’identifier à tout ce qu’elle faisait, à sa volonté, son obstination. Je suis un peu comme ça dans la vie, je peux m’imaginer faire ce qu’elle fait.”
- cccxi “wie die heilige Jungfrau Maria ist die Sopranistin inszeniert. Mit ihrem goldenen Haar und ihrem roten Samtumhang bildet sie den einzigen Glanzpunkt in der kargen schneebedeckten Landschaft.”
- cccxi “auch fehlt es an einer wirklich starken Frauenrolle, um die Feminismus-Ode angemessen zu untermauern. Dass die Figur der Anna Holtz, der ein leichter Hang zur Klischeelastigkeit nicht abzusprechen ist, aber [...] blass und fleischlos bleibt, ist allerdings allein die Schuld des uninspirierten Drehbuchs, und keinesfalls die von Diane Kruger [...] [die] liefert hier nämlich die stärkste Performance ihrer [...] Karriere ab.”
- cccxi “Filme wie ‘Copying Beethoven’ [...] machen sie nicht für’s Geld”.
- cccxi “jede Zeile haben wir analysiert”
- cccxi “stören”

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- ccccxxiii “so deutsch wie dieser Scotch”
- ccccxxiv “Es gibt keine Dietrich, es gibt keine Riefenstahl, es gibt nur [...] von Hammersmark!”
- ccccxxv “wenn man bedenkt, was Frauenrollen in Tarantinos Männerfilmen an Glanz und Stolz verbreitet haben [...] dann wähnt man sich angesichts von Krugers Blässe im falschen Film”
- ccccxxvi “das Spiel von Diane Kruger [...] wirkt mitunter arg hölzern – was doppelt ins Gewicht fällt, weil der deutsche Hollywood-Export ausgerechnet einen Kinostar verkörpert.”
- ccccxxvii “künstlich”
- ccccxxviii “gestelzt”
- ccccxxix “einen unüberhörbaren Ami-Akzent hat”
- cccxli “verräterische Nutte”
- cccxlii “in die rechte untere Innentasche meines Mantels greifen”
- cccxliii “und mir geben was sie darin finden”
- cccxliiii “Was jetzt, Oberst?”
- cccxliiii “was sich das deutsche Kino bis heute nicht traut: Den toten Hitler zu zeigen, sein Gesicht und damit den Mythos selbst zu versehren, den untoten Wiedergänger der Geschichte sterben zu lassen, das tut dieser Film.”
- cccxliiii “Diane a la même origine et l’âge exact du rôle. Marie-Antoinette, c’est elle, c’est une évidence.”
- cccxliiii “Qu’avez vous à pleurnicher? [...] Je serais bien tôt de retour.”
- cccxliiii “Je voulais tellement ce départ. Je ne voulais jamais quelque chose si fortement. J’ai souffert une mortification sans précédent.”
- cccxliiii “Je n’ai besoin de rien! Ni de personnel! Laissez-moi seule!”
- cccxliiii “Diane Krugers Marie Antoinette ist die melodramatische Heroine par excellence. Und genau so spielt sie die Deutsche: expressiv, theatralisch, posenhaft. Ihre Performance ist fantastisch, intensiv und voll hintergründiger Bedeutung.”
- cccxliiii “die Französische Revolution aus einer weiblichen, proletarischen Perspektive innerhalb des Apparats Versailles: Schon in der Anlage verschränkt Jacquot verschiedene Diskurse der Macht, der Sexualität und der Repräsentation.”
- cccxliiii “cette figure est absolument nôtre: c’est cette reine-là que l’on a vu resurgir voici une quinzaine d’années dans un fracas de publications, de films, d’expositions, d’imageries et de gadgets.”
- cccxliiii “Diane Kruger en reine charismatique brisée est brillante.”
- cccxliiii “Diane Kruger incarne avec brio la perverse narcissique dans toute sa splendeur ... et son horreur.”
- cccxliiii “les meilleurs films que j’ai fait, c’est [...] en France”



## Conclusion

The new generation of actresses examined in this thesis has provided a major contribution to the revival of German cinema in the 2000s. Both individually and collectively Nina Hoss, Sandra Hüller, Sibel Kekilli and Diane Kruger have portrayed interesting and complex female characters in films which often critically engage with their social roles. These individuals have therefore become key players, not only in contemporary German and international art films, but also increasingly in films with a wider audience appeal. Moreover, their roles broadly correspond to four dominant production trends within 2000s German cinema. On the more commercial side of the spectrum are glossy, high-budget historical dramas targeting international audiences, and 'relationship comedies' aimed at indigenous viewers, which emulate the tried and tested formulas of the 1990s German genre cinema. While the German and international art house circuit, on the other hand, has welcomed the socially critical Berlin School movement as well as the proliferation of films made by Turkish German filmmakers, offering fresh representations of the experiences and lives of migrants and their descendants in Germany.

Significantly, neither the high-profile historical dramas nor the recent 'relationship comedies' have distinguished themselves through particularly innovative or progressive female characters. German cinema's recent bias towards films with a historical setting suggests that the growing temporal distance to the Nazi period and the GDR makes it easier for filmmakers to address these difficult time periods. But my analysis of the World War II drama *A Woman in Berlin* has demonstrated that while it seeks to provide insights into the atrocities of warfare from an alternative, female perspective through Nina Hoss's protagonist, the director's initial attempt at value neutrality, prevents viewer engagement with the film. However, it is *A Woman in Berlin's* conciliatory ending, which contrasts with the overall detached and observational tone of the film, that highlights most strongly the problems inherent in narrativising, dramatising or simplifying complex historical events. In common with its more successful generic predecessors *Downfall* and *The Lives of Others*, *A Woman in Berlin* neglects the political preconditions and systemic nature of totalitarianism, genocide or state surveillance in favour of a melodramatic, romanticised tale of individuals' fates to maximise box-office appeal.

'Relationship comedies' with a contemporary setting, such as *What a Man*, which

centre on the life experience of young women and men today, have greater potential to engage with prevalent gender images in contemporary Germany. Unfortunately, neither the representation of Sibel Kekilli's character nor her antagonist do justice to contemporary young German women, either reducing them to the function of romantic partners or vilifying them as overly ambitious 'businesswomen'. However, the fact that *What a Man* depicts masculinity in crisis indicates a shift in the understanding of masculinity and femininity in Germany, hinting at the potential of 'relationship comedies' of the new millennium to offer more progressive gender images than their predecessors from the 1990s.

The two production trends to offer a more profound engagement with the situation of women in contemporary Germany both fall within the art film spectrum: the works of Turkish-German filmmakers such as Fatih Akin on the one hand and the Berlin School on the other. The female protagonists of their films are frequently confronted with pressing issues within German society today such as the ramifications of reunification and a changing economic order, gender equality and the question of migration and mingling of cultures.

Thus Sibel Kekilli's protagonist in *Head-On* provides insights into the life experience of Turkish-German women who are part of Germany's largest migrant group, and the film was enthusiastically embraced by audiences. Unlike earlier filmic representations of migrants, the cinema of the affected, the female characters of Turkish-German filmmakers like Akin and Thomas Arslan are no longer silently suffering victims, but women seeking to shape their own lives, their identity being informed by two cultures rather than by an outright rejection of Turkish culture as restrictive or conservative. The press coverage of Kekilli, which for a long time reduced her to her Turkish origins, demonstrates that the process of accepting Turkish migrants into German society is both slow and cumbersome. However, the actress's subsequent successful career and the growing number of positive representations in recent films and TV are indicative of the increasing acknowledgement and normalisation of the Turkish diaspora in Germany's midst.

The films made by Berlin School directors, such as Christian Petzold's *Yella* and *Barbara*, or by filmmakers emulating their observational approach and distinct visual style, such as *Madonnas* and *Brownian Movement*, frequently centre on female characters through which they explore the personal and professional lives of German women. A recurring issue in these films is the persistent female inequality in the workplace and in relationships due to mental and institutional barriers proffered by the problematic German ideal of motherhood according to which the mother is to devote herself entirely to the child, whereas a mother

who works or pursues her own's interest is branded a 'Rabenmutter'. Hüller's successful working mother in *Brownian Movement*, a film that explores female sexuality rather than lamenting gender inequality, lives in Belgium, suggesting that compared to its European neighbours, Germany has a lot to catch up on regarding equal working opportunities for women.

My research into the history of female representation in German cinema has shown that a number of Hoss's, Kekilli's and Hüller's films continue a historical tradition of employing melodramatic conventions in order to illuminate positions of female subjectivity, which goes back to the Weimar Street films of the 1920s. *The Heart is a Dark Forest*, *Madonnas* and *Head-On* all draw on melodramatic narrative structures and tropes, which are used to highlight the discontents of female existence in a male-dominated, oppressive relationship or society or to problematise the restriction of female identity to the role of mother. However, the films use melodramatic conventions in different ways: *Head-On* openly embraces a melodramatic *mise-en-scène* of visual and aural excess as well as sensational plot developments and contrivances such as murder, exile, near-death and redemption that allow viewers both to immerse themselves into the heroine's suffering and be entertained by the dramatic action. *The Heart is a Dark Forest* and *Madonnas*, on the other hand, approach central thematic concerns and representational modes of melodrama in a more self-conscious way. *Madonnas* consistently denies viewers identification with its transgressive heroine, neglecting to employ the female vantage point it provides to explore the reasons for Rita's struggle with motherhood and her radical pursuit of personal and sexual independence and mobility. *The Heart is a Dark Forest* largely renounces a displacement of the heroine's conflict onto the *mise-en-scène*, instead directly addressing her qualms with her stifling existence as stay-at-home mother in the dialogues, and the film ends with Marie's resolute, shocking rejection of the mother role.

With *The Heart is a Dark Forest*, Nina Hoss has also been part of a film that, while not immediately related to the Berlin School movement, is alert to outmoded gender images and the family model of the single male breadwinner that are still common in Germany. The film testifies to renewed efforts of feminist writers and artists to encourage a more timely understanding of male and female roles in contemporary Germany by highlighting the suffering of a woman reduced to the housewife and mother role, which is presented as unfulfilling, as well as by suggesting that gender equality can only be achieved if men and women endorse it in equal measure.

Hoss's films *Yella* and *Barbara* explore the ramifications of German unification from a female point of view. *Barbara* comments on the discrepancies between eastern and western Germany regarding female equality, highlighting the GDR's equal opportunities for women as a positive legacy of East Germany. *Yella* pays tribute to women's mobility and adaptability in the face of the incisive socio-economic changes and hardship following reunification, highlighting the experience of social uprooting and unscrupulousness of neo-liberal capitalism eastern Germans saw themselves confronted with.

The Berlin School thereby continues the tradition of a flourishing of German cinema at times of profound social change or crisis that began with the cinema of the Weimar Republic and continued with the New German Cinema of the 1970s. Both decades produced films in which central female characters faced social or personal problems that reflected the situation of Germans, or German women, as a whole: the progressive social climate of the Weimar Republic prompted a rethinking of gender roles, while the women characters of the New German Cinema reflected the advent of second wave feminism and the ways the country's Nazi past continued to impact on Germans' lives. Significantly, both the New German Cinema's and the Berlin School most emblematic performers are women, indicating that the stories of Hanna Schygulla's and Nina Hoss's characters are deemed better suited to illustrate burning social changes or problems, their responses to these challenges being more interesting, powerful or revealing than that of a male character would be.

Marlene Dietrich, Hanna Schygulla and Nina Hoss also share a stilted, non-naturalistic acting style, and a cold, aloof screen persona that is central to their embodiments of iconic German women, allowing them to counteract common filmic representations of female characters as 'only' sex objects or victims. Dietrich's address to the camera is knowing, ironic and playful, informed by both her experience as cabaret performer and the efforts of frequent collaborator Josef von Sternberg to present the actress's person and body as a cinematic spectacle that made Dietrich the most famous and successful incarnation of German femininity abroad. Schygulla's and Hoss's performance style and screen personas are informed by the Brechtian tenets of epic theatre and the alienation effect, highlighting the historical continuities in actor training in Germany. Their performances are key contributions to their films' social critique, since their acting style imbues their characters with a notable strength and dignity in moments of crisis or defeat. In portraying women who refuse to comply with socially sanctioned female roles, they expose these roles as limiting, oppressive or stifling.



My analyses of some of the actresses' most acclaimed performances in detail has also thrown into relief a number of key issues within the study of film acting. Hoss's debut film *A Girl Called Rosemarie* for example draws attention to the different factors film theorists consider when evaluating film performance, namely the actor's appearance and his or her employment of body and voice on the one hand, and other components of the medium of film such as framing, editing and costume design on the other. When enquiring to which extent the film actor is in control of their own performance, a central issue within the study of screen acting, the account of Sandra Hüller has been particularly useful. While the myriad external influences on film performance have discouraged scholars from investigating the film actor's work, Hüller has insisted on the importance of her agency as a film actress. Her account of the craft film acting encourages a closer investigation of the actor's preparation, as well as how the specific circumstances of the filming process, including the relationship between actor and director, affects their performance. This is necessary if we are to develop a more differentiated account of film acting that goes beyond the reductive and dismissive conceptions of film performance as an externally controlled process dictated by directors or technology.

While Hüller's conscious pursuit of acting challenges has repeatedly led her to idiosyncratic characters, whose experience cannot be generalised, a number of performers studied in this thesis, have assumed a key function in representing a 'typical' German woman or Germany itself in periods of social change or upheaval. Marlene Dietrich's Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel* represented the typical emancipated female of the cosmopolitan, exuberant Weimar Germany, and Hildegard Knef's rubble women and Romy Schneider's Sissi embodied the hope for a benevolent and pacifistic Germany after the terrors of the Nazi regime. Schygulla's Maria Braun was the personification of Germany's blind materialism and inability to come to terms with this Nazi past, and Hoss's Yella is representative of many Germans struggling to internalise the flexibility and ruthlessness demanded by the globalised economy and neo-liberalism of the new millennium. However, five years after *Yella*, Hoss played once again an eastern German woman in a film which, in looking back at recent German history, arrives at a more positive, idealist formulation of what should be the guiding principles of German society. *Barbara's* critical yet sympathetic representation of the GDR raises questions about the status of personal freedom, solidarity, welfare and gender equality in a contemporary capitalist Germany. Hoss's Barbara unites both East and West German values within her person, whereby the film proposes an understanding of German national

identity that takes in the legacies of both German states.

While Dietrich, Knef, Schneider, Schygulla and Hoss came to represent Germany itself or the country's self-image, Sibel Kekilli was initially identified by the German media not as a 'typical' or average German woman but as a member of a minority group that is still understood as its 'Other', i.e. conservative and oppressive compared to German society at large, which considers itself to be more liberal and egalitarian. Having played Turkish-German characters struggling with their oppressive patriarchal family in *Head-On* and *When We Leave*, press coverage on these films conflated the actress with these characters. The media discourse around Kekilli highlights the role of immigrants in defining national characteristics, that is, the formation of national identity through denominating its opposite. Kekilli became part of the negotiation of national identity not only via her roles, but this identity was also mapped onto her public persona. The same applies to a number of actresses studied in this thesis, whose representation in their films and in the media highlights the ruptures and contradictions between ideal images or models of femininity and actual German women of their time.

The figure of Zarah Leander for example was marked by a constant tension between her representation as glamorous performer (both in her films and her capacity as actress) and her androgynous, 'exotic' appearance that made her popular with viewers on the one hand, and the need for her characters – even in her more ambiguous, less openly propagandistic films – to ultimately fulfil the role of the model housewife and mother dictated by Nazi ideology. Similarly, Romy Schneider's incarnation of the sweet, innocent princess figure in the *Sissi* films proved such a wholesome figure of identification for German viewers that her move to France and the more audacious, complex, and sometimes promiscuous characters she played in French films were considered a betrayal, causing her representation in the German media in the 1960s and 1970s to be dominated by suspicion or hostility. In the same vein, Marlene Dietrich's image changed from celebrated German star abroad to that of a renegade abandoning her country as it transpired that she refused to endorse Nazi politics, the state-controlled press dismissing her confident, worldly femininity as 'un-German'.

Although their careers are separated by some seventy years, there is a notable parallel between Marlene Dietrich and Diane Kruger. Their international film careers are founded on portrayals of broadly European, rather than German characters, the fact that they transcend national specificity being the prerequisite of their success. However, while Dietrich's German origins were soon subsumed in her cosmopolitan persona, Kruger's identity has remained a

key element of her star image created by the international press. She is frequently said to embody German national characteristics or taken as proof of the validity of national stereotypes, whereby her persona contributes to common perceptions of 'Germanness' abroad. This also applies to her single performance of a distinctly German character in a US film: while *Inglourious Basterds* takes a fresh, irreverent approach to history, Kruger's most celebrated performance in a US film to date shows once more that the most popular, consumable image of Germans and Germany abroad is one that evokes its totalitarian past.

Media discourse on Kruger also reflects Germany's difficult relationship with its film stars. This is reflected in the persistent distinction between supposedly vain, hollow and untalented celebrities who are seen as part of or pawns within the harsh, cutthroat, entirely mercantilist Hollywood film industry (Kruger being frequently being identified as one of them), and skilled performers who exhibit their craft on the stage such as Nina Hoss or Sandra Hüller. Considering the German media discourse on Marlene Dietrich and Romy Schneider, as well as the domestic reception of Kruger suggests that underlying the suspicious attitude towards stardom is the fear of losing these performers to another country since the German film industry cannot boast with a star system which builds up actors and raises them to star status, and actors command less power with the industry than US film stars.

The representation of Kruger in both the German and international press also supports key findings of star studies. Her public image has been constructed so as to allow readers and viewers to simultaneously *identify with* her experiences and *aspire to* her lifestyle, with press coverage of Kruger reproducing and affirming dominant conservative social conventions and attitudes relating to romantic relationships, gender roles and ideals of beauty (in both the German and English-speaking press). Kruger's public image, of which her physical beauty and past modelling career are key elements, points to a central paradox within her career trajectory: the actress's good looks are both a prerequisite of her success and a limitation, barring access to more interesting or challenging roles and highlighting the scarcity of complex or demanding young female characters in American and international mainstream films.

While Hoss and Hüller have starred in a number of socially critical low-budget films that explore the challenges German women face in their private and working lives, Kruger, in order to further her Hollywood credentials, initially opted for supporting roles in a number of US mainstream films such as *Troy* or the *National Treasure* productions in which her beauty

or appearance is foregrounded over the character's interiority or personal development. However, the critical recognition Kruger has gained for more recent performances in films such as *Inglourious Basterds* and *Farewell, My Queen* supports her two-pronged strategy of pursuing roles in mainstream as well as art films.

Hoss's, Hüller's and Kekilli's role choices equally testify to the actresses' taking control of their careers. Sibel Kekilli initially struggled to leave typecasting as a German-Turk behind, but her roles in *What a Man* and *Games of Thrones* are important steps towards establishing herself with both the German and international film and TV industries. Sandra Hüller's most recent films *Above Us Only Sky* and *Finsterworld* suggest that she is increasingly successful in reconciling her pursuit of demanding roles with films that attract a greater viewer interest and are thus more commercially viable. Finally, Nina Hoss's distinct screen persona has begun to shift away from that of the detached, emotionally mute loner to more optimistic, wholesome figures. This demonstrates that German cinema has afforded her the opportunity to play a range of multifaceted, emblematic female characters, allowing her to evolve as an actress as her career progresses. Nina Hoss, Sandra Hüller, Sibel Kekilli and Diane Kruger thus have greatly enriched German cinema of the new millennium as well as serving as ambassadors of that revived national cinema and offering timely representations of 'Germanness' at home and abroad.

# Filmography

## Selected Filmography Marlene Dietrich

*Angel* (1937) [Film]. Directed by Ernst Lubitsch. USA: Paramount Pictures.

*Blonde Venus* (1932) [Film]. Directed by Josef von Sternberg. USA: Paramount Pictures.

*Der Blaue Engel (The Blue Angel)* (1930). [Film] Directed by Josef von Sternberg. Germany: Universum Films.

*Desire* (1936) [Film]. Directed by Josef von Sternberg. USA: Paramount Pictures.

*Destry Rides Again* (1939) [Film]. Directed by George Marshall. USA: Universal Pictures.

*Knight without Armour* (1937) [Film]. Directed by Jacques Feyder. UK: London Film Productions.

*Morocco* (1930) [Film]. Directed by Josef von Sternberg. USA: Paramount Pictures.

*Schöner Gigolo, armer Gigolo (Just a Gigolo)* (1978) [Film]. Directed by David Hemmings. Germany: Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Leduan Film, Sender Freies Berlin (SFB).

*Shanghai Express* (1932) [Film]. Directed by Josef von Sternberg. USA: Paramount Pictures.

*The Devil Is a Woman* (1935) [Film]. Directed by Josef von Sternberg. USA: Paramount Pictures.

*The Scarlet Empress* (1934) [Film]. Directed by Josef von Sternberg. USA: Paramount Pictures.

*Touch of Evil* (1958) [Film]. Directed by Orson Welles. USA: Universal International Pictures (UI).

*Witness for the Prosecution* (1957) [Film]. Directed by Billy Wilder. USA: Edward Small Productions.

## Selected Filmography Hanna Schygulla

*Ansichten eines Clowns (The Clown)* (1976) [Film]. Directed by Wojtech Jasny. Germany: Filmaufbau, Heinz Angermeyer GmbH, Independent Film, MFG-Film.

*Auf der anderen Seite (The Edge of Heaven)* (2007) [Film]. Directed by Fatih Akin. Germany/Turkey: Anka Film, Dorje Film.

*Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant (The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant)* (1972) [Film]. Directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Germany: Filmverlag der Autoren, Tango Film.

*Die Ehe der Maria Braun (The Marriage of Maria Braun)* (1979) [Film]. Directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Germany: Albatros Filmproduktion, Fengler Films, Filmverlag der Autoren.

*Die Fälschung (Circle of Deceit)* (1981) [Film]. Directed by Volker Schlöndorff. Germany: Argos Films, Artémis Productions, Bioskop Film.

*Falsche Bewegung (Wrong Move)* (1975) [Film]. Directed by Wim Wenders. Germany: Albatros Produktion, Solaris Film, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR).

*Fontane Effi Briest/Fontane Effi Briest oder Viele, die eine Ahnung haben von ihren Möglichkeiten und ihren Bedürfnissen und trotzdem das herrschende System in ihrem Kopf akzeptieren durch ihre Taten und es somit festigen und durchaus bestätigen (Fontane Effi Briest or Many People Who Are Aware of Their Own Capabilities and Needs Just Acquiesce to the Prevailing System in Their Thoughts and Deeds, Thereby Confirming and Reinforcing It)* (1974) [Film]. Directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Germany: Tango Film.

*Heller Wahn (Sheer Madness)* (1983) [Film]. Directed by Margarete von Trotta. Germany: Bioskop Film, Les Films du Losange, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR).

*Katzelmacher* (1969) [Film]. Directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Germany: Antitheater.

*Liebe ist kälter als der Tod (Love is Colder Than Death)*(1969) [Film]. Directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Germany: Antitheater.

*Lili Marleen* (1981) [Film]. Directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Germany: Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), CIP Filmproduktion GmbH, Rialto Film, Roxy Film.

*Passion* (1982) [Film]. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. France/Switzerland: Sara Films, Sonimage, Films A2, Film et Video Productions, Société Suisse de Radiodiffusion et Télévision (SSR).

*Storia Di Pierra (The Story of Pierra)* (1983) [Film]. Directed by Marco Ferreri. Italy/France/Germany: Faso Film, Sara Films, Ascot Film.

*Werckmeister harmóniák (Werckmeister Harmonies )* (2000) [Film]. Directed by Béla Tarr, Ágnes Hranitzky. Hungary/Italy/Germany/France: 13 Productions, Arte, Fondazione Montecinemaverita, Goëss Film, Magyar Mozgóképek Alapítvány, Magyar Televízió Művelődési Főszerkesztőség (MTV) (I), Nemzeti Kulturális Alapprogram, Országos Rádió és Televízió Testület (ORTT), RAI 3, Studio Babelsberg, Von Vietinghoff Filmproduktion (VVF), Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF).

### **Selected Filmography Zarah Leander**

*Ave Maria* (1953) [Film]. Directed by Alfred Braun. Germany: Divina Film.

*Das Herz der Königin (The Heart of a Queen)* (1940) [Film]. Directed by Carl Froelich. Germany: Carl Froelich-Film GmbH, Universum Film (UFA).

*Der Blaufuchs (The Blue Fox)* (1938) [Film]. Directed by Victor Turjansky. Germany: Universum Film (UFA).

*Der Weg ins Freie (The Way to Freedom)* (1941) [Film]. Directed by Rolf Hansen. Germany: Tonfilmstudio Carl Froelich, Universum Film (UFA).

*Die große Liebe (The Great Love)* (1942) [Film]. Directed by Rolf Hansen. Germany: Universum Film (UFA).

*Es war eine rauschende Ballnacht (It Was a Gay Ballnight)* (1939) [Film]. Directed by Carl Froelich. Germany: Tonfilmstudio Carl Froelich, Universum Film (UFA).

*Gabriela* (1950) [Film]. Directed by Géza von Cziffra. Germany: Real-Film GmbH.

*Heimat (Homeland)* (1938) [Film]. Directed by Carl Froelich. Germany: Tonfilmstudio Carl Froelich, Universum Film (UFA).

*La Habanera* (1937) [Film]. Directed by Detlef Sierck. Germany: Universum Film (UFA).

*Premiere* (1937) [Film]. Directed by Géza von Bolváry. Austria: Gloria-Film.

*Zu neuen Ufern (To New Shores)* (1937) [Film]. Directed by Detlef Sierck. Germany: Universum Film (UFA).

### **Selected Filmography Hildegard Knef**

*Alraune (Mandragore (UK)/Unnatural (USA))* (1952) [Film]. Directed by Arthur Maria Rabenalt. West Germany: Carlton Films, Deutsche Styria Film GmbH.

*Das große Liebesspiel (And So to Bed)* (1963) [Film]. Directed by Alfred Weidenmann. West Germany: Teamfilm Produktion.

*Der Mann, der sich verkaufte (The Man Who Sold Himself)* (1959) [Film]. Directed by Josef von Báky. Germany: Filmaufbau.

*Die Dreigroschenoper (Three Penny Opera)* (1963) [Film]. Directed by Wolfgang Staudte. France/Germany: Kurt Ulrich Film GmbH, C.E.C. Films.

*Die Mörder sind unter uns (The Murderers Are Among Us (UK)/Murderers Among Us (USA))* (1946) [Film]. Directed by Wolfgang Staudte. Germany: Deutsche Film (DEFA).

*Die Sünderin (The Sinner)* (1951) [Film]. Directed by Willi Forst. Germany: Deutsche Styria Film GmbH, Junge Film-Union Rolf Meyer.

*Diplomatic Courier* (1952) [Film]. Directed by Henry Hathaway. USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

*Fedora* (1978) [Film]. Directed by Billy Wilder. France/Germany: Bavaria Atelier, Lorimar, NF Geria Filmgesellschaft GmbH, Société Française de Production (SFP).

*Geständnis unter vier Augen (Confession under Four Eyes)* (1954) [Film]. Directed by Andre Michel. West Germany: Deutsche London-Film.

*Jeder stirbt für sich allein (Everyone dies Alone)* (1976) [Film]. Directed by Alfred Vohrer. Germany: Lisa-Film, Constantin Film, Terra Filmkunst.

*Lulu* (1962) [Film]. Directed by Rolf Thiele. Austria: Vienna Film.

*Nachts auf den Straßen (Nights on the Road (UK)/The Mistress (USA))* (1952) [Film]. Directed by Rudolf Jugert. Germany: Neue Deutsche Filmgesellschaft (NDF), Intercontinental Film GmbH, Bavaria Film.

*The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1952) [Film]. Directed by Henry King, Roy Ward Baker. USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

### **Selected Filmography Romy Schneider**

*Boccaccio '70* (1962) [Film]. Directed by Vittorio De Sica, Federico Fellini, Mario Monicelli and Luchino Visconti. Italy/France: Cineriz, Concordia Compagnia Cinematografica, Francinex, Gray-Film.

*Christine* (1958) [Film]. Directed by Pierre Gaspard-Huit. France/Italy: Spéva Films, Play Art, Rizzoli Film.

*César et Rosalie (Cesar and Rosalie)* (1972) [Film]. Directed by Claude Sautet. France/Italy/Germany: Fildebroc, Mega Film, Paramount-Orion Filmproduktion.

*Good Neighbor Sam* (1964) [Film]. Directed by David Swift. USA: Columbia Pictures Corporation, David Swift Productions.

*Gruppenbild mit Dame (Group Portrait with a Lady)* (1977) [Film]. Directed by Aleksandar Petrovic. France/Germany: Cinema 77 4.KG Berlin, Les Productions Artistes Associé, Stella Film, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF).

*Katia (Adorable Sinner)* (1959) [Film]. Directed by Robert Siodmak. France: Spéva Films.

*La Banquière (The Lady Banker)* (1980) [Film]. Directed by Francis Girod. France: Partner's Productions, France 3 (FR 3), Gaumont, Société Nouvelle Cinévog, Société Française de Production (SFP).



- La Passante du Sans-Souci (The Passerby)* (1982) [Film]. Directed by Jacques Rouffio. France/Germany: Elephant Production, Films A2, CCC-Filmkunst.
- La Piscine (Swimming Pool)* (1969) [Film]. Directed by Jacques Deray. Italy/France: Société Nouvelle de Cinématografie (SNC).
- Le Procès (The Trial)* (1962) [Film]. Directed by Orson Welles. France/Germany/Italy: Paris-Europa Productions, Hisa-Film, Finanziara Cinematografica Italiana (FICIT).
- Le train (The Last Train)* (1973) [Film]. Directed by Pierre Granier-Defierre. France/Italy: Lira Films, Capitolina Produzioni Cinematografiche.
- Le vieux fusil (The Old Gun)* (1975) [Film]. Directed by Robert Enrico. France/Germany: Les Productions Artistes Associé, Mercure Productions, TIT Filmproduktion GmbH.
- Les choses de la vie (The Things of Life (US))* (1970) [Film]. Directed by Claude Sautet. France/Italy/Switzerland: Fida Cinematografica, Lira Films, Sonocam.
- L'important c'est d'aimer (The Main Thing Is To Love)* (1975) [Film]. Directed by Andrzej Zulawski. France/Italy/Germany: Albina Productions S.a.r.l., Rizzoli Film, TIT Filmproduktion GmbH.
- Ludwig* (1972) [Film]. Directed by Luchino Visconti. Italy/France/Germany: Megafilm, Cinétel, Dieter Geissler Filmproduktion, Divina-Film.
- Mädchen in Uniform (Girls in Uniform)* (1958) [Film]. Directed by Géza von Radványi. Germany/France: Central Cinema Company Film (CCC), Les Films Modernes (I).
- Mädchenjahre einer Königin (Viktoria in Dover)* (1954) [Film]. Directed by Ernst Marischka. Austria: Erma-Film, Sie Verling.
- Mado* (1976) [Film]. Directed by Claude Sautet. France/Italy/Germany: Italgema Roma, Les Films de la Boétie, Terra-Filmkunst.
- Max et les ferrailleurs (Max and the Junkmen)* (1971) [Film]. Directed by Claude Sautet. France/Italy: Fida Cinematografica, Lira Films, Sonocam.
- Monpti (Love from Paris)* (1957) [Film]. Directed by Helmut Käutner. Germany: Neue Deutsche Filmgesellschaft (NDF), WFA.
- Plein soleil (Blazing Sun)* (UK)/*Purple Noon* (USA) (1960) [Film]. Directed by René Clément. France/Italy: Robert et Raymond Hakim, Paris Film, Paritalia, Titanus.
- Sissi* (1955) [Film]. Directed by Ernst Marischka. Austria: Erma-Film.
- Sissi – Die junge Kaiserin (Sissi: The Young Empress)* (1956) [Film]. Directed by Ernst Marischka. Austria: Erma-Film.

*Sissi – Schicksalsjahre einer Kaiserin (Sissi: The Fateful Years of an Empress)* (1957) [Film]. Directed by Ernst Marischka. Austria: Erma-Film.

*Trio Infernal (The Infernal Trio)* (1974) [Film]. Directed by Francis Girod. France/Germany/Italy: Belstar Productions, Film 66 - Fox Europe Paris, Lira Films, Ozeania Produzioni Internazionali Cinematografiche, TTT Filmproduktion GmbH.

*Une histoire simple (A Simple Story)* (1978) [Film]. Directed by Claude Sautet. France/Germany: France 3 Cinéma, Renn Productions, Rialto Film, Sara Films, Société Française de Production (SFP).

*Wenn der weiße Flieder wieder blüht (When the White Lilacs Bloom Again)* (1953) [Film]. Directed by Hans Deppe. Germany: Berolina.

*What's New, Pussycat?* (1965) [Film]. Directed by Clive Donner, Richard Talmadge. France/USA: Famous Artists Productions, Famartists Productions S.A.

## Filmography Nina Hoss

*A Most Wanted Man* (2014) [Film]. Directed by Anton Corbijn. UK/USA/Germany: The Ink Factory, Potboiler Productions, Amusement Park Films, Demarest Films, Film4, Senator Film Produktion.

*Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin (A Woman in Berlin)* (2008) [Film]. Directed by Max Färberböck. Germany: Constantin Film Produktion, ZDF.

*Barbara* (2012) [Film]. Directed by Christian Petzold. Germany: Schramm Film Koerner & Weber, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), Arte.

*Das Herz ist ein dunkler Wald (The Heart is a Dark Forest)* (2007). [Film] Directed by Nicolette Krebitz. Germany: X Filme Creative Pool.

*Der Vulkan (The Volcano)* (1999) [Film]. Directed by Ottokar Kunze. Germany: Lichtblick Film- und Fernsehproduktion.

*Die Frau des Anarchisten (The Anarchist's Wife)* (2009) [Film]. Directed by Marie Noelle and Peter Sehr. Germany, Spain, France: P'Artisan Filmproduktion GmbH, KV Entertainment, Zip Films, Ciné Boissière.

*Die weiße Massai (The White Masai)* (2005) [Film]. Directed by Johannes W. Betz. Germany: Constantin Film Produktion.

*Elementarteilchen (Atomised)* (2006) [Film]. Directed by Oskar Roehler. Germany: Medienfonds GFP.

*Fenster zum Sommer (Summer Window)* (2011) [Film]. Directed by Hendrik Handloegten. Germany:/Finland: Zentropa International, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF, Edith Film, Arte, YLE Teema, Day-for-Night Maria Köpf Filmproduktion.

*Gold* (2013) [Film]. Directed by Thomas Arslan. Germany: Schramm Film Koerner & Weber, Red Cedar Films, Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), ARD Degeto Film, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), Arte.

*Jerichow* (2008) [Film]. Directed by Christian Petzold. Germany: Schramm Film Körner & Weber.

*Leben mit Hannah (Hannah)* (2006) [Film]. Directed by Erica von Moeller. Germany: Arte.

*Nackt (Naked)* (2002) [Film]. Directed by Doris Dörrie. Germany: Constantin Film Produktion.

*Phoenix* (2014) [Film]. Directed by Christian Petzold. Germany: Schramm Film Körner & Weber, Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), Arte.

*Und keiner weint mir nach (And Nobody Weeps for Me)* (1996) [Film]. Directed by Joseph Vilsmaier. Germany: Lunaris Film.

*Wir sind die Nacht (We Are the Night)* (2010) [Film]. Directed by Dennis Gansel. Germany: Celluloid Dreams, Constantin Film Produktion Rat Pack Filmproduktion.

*Yella* (2007) [Film]. Directed by Christian Petzold. Germany: Schramm Film Körner & Weber.

### **Selected Teleography Nina Hoss**

'Schwestern'('Sisters'), *Bloch* (2002-13) [TV series]. Season 1 Episode 6. Directed by: Edward Berger. Date of original broadcast: 21 April 2002. Germany: ARD.

*Das Mädchen Rosemarie (A Girl Called Rosemarie)* (1996) [TV film]. Directed by Bernd Eichinger. Date of original broadcast: 13 December 1996. Germany: Sat.1.

*Die Geiseln von Costa Rica (The Hostages of Costa Rica)* (2000) [TV film]. Directed by Uwe Janson. Date of original broadcast: 27 January 2000. Germany: Pro7.

*Toter Mann (Something to Remind Me)* (2002) [TV film]. Directed by Christian Petzold. Date of original broadcast: 31 May 2002. Germany: ZDF.

*Wolfsburg* (2003) [TV film]. Directed by Christian Petzold. Date of original broadcast: 25 September 2003. Germany: Arte.

## Filmography Sandra Hüller

*Amour Fou* (2014) [Film]. Directed by Jessica Hausner. Austria/Luxembourg/Germany: Coop 99, Amour Fou Luxembourg, Essential Filmproduktion GmbH.

*Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin (A Woman in Berlin)* (2008) [Film]. Directed by Max Färberböck. Germany: Constantin Film Produktion, ZDF.

*Brownian Movement.* (2010) [Film] Directed by Nanouk Leopold. Netherlands/Germany/Belgium: Circe Films.

*Der Architekt (The Architect)* (2010). [Film]. Directed by Ina Weisse. Germany: Reverse Angle Production.

*Finsterworld* (2013) [Film]. Directed by Frauke Finsterwalder. Germany: Lhasa Films, Walker Worm Film, Arte, Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR).

*Fräulein Stinnes fährt um die Welt (Once Around the Globe)* [Film]. Directed by Erica von Moeller. Germany: Taglicht Media, Torus, Westdeutscher Rundfunk.

*Henri IV.* (2009) [Film]. Directed by Jo Baier. Germany/France/Austria/Spain: Ziegler Film & Company.

*Madonnen (Madonnas)* (2007) [Film]. Directed by Maria Speth. Germany: Pandora Filmproduktion.

*Requiem* (2006) [Film]. Directed by Hans-Christian Schmid. Germany: 23 | 5 Filmproduktion.

*Über uns das All (Above Us Only Sky)* (2011) [Film]. Directed by Jan Schomburg. Germany: Pandora Filmproduktion.

*Vergiss Mein Ich (Lose My Self)* (2014) [Film]. Directed by Jan Schomburg. Germany: Pandora Filmproduktion, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR).

## Selected Teleography Sandra Hüller

*Aghet – Ein Völkermord (Aghet)* (2010) [TV film]. Directed by Erich Friedler. . Date of original broadcast: 9 April 2010. Germany: Norddeutscher Runfunk, Trebitsch Entertainment.

‘Sucht’ (‘Addiction’), Season 6, Episode 4. *Der Kriminalist* (2006-) [TV series]. Directed by Filippos Tsitos. Date of original broadcast: 2 December 2011. Germany: Monaco Film GmbH.

## Filmography Sibel Kekilli

*Der letzte Zug (The Last Train)* (2006) [Film]. Directed by Joseph Vilsmaier and Dana Vávrová. Germany: Central Cinema Company Film (CCC), Diamant Film, Perathon Film-und Fernsehproduktions GmbH.

*Die Fremde (When We Leave)* (2010). [Film]. Directed by Feo Aladag. Germany: Independent Artists Filmproduktion, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (RBB), Arte.

*Eve Dönüş (Home Coming)* (2006) [Film]. Directed by Ömer Ugur. Greece/Turkey: Greek Film Center, Highway Productions, Limon Yapim, Max Productions, PPV Athens.

*Gegen die Wand (Head-On)* (2004) [Film]. Directed by Fatih Akin. Germany/Turkey: Wüste Filmproduktion.

*What a Man* (2011) [Film]. Directed by Matthias Schweighöfer. Germany: Fox International Productions, Pantaleon Films.

*Winterreise (Winter Journey)* (2006) [Film]. Directed by Hans Steinbichler. Germany: Arte, Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Dresbach-Schaefer- Quabeck, Wega Film, d.i.e. Film GmbH.

## Selected Teleography Sibel Kekilli

*Game of Thrones* (2011-) [TV series]. Created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. Date of original broadcast: 17 April 2011. USA: HBO.

*Gier (Greed)* (2010) [Two-part TV series]. Directed by Dieter Wedel. Date of original broadcast: 20 and 21 January 2010. Germany: ARD Degeto Film, Arte, Bavaria Film.

'Borowski und die Frau am Fenster', *Tatort* (1970-) [TV series]. Episode 812. Directed by Stephan Wagner. Date of original broadcast: 2 October 2011. Germany: Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR) for ARD.

'Borowski und der coole Hund', *Tatort* (1970-) [TV series]. Episode 842. Directed by Christian Alvarth. Date of original broadcast: 6 November 2011. Germany: NDR for ARD.

'Borowski und der freie Fall', *Tatort* (1970-) [TV series]. Episode 846. Directed by Eoin Moore. Date of original broadcast: 14 October 2012. Germany: NDR for ARD.

'Borowski und der brennende Mann', *Tatort* (1970-) [TV series]. Episode 873. Directed by Lars Kraume. Date of original broadcast: 12 May 2013. Germany: NDR for ARD.

'Borowski und der Engel', *Tatort* (1970-) [TV series]. Episode 892. Directed by Andreas Kleinert. Date of original broadcast: 29 December 2013. Germany: NDR for ARD.

'Borowski und das Meer', *Tatort* (1970-) [TV series]. Episode 906. Directed by Sabine Derflinger. Date of original broadcast: 13 March 2014. Germany: NDR for ARD.

'Borowski und der Himmel über Kiel', *Tatort* (1970-) [TV series]. Episode 933. Directed by Christian Schwachnow. Date of original broadcast: 25 January 2015. Germany: NDR for ARD.

## Filmography Diane Kruger

*Copying Beethoven* (2006) [Film]. Directed by Agnieszka Holland. USA/Germany/Hungary: Sidney Kimmel Entertainment, Myriad Pictures, VIP 2 Medienfonds, Eurofilm Stúdió, Anomaly Entertainment, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).

*Forces spéciales (Special Forces)* (2012) [Film]. Directed by Stéphane Rybojad. France: Easy Company, StudioCanal, Canal+, TPS Star, Banque Postale Image 4, A Plus Image 2, Sofica Manon.

*Goodbye, Bafana* (2007) [Film]. Directed by Bille August. Belgium/France/Germany/South Africa/Italy/UK/Luxemburg: Banana Films, Arsam International, Film Afrika Worldwide, Future Films, Thema Production, X-Filme Creative Pool.

*Inglourious Basterds* (2009) [Film]. Directed by Quentin Tarantino. USA/Germany: Universal Pictures, The Weinstein Company, A Band Apart, Studio Babelsberg, Visiona Romantica.

*Joyeux Noël (Merry Christmas)* (2005) [Film]. Directed by Christian Carion. France/Germany/UK/Belgium/Romania/Norway: Nord-Ouest Productions, Senator Film Produktion, The Bureau, Artémis Productions, Media Pro Pictures, TF1 Films Production, Les Productions de la Guéville.

*L'Âge des ténèbres (Days of Darkness)* (2007) [Film]. Directed by Denys Arcand. France/Canada: Cinémaginaire Inc., Mon Voisin Productions.

*Les adieux à la reine (Farewell, My Queen)* (2012) [Film]. Directed by Benoît Jacquot. France: GMT Productions, Les Films du Lendemain, France 3 Cinéma, Morena Films, Euro Media France, Invest Image.

*Mon Idole (Whatever You Say)* (2002) [Film]. Directed by Guillaume Canet. France: M6 Films, Pendrake Films, Nord-Ouest Productions, Mars Distribution, Sparkling, Caneo Films.

*National Treasure* (2004) [Film]. Directed by John Turteltaub. USA: Walt Disney Pictures, Jerry Bruckheimer Films, Junction Entertainment, Saturn Films.

*National Treasure 2: Book of Secrets* (2007) [Film]. Directed by John Turteltaub. USA: Walt Disney Pictures, Jerry Bruckheimer Films, Junction Entertainment, Saturn Films, Sparkler Entertainment, NT2 Productions.

*Pour elle (Anything for Her)* (2008) [Film]. Directed by Fred Cavayé. France Fidélité Films, Wild Bunch, TF1 Films Production, Jerico, TPS Star.

*The Host* (2013) [Film]. Directed by Andrew Niccol. USA: Chockstone Pictures, Nick Wechsler Productions, Silver Reel.

*The Hunting Party* (2007) [Film]. Directed by Richard Shepard. USA: Intermedia, The Weinstein Company, Cherry Road Films, Cherry Hill Productions, Jadran Film, QED International, Scout Film.

*Troy* (2004) [Film]. Directed by Wolfgang Petersen. USA: Warner Bros., Helena Productions, Latina Pictures, Radiant Productions, Plan B Entertainment, Nimar Studios.

*Un Plan Parfait (A Perfect Plan)* (2012) [Film]. Directed by Pascal Chaumeil. France: Quad Productions, TF1 Films Production, Scope Pictures, Les Productions du Ch'timi, Chaocorp Distribution Year dawn, Universal Pictures International.

*Unknown* (2011) [Film]. Directed by Jaume Collet-Serra. UK/France/Germany: Dark Castle Entertainment, Panda Productions Inc., Canal+, Horticus UK, Studio Babelsberg, TF1 Films Production.

*Wicker Park* (2004) [Film]. Directed by Paul McGuigan. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Lakeshore Entertainment.

### **Selected Teleography Diane Kruger**

*The Bridge* (2013-14) [TV series]. Created by Elwood Reid and Meredith Stiehm. Date of original broadcast: 10 July 2013. USA: FX Productions, Shine America.

*The Piano Player* (2002) [TV film]. Directed by Jean-Pierre Roux. UK/USA/Germany/Spain: American Video Films, Bauer Martinez Studios, Bladerealm Ltd., Film Afrika Worldwide, Splendid Pictures.

### **Other Films Cited**

*Aimee & Jaguar* (1999). [Film] Directed by Max Färberböck. Germany: Senator Film.

*Air Force One* (1997) [Film]. Directed by Wolfgang Petersen. USA:

*All That Heaven Allows* (1955) [Film]. Directed by Douglas Sirk. USA: Universal International Pictures.

*Almost Famous* (2000) [Film] Directed by Cameron Crowe. USA: Columbia Pictures, DreamWorks SKG, Vinyl Films.

*Amour* (2012) [Film]. Directed by Michael Haneke. France/Germany/Austria: Les Films du Losange, X-Filme Creative Pool, Wega Film, France 3 Cinéma, ARD Degeto Film, Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR).

*Autumn in New York* (2000) [Film]. Directed by Joan Chen. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Lakeshore Entertainment.

*Base-moi (Fuck me)* (2000) [Film]. Directed by Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi. France: Pan-Européenne, Canal+, Take One, Wild Bunch.

*Basic Instinct* (1992) [Film]. Directed by Paul Verhoeven. USA: Carolco Pictures, Canal+.

*Becoming Jane* (2007) [Film]. Directed by Julian Jarrold. UK/Ireland: HanWay Films, BBC Films, Ecosse Films, 2 Entertain, Blueprint Pictures.

*Belle de Jour* (1967) [Film]. Directed by Luis Buñuel. France: Robert et Raymond Hakim, Paris Film Productions, Five Film.

*Berlin 36* (2009) [Film]. Directed by Kaspar Heidelbach. Germany: Degeto Film.

*Carnival of Souls* (1962). Directed by Herk Harvey. USA: Harcourt Productions.

*Casablanca* (1942) [Film]. Directed by Michael Curtiz. USA: Warner Bros.

*Das Boot* (1981). [Film] Directed by Wolfgang Petersen. Germany: Bavaria Film.

*Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari (The Cabinet of Dr Caligari)* (1920) [Film]. Directed by Fritz Lang. Germany: Decla-Bioscop AG.

*Das Leben der Anderen (The Lives of Others)* (2006) [Film]. Directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. Germany: Wiedemann & Berg Filmproduktion, Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Arte.

*Das Wunder von Bern (The Miracle of Bern)* (2003) [Film]. Directed by Sönke Wortmann. Germany: Little Shark Entertainment GmbH, Senator Film Produktion.

*Dealer* (1999) [Film]. Directed by Thomas Arslan. Germany: Trans-Film, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF).

*Der Amerikanische Freund (The American Friend)* (1977) [Film]. Directed by Wim Wenders. Germany, France: Filmverlag der Autoren, Les Films du Losange, Moli Films.

*Der Baader Meinhof Komplex (The Baader Meinhof Complex)* (2008). [Film]. Directed by Uli Edel. Germany: Constantin Film Produktion.

*Der bewegte Mann (Maybe... Maybe not)* (1994) [Film]. Directed by Sönke Wortmann. Germany: Neue Constantin Film, Olga Film GmbH, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR).

*Der Förster vom Silberwald (The Forester of the Silver Wood)* (1954) [Film]. Directed by Alfons Stummer. Austria: Rondo Film.

*Der Himmel über Berlin (Wings of Desire)* (1987) [Film]. Directed by Wim Wenders. Germany: Road Movies Filmproduktion, Argos Films, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR).



*Der schöne Tag (A Fine Day)* (2001) [Film]. Directed by Thomas Arslan. Germany: Pickpocket Productions, Zero Film GmbH, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF).

*Der Untergang (Downfall)* (2004) [Film] Directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel. Germany: Constantin Film Produktion.

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