

**Storytelling and Survival in the “Murderer’s House”:  
Gender, Voice(lessness) and Memory in Helma Sanders-Brahms’  
*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter***

by

Rebecca Reed  
B.A., University of Victoria, 2003

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirement for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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### **ABSTRACT**

Helma Sanders-Brahms' film *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* is an important contribution to (West) German cinema and to the discourse of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or "the struggle to come to terms with the Nazi past" and arguably the first film of New German Cinema to take as its central plot a German woman's gendered experiences of the Second World War and its aftermath. In her film, *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*, Helma Sanders-Brahms uses a variety of narrative and cinematic techniques to give voice to the frequently neglected history of non-Jewish German women's war and post-war experiences.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family for without their support and encouragement  
I would never have finished it.  
Thank you.

Specifically, I would like to dedicate this study to my grandmother,  
Mary Morgan Reed (1915-2009) who, like Lene, survived hardships and war with a similar  
strength of character.

I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my niece Sophia Audrey Dickson – may you grow  
up to be a resilient woman who can always find her voice.

## Introduction

In February of 1980, Helma Sanders-Brahms' film *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* (*Germany, Pale Mother*) premiered at the 30<sup>th</sup> Berlin International Film Festival. In this (auto)biographical film, Sanders-Brahms recounts the story of her mother's gendered experiences of the "Third Reich,"<sup>1</sup> the Second World War, and the post-war years of reconstruction, while at the same time depicting her own early childhood memories of those years. While exploring her own subjectivity, Sanders-Brahms traces the intersection of her mother's private dreams and the politics of the "Third Reich." In an interview with the director, I asked her which personal, political, or artistic factors inspired her to make a film about her mother's life during the Hitler and Adenauer eras. She replied that when she was pregnant with her daughter in 1977, she felt emotionally closer to her mother and began to reflect on "how she might have lived [through] this experience, having a child, in the middle of the war" (Reed 135). Sanders-Brahms also revealed that she wanted to create a film that thematized an aspect of Second World War history that had often been ignored in traditional historical narratives: a woman's experience. She states:

I felt that there were so many films about the male vision of war and Nazism, that it would be really something new and special to make a film about the female vision of these things like war and fascism...another idea that I had was [to explore] the relationship of mother and child under these circumstances, [which] is very special and had not yet really been exploited in cinema so far. (Reed 136)

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis I place quotation marks around the problematic term "Third Reich" to distance myself from the political and ideological overtones and associations of this expression that I recognize but do not share.



Sanders-Brahms describes a phenomenon in (West) German cinema since 1945 in which the majority of films set during the years of conflict and the post-war period privilege male accounts of war and reconstruction in that they focus on men's stories, which are told from a male point of view. This tendency to 'overlook' female voices in (West) German films set during the Hitler and Adenauer eras can also be extended to the historical research focusing on this time period. In 1995 film scholar Renate Möhrmann wrote: "[It] never ceases to amaze me [that] the experiences of mothers from this period are almost never documented; they are virtually absent as the subject of serious cultural debate. History was always written from the perspective of men" ("Mother Figures," 68-69). While thousands of historical books and academic papers have been published on the "Third Reich," the Holocaust, and the Economic Miracle since 1945, there has been relatively little research until recently that treats issues of gender or issues particular to women (Reading 34, von Saldern 142). Since the late 1970s, there has been a small but growing body of gendered historical accounts of the war, the Holocaust, and the post-war era.<sup>2</sup>

*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* is an important contribution to (West) German film and to the discourse of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or "the struggle to come to terms with the Nazi past" in that it was, in my opinion, the first film of New German Cinema to take as its central plot a German woman's gendered experiences of the Second World War and

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<sup>2</sup> One of the earliest studies addressing gender issues was Marion Kaplan's *The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany: The Campaigns of the Jüdischer Frauenbund, 1904-1938* (1979). Soon after this was followed by Vera Laska's *Women in the Resistance and the Holocaust; The Voices of Eyewitnesses* (1983) and Bridenthal et al.'s *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (1984). A key work on German women's roles in the "Third Reich" which also includes a chapter on Jewish women as victims and survivors is Claudia Koonz's *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (1987). There was also Carol Rittner and John K. Roth's *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* (1993). More recent gendered historical studies include Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman's *Women in the Holocaust* (1998), Judith Baumels' *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust* (1998), and Anna Reading's *The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust: Gender, Culture, and Memory* (2002).

its aftermath. German women's personal stories relating their gendered experiences of the Second World War and its aftermath have helped change the prevailing forms of representation of the recent German past. This thesis will argue that in her film, *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*, Helma Sanders-Brahms uses a variety of narrative and cinematic techniques to give voice to the frequently neglected history of non-Jewish German women's war and post-war experiences.

My study contributes to the scholarship on German women's film in general and *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* in particular as it explores Sanders-Brahms' film from a perspective that connects gender issues and memory studies with an examination of formalistic cinematic and narrative techniques. With regard to film and gender studies, I will maintain that Sanders-Brahms employs techniques such as the use of an authorial female voice-over, the insertion of authentic footage, and codes of fantasy and fairy tale to depict a mother and daughter's gendered experiences of war.<sup>3</sup> In terms of memory studies, I will argue that Sanders-Brahms juxtaposes re-enacted scenes inspired by her mother's experiences of war with documentary footage<sup>4</sup> and radio broadcasts to demonstrate how historical events affected the lives of German women and children on the home front. Moreover, I will contend that Sanders-Brahms uses a retelling of the Grimms' fairy tale "Der Räuberbräutigam" ("The Robber Bridegroom") as a narrative locus in which to allegorically remember the crimes of the Holocaust. I will also argue

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<sup>3</sup> *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* is an (auto)biographical film in which the director Sanders-Brahms recreates her mother's experience of the Second World War and the post-war years of reconstruction while tracing her own personal experiences of the period (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 10). The (auto)biographical nature of the film is underscored by credits at the end of the film which reveal that the character Lene is the fictional representation of Sanders-Brahms' mother Helene Sanders (born Brahms) and the character of Anna is the fictional representation of the filmmaker as a child.

<sup>4</sup> In this thesis I will use the terms "documentary footage," "archival footage," and "newsreel footage" interchangeably.

that Sanders-Brahms uses the fairy tale to thematize the complex issue of non-Jewish German women's roles in the Nazi state and their involvement in the Holocaust.

My thesis differs from earlier studies on *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* in several ways. First it offers a more in-depth analysis of various cinematic techniques Sanders-Brahms employs to articulate her mother's and her own gendered experiences of war. For example, scholars such as Kaes, Kosta, and Knight deal only tangentially with Sanders-Brahms' use of documentary footage in the film. In contrast, in his work *Politics of the Self: Feminism and the Postmodern in West German Literature and Film* (1991), McCormick offers a more detailed examination of the director's intercutting of authentic archival footage into three sequences of the film. McCormick concludes that the documentary scenes historically contextualize the fiction occurring, and, concomitantly, the enacted scenes offer a social context to the archival footage (*Politics* 191-193). Using McCormick's research as a point of origin, I complete a close reading and analysis of all other scenes in which Sanders-Brahms incorporates documentary or radio broadcasts. In this analysis, I argue that Sanders-Brahms blends moments of individual and public memory in order to imbue memory in her film with a texture that is at once social and historic. Also, I consider the narrative ends to which Sanders-Brahms incorporates the "Maikäferlied," a traditional German children's song, into her film.

With regard to memory studies, my thesis differs from preceding critical literature in that it applies Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" or of mediated generational memory to Sanders-Brahms' use of images emblematic of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. With specific regard to issues of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and to women's complicity in the crimes of fascism, I examine how the ambivalent victim/perpetrator

roles of three female characters in the fairy tale echo the fluid behaviours of the mother figure in the film narrative. The expression used in the title “in the murderer’s house” is gleaned from “Der Räuberbräutigam” and it refers to the situation of the heroine who at one point finds herself trapped in a house inhabited by her murderous future husband and his band. Held captive in this den of ignominy, she witnesses the murder of another young woman. Thus the heroine is at once a victim in the sense that she cannot escape and a bystander in that she does nothing to stop the murder. I argue that Lene is also ensnared in the “house of murderers” of Nazi Germany and that she possesses similar complex and contradictory roles. Moreover, I contend that the actions and attitudes of all three female characters in the tale emphasize the multidimensional and changing nature of non-German Jewish women’s roles in the “Third Reich” and post-war period. My thesis also adds to existing critical studies on the film in that it includes a personal interview with the director which took place in Berlin, Germany in March 2009. In this interview, Sanders-Brahms and I discussed ideas which previously had not been addressed in prior interviews,<sup>5</sup> such as her understanding of the parallels I draw between the ambivalent roles of the mother figure and the three female fairy tale characters.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 summarizes West German post-war cinema in its historical context in order to situate *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* in this cinematic framework. I trace the various stages of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in post-war West German cinema in order to outline how the generally escapist and exculpatory films of the post-war period were eventually superseded in the late 1970s and

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Sanders-Brahms’ interviews with Renate Möhrmann (1980), Peggy Parnass (1980) and Peter Brunette (1990).

early 1980s by a wave of historical films. These historical films sought to come to terms with Germany's fascist past through an examination of personal experiences and stories.

Chapter 2 begins with an examination of *Neue Subjektivität* or "New Subjectivity" a literary and cinematic trend in the Germany of the 1970s that valued personal experience and prepared the way for West German women's (auto)biographical filmmaking. Next is a brief discussion about the marginalization of women's voices in the context of German history. I examine how Sanders-Brahms' approach of recreating German war and post-war history from the perspective of individual experience corresponds to the goals of *Alltagsgeschichte* or the "history of everyday life" and of oral history in that it recaptures a history from below. This is followed by a detailed analysis of two scenes central to depicting a woman's gendered experiences of conflict, a birth scene and a rape scene. In this analysis I examine the cinematic techniques Sanders-Brahms uses to juxtapose women's personal experiences with the generally accepted memory of actual historical events, such as the interweaving of archival footage with enacted scenes inspired by her mother's own experiences. In my analysis of the rape scene, I maintain that Sanders-Brahms intended the mother figure's stoic response to being violated as a critique of the silence in post-war Germany surrounding the rapes of German women by Allied soldiers at the end of the war.

Chapter 3 examines the function of stories as means of conveying cultural knowledge and personal memory from one generation to the next. I begin by exploring women's traditional role as storytellers. Next, I examine how Sanders-Brahms assumes the enunciative role of woman as storyteller by fictionally recreating her mother's experiences of the Hitler and post-war era through the public medium of film. In this act

of memory, she opens up an intergenerational dialogue through three specific cinematic techniques: a dramatic reading of a Brecht poem by the poet's daughter, using voice-over narration to carry on a dialogue with her mother's life, and having her own daughter play a role in the film. I also consider how the mother's retelling of the Grimms' fairy tale, "Der Räuberbräutigam," ("The Robber Bridegroom") becomes a story which is layered within the story of the filmic narrative. This is followed by a brief summary of the fairy tale and a discussion of Sanders-Brahms' use of the tale as a narrative locus in which she allegorically remembers the horrors of the Holocaust.

Chapter 4 explores how the roles of each of the three female characters in the Grimms' fairy tale "Der Räuberbräutigam" reflect different aspects of the mother figure's attitudes and actions at different points in the film, with particular emphasis on her involvement in the crimes of the "Third Reich." I examine how the behaviour of the miller's daughter, the old woman, and the murdered maiden in the Grimms' tale underscores and thus emphasizes how the mother figure reacts to hardship and the deportation of the Jews during the Nazi era, and to men's oppression of women during the Economic Miracle. Moreover, I theorize that the wider implications of this paralleling technique are that non-Jewish German women's roles in German fascism were not clearly-defined and static but were instead complex and dynamic as women adapted to their constantly changing situations. In this section, I also consider the issue of women's survival in patriarchal societies and how finding one's voice through telling one's tale can sometime ensure female survival.

In the conclusion to this thesis, I contrast the mother's voicelessness in the film narrative with the coming to speech of Sanders-Brahms through the creation of

*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*. Moreover, I investigate a motif of “Der Räuberbräutigam” that involves the importance of providing physical evidence to prove the truth of one’s story. I also consider how this theme can be applied to various aspects of the film and to the creation of the film itself. The conclusion is followed by an appendix containing a transcript of my personal interview with Helma Sanders-Brahms.

Steven Taubeneck has characterized Sanders-Brahms’ unique film language as a “distinctive kind of fantastic realism that combines Brecht and Pasolini with a more feminist yet personal, highly cultured yet critical, aesthetic” (Buitenhuis, Plessis, and Taubeneck 67). He goes on to state that it is not only Sanders-Brahms’ selection of themes, but also the way that she presents her material that adds what he defines as “a personal and feminist edge” to her work (67). My study is, I believe, of particular importance because it merges an analysis of the formal cinematic and narrative techniques Sanders-Brahms employs in her film with an exploration of the highly individual story told in *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* as seen through the theoretical lenses of oral history, *Neue Subjektivität*, and fairy tale studies. Finally, my thesis is significant because it is through such studies of *Geschichten* or personal stories that the concept of *Geschichte* or of a master narrative of history and of a single authoritative record of the past is deconstructed.

## Chapter 1: A (De)Politicized West German Cinema: The *Heimatfilm* and the *Kriegsfilm*

After the end of the Second World War there was a desire to forget the Nazi past and during the 1950s it tended not to be a topic for public discussion. As (West) German filmmaker Margarethe von Trotta observed in 1984, “We felt that there was a past of which we were guilty as a nation but we weren’t told about in school. If you asked questions, you didn’t get answers” (quoted in Bergmann 47). In the late 1940s and the 1950s West Germany focused on rebuilding its economy. With help from the Marshall Plan and the currency reform of 1948, the West German economy soon flourished. Many West Germans blinded themselves to the continuities with the “Third Reich” and thought that the past of their country could now be forgotten.

During the Adenauer and Erhard era, a remarkable change of mood took place in West German cinema. The first films made after 1945 were the so-called *Trümmerfilme* (rubble films)<sup>6</sup> that thematized the country’s wartime devastation and political defeat through their remarkable stories, characters, and locations (Hake 91). However, the realism of the *Trümmerfilme* soon became less popular as German audiences started to demand films that corresponded more to their fantasies than to mundane social realities. The *Trümmerfilme* disappeared from the screen after 1948 (Fehrenbach 149). Throughout the 1950s, West German cinema focused less on taking a critical look at the recent German past and more on making pleasing entertainment films for a domestic

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of *Trümmerfilme* include Wolfgang Staudte’s *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers Are among Us*, 1946), Harald Braun’s *Zwischen gestern und morgen* (*Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, 1947), Josef von Bány’s *Und über uns der Himmel* (*And above Us the Sky*, 1947), Helmut Käutner’s films *In jenen Tagen* (*In Those Days*, 1947) and *Der Apfel ist ab* (*The Apple Fell*, 1948) and Robert A. Stemmle’s *Berliner Ballade* (*Berliner Ballad*, 1948). In this thesis, all the primary works that I list but do not discuss in detail are not included in the “Works Cited.” In contrast, all the secondary works that I list are included in the “Works Cited.”



audience. One of the most popular genres of this period was the escapist *Heimatfilm*,<sup>7</sup> which depicted “the unproblematic activities of simple country folk in settings of natural magnificence and pastoral bliss” (Phillips xiii). These morally simplistic films played out in idyllic rural settings were very popular with audiences of the 1950s as they perfectly complemented many West Germans’ desire to forget the Nazi past as quickly as possible. The nostalgic and sentimental *Heimatfilme* not only acted as a refuge from the chaos of post-war German reality, but also tried to convey a new sense of home and belonging to millions of refugees and exiles who had been displaced from their original homelands (Kaes 15).

Another popular cinematic genre of the 1950s was the war film (*Kriegsfilm*). The war films of the Adenauer era discouraged historical analysis and moral introspection through their naturalistic style and through their presentation of Germans as the victims of history. *Kriegsfilme* such as Helmut Käutner’s *Des Teufels General* (*The Devil’s General*, 1954) and Paul May’s *08/15* (1954-5) present an exculpatory version of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* because they tend to portray German soldiers as noble victims of the tyrannical Nazi regime and do not address or investigate the soldiers’ complicity with this regime (Furhammar and Isaksson 221). Even films critical of war such as Bernhard Wicki’s immensely successful film, *Die Brücke* (*The Bridge*, 1959), retain a political ambivalence. Set in 1945, this pacifist war drama depicts the tragic story of seven German child-soldiers who are senselessly killed while defending an

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<sup>7</sup> Examples of *Heimatfilme* are: Hans Deppe’s *Schwarzwaldmädels* (*Black Forest Girl*, 1950), and *Grün ist die Heide* (*Green is the Heather*, 1951), Hans Wolff’s *Am Brunnen vor dem Tore* (*At the Well Outside the Gate*, 1952), Hans Deppe’s *Wenn der weisse Flieder wieder blüht* (*When the White Lilacs Bloom Again*, 1953), Harald Reinl’s *Die Fischerin vom Bodensee* (*The Fisherwoman from Lake Constance*, 1956), and Wolfgang Liebeners’ films *Die Trapp-Familie* (*The Trapp Family*, 1956) and *Die Trapp-Familie in Amerika* (*The Trapp Family in America*, 1958).

insignificant bridge from an American tank attack. The ambivalence stems from Wicki's focus on the fate of the young soldiers who are as innocent as they are apolitical (Kaes 17).

In sum, both the *Heimatfilme* and *Kriegsfilme* of the 1950s were part of a depoliticized popular post-war cinema. While the *Heimatfilme* offered West German audiences a 'holiday from history,' the *Kriegsfilme* offered moviegoers comforting versions of history.

## 1.1 The Oberhausen Manifesto and New German Cinema during the 1960s

The decisive break of West German film of the 1960s with “Papas Kino,”<sup>8</sup> or the cinema of the post-war period, came in 1962 at the Eighth West-German Short Film Festival in Oberhausen. A group of twenty-six young directors and journalists led by Alexander Kluge issued a manifesto demanding a state system of funding for films to move West German cinema artistically beyond the popular/populist productions of the 1950s. The Oberhausen Manifesto was self-assertive and revolutionary in tone. Starting from the premise that the old order of German cinema had finally collapsed, the authors of the manifesto announced their own “zero hour,” and made clear their determination to create a new feature film (Pflaum and Prinzler 9). Moreover, the directors rejected the exploitation of film for commercial and ideological purposes and sought to establish a new kind of film both politically and artistically. Above all, the filmmakers wanted to serve as a critical voice in the Federal Republic of Germany by creating an art cinema with social relevance, and they demanded government funding and subsidies that would afford them this freedom (Hake 144). Hence, their Manifesto was a declaration of artistic and ideological independence:

Der Zusammenbruch des konventionellen deutschen Films entzieht einer von uns abgelehnten Geisteshaltung endlich den wirtschaftlichen Boden. Dadurch hat der neue Film die Chance, lebendig zu werden.  
Deutsche Kurzfilme von jungen Autoren, Regisseuren und Produzenten erhielten in den letzten Jahren eine große Zahl von Preisen auf internationalen Festivals und fanden Anerkennung der internationalen Kritik. Diese Arbeiten und ihre Erfolge zeigen, daß die Zukunft des deutschen Films bei denen liegt, die bewiesen

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<sup>8</sup> The West German motion picture journal *Filmkritik* borrowed the phrase “Papas Kino” from a review in the French journal *Arts* of Alain Resnais’ film *L’année dernière à Marienbad* (*The Last Year at Marienbad*, 1961), entitled “Le cinéma de papa est mort.” This phrase soon became a catchword for French New Wave Cinema. *Filmkritik* then adopted the German phrase as a motto for its appeal for a New German Cinema, calling for a break with “Papas Kino” (quoted in Halle and McCarthy 193).

haben, daß sie eine neue Sprache des Films sprechen.  
 Wie in anderen Ländern, so ist auch in Deutschland der Kurzfilm Schule und Experimentierfeld des Spielfilms geworden. Wir erklären unseren Anspruch, den neuen deutschen Spielfilm zu schaffen.  
 Dieser neue Film braucht neue Freiheiten. Freiheit von den branchenüblichen Konventionen. Freiheit von der Beeinflussung durch kommerzielle Partner. Freiheit von der Bevormundung durch Interessengruppen.  
 Wir haben von der Produktion des neuen deutschen Films konkrete geistige, formale und wirtschaftliche Vorstellungen. Wir sind gemeinsam bereit, wirtschaftliche Risiken zu tragen.  
 Der alte Film ist tot. Wir glauben an den neuen. (VIII. Westdeutsche Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, 119)<sup>9</sup>

One direct result of the Oberhausen Manifesto and the subsequent lobbying of its signatories and supporters was the creation of a government-funded body to help subsidize new films by young directors (Sandford 13). The federal Ministry of the Interior established the *Kuratorium junger deutscher Film* in 1964, designed to support the first and second projects of “debutant” filmmakers. Support came through interest-free loans, which averaged about DM 300,000 (€ 153,390) for each of the twenty films it financed in its first three years of operation (Pflaum and Prinzler 110-11).

The efforts of the Oberhausen group and the *Kuratorium* loans resulted in a modernist cinema that proved artistically inventive yet unpopular with German

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<sup>9</sup> “The collapse of the conventional German cinema finally removes the economic basis for a mode of filmmaking whose attitude and practice we reject. With it the new film has a chance of coming to life. German short films by young authors, directors, and producers have in recent years received a great number of prizes at international festivals, and gained the recognition of international critics. These works and these successes show that the future of the German film lies in the hands of those who have proven that they speak a new film language.

Just as in other countries, the short film has become in Germany a school and experimental basis for the feature film. We declare our intention to create a new German feature film.

This new film needs new freedoms. Freedom from the conventions of the established industry. Freedom from outside influence of commercial partners. Freedom from the control of special interest groups. We have concrete intellectual, formal, and economic conceptions about the production of the new German film. We are as a collective prepared to take economic risks.

The old film is dead. We believe in the new one” (quoted in Rentschler, *West German Filmmakers 2*).

audiences. This film movement of the 1960s is known as the New German Cinema,<sup>10</sup> because it rebelled against the older generation of filmmakers, who produced the so-called “*Papas Kino*.” New German Cinema produced an abundance of filmic adaptations of literary works, a few of which took a more serious look at the recent German past. Three examples of this are Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet’s minimalist film *Nicht versöhnt* (*Not Reconciled*, 1965) adapted from Heinrich Böll’s novel *Billard um halb zehn* (*Billiards at Half Past Nine*), Alexander Kluge’s, *Abschied von gestern* (*Yesterday Girl*, 1966) based on his own short story “Anita G.” from the collection *Lebensläufe*, and Volker Schlöndorff’s *Der junge Törless* (*Young Törless*, 1966), a cinematic adaptation of Robert Musil’s 1906 novel, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless* (*The Confusions of Young Törless*). *Abschied von gestern* has the most relevance to my contextualization of *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* as Kluge’s film depicts a woman’s gendered experiences in West German society of the 1960s. Therefore, only *Abschied von gestern* will be discussed in this thesis.

*Abschied von gestern* demonstrates the inescapable connection between the past and the present. The film focuses on the troubled toils of Anita G, a young East German woman of Jewish descent who tries but fails to find success in West Germany. In a disjointed sequence of episodes, the viewer sees Anita stumbling through various ephemeral jobs and short-lived relationships, to end up an unmarried mother in prison. Like so many refugees from the East, Anita arrives in the Federal Republic expecting to

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<sup>10</sup> The term “Young German Film” is sometimes used to designate the the avant-garde cinema produced by a young generation of West German filmmakers beginning in 1962 with the signing of the Oberhausen Manifesto (Knight, *New German Cinema* 13). In the 1970s, the movement was renamed “New German Cinema” by New York film critics (Flinn 6). Throughout this thesis I will refer to the trend in West German cinema spanning from approximately the late 1960s to the mid-1980s in which a generation of filmmakers born circa the period of the Second World War directed a slew of critically acclaimed films as “New German Cinema.”

‘make a clean break’ and to ‘build a new life.’ A more literal translation of the film’s ironic title, “Taking Leave of Yesterday,” refers to Anita’s illusion that the past can be separated from the present. However, as Sandford explains, “past and present are inseparable, for the past is the precondition of the present, and its weight is by definition inescapable” (21). The film suggests that Anita’s family was persecuted by the National Socialists because they were Jews and by the Communists because they were capitalists. Anita’s past is that of an unwanted outsider, and that is what she remains in the present of the film.

Kluge develops this theme of indivisibility of past and present at the individual level, through photographs of Anita’s childhood and her memories of childhood holiday celebrations, images of children’s books and stories, and nostalgic tango music which sentimentally echoes days past. However, the director also presents this theme at the national level, with the suggestion that individual history and national history are also inextricably connected. Hence *Abschied von gestern* is also a film about West Germany, a society that, in the 1960s, had not taken leave of its past as much as it would have liked. The film contains many sequences that comment ironically on West Germany’s relationship to its past. Some are grotesque, such as the dreamlike sequence in which two men ask a mother which of her two children is to have its brain removed and then tell her, “Dieses System hier ist mit keinem der vorangegangenen totalitären Systeme zu vergleichen. Das ist das Neue daran” (Kluge and Patalas, *Abschied von gestern. Protokoll 57*).<sup>11</sup> Other sequences are more subtle, such as the one in which a trainer at a dog show explains to Anita the authoritarian philosophy of his profession: the dogs will

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<sup>11</sup> “This system here cannot be compared to any previous totalitarian system. That is what is new about it” (Kluge and Patalas, *Abschied von gestern. Protokoll 57*). All translations of quotations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

be beholden to him, for only through discipline and training will they find freedom. Such sequences suggest that although post-war West German society would like to take leave of its fascist history, it is unable to do so because the authoritarian legacy of this past still exercises an effect on modes of thinking and behaving in the present. While *Abschied von gestern* thematizes Germany's fascist past, the ambitious and challenging formal strategies of this film, such as lack of narrative unity, did not make it accessible to a broader public.

While 1965-1966 was a successful year for West German films that took a more serious look at the troubled German past, the next decade saw relatively few films that addressed issues of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. As will be discussed in the following section, it was not until the later half of the 1970s that West German cinema began to challenge the 'collective amnesia' about the recent German past

## 1.2 The German Autumn and the “Return of History as Film”

The historic myopia of the cinema of the 1950s and 1960s was rectified in the 1970s during a resurgent interest in the fascist past that became known as the *Nazi-Welle* or “Nazi wave.” As the artist Christo suggested in an interview, “The Germans suddenly began to reinvent National Socialism. The Hitler period became an extraordinary creative source for a whole generation of filmmakers” (quoted in Lotringer 20). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, young West German directors produced a slew of historical films that directly dealt with Germany’s fascist past. Between 1975 and 1985 alone, more than fifty new feature films dealing with National Socialism were made in West Germany, nearly as many as in the thirty years before (Reimer and Reimer 82). Two of the first films of the *Nazi-Welle*, Joachim Fest’s *Hitler – Eine Karriere* (*Hitler – A Career*, 1977) and Hans Jürgen Syberberg’s *Hitler, Ein Film aus Deutschland* (*Hitler, A Film From Germany*, 1977) directly thematized Adolf Hitler’s years in power. Shortly thereafter followed a number of historical films which accelerated the velocity of the *Nazi-Welle*, including *Deutschland im Herbst* (*Germany in Autumn*, 1977) by a collective of West German filmmakers, Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*, 1978/1979), Helma Sanders-Brahms’ *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* (1979), and Volker Schlöndorff’s *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*, 1979).

What caused West German filmmakers in the late 1970s to dramatically break the silence about the National Socialist past? While the liberal policy of film funding instituted in 1974 provided the funds for historically-oriented films, West German directors’ renewed interest in the “Third Reich” can also be viewed as a reaction to



political events that took place in 1977. McCormick has asserted that the “history-film” trend in New German Cinema can be explained in part as:

a response to the trauma of the “German Autumn” of 1977, when the hysteria and polarization around the activities of the terrorist “Red Army Faction” reached its peak, and memories of earlier periods of turbulence in twentieth-century German history were awakened. (“Gender” 250)

On September 5, 1977 prominent West German industrial and former Nazi Hanns Martin Schleyer was kidnapped by members of a terrorist group known as the Red Army Faction (RAF). The following month the RAF hijacked a Lufthansa airliner, compelling it to land in Mogadishu, Somalia. These terrorist actions were meant to force the West German state to release RAF members Andreas Baader, Gundrun Ensslin, and Jan-Carl Raspe from their confinement in the maximum security prison at Stammheim, near Stuttgart. Instead, an antiterrorist team of the West German border police liberated the hostages and killed the hijackers. Moreover, in Stammheim the next morning Baader, Ensslin, and Raspe were found dead, apparent suicide victims under circumstances so suspicious that an international commission was required to investigate the matter. In an atmosphere of suspicion, fear, and hysteria, the West German government reacted with increased security measures and the persecution of anyone it suspected of being a RAF sympathizer. A fear of surveillance and censure spread across the country and many left-leaning Germans felt that their civil liberties, especially their freedom of expression, were threatened. This situation caused many older West Germans to recall how the Nazi regime had suppressed the civil rights of many segments of the population during the “Third Reich.” Norbert Elias, who was eighty years old in 1977, writes in his essay on the “German Autumn” of 1977:

Die Gewaltakte kleiner, festgeschlossener Terroristengruppen in der Bundesrepublik und die Gegenwelle der Sympathisantenjagd haben lediglich die Funktion eines Auslösers, der latente Bruchstellen mit einem Ruck ins Offene bringt und für alle Welt sichtbar macht. Die Gründe für die Brüchigkeit der westdeutschen Gesellschaft gehen weiter zurück. (734)<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, Elias suggests that the crimes of Germany under Hitler differed qualitatively from the crimes of other nations by their sheer senselessness, a feature he claims also characterizes the terrorist acts of Autumn 1977 (744). Building on Elias' argument, Kaes maintains that the senselessness of the RAF terrorist acts stemmed from the collective trauma the post-war generation experienced when it found out the truth about the atrocities committed by its parents' generation. Kaes writes:

It was only a matter of time before [the post-war generation's] repressed trauma would coalesce with [its] frustration about the "petrified conditions" of the Federal Republic. The memory of the Nazi reign of terror had been excluded from public discussion during the entire reconstruction phase of German postwar history; Germans had thus been denied the chance to work through the past and come to terms with it. This omission now seemed to be taking its revenge in the terrorism of the younger generation. (25)

Alexander Kluge, writing in 1979, also associated the RAF violence of 1977 and the West German government's ensuing suppression of civil liberties with the Hitler regime. Kluge proposed that the events of 1977 jolted many people out of their historical amnesia:

Die tödliche Katastrophe hat bei vielen Menschen eine Durchbrechung der Erinnerungslosigkeit ausgelöst. Die Ereignisse hatten unmittelbar nicht zuviel mit Krieg zu tun, aber es wird »1945«, »Krieg« assoziiert. Es ist kein Zufall, daß eine Bewegung in den Gefühlen entstanden ist, die nach Deutschland und nach der Geschichte fragt, die in dieser Form der Erscheinung tritt. Der verdrängte Schock bricht hier an einer Stelle heraus, der für eine wirkliche Verarbeitung des bisher

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<sup>12</sup> "The violent acts of small, hermitic groups of terrorists in the Federal Republic and the reaction of declaring open season on sympathizers have only the function of a trigger: they suddenly brought to light the latent fissures that exist in West German society and make them visible to the whole world. The reasons for these fissures go further back" (Elias 734).

Verdrängten eigentlich gar nicht geeignet ist oder neue Verzerrungen heraufbeschwört. (*Die Patriotin* 28)<sup>13</sup>

The film *Deutschland im Herbst* resulted from the concerns of a group of New German filmmakers with Autumn 1977 and its relations to earlier periods of German history. As Kaes proposes:

[An] impetus for Fassbinder's [and other New German filmmakers'] turning to history was the crisis of Autumn 1977, which Fassbinder's generation experienced as a watershed in the political development and self-understanding of the Federal Republic. (79)

In October 1977, nine directors of the New German Cinema, including Kluge, Fassbinder, Schlöndorff, and Reitz, joined forces to produce a collective film about Germany in 1977 which would serve as both a chronicle and a commentary. This collaborative effort was intended to document immediate reactions to the events of Autumn 1977 and to reflect the anxieties of the period in short fictional scenes. The film was also meant to be a method of opposing the West German government's news blackout and an effort to counter the official version of events with an unofficial version.

*Deutschland im Herbst* seeks to resist Germans' collective amnesia of recent German history by relating images of the terrorist present of 1977 to the Nazi past (Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 260, Kaes 26). The film is framed with documentary footage of two public ceremonies of mourning, the state funeral and burial of Hanns Martin Schleyer and the controversial internment in a Stuttgart cemetery of Andreas Baader, Gundrun Ensslin, and Jan-Carl Raspe. In between, there are images of violence

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<sup>13</sup> "The fatal catastrophe succeeded in cutting through the amnesia of many. The events did not have much to do with war directly, but '1945' and 'war' were associated with them. It is no coincidence that we have an emotional movement that is posing questions about Germany and about the history that takes the form it has. The repressed shock breaks out in terrorism, a point that is not suited to genuinely coming to terms with previously repressed material; it may even produce new distortions" (Kluge, *Die Patriotin* 28).

in German history and scenes of funerals, including documentary footage of Rosa Luxemburg before she was murdered and the state funeral of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, who was compelled by Hitler to commit suicide in 1944. Past and present converge in a striking manner, when, in an interview, Manfred Rommel, son of the Nazi Field Marshall and mayor of Stuttgart, demands a dignified burial for the RAF terrorists.

In his 26-minute section of the collaborative film, Fassbinder also illustrates the legacy of the past in the present. The director appears as himself, dramatizing his personal reactions to the political situation of Autumn 1977 and giving the viewer what Kaes calls a “psychogram of his anxieties and aggressions” (79). On the one hand, Fassbinder accuses West Germany of not having learned anything from its fascist past, citing the state’s persecution of leftist individuals. On the other hand, he perpetuates fascist patterns of behaviour in his own private sphere, treating his mother in an authoritarian manner and physically attacking his lover, Armin, when the latter opposes Fassbinder’s opinion. As Gabriele Weinberger suggests, Fassbinder depicts himself as “the epitome of the post-war generation that has come of age as the victimized turned victimizer” (10). Moreover, Fassbinder depicts the interconnectedness of past and present in a staged conversation with his mother about German traditions of state violence and political resistance, specifically raising the question whether the West German government is legitimized in breaking the law in the fight against terrorists. Fassbinder tells his mother that precisely because she had lived through the Hitler regime, she should have a deeper respect for democracy. Instead, his mother advocates a retreat from democracy stating, “In such a situation you simply can’t get by with democracy... The best thing would be an authoritarian ruler, but one who is good, kind, and well-meaning”

(*Deutschland im Herbst* n. pag.).<sup>14</sup> Hence Fassbinder uses his mother as a mouthpiece for a memory of Hitler common for Germans of the war generation: that Hitler was a benefactor who at one point went insane. Through the discussion of mother and son, as well as through Fassbinder's relationship with his lover, the viewer is confronted with the legacy of fascist modes of thinking and behaviour in the Federal Republic of the late 1970s.

*Deutschland im Herbst* inspired several individual projects that addressed Germany's fascist past (Kaes 27). The heroine of Kluge's episode of the collective film is Gabi Teichert, a Hessian school teacher who attempts to excavate Germany's fascist past. Teichert reappears as the heroine of Kluge's film *Die Patriotin* (*The Patriot*, 1979) where digging for Germany's buried history serves as the film's central metaphor. Fassbinder used his conversation with his mother in his segment of *Deutschland im Herbst* as the impetus to reflect on the Federal Republic of the 1940s and 1950s in his *BRD-Trilogie* (*FRG-Trilogy*), which includes *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*, 1979), *Lola* (1981), and *Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss* (*The Longing of Veronika Voss*, 1981). Edgar Reitz, in his episode of *Deutschland im Herbst*, had shown a border guard, speaking in dialect, aspiring to one day become an aviator. Reitz later took up these themes in his filmic saga *Heimat* (1979).

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<sup>14</sup> In this instance I quoted the English subtitle of the film as I did not have access to the original German script.

### 1.3 Images of History: The West German Reception of *Holocaust*

Apart from the German Autumn 1977, a second important impetus for young German filmmakers' turning to history was the West German telecast of the American mini-series *Holocaust* in January 1979. The National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) mini-series, televised over four consecutive days on the Third Channel of West Germany's largest regional television networks, *Westdeutscher Rundfunk*, caused the West German public to engage with repressed German history in a way no film had done before. An estimated 20 million viewers – about half the adult population of the Federal Republic – watched *Holocaust* (“Holocaust” 18). Approximately 40 percent of the West German television audience watched the program every night, more than 35,000 telephone calls (four times the number reported by NBC during the American showing of the film) were received by television stations, and an equal number of letters and telegrams were sent. Moreover, over 20,000 information booklets published by the West German government to accompany the show disappeared in an avalanche of orders reaching 255,000 (Markovits and Allen 13-17). During each of the four episodes telephone numbers were shown at the bottom of the screen inviting viewers to phone in after the show to discuss their experiences – before the whole country – with experts from academia and the press. These open-ended discussions following each episode of *Holocaust* lasted for hours (Kaes 30). Heinz Höhne, writing for one of West Germany's largest weekly magazines, *Der Spiegel*, captured the mood of public opinion:

Eine amerikanische Fernsehserie von trivialer Machart, produziert aus mehr kommerziellen als aus moralischen Motiven, mehr zur Unterhaltung als zur Aufklärung, hat geschafft, was mit Hunderten von Büchern, Theaterstücken, Filmen und TV-Sendungen, Tausenden von Dokumenten und allen KZ-Prozessen

in drei Jahrzehnten Nachkriegsgeschichte nicht gelungen ist: die Deutschen über die in ihrem Namen begangenen Verbrechen an den Juden so ins Bild zu setzen, daß Millionen erschüttert wurden. [...] Erst seit und dank *Holocaust* weiß eine größere Mehrheit der Nation, was sich hinter der schrecklichen und doch so nichtssagenden Bürokraten-Formel "Endlösung der Judenfrage" verbirgt. Sie weiß es, weil die US-Filmmacher den Mut hatten, sich von dem lähmenden Lehrsatz freizumachen [...], das der Massenmord undarstellbar sei. (22)<sup>15</sup>

*Holocaust* managed to "bring home the horrors of Nazi rule and to open the locked doors of memory, conscience, and personal history [...] for millions of Germans" (Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 271). But what aspect of *Holocaust* allowed it to impact the West German psyche in this fashion? Ian Buruma maintains that *Holocaust* was able to penetrate the West German imagination in a way that no film had done before because it reinforced viewer identification with Jewish suffering. Buruma explains:

The Auschwitz of the courtroom, the chapel, or the museum had been an abstraction, a metaphor, a bunch of unimaginable statistics, the death of millions with no name. [...] The family of Dr. Joseph Weiss, even in the incarnation of American soap opera characters, had an identity every German could recognize: solid, educated, middle-class [...] *Holocaust* proved that metaphors and illusions were not enough to bring history alive. The Weiss family had to be invented, the past re-enacted. The soap opera form had such a powerful effect because it was the opposite of Brechtian alienation: emotions are boosted, identification is reinforced. [...] Yet it is precisely that kind of identification that much postwar German art and literature shied away from. Identification with the Jewish victims could not be done with real conviction; identification with the persecutors – that is, with your parents, your grandparents, or yourself – was too painful. (90)

Hence, Buruma believes that the soap-opera format of the mini-series encouraged West German viewers to empathize with Jewish victims of the "Third Reich,"

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<sup>15</sup> "An American television series, made in a trivial style, produced more for commercial than for moral reasons, more for entertainment than for enlightenment, accomplished what hundreds of books, plays, films, and television programs, thousands of documents and all the concentration camp trials have failed to do since the end of the war: to inform Germans about the crimes against Jews committed in their name so that millions were emotionally touched and moved [...] Only since, and thanks to, *Holocaust* does a large majority of the nation know what was hidden behind the seemingly innocuous bureaucratic phrase, "the final solution." They know it because U.S. filmmakers had the courage to free themselves from the crippling precept that it is impossible to portray mass murder" (Höhne quoted in Kaes 30).

personalized in the fictitious characters of the Weiss family. The accessibility of *Holocaust* sets this mini-series apart from much post-war German film which discourages identification (and thus is meant to encourage critical reflection) through Brechtian alienation techniques.<sup>16</sup>

Peter Märthesheimer, responsible for acquiring *Holocaust* for West German television and also Fassbinder's scriptwriter on *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, seems to concur with Buruma that it was the psychological mechanism of identification around which the power of the program centred. This artistic technique engendered the unexpected and tremendous response because it addressed West Germans' collective "inability to mourn" (Märthesheimer and Frenzel 12).<sup>17</sup> Märthesheimer and Frenzel claim that although most Germans living during the Hitler regime did not actively participate in the "Final Solution," the lack of resistance and the silence of the majority give credibility to the post-war concept of collective guilt. When confronted with the horrible reality of the concentration camps, most Germans reacted to the charge of collective guilt with "individueller Abwehr: mit Blindheit, mit Schuldvorwurf, mit Verstocktheit" (12).<sup>18</sup> When, after the war, the Allies expected individual Germans to accept some political responsibility for the crimes committed during the Nazi regime, Märthesheimer maintains that many Germans repressed their guilt: "1945 legten diese Menschen ihre Seele auf Eis" (13).<sup>19</sup> They go on to suggest that *Holocaust* was able to

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<sup>16</sup> Brechtian alienation techniques are designed to produce an "alienation effect." An encyclopedia of acting terms describes the alienation effect as "The purposeful alienation of an audience from the emotional and sentimental aspects of a drama. This effect is desired in order to keep the audience aware of the larger social issues being presented in the work" (Osnes and Gill 9).

<sup>17</sup> The term "inability to mourn" was coined by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich and it was also the title of their book *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern (The Inability to Mourn)* which was first published in 1958.

<sup>18</sup> Germans reacted to the charge of collective guilt with "individual defenses: blindness, imputation of wrong, lack of penitence" (Märthesheimer and Frenzel 12).

<sup>19</sup> "In 1945 these people put their soul on ice" (Märthesheimer and Frenzel 13).



impact West Germans in such a dramatic fashion because it employs a narrative strategy that encourages viewer identification with the Nazis' Jewish victims. By participating in the Jewish victims' fear, the viewer was liberated from:

unheimlichen, lähmenden jahrzehntelang unterdrückten Angst, wir seien in Wahrheit mit den Mördern im Bunde gewesen. Stattdessen erleben wir, wie in einem Psychodrama in einem therapeutischen Experiment, jede Phase des Schreckens, den doch vermeintlich wir den anderen angetan hatten, an uns selbst, spüren ihn, erleiden ihn – und können ihn so endlich im wahrsten Sinn des Wortes als unser eigenes Trauma auch bearbeiten. (17)<sup>20</sup>

While some West German voices such as Märthesheimer's and Frenzel's praised *Holocaust* for its ability to bring home the atrocities of the Nazi regime, others were shocked and angered by the NBC mini-series. The film was criticized by some as an obscene and shameless exploitation of suffering for commercial profit. Franz Joseph Strauss, the CDU-CSU candidate for Chancellor in the 1980 elections, labelled it a "Geschäftsmacherei" or a "fast-buck operation" ("Endlösung im Abseits" 133). Peter Schulz-Rohr, director of the station SWR, criticized the telecasting of *Holocaust* as yet another "Pflichtübung in Vergangenheitsbewältigung,"<sup>21</sup> one whose emotional energy stemmed from "die deutsche Neigung zur manchmal fast exhibitionistisch anmutenden Selbstanklage auf fatale Weise mit dem Absolvieren öffentlicher Bußübungen verbindet" (quoted in Märthesheimer and Frenzel 48). Edgar Reitz complained that "Die

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<sup>20</sup> According to Märthesheimer and Frenzel, by participating in the fear of the Jewish victim, the viewer of *Holocaust* is freed from "the horrible, paralyzing anxiety that has remained repressed for decades that we in truth were in league with the murderers. Instead we experience, as in the psycho-drama of a therapeutic experiment, to feel and suffer every phase of the horror – which we were supposed to have committed against the other – in ourselves – and thereby are finally able to in the truest sense of the word deal with it as our own trauma" (17).

<sup>21</sup> Schulz-Rohr slated *Holocaust* as a "compulsory ritual in coming to terms with the past" and claimed that the emotional energy of the series stemmed from the "German inclination to almost exhibitionistic [...] self-accusation combined in an almost embarrassing fashion with rituals of public penance" (quoted in Märthesheimer and Frenzel 48).

Amerikaner haben mit *Holocaust* uns Geschichte weggenommen” (102)<sup>22</sup> because films in the style of the mini-series prevented Germans from “unsere Vergangenheit erzählerisch in Besitz [zu] nehmen, aus der Welt der Urteile aus[zu]brechen” (100). Ian Buruma refutes Reitz’s polemic regarding American appropriation of German history, stating, “In fact, *Holocaust* had done no such thing. German artists themselves had failed to find a narrative for Auschwitz” (89).

In sum, West German critical reactions to NBC’s *Holocaust* ranged from praise for the mini-series’ ability to bring home the horror of Nazi atrocities to rejection of the work for its exploitation of Jewish suffering for commercial profit and its expropriation of German history. While it is difficult to assess the actual effect that *Holocaust* had on the West German public, it is certain that the film generated a new interest in images and narratives of the past. As Anton Kaes asserts:

The German Autumn of 1977 had evoked an “excessive motivation” (Kluge) among intellectuals and filmmakers to deal with German history, but only the broad reception of *Holocaust* allowed the numerous films about the recent German past to find an audience. *Germany in Autumn* presented impressions of a country on which the past weighs heavily; the German reaction to *Holocaust* showed how much still had to be done to master that past. [...] It cannot be denied that in [...] the wake [of *Holocaust*] a new historical consciousness emerged in the Federal Republic. The past suddenly seemed very present. German filmmakers felt challenged to come to terms with German history and its images (35).

The immense media attention generated by *Holocaust* caused some New German Cinema directors to recognize in the “history film” an opportunity to gain worldwide attention (albeit mostly in the United States) and to finally open a truly international market for their works (Weinberger 11). As Edgar Reitz put it:

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<sup>22</sup> Reitz claimed, “The Americans have stolen our history through *Holocaust*” (102) because films in the style of *Holocaust* hindered Germans “from taking narrative possession of our past, from breaking free of the world of judgments” (100).

If German films are to make use of what is their last chance internationally, they must come to terms with their Nazi past. Our generation is the only one that can deal with the period at all, for we can drop the whole moral burden, we were never Nazi. We can tell the story of 1940 with open eyes. (Quoted in Fischli n. pag.)

Reitz addressed the German past in his fifteen-and-a-half-hour filmic epic, *Heimat I*, which was released as an eleven-part series on West German television in 1984. As one of the most ambitious West German film and television projects, *Heimat* took five years to complete. Reitz's mammoth work traces the history of Schabbach, a small village in the Hunsrück mountains, from the 1920s to the 1950s through the destinies of various villagers, primarily the members of one family, the Simons. Twentieth-century German history is presented as a backdrop to the characters' personal lives. As Eric Santner explains, "Located initially on the outermost margins of history writ large [...] the village offers the opportunity to bear witness to the slower rhythms of history from below" (59). Criticized for its sentimental tendencies, but praised for its close attention to the organization of quotidian life, *Heimat* provoked intense debates about the relationship between history, memory, narrative, and national identity. Specifically, the series was criticized for its affirmative recreation of Germanness outside the realities of anti-Semitism. Gertrude Koch, one of the most outspoken critics of *Heimat*, accused the film of marginalizing the fate of the Jews. She states,

The film reproduces the standard ellipses concerning the extermination of the Jews [...] Whenever real horror would have to be thematized, the film resorts to [...] fade-out strategies which are analogous to the defense mechanisms of experience and as such elude critical reflection. (16-17)

Despite such criticism, *Heimat* was enthusiastically received by West German television audiences and at film festivals in Venice, London and the United States (Santner 57). Riding on the wave of *Heimat*'s international success, Bernhard Sinkel

completed his eight-hour, four-part mini-series *Väter und Söhne (Fathers and Sons)*, which premiered on West German television in 1986. This lavishly-produced 18-million-DM production was financed with American, German, French, and Italian money and boasted an international cast headed by Burt Lancaster and Julie Christie (Weinberger 11). The conventionally filmed and narrated three-generation family saga thematizes and personalizes the eventual entanglement of the German industrial complex in the atrocities of the Nazi regime. One member of a German industrialist family is depicted as a corrupt man whose lust for power and success in business lead to the development of Cyclone B gas which was used at Auschwitz.

#### 1.4 *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* as Counter-Fiction and Brechtian Melodrama

It should be noted that *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* was made in 1979, the same year that *Holocaust* was broadcast on West German television and that the mini-series played a major role in precipitating the country's "remembering" process. *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in February 1980 and therefore, chronologically, it was released several years before the airing of Reitz's *Heimat* in 1984. Hence *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* must be seen as a very early example of a West German film that confronted the fascist past from the perspective of individual experience. In my research I found only one critic who directly acknowledges this fact. Everett claims *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* "is one of the earliest female [cinematic] autobiographies, and – arguably – the first post-war German film to face up to Germany's troubled past" (132).

In some aspects, *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* can be seen as a reaction to certain trends in post-war West German cinema. *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* is different from the personal stories of war presented in the *Kriegsfilm* of the 1950s in that it envisions German war history from the perspective of a female civilian rather than that of a male soldier. Moreover, it does not present a revisionist recreation of history typical of the post-war *Kriegsfilme* in which Germans are portrayed as noble anti-Nazis who have no complicity with the crimes of the Hitler regime. As will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 4, Sanders-Brahms depicts not only Lene's victimization, but also her role as bystander in the face of National Socialist policies with regard to the Jews. During my interview with the director, Sanders-Brahms explained that she did not find the

exculpatory brand of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* presented in the *Kriegsfilme* believable and that she wanted to show ordinary Germans' behaviour under fascism as complex and contradictory. She stated:

[S]everal films were made that were personal stories. But they were personal stories that were more or less about people who had behaved well during fascism. [...] You always show the well-behaved man who fights against Nazis. And then, of course, there were men's stories, mostly men or boys' stories. Like for example, *Die Brücke* [*The Bridge*] by Bernhard Wicki. And, to me, all these films did not really convince me because I felt that things were much more complex. I lived through them as a small child [... *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*] is not just telling a nice story about something in a brutal and horrible time, but it's very complex. [...] Lene is not a Nazi, but she is not a fighter against fascism either. Her husband is not a Nazi, but he is also not a fighter against Nazism. And, at special times, he also uses phrases of the Nazis for himself. (Reed 159)

Sanders-Brahms went on to reveal that she felt that it was this very complexity that caused *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* to receive critical acclaim internationally but also to be attacked by critics in West Germany. She claimed that in West German society of the late 1970s, "This complexity was seen as something that you shouldn't really do in a film. So it irritated the critics terribly" (Reed 159-160).<sup>23</sup>

While *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* differs from the personal stories of war presented in the *Kriegsfilme* of the 1950s and in its retelling of German war history from a woman's perspective and in its depiction of the ambivalent behavior of ordinary Germans during the "Third Reich," it shows some stylistic similarities with other films of the *Nazi-Welle*. *Holocaust* and *Heimat* employ classical realist codes of representation and elements of melodrama. In classical realism, evidence of the constructedness of the

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<sup>23</sup> One reason why the film was so controversial is that it transgresses the cultural taboo of disclosing the political past of one's own family members during the "Third Reich" to the public. Any critical look at the past was promptly labeled as *Nestbeschmutzung* (Weinberger 73). This attitude towards the recent German past certainly influenced the critical reception to *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*. Olav Münzberg wrote a sociopsychological analysis of the film in which he suggests that *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*, by breaking cultural taboos, awakens unresolved anxieties (Münzberg 34-37).

story must be hidden as much as possible so the story appears to simply “happen.” Moreover, the story appears as if it is taking place now, before the eyes of the spectator and thus has an aura of immediacy. This is the typical form of representation of Hollywood films (Metz 546-7). The realistic style of *Holocaust* and *Heimat* and the carefully reconstructed mise-en-scène impart a strong reality effect to the film (Kaes 29, Aitken 221). Moreover, *Holocaust* and *Heimat* exhibit characteristics of the family melodrama such as the presentation of the domestic sphere, the uses of music to accentuate pathos, the episodic structure, and the moral polarization of the characters (Elsaesser, “Tales” 573).

*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* also fits some of the conventions of cinematic realism and melodrama. Many of the enacted scenes are filmed in a realistic style and Lene’s story is certainly one of suffering. Ellen Seiter criticizes the film for its use of “realistic and melodramatic codes” arguing that they tend to depoliticize the film (569). She states “My concern [...] is with the way that the filmmaker’s use of melodramatic codes obscures the ability to read the family narrative in political, rather than in pathetic terms” (573). However, I argue that Sanders-Brahms’ use of realistic and melodramatic codes does not diminish the political aspects of the film. This is because the director uses various formal techniques to disrupt the “illusion of the reality” and to provoke the viewer to think critically about the greater political issues being presented in the film diegesis. Filmmakers of New German Cinema are often perceived as making films that oppose Hollywood traditions. One of Fassbinder’s contributions to New German Cinema was an attempt to fuse melodrama with Brechtian distancing (McCormick, *Politics* 196). Fassbinder sought to create films that stood somewhere between the two poles of

realistic and avant-garde and that would let audiences, in his words “feel and think” (Fassbinder 21-22). *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* could also be classified as a Brechtian melodrama. In her presentation of her mother’s story of love and suffering, Sanders-Brahms uses a variety of techniques to distance the audience from unhindered identification with the characters (McCormick, *Politics*, 196-197). As will be further explored in Chapters 2 and 3, Sanders-Brahms foregrounds her role in constructing the film and diminishes viewer identification with Lene’s story through various alienation devices including an authorial female voice-over, the intercutting of newsreel footage with enacted scenes, the opening Brecht poem, and the fairy tale sequence. Moreover, the director uses her own voice in the voice-over and has her own daughter play a role in the film to develop the theme of interconnectedness between the past and present at the personal level. While the Brecht poem is used to illustrate the continuity between past and present at the national level, the director intersplices newsreel footage with enacted scenes to suggest that individual history and national history are inseparable. Thus Sanders-Brahms utilizes Brechtian alienation devices to similar ends as Alexander Kluge does in his film *Abschied von gestern*.

Sanders-Brahms’ *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* can be seen as offering a counter-history to the male-centered images of war of the *Kriegsfilme* of the 1950s. The film can also be perceived as a product of New German Cinema in that it combines realistic melodrama with Brechtian alienation in the style of Fassbinder. The following section will contextualize Sanders-Brahms’ film in relation to two other trends in the West German cultural scene of the 1970s.



## Chapter 2: New Subjectivity and West German Women's Autobiographical Films

It has been well established in German literary history that the dissolution of the West German student movement and the political disillusionment of the 1970s were complemented by the re-orientation of literature toward the private sphere. As Leslie Adelson explains:

In the aftermath of the student movement, it became popular to speak of a *Tendenzwende* [or “change of direction”], a turning away from a highly political sphere. [...] With regard to literature, *Tendenzwende* has provided a ready label for the development which seems to favor political concerns and aesthetic expression over collective interests and political content. (5)

This new trend in literature, which emphasized personal experience, feeling, and the unique subjectivity of the writer, became known as *Neue Subjektivität* or “New Subjectivity.” The more subjective literature of the 1970s is usually seen as a reaction to the excessive politicization of literature of the previous decade. As McCormick maintains, the literary current of the 1970s moved away “from politically motivated documentary ‘objectivity’ to autobiographical ‘subjectivity’” (*Politics* 25). Yet the New Subjectivity of the 1970s retained some aspects of the politically engaged literature of the 1960s. For example, the demand for authenticity and immediacy, which was fundamental to the literature of the 1960s, was continued in the autobiographies of the late 1970s. Moreover, the concern with Germany's fascist past, which engendered such documentary dramas as Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter* (*The Deputy*, 1963) and Peter Weiss's *Die Ermittlung* (*The Investigation*, 1966), was carried on in the wave of historical novels and biographies of the late 1970s (Kaes 140). However, the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* of the 1970s no longer focused on public figures (such as

Pope Pius XII in Hochhuth's drama) as authors narrowed the scope of their inquiries to their own parents. Authors born during the 1930s and 1940s sought clarity about their backgrounds by investigating their relationships to their parents – most often their fathers – and their parents' behavior during Nazism. This subject matter had a clear political dimension, especially if the parents were compromised by their role in National Socialism. The first and most noted work of the period, Bernward Vesper's *Die Reise* (*The Journey*, 1977), was published six years after the author's suicide in 1971.

Bernward Vesper, son of the Nazi writer Will Vesper and lover of terrorist Gundrun Ensslin, struggles to establish clarity about his own identity by attempting to deal both with the painful memories of his relationship to his authoritarian father and his relationship to his father's political past. The success of Vesper's novel provoked a renewed interest in the past and a wave of *Generationenliteratur*, or "generation literature," in which authors confronted their parents' involvement in the Nazi past as a necessary first step to authentic self-definition (McCormick, *Politics* 180-1). Some of the most important works of this genre include: Elizabeth Plessen's *Mitteilung an der Adel* (*Message to the Aristocracy*, 1976), which portrays the efforts of a young woman of aristocratic background to come to terms with her father's traditional, authoritarian values as she drives to his funeral; Ruth Rehmann's *Der Mann auf der Kanzel* (*The Man on the Pulpit*, 1979), which questions how the author's father, a Protestant pastor in a rural village, could have collaborated with German fascism and how he could have kept silent about a crime committed by Nazis in the village where he lived; Christoph Meckel's *Suchbild. Über meinen Vater* (*Image for Investigation about My Father*, 1980), which traces the portrait of Meckel's father, a struggling artist, who in the period of the "Third

Reich” opposes fascism, but who eventually becomes a member of the cultural elite who remained aesthetically “in the clouds” while atrocities were being committed (Schneider 19-21); and Brigitte Schwaiger’s *Lange Abwesenheit* (*Long Absence*, 1980), which analyses the narrator’s ambivalent feelings about her father, following his death. As a child, the narrator sought her father’s attention and approval while resenting his elusiveness and his prejudiced and racist attitudes. She examines her relationship with her father in order to understand certain aspects of her own personality, particularly the aspects affecting her relationship with her lover. Thus, the exploration of her experience with her father becomes a process of self-discovery in which she gains insight into the forces of her own behaviour (Wigmore 93).

The authors of these *Väterromane* frequently demonstrated ambivalent feelings towards the father figures depicted in their narratives, who were often both perpetrators and victims during the Nazi regime. As Kaes maintains, the authors “remember their fathers with a mixture of sympathy and revulsion, love and rejection; they mourn them, but still condemn them as Nazis” (141).

While many female authors’ autobiographical retrospectives of the late 1970s and early 1980 focused on their relationships to their fathers, some works thematized the mother-daughter relationship. With the emergence of the second women’s movement in the early 1970s, some female authors of the post-war generation rebelled against the role models their mothers embodied and reinforced (Gerstenberger 336). Examples of some works of the period, which deal with the mother-daughter conflicts are the following: Karin Struck’s *Die Mutter* (*The Mother*, 1975), which protests against the objectification of the female body and its reproductive functions; Helga Novak’s *Die Eisheiligen* (*The*

*Ice Saints*, 1979), which depicts an abusive mother who passes on her female self-hatred to her daughter; and Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Klavierspielerin* (*The Piano Teacher*, 1983),<sup>24</sup> which explores a sadomasochistic mother-daughter relationship. These *Mütterromane* are primarily written from the daughter's subjective perspective and explore the themes of dependency, separation, emotional hardening on both sides of the mother-daughter dyad, and female identity formation.

The search for personal identity through an examination of the mother's life and mother-daughter relationships was not only a literary, but also a cinematic trend. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, several female West-German directors began making full-length feature films that examined their mother's lives and their own childhoods, often in connection with a feminist questioning of traditional sex-roles. Revealing the past in the present, Jeanine Meerapfel's *Malou* (1981) traces a woman's attempts to recreate her mother's tragic life story and, in so doing, to come to terms with her own complex identity of being Catholic, Jewish, and Argentinean in West German society. Jutta Brückner's *Hungerjahre* (*Years of Hunger*, 1979) uses the story of a young girl growing up during the 1950s to draw a connection between sexual repression and the culture of the Economic Miracle (Hake 167). The daughter is forced to surrender to her mother's anxieties about sexuality and to the imperatives her mother places on her body and thus a negative female self-image is perpetuated between generations (Kosta 172).

In her film *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* (1980) Helma Sanders-Brahms recounts the story of her mother's personal experiences of Nazism, the Second World War, and its aftermath along with her own childhood experiences of those eras and thus offers a very

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<sup>24</sup> While the official English title of *Die Klavierspielerin* is *The Piano Teacher* a more literal translation would be "The Piano Player."

direct and personal confrontation with the issues of fascism and war. Her film can be understood as a cinematic manifestation of *Generationenliteratur*, in which a member of the post-war generation seeks to understand her mother's experience of and involvement in the "Third Reich." Her work can also be understood as a part of the literary/cinematic movement of New Subjectivity of the late 1970s and early 1980s in that it merges the director's personal memories and subjective experience of the war and the Adenauer era with the historical discourse of coming to terms with the past. As will be seen in the following section, *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* was influenced by a relatively recent movement in historiography which began in the early 1980s. This trend in historical understanding was characterized by a move away from a single authoritative record of the past to an embracing of the importance of adding personal stories in all their complexity to the grand narrative of history.

## **2.1 Women's Missing Voices: *Herstory*<sup>25</sup> in Helma Sanders-Brahms' *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter***

It was not until the latter part of the twentieth century that oral historians and feminists, and later, post-modernists began to deconstruct the idea that history can only be reconstructed by means of grand historical narratives (Reading 33). Since the 1970s, oral history and feminism have both been preoccupied with the idea of reclaiming a hidden history. Oral historians were striving to introduce into the historical dialogue the missing voices of the non-hegemonic classes to create a "history from below." As oral historian Portelli explains in his book *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (1991) oral history is important because "it gives us information about [...] social groups whose history is missing or distorted" (47). Similarly, feminists wanted to emphasize the roles played by women past and present through a reformulation of history, which for the first time gave adequate attention to women's historical contributions. Thus both oral historians and feminists have helped move the field of history away from a single authoritative record of the past that was largely preoccupied with military events. Through harvesting the recollections and achievements of women and other groups traditionally disenfranchised from the historical record, feminists and oral historians have helped history become a richer and more inclusive reservoir of human memory.

In the context of German history, until circa 1975, women's perspectives had largely been ignored. There was little research addressing the issue of gender or issues particular to women. Bodo von Borries writes that women's history in the German

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<sup>25</sup> The term "herstory" designates women's history, knowledge, and contribution to society and also refers to the ways that women's perspectives have been devalued in Western history and other cultures. The term was coined by Robin Morgan, former editor of *Ms.* magazine in the early 1970s and entered journalistic writing in the 1980s (Herbst 173).

context has only become part of the historical record since 1975 and that, even then, it remained marginalized. He states: “Even if one possessed a personal interest and an analytical curiosity, one could not learn about or research women’s history because of the lack of models and materials” (49).<sup>26</sup> Such gender gaps also apply to the historiography of the “Third Reich” and Holocaust. In an article entitled “Memory and the Holocaust: Processing the Past Through a Gendered Lens,” Joyce Marie Mushaben argues that the many roles of women in Nazi Germany have been rated as insignificant in configuring the master narrative of history. She argues that women who made Hitler’s rise to power possible were dismissed as insignificant collaborators. She includes, among others, Winifred Wagner, Eva Braun, Emmy Goering, Leni Riefenstahl, and Magda Goebbels (154-155). She goes on to state that:

Few mainstream historical accounts suggest that these women contributed to Hitler’s power base in very influential ways. Nor do I recall any accounts of the unique ‘survival strategies’ employed by women in the concentration camps during my personal visits to Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Auschwitz, and Birkenau in the 1980s. The truth is: women are still not taken seriously as historical actors by those composing the ‘master narrative’ (155).

This silence regarding women’s gendered experiences can also be seen in the area of Holocaust studies. Joan Ringelheim, historian and Head of Oral History at the US Holocaust Museum has expressed concern that gender issues have for the most part been dismissed in historical discussions of the Holocaust. For example, at the 1993 opening conference of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which had 18 panels and 80 participants, including 16 women, there was no specific lecture on women or gender. There were, however, lectures which discussed the persecution of the disabled,

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<sup>26</sup>Although Borries is referring to his research on German women’s history prior to the rise of German fascism, his statement could be used to describe the difficulty faced by feminist scholars when confronted with the sparse documentation of women’s lives in general.

homosexual men, and Afro-Germans; the 'ordinary men' who became murderers, the rescuers, the churches, and the bystanders (Ringelheim 344). Ringelheim writes, "When this omission was questioned, the answer sheepishly offered was, 'We forgot.' This answer was given even though panels on the issue of gender were proposed to the planning committee" (346). She goes on to state that, "One would think that the importance of the study of gender during the Holocaust would be widely accepted today. Unfortunately, however, that is not true" (346). One reason why gender has been ignored in the history of the Holocaust may be that it is seen as a possible distraction from the main events of the Holocaust itself. Ringelheim proposes that the denial and minimization of certain aspects of the Holocaust such as rape and sexual assault have resulted in a line that divides "what is considered peculiar or specific to women from what has been designated as the proper collective memory of, or narrative about, the Holocaust" (344). She cites the case of a female Holocaust survivor who experienced this split in collective Holocaust memory and her personal gendered memories of the Holocaust. The survivor, in trying to describe her experience of rape during the Holocaust, found it difficult conceptualizing where her experiences fit in: "Although Pauline recognized her experiences as different from men's she did not know how or where to locate them in the history of the Holocaust. There was a split between traditional versions of Holocaust history and her own experience" (Ringelheim 344).

Claudia Koonz, in her book *Mothers in the Fatherland* (1987), has shown how a similar split applies to the writing of the broader history of Nazism and the role of German women within the "Third Reich." She claims that in many accounts of Germany's Nazi past, German women's participation in this history is missing. Nazi



perpetrators are defined predominantly as male and their victims are depicted as an undifferentiated ‘race.’ Koonz claims:

Women’s history during the Third Reich lacks the extravagant insanity of Hitler’s megalomania; it is often ordinary. But there, at the grassroots of daily life, in a social world populated by women, we begin to discover how war and genocide happened by asking who made it happen. (xxxv)

In her film, *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*, Helma Sanders-Brahms blurs the dividing line between women’s gendered experience of war and what has been designated as the collective memory of the German wartime experience. Her endeavour was an important pioneering effort since women’s experience of war and National Socialism were only starting to be recognized as worthy of documentation and study during the 1980s.<sup>27</sup> As McCormick explains, “The relevance of Sanders-Brahms’ project to feminism is evident in its presentation of an aspect of history of the Second World War that was often neglected: a woman’s experience” (*Politics* 187). Sanders-Brahms’ examination of the effects of war on women in the private sphere offers a perspective that has been missing in traditional accounts of history. By addressing her mother’s experiences, Sanders-Brahms brings to public attention a history that is often neglected, that of non-Jewish German women’s experience of the “Third Reich,” the Second World War, and the Economic Miracle. With regard to women’s gendered experience of this period, the director takes part in what Adrienne Rich terms as a process of “re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (35). Rich calls for women to tell their stories in order to open “master

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<sup>27</sup> One of the earliest works in German in the post-war period on women’s roles in National Socialism was *Mutterkreuz und Arbeitsbuch: Zur Geschichte der Frauen in der Weimarer Republik und im Nationalsozialismus* (1981) edited by the Frauengruppe Faschismusforschung. Some of the earliest research on the topic published in English includes Jill Stephenson’s works *Women in Nazi Society* (1975) and *The Organization of Nazi Women* (1981) and Leila Rupp’s *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (1978).

narratives” to women’s perspectives and underrepresented voices and to deconstruct the idea of a homogenized authoritative record of the past. Standard historical accounts of war, which have tended to dominate and determine historical memory, are concerned with military events, concepts of victory and defeat and filled with images of combat and destruction. These narratives are often bolstered and perpetuated by mainstream cinema such as in the *Kriegsfilme* discussed in Chapter 1. Personal memories tend to offer a different perspective to these popular images. Personal histories, especially those of women as a traditionally historically disenfranchised group, must be articulated and studied in order to guard against a unified telling of history, based on the exclusion of non-hegemonic voices.

In the film script that accompanies her film, Sanders-Brahms explains that she combined her private memories of the war with documentary images of that period in order to create a differing perspective of German history and to work through her own traumatic personal recollections:

Mir haben die Kriegsfilme mit Pyrotechnik nämlich nicht gefallen. “Steiner I” zum Beispiel, ein 15-Millionen-Projekt, viel Geld für Schlachtfelder, Panzer, Explosionen – und dann war es doch nur Kinokrieg mit Piffpaff und Tomatenketchup-Blut. Möglicherweise so, wie sich die Generäle den Krieg vorstellen, wenn sie ihn planen als großes Räuber-und-Schanditz-Spiel mit tödlichem Ausgang für ein paar Millionen: so müßte der Krieg eigentlich sein, wie die Pyrotechnik ihn macht. Aber aus meinen Erinnerungen, wußte ich, so war er nicht. Und als ich die Dokumentaraufnahmen sah und wiedersah, wußte ich: so war der Krieg, den ich gesehen habe in den ersten Jahren meines Lebens, das waren die Bilder, die manchmal immer noch in meinen Träumen auftauchen und die ich zu bewältigen versuche, indem ich diesen Film mache. (*Film-Erzählung* 118)<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “Namely, I did not like war films with pyrotechnics. “Steiner I,” for example, a 15 million project, a lot of money for battlefields, tanks, explosions – and then it was still movie-war with ‘Bang! Bang!’ and tomato ketchup blood. Possibly they reflected how generals imagined war, when they plan it as a huge game of robbers and desecrators with fatal consequences for a few million: this is the way the war would actually be, the way pyrotechnics make it. But based from my memories, I knew it wasn’t like that. And when I saw and saw again the documentary footage I knew: this is how the war was that I saw in the first

Thus, Sanders-Brahms creates a counter-history to standard depictions of war which thematizes a story of women's survival. The director explains, "Dies ist die positive Geschichte Deutschlands während des Faschismus, des Zweiten Weltkriegs und danach. Die Geschichte der Frauen, die das Leben in Gang hielten, während die Männer zum Töten eingesetzt wurden. Sie hätte längst dargestellt werden müssen" (*Film-Erzählung* 25).<sup>29</sup> Sanders-Brahms' recollections are of daily life during the war and post-war period rather than of famous historical events of this era. Her film considers historical events only to the extent that they affected her mother's and her own personal experiences. Thus Sanders-Brahms' approach corresponds to some of the goals of *Alltagsgeschichte* or the "history of everyday life" and of oral history in that it focuses attention on "the forgotten victim of history instead of the big battalion" and attempts to "recapture the subjective experience of people in the past" (Evans 240).

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years of my life, those were the pictures, which sometimes even still surface in my dreams and which I am trying to cope with by making this film" (*Film-Erzählung* 118).

<sup>29</sup> "This is the positive history of Germany during fascism, the Second World War, and afterwards. The history of women, who kept life going, while the men were away at the front being mobilized to kill. It should have been depicted long since" (*Film-Erzählung* 25).

## 2.2 Birth and Rape: Two Scenes Emphasizing a Woman's Gendered Experience of War

While standard historical accounts of the “Third Reich” and the Second World War have tended to focus on important battles and concepts of victory and defeat, Sanders-Brahms’ film *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* was one of the earliest West German films to recount a woman’s personal experience of these historical periods.<sup>30</sup> Sanders-Brahms includes in her film several scenes depicting a woman’s gendered experience of war. Two scenes that are of central importance in representing this individual female experience are the birth scene and the rape scene. In the first sequence, Lene gives birth to her daughter, Anna, during an Allied bombing raid. In the second, Lene is raped by two American service men in an abandoned building while her daughter looks on. A close reading of these scenes will show how Sanders-Brahms uses such cinematic techniques as female voice-over and the insertion of documentary footage into her fictional narrative in order to juxtapose the generally accepted public collective memory of the German war experience with a fictional re-creation of Sanders-Brahms’ mother’s personal experiences of this period. Through intertwining the pivotal events of Lene’s gendered experience of war with the public documentary record of that era, Sanders-Brahms underscores the intrusion of historical forces into Lene’s life (McCormick, *Politics* 191). This emphasis stresses the “false dichotomy” of the division between the private and public realms.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Although Kluge’s film *Abschied von gestern* features the experiences of a young East German refugee in the West Germany of the 1960s, the film does not directly depict her experiences of the war or the immediate post-war era, and only refers in passing to her Jewish heritage.

<sup>31</sup> Judith Mayne has written, “Feminist theorists have always stressed that the division between the realms of public and private is a false dichotomy. Traditionally and historically, women’s sphere has been the private, the realm of family, home, and personal relations. And men’s sphere has been the public sphere of

In the birth sequence, Sanders-Brahms intertwines two strands of narrative by cross-cutting moments of Lene's personal agony while giving birth to her daughter with documentary footage of Allied planes bombing German cities. The shots depicting Anna's birth take place in Lene's house. A high-angle, close-up shot of Lene's face and upper body shows her lying in bed breathing heavily with labour pains. A midwife sits by Lene's bed, encouraging her to breathe deeply. The midwife's words are almost completely obscured by the wail of air raid sirens, the deafening rumble of plane engines and anti-aircraft fire, and the whistle of bombs dropping and exploding. The camera angle in this scene appears to be from the perspective of an observer standing on the other side of Lene's bed across from the midwife, looking down into Lene's face. This point of view evokes empathy for Lene's situation as the viewer clearly witnesses the pain she is experiencing. The air raid sirens and the rumble of the bombs emphasize the extremely vulnerable position these two women are in, and evoke feelings of fear and shock in the viewer who is appalled at these dangerous circumstances. The women, however, do not appear to be afraid. They are so focused on the experience of child birth that they do not seem to be conscious of the bombs exploding around them.

The camera then cuts to early-colour documentary footage of an Allied bomber pilot in his plane. A close-up eye-level shot shows the back of the pilot's head and neck silhouetted against the frame of his plane and a blue sky. His individual features are obscured. This 'facelessness' suggests that the killing the bomber perpetuates has dehumanized him. He seems to become part of the machine he uses to destroy the lives

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official work and production" (160). According to this dichotomy, women are "privileged" to inhabit the realm of blissful warmth free from politics (McCormick, "Confronting German History" 188).

of civilians like Lene and the midwife. The depersonalization of the bomber stands in stark contrast to the intensely personalized shots of Lene giving birth.

A second high-angle shot shows an Allied plane dropping bombs onto a patchwork of fields that are almost completely hidden by clouds and smoke. The camera pans downward to follow the trajectory of the falling bombs. While, in a previous scene, Lene is shown in the life-giving process of channelling Anna out of her body, the bomber channels his payload out of his plane giving birth to destruction.

In the following shot, the camera cuts back to another close-up shot of Lene panting in her most private and personal pain. The midwife tells her to push with the next contraction. Lene shakes her head. The midwife encourages her again and assures her that she can do it. Following this, there is a slow pan over to the midwife who looks concernedly at Lene. Next, the camera pans back to Lene who is looking intently at the midwife. Lene is overwhelmed by the experience of giving birth and it appears that her intense focus on the midwife helps her endure the extreme pain. The midwife gently lifts Lene's head and firmly instructs her to push with the next contraction. As Lene reaches the climax of the birth, the volume of the midwife's voice crescendos so that for the first time it is louder than the sounds of the bombs, anti-aircraft fire, and plane engines. While this increase in volume indicates that Lene has reached the most difficult and painful part of the birth, thematically it could also suggest Lene's struggle to give life triumphs over the destruction and chaos that surrounds her.

The action then cuts back to another close-up shot silhouetting an Allied bomber pilot's head against the sky. This is followed by an aerial shot of bombs dropping onto fields and a German city which is barely visible on the right-hand side of the screen. The

bombs fall downward from the upper right-hand corner of the screen. Next follows a close-up shot of Lene's face which is contorted in agony. In a loud, firm voice, the midwife tells Lene to push her knees into her chest. The action jumps back to another aerial shot of a rural town which is hardly visible beneath the clouds of smoke billowing upwards from the explosions. The bombs in this shot fall from the top left-hand side of the screen, creating a strange symmetry with falling bombs of the earlier shot. The rapid juxtaposition of the birth and bombing scenes underscores the fact that both actions are happening simultaneously.

The camera then cuts to another close-up shot of Lene pushing her knees into her chest. She lets out three agonizing screams and the midwife tells her that the baby's head has appeared. She then leans back on the pillow and smiles. Lene screams once more and the midwife tells her that the birth is completed and that she can relax. The off-screen voice of the midwife even jokes with "Die Beine aufstellen, sonst erdrückt man sein Kind!" (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.).<sup>32</sup> Lene smiles at this joke and then the midwife congratulates Lene and announcing the sex of the child: "Heil Hitler! Ein Mädchen!" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 53).<sup>33</sup> The midwife's congratulatory "Heil Hitler!" is a representation of the intrusion of politics into the private sphere. The midwife has been so indoctrinated with Nazi ideology that she continues to salute the German Führer even when a bombing raid brought on in part by the politics of his government is destroying her city.

The following scene, cuts to a shot of a newborn baby with its umbilical cord still attached lying in the blood of the afterbirth and whimpering. Lene's off-screen voice

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<sup>32</sup> "Keep your legs up or you will smother your child!" (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.).

<sup>33</sup> "Heil Hitler! A girl!" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 53).

comments, “Ein kleines Mädchen. Kein strammer Junge” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 53).<sup>34</sup> Lene’s comment suggests that she has been indoctrinated by gender-based Nazi ideology that assumed that women were inferior to men.

Next follows a shot of Lene who turns to the midwife saying, “Es ist mir so fremd” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 53).<sup>35</sup> The action shows a second shot of the newborn baby lying in blood and the narrator’s voice-over comments, “Als sie mich von dir abschnitten, Lene, fiel ich auf ein Schlachtfeld” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 112).<sup>36</sup> This statement is accompanied by a haunting piano melody in the higher registers. The concurrent presentation of the image of the bloody child and the utterance of the word “battlefield” evokes images of the death and suffering caused by the war. It could also be read as a criticism of contemporary gender-based social conventions which dictate that it is acceptable to show the blood of men on the battlefield, whereas women’s blood is considered private and therefore unfit to be shown in the public forum of film.

The final scene of the sequence consists of a black and white documentary aerial panning shot of a bombed out German metropolis which is probably Berlin. The shot is several seconds long and underscores the magnitude of the destruction which Allied bombing raids inflicted on German cities and civilians during the Second World War. As the melancholy piano melody continues, the narrator’s voice-over comments, “So viel, was ich noch gar nicht sehen konnte, war schon kaputt” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 113).<sup>37</sup> The piano accompaniment of the last two scenes emphasizes the

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<sup>34</sup>“A little girl. No fine [strong] boy” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 53).

<sup>35</sup> “It’s so strange to me” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 53).

<sup>36</sup> “As they cut me from you, Lene, I fell onto a battlefield” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 112).

<sup>37</sup> “So much of what I couldn’t yet see was already destroyed” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 113).



narrator's sadness at the destruction of her homeland that took place around the time of her birth.

This montage of birth and destruction serves two narrative purposes. The first is expository in that it historically contextualizes Anna's birth during an aerial bombing raid. Lene's personal struggle to give birth is historically situated during a battle of nations being waged above and around her. When Hans later remarks to his wife that her life has been relatively easy while he has been fighting, she answers him, "Weißt du, wie das ist, bei Fliegeralarm ein Kind zu kriegen?" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 67).<sup>38</sup> Through the juxtaposition of a fictional re-enactment of Lene's very personal experience of giving birth with documentary footage of Allied planes bombing German cities, Sanders-Brahms destroys the illusion that the "private" sphere traditionally inhabited by women can be insulated from the forces of history and politics.

The second narrative function of the sequence is to confront the historical record with a re-creation of women's gendered experiences of war, namely the effect that the "total war" strategy of bombing of civilian populations had on women and children. During the Second World War, governments responsible for bombings on either side of the conflict did not give civilian populations any special status. Rather civilian populations became intended targets. Through the birth/bombing montage, Sanders-Brahms supplements and enriches the public historical record with a fictional re-creation of her mother's gendered experience of the Second World War. This sequence offers the viewer an insight into a part of Germany's wartime history that is often neglected by mainstream narratives of history. As McCormick suggests:

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<sup>38</sup> "Do you know what it's like to give birth to a child during an air raid?" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 67).

Sanders-Brahms fictional sequence of the birth gives us part of the historical reality of war largely unrecorded by documentarists, but nonetheless an essential part, without which much of what is recorded does not make sense. Why would non-military targets be bombed if there were no civilian population to terrorize in the midst of its daily life – working, eating, cooking, making love, sleeping and giving birth? (*Politics* 192)

Thus, the inclusion of women's gendered experiences of war in the public historical record will serve the simultaneous function of enriching the historical record with women's personal accounts of war and of illuminating the impact the historical forces have had on individual women's lives.

Thematically speaking, the birth sequence establishes a paradigm based on gender in which women are symbolically associated with life-giving processes, whereas men act as the bearers of death. Kosta criticizes Sanders-Brahms for creating what she sees as “blatant stylizations of essentialized gender polarities (life and death, woman and man)” and feels that “the birthing scene, intercut with scenes of a bomber, reduces sexual difference to culturally contrived formulas” (150). While I would agree with Kosta that the birth scene establishes a gender-based paradigm where women are depicted as fostering life and men as destroying it, I would argue that this is a rather realistic paradigm for the film's historical setting during the Second World War. Allied Bomber pilots would have been male. Moreover, in the political and social context of the “Third Reich” non-Jewish German women were encouraged to become mothers and to provide the regime with as many children as possible. In fact, Hitler awarded the *Mutterkreuz* or the “mother's cross” to women who produced four or more children (Koonz 186). ‘Giving life’ was fully supported by the regime and sanctified by the highest authority. Therefore, while gender-based polarities exist in this scene, I feel that they do not

essentialize men or women's experiences of war in that these experiences are based on a historical and social reality.

The second sequence of the film that depicts a woman's gendered experience of war is the scene in which Lene is raped by two American soldiers. In the film narrative, the rape sequence takes place during Lene and Anna's migration to the East and interrupts Lene's narration of the Grimms' fairy tale "Der Räuberbräutigam" ("The Robber Bridegroom"). The scene is preceded by two scenes of early-colour documentary newsreel footage. The first consists of a very lengthy aerial panning shot of bombed out Berlin, which goes on for 1 minute and 5 seconds and which shows the extreme scope of the devastation to the German metropolis. This scene is accompanied by a sombre piano melody dominated by shrill disharmonies. The accompaniment appears to be a funeral march and it underscores the sadness, loss, and otherworldliness of the devastation. The second scene shows an American soldier sitting on the ground playing a legless concert piano. His dissonant plunking captures the attention of a female civilian standing at the far left-hand corner of the screen holding a broom and dustpan. She turns to look at the piano player briefly and, moving from right to left, walks off screen. Two American soldiers walk past the piano player, pause, turn to look at him briefly and smile. Then they lift their heads quickly as if the off-screen woman has caught their attention and they saunter off screen as if wanting to catch up with the woman. The right to left movements of the woman and soldiers create a sense of tension and uneasiness in the Western viewer. This is because right to left movement contradicts the Western eye's natural instinct to move over an image from left to right, due in part to the way people are trained to read (Giannetti 33). The image of male members of a conquering army following a

female member of a conquered civilian population foreshadows the American soldiers' pursuit of Lene in the subsequent rape scene. Moreover, these scenes of newsreel footage underscore for the audience the idea that the violence and destruction of war do not spare civilians or their personal property. They work together with the sequence depicting Lene's rape as a commentary on how, in times of war, conquered civilian populations, especially conquered civilian women, lose rights of ownership not only over their personal possessions but also over their bodies. As Sabine Smith explains, these scenes function "as a commentary on the extent to which the war intrudes on civilians' private (physical, i.e., bodily) space" (241).

In the first scene of the rape sequence a low-angle medium tracking shot shows two drunken American GIs, with bottles of alcohol in hand, walking through a large deserted urban building that resembles an abandoned factory or railway station.<sup>39</sup> Following the same pattern of movement as figures in the newsreel footage, the soldiers appear at the far right-hand side of the screen and move from right to left and slightly away from the camera, as if they were walking in a semi-circle around it. The camera smoothly tracks their progression. This movement has the dual function of establishing continuity with the previous shot and evoking a feeling of apprehension in the viewer. One soldier says to the other in English, "Don't drink it all, for crying out loud" (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.). The soldiers suddenly lift their heads as if they have seen someone. The camera continues to track and it reveals Lene and Anna walking far in the distance on the right side of the screen. In this shot a pillar in the middle of the

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<sup>39</sup> Sanders-Brahms identifies the building in the accompanying film script as an abandoned freight yard in Berlin. She states that "Die Ruinen sind die vom Anhalter Güterbahnhof hier in Berlin. Echte. Echte Kriegeruinen, keine Filmruinen" ("The ruins are those of the [Saxony-]Anhalt freight yard here in Berlin. [They are] real. Real war ruins, not film ruins") (Helma Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 116).

image visually separates the running soldiers and the mother and daughter, as if to divide them into two distinct categories; powerful male warriors of a conquering army and vulnerable female civilians of a conquered population.

The camera continues to pan behind the pillar so that, for a moment, Lene and Anna are hidden behind the pillar and the viewer can only see the soldiers running in the direction of mother and daughter. This shot composition increases the feeling of tension in the viewer as he/she loses sight of Lene and Anna for an instant while seeing the aggressors moving in their direction, and thus becomes increasingly alarmed for the fate of mother and daughter. The camera moves past the pillar, and, in a long shot shows Lene and Anna walking hurriedly in a right to left direction while the soldiers run towards them. The camera zooms in very slowly as the soldiers run up to Lene and position themselves on either side of her and Anna, walking along with them for a few paces. The taller, stronger soldier, who is positioned closer to the camera, holds onto Lene's arm, while the other grabs hold of her rucksack. The camera continues to slowly zoom into a medium shot that shows the soldier closer to the viewer holding his bottle up to Lene's face and saying, "Hey, how about some wine. C'mon" (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.). Lene does not acknowledge him but continues forward looking at the ground. The same soldier complains in an angry voice, "Hey, look, you don't have to snub me like that" (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.). At this point, the soldier throws his bottle to the ground where it shatters loudly. Next, the larger soldier grasps Lene's hand and rapidly pulls her downwards while the second soldier pushes her from behind. In a panicked voice, Lene screams "Anna!" (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.). The camera moves rapidly downward, showing the larger soldier falling backwards onto the

ground, Lene tumbling on top of him, and the second soldier pushing himself onto Lene. The viewer hears the off-screen voice of one of the American soldiers grumbling, “Nazi bitch!” (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.). The rapid camera movement, the blurred image, and the terrified scream evoke in the viewer Lene’s feelings of panic. Through his derogatory name-calling, the soldier dehumanizes Lene, making it easier for him to justify to himself the act of sexual violence he and his fellow GI will commit against her.

Next, the camera swoops quickly upwards from Lene and the soldiers to a close-up shot of Anna’s feet, and then to another low-angle close-up shot of her upper-body. The camera then zooms into a low-angle close-up shot of Anna’s face. The camera does not show the rape itself, but instead depicts mother and daughter keeping eye contact. First, the camera focuses on Anna’s face for approximately 20 seconds, showing the child witnessing the rape of her mother without disclosing any visible emotional reaction. Simultaneously, the viewer hears the off-screen grunting and groaning of the American GIs. The indirect presentation of the rape intensifies rather than decreases the emotional effect, as the viewer imagines what Anna witnesses (Smith 242). Moreover, the low-angle of the camera angle in this scene appears to be from the point of view of Lene, who is lying on the ground. This perspective underscores Lene’s overriding concern for her daughter’s well-being, which she maintains even while being sexually assaulted.

Next, the camera cuts to a high-angle extreme close-up shot of Lene’s face. Her eyes are closed, her nostrils are flared and her lips are pursed in an expression of disgust. Fluttering her eyelids, she slowly opens her eyes, and turns her head to the right of the screen. The extremely high angle of this shot seems to be from the perspective of Anna, who is standing above her mother. This point of view again emphasizes the strong

emotional connection between mother and daughter. Next, a low-angle close-up on Anna's feet shows her walking down three stairs. The camera then pans over the ground and focuses in on another close-up shot of Lene's face. Lene looks off-screen in Anna's direction and calmly tells her daughter, "Das ist das Recht des Siegers, kleines Mädchen. Man nimmt die Sachen, und die Frauen" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 79).<sup>40</sup> Anna then bends down and kisses her mother and Lene smiles very warmly at her daughter. Thus, in the rape sequence, mother and daughter are only visually and physically separated for the duration of the incident. After this scene, the narrative moves on in a rather abrupt transition, showing Lene and Anna riding a train. The muted sounds of the rape sequence are juxtaposed to the loud noises of the subsequent train ride (and to those of the earlier birth scene).

Thematically, the rape sequence also serves as a critique of the widespread silence in post-war German culture surrounding women's rapes by Allied soldiers during and after WWII. In her controversial 1992 film *BeFreier und Befreite: Krieg, Vergewaltigungen, Kinder* (*Liberators Take Liberties: War, Rape, Children*) German filmmaker Helke Sander asserts that although rapes of German women by Allied soldiers (in this case predominantly Soviet troops) in Berlin and other parts of Germany at the end of the war took place on a massive scale, there was never much public discussion of them in either German state (Sander and Jahr 11). Although historical and bibliographical accounts briefly referred to the rapes, they were almost never a topic of extensive discussion.<sup>41</sup> In the book accompanying the film, which documents the research for the

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<sup>40</sup> "That's the right of the victor, little girl. One takes possessions and women" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 79).

<sup>41</sup> One exception to this historical phenomenon was an anonymously published diary entitled *Eine Frau in Berlin* that appeared in Germany in 1959. Anon., *Eine Frau in Berlin. Tagebuchaufzeichnungen* (Geneva:

film and contains a transcription of the film's dialogue, Sander states that prior to her film, there had been virtually no research on the subject. She also claims that each document brought to light during the course of the research done by herself and her collaborator, Barbara Johr, was often the result of months of searching (Sander and Johr 11).

Sander's difficulty finding research and historical documentation on rapes of German women by Allied soldiers at the end of the war suggests that the rapes had been a taboo subject in Germany for several decades after the conflict. Atina Grossman also emphasizes the silence surrounding the rapes, stating:

...the topic [of the mass rapes] was suppressed, not as too shameful for women to discuss, but as too humiliating for German men and too risky for women who feared (with much justification, given the reports of estrangement and even murder) the reactions of their menfolk. (61)

I maintain that in her film, *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*, Sanders-Brahms uses Lene's stoic reaction to being raped as a critique of the silence and historical marginalization in post-war German culture of German women's rapes by Allied soldiers at the end of the Second World War.<sup>42</sup> In my opinion, the filmmaker intended Lene's reiteration to her daughter of the saying, "To the victor the spoils" and her subsequent shaking off of the incident to function as an ironic commentary on the way post-war German society *expected* German women to suppress the trauma of rape, to shrug it off, and to simply carry on as if nothing of great importance had happened to them. This view is contrary to that of some feminist scholars who are outraged at Lene's passive

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Hulmut Kossodo, 1959). It had been published first in English in 1954 under the title *A Woman in Berlin*, trans. James Stern (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1954).

<sup>42</sup> Sanders-Brahms critiques this silence in post-war West German culture surrounding the rapes of German women in light of the German atrocities that took place during the war. As will be shown, she depicts Lene as a bystander of the crimes of the Nazi regime against Jewish Germans.



endurance and stoic acceptance of being raped, and who suggest that the character's reaction shows that she has internalized patriarchal rape myths. As Smith explains:

Lene's response [to being raped] is astonishing: apparently unshaken, she is presented as maintaining her composure, keeping her nerve [...] The viewer is confronted with an outrageous scene that seems designed for emotional effect [...] It seems to suggest that Lene has internalized patriarchal rape myths, as she states that the chaos of war gives men the license to rape enemy women [...] Lene passes on to Anna the lesson that the victors in war have the right to rape enemy women. This highly problematic gesture [...] reflects, of course, a rather disturbing self-image. It allows Lene to regard herself as *Kriegsbeute* ["war booty"]. (241-42)

I agree with Smith that Sanders-Brahms intended Lene's reaction to her rape to shock the viewer. However, I feel that Sanders-Brahms employs Lene's shocking response as a Brechtian distancing technique. This approach serves to alienate the viewer from the action and to make him/her reflect critically on the attitude of post-war German society towards German women's rapes as an episode in history that should be forgotten and ignored. However, the problem with Sanders-Brahms' approach is that many non-German viewers of her film may not have been aware of the taboo in German society surrounding wartime rapes and thus would not have understood her critique of the cultural repercussion of this episode in German history.

### 2.3 The Role of Documentary Footage and Radio in *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*

While the previous section discusses Sanders-Brahms' use of documentary footage in the birth and rape scenes, this section deals with her use of archival footage in other scenes of *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*. In several scenes of the film Sanders-Brahms fuses fictional re-enacted moments inspired by her mother's and her own personal recollections of war with iconographic images and sounds that have come to represent official discourses on the past (including archival footage of bombed-out cityscapes, recordings of Hitler's political speeches, and newsreel shots of the famed *Trümmerfrauen* or "women of the rubble" starting to rebuild the devastated German cities). By merging fictional (auto)biographical narrative with documentary footage, Sanders-Brahms places 'private' experience and broader socio-political 'events' in dialectic relation. This intermingling of re-enacted scenes and archival footage contextualizes both the personal and collective memories. The newsreel images depicting events of national history such as aerial bombing raids and Germany's capitulation in 1945 situate the fictional scenes in a historical context. Conversely, the enacted scenes locate the historical/political events in a social context by illustrating how Lene, Anna and other German women and children were affected by and reacted to events such as the bombings. Through blending moments of individual and public memory, Sanders-Brahms emphasizes the interdependence of the public and private realms of experience. As Leonie Naughton explains:

*Germany Pale Mother's* mobilisation of a range of discursive modes serves to elucidate the nexus of the public and the private, of individual recollection and officially instituted histories. [...] Moving from the monumental events of national history to the quotidian, the film succeeds in imbuing memory with a

texture which is both social and historic. Rather than presenting personal experience and recollections as ‘private’ constructions, *Germany Pale Mother* presents them in correlation to historic context and social imperative. (n. pag.)

By blending subjective memories and archival footage of the war in her film, Sanders-Brahms emphasizes the problematic process of historical recovery. She does not treat history as an unquestionable fixed referent, but rather reveals it to be a site of contestation between genders, between generations, and between the victorious Allied Forces and the defeated German population (Naughton n. pag).

Let us turn now to an examination of the other sequences of the film that juxtapose fictional scenes and archival footage. After the birth/bombing montage, the next sequence that contains authentic footage shows Lene and her infant daughter taking refuge from a bombing raid in an air raid shelter. In this sequence, Sanders-Brahms uses both newsreel footage and radio broadcasts to refer to the political forces that intrude on Lene’s private life. The first scene of this sequence shows Lene alone at home, holding Anna in her arms, and sitting in front of a Christmas tree. She listens to the famous radio broadcast of “Stille Nacht” or “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve 1942 sung by German soldiers on the outmost reaches of the expanded German Reich. The broadcast is ironic because, as Hillman suggests, “It’s rendition [...] feigns a sovereignty that the imminent collapse of Stalingrad was to totally negate” (71). Ironically, the line “alles schläft” or “everything sleeps” is interrupted by air raid sirens. Lene is shown placing Anna in a baby carriage, collecting a suitcase, leaving her house, and hastily pushing the carriage past a pile of rubble towards the nearest air raid shelter. Flashes of light illuminate the dark scene. The next shot shows Lene entering the shelter and sitting down among a group of frightened women, children, and elderly men. The shelter radio broadcasts a

speech by Hitler, which states “If the enemy thought he could sap our spirits with a few surprise attacks, he was wrong. They are an alarm for total war” (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.).<sup>43</sup> Hitler then pronounces, “We shall no longer speak of lost comforts in Germany” (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.).<sup>44</sup> A mother gives her son a knowing look and then glances towards the ceiling. Next follows an early-colour documentary shot of planes flying in formation over the bombed ruin of a building silhouetted against a night sky. This footage is accompanied by ominous bass piano chords that underscore the fear felt by the shelter occupants. The camera then cuts to a close-up shot of a woman rocking a girl back and forth in her arms. The lights in the shelter begin to flicker as someone lets out a terrified scream. A medium shot shows Lene bracing Anna’s carriage with her upper body in an instinct to protect her child. Next follow more shots of night bombings and the terrified reactions of the civilians in the shelter. As the sounds of the bombs crescendo and shelter occupants become more agitated, the warden cries out “Kein Wort!” (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.).<sup>45</sup> He turns up Hitler’s speech on the radio, which ends in a jubilant crowd cheering “Sieg Heil!” (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.).<sup>46</sup> Next, as the intensity of the bombing decreases, the civilians in the shelter are shown passing around a bottle of schnapps and making casual conversation. A more hopeful piano melody accompanies the action.

In this sequence, Sanders-Brahms alternates enacted scenes with archival footage in order to confront the public historical record of the war with images of how aerial

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<sup>43</sup> I quoted the English subtitle of this sentence from Hitler’s speech as I could not adequately hear the German sentence which was made unintelligible by other diagetic sounds such as screams and the roar of exploding bombs.

<sup>44</sup> I quoted the English subtitle of this sentence rather than the German original for the same reason stated in the above footnote.

<sup>45</sup> “Not a word!” (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.).

<sup>46</sup> “Hail [to] victory!” (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.).

bombings terrorized civilian populations. While the documentary shots of the bombing are distanced, impersonal, and mechanistic, the enacted scenes are extremely immediate, personal, and visceral. The fictional scenes evoke in the viewer fear for the fate of the shelter occupants and empathy for their terrifying situation. In particular, they increase the viewer's emotional identification with Lene's struggle to bring herself and her daughter through the war alive. In contrast, the radio broadcasts in this sequence function ironically. The soldiers on the broadcast sing "Stille Nacht," and when the air raid siren begins to wail, the viewer realizes it will be anything but a silent night for Lene and Anna. This juxtaposition also highlights the disparate types of terrifying experiences soldiers had on the front to those civilians experienced in the air raid shelters. Also, in the radio broadcast Hitler claims that the enemy, through surprise attacks, has provoked his government to engage in total war. Meanwhile, the enacted scenes depict a total war being waged on the German people by this same enemy. The irony in this scene stems from the fact that most viewers recognize that it was Hitler's 'surprise invasions' into sovereign nations such as Poland that began the Second World War. Moreover, Hitler's decree that Germans shall no longer speak of lost comforts is ironically juxtaposed with images of civilians in the most uncomfortable of situations. Thus, Sanders-Brahms combines enacted scenes, documentary footage, and radio broadcasts in an ironic critique of Nazi propaganda and Hitler's aggressive expansionism.

Following the air raid shelter scene, the third scene that combines archival and enacted scenes occurs in the sequence when Lene and Anna arrive on foot in Berlin. Fictional scenes of Lene are cross cut with documentary footage of a young boy surrounded by ruins interviewed in Berlin at the end of the war. The scene is edited in

such a way that the two characters appear to converse with one another. Lene asks the boy how to get to the Halensee district of Berlin. With precocious confidence he explains which bus to take. When Lene asks where his family is, he answers that they have disappeared and that he has been looking for them for six weeks. The boy then turns and, under the weight of his heavy backpack, walks away from the camera into the ruined cityscape of Berlin.

In this sequence, the documentary footage depicts the rubble of Berlin and lends historical authenticity to the fictional shots. Moreover, this sequence illustrates the extent to which the public and private realms of experience are intermeshed. The ‘public’ forces of war and politics have disrupted the ‘private’ life of this boy, separating his family and forcing him to leave his home. As McCormick explains:

The boy, whose lonely search for his family was thus preserved for a few moments in some rare documentary footage has long since disappeared from history; the moments, however, are precious for their poignant illustration of the war’s disruption of the family, its intrusion into the personal experience of those members of the civilian population normally most sheltered from public life. (*Politics* 192-193)

McCormick goes on to suggest that because the boy’s search has been recorded onto documentary footage, it has become part of the public record of war (*Politics* 193). He also notes that it is interesting that it is to this highly personal moment of the public historical record that Sanders-Brahms has sutured her mother’s story most tightly. Like the boy, Lene has been forced out of her home, is searching for relatives, and is required to develop new skills never required of her before (*Politics* 193). Thus, through this juxtaposition of fictional and documentary scenes Sanders-Brahms encourages the viewer to feel empathy for both Lene’s and the boy’s personal plights. The solitary unknown boy becomes representative of countless other children whose families were torn asunder

by war. A final interesting point of this scene is that the difference in film grain emphasizes for the viewer that this is a dialogue of time levels. Lene's conversation with the boy is representative of the objective of Sanders-Brahms' film; a dialogue with the past. Just as the mother figure asks questions of the documentary record of the past, Sanders-Brahms holds a dialogue with her mother's past.

In another sequence of the film, documentary footage is used to distance the viewer from the action of the fictional narrative. After Lene and Anna have arrived in Berlin, they find refuge at the apartment belonging to rich relatives. A medium shot shows them taking a bath together. Sanders-Brahms' off screen voice-over comments, "So liebten Lene und ich uns in der Badewanne und flogen wie die Hexen über die Dächer" (*Film-Erzählung* 113).<sup>47</sup> The voice-over bolsters the happy mood of the playful interaction between mother and infant. It is from the perspective of the adult filmmaker and it recounts her idealized memories of those times spent wandering through war-torn Germany with her mother. It is at this point in the film where the objections of some feminist critics that the harsh realities of war are minimized by the mother-daughter symbiosis seem most justified. For example, Claudia Lenssen claims that the film is "the story of a very happy symbiosis and an escape from the bombings and all the horrors of war. The mother and daughter create a world of their own" (Fehervary, Lenssen, and Mayne 176). Moreover, Seiter claims that, "[t]he emphasis on the psychological self-sufficiency of the mother and daughter relationship results in the detachment of women from social, economic, and political relationships" (572). In my view, the filmmaker's idealized memories of that time are undermined by the sequence of documentary footage

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<sup>47</sup> "And so Lene and I loved each other in the bathtub and flew like witches over the rooftops" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 113).

that follows, this being an aerial footage shot from a plane flying over the bombed buildings of Berlin. This documentary footage shows the viewer a historical reality, which provides the corrective to the child's fantasies and thus distances the viewer from identifying with the daughter's idealized memories. As McCormick explains:

“Flying over the rooftops” [...] would have meant flying over miles of bombed out buildings, many of which had no roofs, as the spectator can ascertain during this silent sequence of eerie footage showing Berlin in ruins [...] The spectator is not allowed to participate in the joy shared by the mother and daughter – which is idyllic only in the memory of the child, in any case – without being confronted with the visual evidence of how ghastly a world it was she remembers so selectively. (*Politics* 198-199)

The next scene containing archival footage takes place after a scene showing Lene and Anna wandering through a snowy rural landscape in an unspecified part of eastern Germany. A medium shot of early-colour footage shows the burning wreckage of a crashed airplane and then the camera cuts to an image of Hitler's bunker in flames (Kaes 149, Hyams 43). The action is accompanied by an off-screen radio broadcast telling of Hitler's death. The announcer states, “Aus dem Führerhauptquartier wird gemeldet, daß unser Führer, Adolf Hitler, heute Nachmittag in seinem Befehlsstand in der Reichkanzlei bis zum letzten Atemzuge gegen den Bolschewismus kämpfend für Deutschland gefallen ist” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 92).<sup>48</sup> The camera then cuts to a close-up shot of Lene's face and hand against a backdrop of green leaves. On her finger is perched a cockchafer, a type of European beetle. Lene sings the “Maikäferlied,”<sup>49</sup> a traditional German children's song similar to “Ladybird, Ladybird”:

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<sup>48</sup> “From the headquarters of the Führer it has been announced that our Führer, Adolf Hitler, died this afternoon in his chancellery while fighting to his last breath for Germany against Bolshevism” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 92).

<sup>49</sup> The song has been associated in Germany with mass conflicts since the 17th century. The song was first sung in the Thirty Years War, when, after 1618, vast regions of Pomerania were pillaged and two-thirds of the population did not survive the conflict (“Maikäfer, flieg!”).



Maikäfer flieg.  
 dein Vater ist im Krieg  
 die Mutter ist im Pommerland  
 Pommerland ist abgebrannt  
 Maikäfer flieg (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 92).<sup>50</sup>

When the song is finished the beetle flies away and Lene laughs joyfully and looks downwards. A close-up shot of Anna's face depicts her watching the scene. The camera then cuts back to Lene to show her sighing in a relieved fashion. A medium-range documentary shot then shows the wreckage of another smouldering German airplane. Next follow close-up documentary shots of a soldier's blood-smeared face and hand. After this, Lene recounts the "Räuberbräutigam" fairy tale to Anna as they wander through the German countryside.

Several themes of the "Maikäferlied" resonate with the images of this sequence to produce layers of meaning. The green background in the enacted close-up shot of Lene shows that it is spring, a concept that is reinforced by the mention of the month of May in the term "Maikäfer." The evocation of spring, Lene's joyful laugh and sigh of relief, and the radio announcement of Hitler's death conspire together to create a sense of release from tension in the viewer. This feeling of release underscores Lene's sense of liberation from the darkness of war and winter. However, these positive impressions are starkly juxtaposed with the tragic mood created by the newsreel footage showing the destruction war causes to human lives and property. The images of Hitler's bunker and a plane engulfed in flames reverberate with the line in the song describing the destruction of Pomerania. The documentary footage and the radio announcement create a sense of

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<sup>50</sup> "Cockchafer fly / Your father is at war. / Your mother is in Pomerania / Pomerania has burnt down / Cockchafer fly" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 92).

defeat and loss which is often accepted as the public memory of Germans' reaction to their country's capitulation. In contrast, Lene's personal reaction to Germany's surrender and Hitler's death is one of joy and relief. Thus, Sanders-Brahms juxtaposes the public collective traumatic memory of the German experience of the end of the war with Lene's personal joyful reaction.

The themes of the "Maikäferlied" also emphasize elements of Lene and Anna's personal story. Like the cockchafer, Lene and her daughter are living through a period of conflict. The song encourages the cockchafer to flee, lest it be lost in the destruction of war. Lene and Anna have also had to flee Berlin to avoid the aerial bombing raids. Moreover, the cockchafer's father is in battle as Anna's father, Hans, is absent from his family as he has been enlisted to fight. Further, the small insect's mother is in Pomerania, and Lene and Anna are in the German east, having fled the air raids in Berlin. Sanders-Brahms' film does not show the flight of German civilians from the advancing Russian army and the raping of German woman by Russian soldiers. However, her original film script depicted Lene and Anna fleeing from the Red Army, Lene's rape by Russian soldiers, and the subsequent termination of her pregnancy by a female Russian doctor (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 77-80).<sup>51</sup> Just as the cockchafer's mother is caught up in the destruction of Pomerania, so Lene too, in the film script, is caught up in the destruction of the German east by Russian troops. Therefore, in many ways, the circumstances of the small beetle in *Maikäferlied* parallel those of Lene and Anna in the film narrative.

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<sup>51</sup> In her film, Sanders-Brahms decided to insert Lene's telling of the "Räuberbräutigam" fairy-tale instead of her rape by Russian soldiers and the subsequent abortion. Sanders-Brahms regarded the substitution as one of the more successful aspects of the film (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 116).

Why does Lene sing the *Maikäferlied* to Anna in this sequence? Gabriele

Weinberger claims that Lene's singing of the song reinforces her isolation from her historical reality and her "naïve perpetuation of patriarchal, bourgeois myths" (84). She states:

Instead of becoming aware and active, Lene gets lost in her fairy-tale world and does not perceive the real world around her. By association, Lene's world that she created for herself and her daughter is identified as a fairy-tale world. Her joyous reaction to the real world, to Hitler's suicide and Germany's capitulation, is the childlike recitation of the children's song *Maikäfer flieg*. She is incapable of finding her own language and thus can only reiterate for her daughter the male discourse. (84-85)

I disagree with Weinberger that Lene sings the *Maikäferlied* to Anna because she cannot find her own words to express her happiness. In my opinion, Lene sings this song in order to make Anna aware of the necessity of their journey in terms that the child can comprehend and in a fashion that will not terrify her. Through identifying with the cockchafer and its need to flee danger in a war-torn country, Anna can confront her personal situation in a manner that is not too direct. As Landwehr explains, reciting and listening to stories can have a therapeutic effect in coping with traumatic experiences. She claims:

Stories enable us to confront our own sufferings through empathy with the protagonists. They also draw a boundary through the world of fiction and our reality, establishing a safe distance between the tribulations of protagonists and our world. This dual role of narratives [...] in evoking empathy with the characters while also protecting us from direct confrontation with difficult issues provides the effective mechanisms of a trauma narrative. (135)

Lene's singing of the *Maikäferlied* reflects her desire to provide her daughter with a safe locus in which to consider their circumstances and the reasons for their journey. The song allows Anna to become aware of her situation in an indirect fashion, by

considering the parallel circumstances of the small beetle. The indirect nature of this reflection would serve to minimize the child's fear of the vulnerable situation in which she and her mother find themselves.

Following the *Maikäferlied* sequence, the final scene of the film containing documentary footage takes place after the end of the war. A twenty-second early colour documentary panning shot depicts *Trümmerfrauen* standing amidst the ruins of a city block in several human chains, collecting usable bricks and passing them down the chains in buckets. The camera then cuts to a close-up documentary shot of a middle-aged woman standing in front of a pile of stacked bricks. The woman takes hold of a bucket with a brick passed to her from the right of the screen and passes it left off screen down the line. Next, she receives an empty bucket from the left hand side of the screen and passes it off screen to the right up the line. This crisscross motion flows into an enacted scene showing a human chain of women passing buckets. The chain culminates with a shot of Lene and her sister, Hanne, who are shown stacking usable bricks in a large pile. Lene and Hanne are smiling and joking playfully with one another, actions that suggest they enjoy taking part in the reconstruction effort. The documentary shots are accompanied with a cheerful piano melody.

The archival footage of the *Trümmerfrauen* in this scene depicts perhaps the most famous collective memory of German women in the immediate post-war period. These hopeful and inspiring images depict German women as cooperative, diligent, and full of agency, determined to rebuild their cities from the devastation of war. As Markovits and Reich suggest, in post-war Germany *Trümmerfrauen* came to symbolize the resilient, industrious, and frugal nature of the German people. They write:

Beginning with the so-called reconstruction period of the late 1940s and early 1950s, there developed the collective memory of the hard-working Germans, the *Trümmerfrauen*, who with their bare hands and nothing to sustain them were able to scrimp and save, eventually beginning the Federal Republic's successful economic recovery. This collective memory [...] takes pride that no adversity, regardless of its magnitude, could stop the Germans from once again picking themselves up, like a 'phoenix from the ashes,' to become the economic envy of the world. (460)

However, Sanders-Brahms undermines these very optimistic iconographic images of *Trümmerfrauen* with an off-screen voice-over comment that incorporates the adult filmmaker's insights into the nature of this new beginning. In the voice-over the narrator ruefully addresses her mother, saying:

Lene, was sollten wir vom Frieden erwarten? Am Anfang nach dem Krieg, das Aufräumen machte noch Spaß. Aber die Steine, die wir klopfen, die wurden zu Häusern zusammengesetzt, die noch schlimmer waren als die vorher. Lene, wenn wir das gewußt hätten. Lene, wenn wir das gewußt hätten. (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 113)<sup>52</sup>

This comment hinders the spectator's enjoyment of the cheerful scene, as it foreshadows the idea that Lene's return to the domestic sphere will be a disillusioning and traumatic experience. As Kosta suggests, in this scene, "documentary footage of the famed *Trümmerfrauen* [...] ironically dramatizes the women rebuilding the sites of their own demise" (129).

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<sup>52</sup> "Lene, what should we have expected from peace? At first after the war cleaning up was still fun. But the stones that we hammered were used to build houses that were worse than those before. Lene, if only we had known that. Lene, if only we had known that" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 113).

## 2.4 Summarizing Remarks

In this chapter I have discussed how on the West German cultural scene a *Tendenzwende* or change of direction took place from the 1960s to the 1970s. While many authors and filmmakers of the 1960s attempted to objectively document political and social realities, writers and directors of the 1970s tended to value authorial subjectivity and created works based on personal experience. In the late 1970s many artists of the post-war generation began to turn their attention towards history, while maintaining a concern for the self and its psychological development. This contributed to a wave of *Generationenliteratur*. Written by authors born in the 1930s and 1940s, these books dealt with the authors' relationships with their parents and their parents' involvement in National Socialism. While these works often focused on the authors' relationship with their fathers, some works written by women in the late 1970s and early 1980s began to examine the mother-daughter relationship. At this time, female West German filmmakers began making films that combined autobiography and feminist perspectives in the larger examination of historical issues. Specifically, they explored their identities as women by telling the stories of their mothers' experiences during National Socialism and the post-war period.

*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* is an important project as it emphasizes an aspect of German history that was often neglected: a non-Jewish German woman's experience of the "Third Reich" and post-war period. In this film, Sanders-Brahms fuses historical and political investigation with an intensely personal exploration of the mother-daughter

relationship. Through its subjective autobiographical perspective, the film is able to access the public space of German history. As Everett explains:

Through the intimate subjective language of autobiography this film is exploring far wider social and political issues. Sanders-Brahms's quest for identity, articulated through her subjective exploration of the mother-daughter relationship, discovers in her mother's private experience a point of intersection between the personal, domestic space of home, and the external, political space of fascism and war. The merging of the personal and political, that is characteristic of the [autobiographical] genre, offers a path by which traditionally marginalized, voiceless women can actually enter into history, can penetrate the phallogentric power structures of the public realm. (133)

As has been shown in this chapter, one of the most striking ways Sanders-Brahms merges the personal and political in her exploration of her mother's gendered experiences of war is to alternate archival footage with re-enacted scenes of events in her mother's life. The effect of these confrontations is that they historically contextualize the fiction occurring onscreen while simultaneously giving a social context to the historical events depicted. In this way, Sanders-Brahms succeeds in imbuing memory in her film with a "texture which is both social and historic" (Bommes and Wright 256).

### **Chapter 3: Storytelling and Memory in *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* Storytelling as a Female Art**

For centuries women have told stories to each other and to their children. The female narrator of Margaret Atwood's story, "Significant Moments in the Life of my Mother" (1984), conspiratorially reports that there are always "some stories which my mother does not tell when there are men present: never at dinner, never at parties" (11). The reader learns that these stories are usually told in domestic settings: "usually in the kitchen, when [the women] are shelling peas, or taking the tops and tails off the string beans or husking corn" (Atwood 11). They are melodramatic tales telling of "romantic betrayals, unwanted pregnancies, illnesses of various horrible kinds, marital infidelities, mental breakdowns, tragic suicides, unpleasant lingering deaths" (Atwood 11). These stories of women's lived experience are received by the female company with reverent attention: "The women, their own hands moving silently among the dirty dishes or the husks of vegetable, nod solemnly" (Atwood 11).

The tales to which Atwood refers are the legacy of a narrative tradition in which women are the primary storytellers. In Europe, this tradition flowed down through the generations primarily through women's oral retelling until the stories were appropriated by male collectors and editors who channelled them into print culture. The history of the fairy tale in France and Germany illustrates how stories once recited by women were later co-opted and disseminated by men. Fairy tale scholar Warner claims that while in the eyes of posterity Charles Perrault (1628-1703) has become the most famous French pioneer of fairy tales, he was greatly outnumbered and in some cases preceded by women authors whose work has faded from view (xii). *Le Cabinet des fées (The Fairy Library)*,



a series of forty-one volumes published in 1785 by Charles-Joseph de Mayer, contains hundreds of fairy tales of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the high point of the literary genre. The *Cabinet* includes more than twenty authors and over half of these are women (Warner xii). Further, according to Jarvis, German women also wrote *Volksmärchen* and *Kunstmärchen* long before the Grimm Brothers (“Trivial” 119). For example, writer Benedikte Christiane Naubert, who is often forgotten in modern canonical histories of the genre, published her *Neue Volksmärchen der Deutschen* from 1789-92, predating the Grimms’ collections by more than two decades.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, investigations about the sources and methods used by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm have shown that more than fifty women and girls contributed tales and tale variants to the Grimms’ collections of stories from 1808 to 1830 (Blackwell 1).

Feminist readings of fairy tales have relied on the argument that storytelling is “semiotically, a female art” (Rowe 71). Rowe shows that through their association with fates, fairies, and spinning in European culture, women are identified with the art and power of spinning tales (54-71). She suggests that the history of male appropriation of folk and fairy tales is the history of men’s attempt to gain control of this female voice, to take possession of the female art of storytelling. Rowe writes:

To have the antiquarian Grimm Brothers regarded as the fathers of modern folklore is perhaps to forget the maternal lineage, the “mothers” who in the French *veillées* [social gatherings] and English nurseries, in courts and the German *Spinnstube*, in Paris and on the Yorkshire moors, passed on their wisdom. The Grimm brothers, like Tereus, Ovid, King Shahryar, Basile, Perrault, and others reshaped what they could not precisely comprehend, because only for women does the thread, which spins out the lore of life itself, create a tapestry

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<sup>53</sup> Other fairy tale collections published by female writers which predate the Grimms’ *Kinder und Hausmärchen* include Agnes Franz’s 1804 *Kinderlust*, Caroline Stahl’s 1818 edition of *Fabeln, Märchen und Erzählungen für Kinder*, and Amalie Schoppe’s voluminous fairy-oeuvre composed of works like *Kleine Märchen-Bibliothek, oder gesammelte Märchen für die liebe Jugend* (1828) and *Volkssagen, Märchen und Legenden aus Nord-Deutschland* (1833) (Jarvis, “Trivial” 119-20).

which can be fully read and understood. Strand by strand weaving [...] is the true art of the fairy tale—and it is, I would submit, semiotically a female art. (68-71)

But what is the function of these narratives told by women throughout the centuries? Folk and fairy tales have the important social function of conveying women's lived experience in the form of a story that arouses the curiosity of listeners. As Rowe explains, through the vehicle of "the mesmerizing voice, wise women [...] have] passed on the secret lore—of birthing, dying, destiny, courtship, marriage, sexuality from generation to generation" (64). Moreover, female storytellers convey social attitudes and expectations. In Warner's words they "pass on [to their children] vital information about the values and beliefs of the community in which they are growing up, will instruct them in who is trusted and who is not, about what is considered praiseworthy and what is condemned, about alliances and enmities, hopes and dangers" (49). Thus through telling stories, women have traditionally transmitted knowledge, both cultural and personal, down through the generations.

### 3.1 Intergenerational Dialogue in *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*

In her film, *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* Helma Sanders-Brahms takes up the enunciative role of woman as storyteller by recreating her mother's and her own experiences of the Hitler years and post-war era. Through using the public medium of film to portray this narrative, Sanders-Brahms preserved her story as a cultural artefact, making it accessible to a wide audience at the time of its release, today, and for generations to come. The theme of communication between generations is one that is central to Sanders-Brahms' project. She seeks to open up an intergenerational dialogue through three specific cinematic techniques. These include: a dramatic reading of a Brecht poem by his daughter, the director's commentary on her fictionalized recreation of her mother's life through the authorial voice-over, and Sanders-Brahms' daughter playing a role in the film.

*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* takes its title from Brecht's prophetic poem "Deutschland" ("Germany") written in 1933 during his exile from Germany (Brecht, *Poems* 555). In the prologue to Sanders-Brahms' filmic action, Hanne Hiob, Brecht's own daughter, reads her father's poem. This reading is accompanied by twelve shots of the poem's text in small print on a black and white background. Through having Brecht's daughter read his lyrical allegory of Germany as a mother despoiled by fascism, Sanders-Brahms traces a thematic connection between the post-war generation of daughters and their interrogation into their mothers' roles in Germany's fascist past. Hiob's reading sets up the idea of an interaction between generations in which a "German daughter" of the post-war generation reads a poem that questions the "German mother,"

(albeit the fictional, allegorized mother) of the war generation about her silent complicity in the crimes of the Nazi regime. This interrogation prefaces and parallels Sander-Brahms' questioning of her mother's actions during the Hitler regimes, actions that are depicted in a fictionalized form in the film narrative. The intergenerational dimension of the prologue is further emphasized by the fact that Brecht, a "son" of Germany "the pale mother," penned the poem now being read by his daughter. However, Brecht was a "German son" who was fortunate enough to leave Germany before the full extent of Nazi brutality had manifested itself.

In the poem, Brecht uses a mother figure as a metaphor for Germany:

O Deutschland, bleiche Mutter!  
 Wie sitzt du besudelt  
 Unter den Völkern.  
 Unter den Befleckten  
 Fällst du auf. (Brecht, *Werke* 253)<sup>54</sup>

The first stanzas of the poem set up a fictional scenario in which the sons, representing the National Socialists, shame 'mother Germany' through their crimes. As Kaes suggests, Brecht makes a distinction between the National Socialists and the German people, along gender-specific lines (Kaes 148). The German mother, Germania, is presented as an ambivalent figure who is simultaneously victimized by her sons and passively complicit in their misdeeds. The sons have shamed their mother by killing their brother, a sibling who represents the victims of Nazism. In doing so, they have stained and defiled her: "Von deinen Söhnen der ärmste / Liegt erschlagen. / Als sein Hunger groß war / Haben deine anderen Söhne / Die Hand gegen ihn erhoben. / Das ist ruchbar

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<sup>54</sup> "O Germany, pale mother / How you sit defiled among the peoples! / Among the besmirched, / You stand out" (Brecht, *Poems* 218).

geworden” (Brecht, *Werke* 253).<sup>55</sup> Mocking her with laughter and defiant gestures, the sons humiliate the mother, leaving her victimized and violated. From the perspective of others, the mother’s shame implicates her in her sons’ murderous crimes. She is regarded as their accomplice: “Und dabei sehen dich alle / Den Zipfel deines Rockes verbergen, der blutig ist / Vom Blut deines / Besten Sohnes” (Brecht, *Werke* 253).<sup>56</sup> Thus the poem constructs the National Socialist terror as a situation of familial violence in which the Nazi sons victimize the German mother, who is implicated in their crimes in so far as she tries to conceal them.

While Brecht’s “Deutschland” depicts Germany as a mother despoiled by her sons, I do not feel that the poem sets up a simplistic allegory in the film in which Lene is meant to be viewed exclusively as the German people. Brecht’s poem functions like the scene titles of his plays, which emphasize the historical and political context of the action which is about to take place (McCormick, “Confronting German History” 200). An alienation technique Brecht used in many of his plays was to have the actors hold placards announcing both the themes and the outcome of the scene so that the audience would not get too emotionally involved in the suspense of the drama (Osnes and Gill 9). The action of Sanders-Brahms’ film begins around 1933, the year Hitler became chancellor of Germany, and the year Brecht wrote the poem “Deutschland.” Moreover, Sanders-Brahms uses the poem to introduce an important theme in her film, that of communication between generations. By having Brecht’s daughter Hiob read her father’s

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<sup>55</sup> “Of your sons the poorest / Lies struck down. / When his hunger was great / Your other sons / Raised their hands against him. / This is now notorious” (Brecht, *Poems* 219)

<sup>56</sup> “And at the same time all see you / Hiding the hem of your skirt, which is bloody / With the blood of your / Best son” (Brecht, *Poems* 219).

work, Sanders-Brahms draws the viewer into a story, which is above all an intergenerational dialogue.

A second aspect of the interaction across the generations in *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* is Sanders-Brahms' use of the cinematic voice-over technique. In creating a fictionalized account of her mother's and to some extent her own personal experiences of the war and post-war period, the director does not attempt to create an illusion of objective history. While she constructs the plot of her filmic narrative around her mother's life, she emphasizes her own authority in the cinematic retelling of her mother's story through the use of an off-screen voice-over. A disembodied female voice, Sanders-Brahms' own voice, comments on the images of the film and thus lends a discursive quality to this work of memory. From the outset of the film, the filmmaker foregrounds her role in the construction of the film's meaning by identifying her parents and by establishing herself as the narrator of their story. The director thus emphasizes her autobiographical perspective on the events being played out in the film. As Kosta explains, "The narrator is the author as well as the speaking subject; she narrates her mother's past. The commentary interprets the image and establishes the autobiographical viewpoint in relation to the image" (135). The voice-over not only serves to inscribe the author within the text, but it also works as a distancing technique that prevents the audience from unmediated identification with the film's illusion of reality. One of most striking examples where Sanders-Brahms uses the voice-over to foreground her authorial subjectivity and to alienate the viewer from the on-screen action takes place when the newly married Hans and Lene embrace in their home. As the newlyweds tenderly undress one other, the off-screen voice interrupts the intimacy on the screen, stating:

Eure Unarmung kann ich mir nicht denken. Wie deine und deine Haut sich berührt, kann ich nicht denken. Ihr seid meine Eltern. Zwischen euch bin ich. Ich habe nicht geheiratet. Das habe ich an euch verlernt. (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 112)<sup>57</sup>

The voice-over from the perspective of the adult narrator hampers the viewer from enjoying the romance and innocence of the scene. By telling the audience that she decided not to marry because of her parents' marriage, the narrator distances the viewer by suggesting that the happy, amorous couple they see on screen will not continue to be happy and in love. Through the voice-over the filmmaker also exposes her role in constructing the discourse by revealing her reasons for filming the scene as she does and for cutting it after her parents begin to undress each other (McCormick, *Politics* 197). She uses the voice-over to foreground her subjectivity in the creation of the fiction and to bring the past into relationship with the present. Thus her strategic use of voice-over opens up a dialogue between the past and present and between the generations, especially between mother and daughter.

A third way in which Sanders-Brahms establishes communication between generations is by having her own daughter, Anna Sanders-Brahms, play a role in the film. The character of Anna, who represents the filmmaker as a child in the story, is played at one point by Anna Sanders-Brahms, Helma Sanders-Brahms' daughter. When I asked Sanders-Brahms during our personal interview which actress playing the character of Anna in the film was her own child, she replied that her daughter was the toddler "with her hair sticking out [on end]" (Reed 138). By using her daughter to represent her own part in her fictional retelling of her mother's story, Sanders-Brahms doubly emphasizes

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<sup>57</sup> "I can't imagine your embrace. I can't imagine how your skin and yours touch each other. You are my parents. I am between you. I haven't gotten married. I unlearned that from you" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 112).

the autobiographical project of her film (McCormick, *Politics* 197). Through having her daughter play a role in the film and by dedicating the film to her, Sanders-Brahms continues an intergenerational dialogue in which she communicates to her child both her personal and historical inheritance. In this way, Sanders-Brahms places value on both her mother's and her own experience of fascism and war and tries to ensure that through her film the lessons of their experience will be conveyed to future generations of women.



### 3.2 Retelling a Grimm Tale: Voice and Memory in “Der Räuberbräutigam”

Along with her use of the Brecht poem and the female voice-over as distancing techniques in her film, Sanders-Brahms has stated that she intentionally used the retelling of the Grimm fairy tale “Der Räuberbräutigam” (“The Robber Bridegroom”) as a *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect.<sup>58</sup> As a story within a story, the fairy tale interrupts the narrative of Lene and Anna’s wartime experiences. Concurrently, the presence and the forces of war intrude on Lene’s retelling of the tale, for example, when mother and daughter see a dead soldier in the undergrowth or when Lene is raped by two American soldiers. Thus the two stories take place simultaneously, each one interjecting on the other. The interruption of the fairy tale on the main narrative is significant because the fairy tale is narrated rather than enacted. Almost word for word, Lene narrates to Anna the text of “Der Räuberbräutigam” as recorded by the Brothers Grimm in their 1819 edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. The telling goes on at great length, taking approximately fifteen minutes. While the viewer hears Lene recounting the fairy tale, they see mother and daughter wandering across the German countryside. Visually the principle narrative continues, whereas aurally the tale of “Der Räuberbräutigam” is heard. The events of the fairy tale comment on the visual images seen in the filmic narrative to create new layers of meaning, layers which allude to the historical events of the Holocaust. Before proceeding with an examination of the effect created through this synergy of plot events and film images, it seems appropriate to review the tale itself.

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<sup>58</sup> In an interview Sanders-Brahms said: “Außerdem setze ich das Märchen auch als ein Mittel der Verfremdung ein” (“Moreover, I included the fairy tale as an alienation effect”) (Möhrmann 156).

### 3.3 “Der Räuberbräutigam”: The Story Within

The fairy tale tells the story of a miller who promises his beautiful daughter’s hand to a wealthy suitor. Although the suitor is rich and handsome, the daughter feels her heart shudder with dread whenever she thinks of her husband-to-be. The stranger insists that his fiancée visit his home in the dark woods and, so that she can find her way to his house, he scatters ashes along the path. The miller’s daughter begins her journey with unease and therefore she too marks the path by scattering peas and lentils behind her. She walks into the depths of the forest and when she arrives at her bridegroom’s house a talking bird warns her that she is about to enter the house of murderers calling, “Kehr um, kehr um, du junge Braut. Du bist in einem Mörderhaus” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 93).<sup>59</sup> The miller’s daughter enters the house to find it deserted but for an old woman in the cellar who repeats the warning already given to the girl. The old woman also predicts that the girl will marry death and that her husband-to-be intends to murder her and cut her body up into pieces.

The old woman takes pity on the heroine and hides the girl behind a large barrel, from where she witnesses the return of her bridegroom and his accomplices who have in their captivity a young maiden. The members of the band poison the maiden with three glasses of wine, one red, one yellow, and one white, so that her heart bursts in two. The robbers strip, dismember, salt, and eat the maiden. During this process, one of the robbers notices that she is wearing a golden ring and tries to pull it off. When he is unsuccessful, he chops off her finger to seize the ring, but the finger slips from his grasp

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<sup>59</sup> “Turn around, turn around, you young bride. You are in a murderer’s house” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 93).

and springs into the lap of the hidden miller's daughter. The robber wants to look for the finger, but the old woman dissuades him from doing so, and serves the robbers wine with a sleeping potion in it. The two women then escape from the house to find that the ashes which marked the path have blown away. However, the peas and lentils have sprouted, and the two make their way in the moonlight back to the miller and tell him of the events.

The wedding festivities, already planned, take place. Each guest is asked to tell a story. The miller's daughter tells of her journey into the woods, of the house of murderers and the robber bridegroom, prefacing the tale with, "Mein Schatz, das träumte mir nur" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 96).<sup>60</sup> This dissembling strategy enables the miller's daughter to tell the whole story without awakening the bridegroom's suspicions. When she tells of the golden ring and the dismemberment, she turns to the bridegroom to announce, "Hier ist der Finger mit dem Ring" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 96).<sup>61</sup> The bridegroom turns "kreideweiß" (while the literal translation of this term is as pale as chalk, Hyams claims that the expression can be translated as "as pale as ashes" (44)). He is detained by the wedding party guests and, along with the rest of his band, brought to trial and punished for his crimes.

The timing of the end of Lene's retelling within the filmic narrative is significant. When Lene finishes the narrative of the tale with the line, "Hier ist der Finger mit dem Ring" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 96), we see Lene and Anna travelling on a freight train. In a medium shot, Lene embraces her daughter and her golden wedding band is highlighted and made conspicuous through her gestures. At this point in the film, the image of the golden ring connects Lene with the murdered maiden of the tale, who

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<sup>60</sup> "It was just a dream, my love" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 96).

<sup>61</sup> "Here is the finger with the ring" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 96).

also wears a golden ring. Both women are violated by male figures. The Other bride is abducted, coerced to drink wine, stripped, dismembered, salted, and ‘consumed’ by a group of men against her will. These brutal acts can be read as a group rape and sex murder. As Cook claims: “Although there is no mention of rape, the suggestive description of the fiendish murder [...] clearly stands for a voracious and wilful sexual assault, that one would, of course, omit in a folktale told to children” (Cook 115). At this point in the filmic narrative, Lene has also been raped by two Allied soldiers who offer her wine before sexually assaulting her. While both women have acts of sexualized violence perpetrated against them, the fate of the perpetrators differs in the two narratives. In the fairy tale, the miller’s daughter is able to see that the robbers are stopped from further acts of violence against women, by telling publicly about the murder she has witnessed and by providing proof of the crime in the form of the severed finger (McCormick, *Politics* 203). In contrast, the soldiers who rape Lene are not brought to justice. In the post-war section of the film, Lene appears to passively accept her victimization in that she does not speak to anyone about it. Instead, she is silent about the suffering she has endured and does nothing to ameliorate her situation. When she is reunited with Hans, she does not even tell him about the rape.

One possible reason why Lene does not speak about the rape could be that she chooses to suppress her suffering so as not to anger her husband. If one accepts this theory, then Lene's silence regarding the rape could symbolize the silence of many female wartime rape victims in post-war Germany. As discussed in Chapter 2, many German women who had been sexually assaulted during the war tended not to discuss their traumatic experiences in order avoid enraging their male partners. Moreover, wartime

rapes were collectively perceived as a taboo not fit for public discussion. In an interview in her film *BeFreier und Befreite*, German feminist filmmaker Helke Sander states that she is aware of only one single case where a woman, after being raped, filed an application to be acknowledged as a victim of war (Sander and Johr 168). In response to Sander's statement, Schmidt-Harzbach, who has written extensively on the issue of German women's rapes at the end of the Second World War, replies that it is remarkable that the suffering of female German rape victims was considered socially taboo whereas the suffering of male war victims was recognized by the state and openly discussed. She states:

Ich finde sehr bezeichnend, daß Du bisher nur diesen einzigen Fall rausgefunden hast. Denn ganz zu den Männern, deren Gefangenschaft und Kriegsverletzungen gesellschaftlich anerkannt werden, die auch Entschädigung bekommen, ist es bei Frauen nicht der Fall. Außerdem ist es so, daß die Männer ihre traumatischen Erlebnisse bearbeiten können, das wird ihnen gesellschaftlich eingeräumt. Sie können es in Vertriebenenverbänden, im Veteranenverein, sie können das auch in der Literatur und in Filmen, d.h., sie haben die Möglichkeit, mit dem, was kollektiv erfahren wurde, umzugehen und es zu verarbeiten. Das haben die Frauen nicht. (Quoted in Sander and Johr 168)<sup>62</sup>

Schmidt-Harzbach goes on to explain that during the post-war period German women did not take the opportunity to form support groups in which to process their collective trauma. She claims that the vast majority of German women did not speak publicly about their suffering “[weil] es dadurch mit der Familie und den Männern besser auszuhalten war” (Sander and Johr 168).<sup>63</sup> Thus, while Lene could have informed the authorities that

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<sup>62</sup> “I find it significant that so far you have discovered only this single instance. Because this was in contrast to the men, whose imprisonment and war injuries were recognized and who also received compensation, not the case with women. Moreover, men could work through their traumatic experiences, society permitted them to do so. They could do this in displaced persons organizations, in veterans’ associations, in literature and in film, that is to say, they had the opportunity to cope with and to work through that which was experienced collectively. Women didn’t have that [opportunity]” (quoted in Sander and Johr 168).

<sup>63</sup> “[T]hrough doing this they could get along better with their families and their men” (quoted in Sander and Johr 168).

she had been raped, she would have contravened the taboos of her society by publicly protesting the violation.

### 3.4 “Der Räuberbräutigam,” Postmemory, and German History

While the previous section summarizes “Der Räuberbräutigam,” and discusses similarities and differences between the tale and the filmic narrative, this section discusses the tale as a narrative locus for the crimes of the Holocaust. The narration of “Der Räuberbräutigam” is one of the most haunting and compelling sequences of *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*. It is remarkable and uncanny that this particular Grimms’ fairy tale, recorded over a century before Hitler’s ascension to power, appears, in retrospect, to symbolically foreshadow the history of Germany under Nazism and alludes to “the house of murderers” which Germany was to become (Naughton n. pag.). Sanders-Brahms corroborates this idea that the fairy tale recalls events in German history. While she calls the fairy tale “dies verrückte Ungetüm mitten im Film,” she also states that “das Märchen leistet eine Menge – es beschreibt ziemlich präzise Lenes Geschichte und die deutsche Geschichte in einer sehr durchsichtigen Metapher” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 116).<sup>64</sup>

But how does the fairy tale act as a narrative locus in which to depict the horrors of the National Socialist genocide of German Jews and other victims? The Nazis’ program of extermination and terror is depicted in this segment of the film through the concurrent presentation of narrative events in the fairy tale and certain images that have come to represent the Holocaust in public consciousness. As Lene and Anna wander through the German countryside, they come upon an abandoned factory with a tall

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<sup>64</sup> While Sanders-Brahms calls the fairy tale “the mad monstrosity in the middle of the film” she also claims that “the fairy tale accomplishes a lot – it describes quite precisely Lene’s story and German history in a very transparent metaphor” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 116).

chimney and an industrial oven inside, in front of which they rest for the night. The tale is briefly interrupted when Lene is accosted and raped by two American soldiers while leaving the abandoned factory. Lene finishes recounting the tale to Anna, as they sit on the car of a freight train.

In the context of a film set during the “Third Reich,” images of a smokestack, an abandoned factory, ovens, and a freight train would suggest the events of the Holocaust to a viewer familiar with recent German history. One cannot claim with certainty that these images would cause the viewer to directly ‘remember’ the Holocaust. When the film premiered in 1980 a substantial number of viewers would have been born after the events of the Second World War and the Holocaust had taken place. This would be even more so the case with viewers of *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* today. Thus, such images would evoke in many audience members what Marianne Hirsch has termed a ‘postmemory’ of the Holocaust. Hirsch uses the term to describe the situation of a generation that has not lived through traumatic events of the past directly, but nevertheless feels strongly connected to and influenced by these events. She states:

In my reading, postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and by history from a deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. (*Family Frames* 22)

Hirsch developed the notion of postmemory in relation to children of Holocaust survivors. In a 2001 essay entitled “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” Hirsch examines the repetition in scholarly and popular literature of a select canon of iconographic images of the Holocaust. She locates the compulsive replication of emblematic images such as the photograph of the entrance to Auschwitz I



with its ironic “Arbeit macht frei” or “Work will make you free” sign in the postmemory of the second generation to the trauma of the first. She argues that “compulsive and traumatic repetition connects the second generation to the first by *producing* rather than *screening* the effect of trauma that was lived” (Hirsch, “Images” 8). Drawing on the work of art historian Jill Bennett, Hirsch suggests that photographs of traumatic events can convey an emotional or bodily experience by evoking the viewer’s own emotional and bodily memories. The photographs create an affect in the viewer, speaking from the body’s sensation (Hirsch, “Images” 15). Hirsch writes, “This connection between photography and bodily or sense memory can perhaps account for the power of photographs to connect first- and second-generation subjects in an unsettling mutuality that crosses the gap of genocidal destruction” (Hirsch, “Images” 15).

To Hirsch’s discussion of photographs as the main catalysts of postmemory, I would like to add my personal observation that documentary film footage, radio broadcasts, and the iconography of political regimes can also trigger second-generation memories of collective traumatic experiences. As I have discussed in Chapter 2, Sanders-Brahms intercuts into her fictional narrative images and sounds that have come to signify the archive of the German war and post-war experience. She employs postmemories, in my broader understanding of the term, in the form of archival footage of Allied bombing raids, urban ruins, and shots of *Trümmerfrauen* along with radio broadcasts of Hitler’s speeches in order to historically and politically contextualize the action of her dramatic narrative. Further, she uses images of Nazi iconography to similar effect. For example, in the introductory scene of *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*, the Nazi swastika flag is overwhelmingly present and it places the action of the enacted story in

connection with the politics of the “Third Reich.” An extreme close-up of the flag shows it covered in a swarm of black flies, which suggests the infestation of Germany by Nazism.<sup>65</sup> The flag cannot be contained within the frame of the camera, suggesting that the effects of National Socialism extend well beyond the borders of the war generation’s life into the existence of Sanders-Brahms’ generation (Kosta 139).

Moreover, during my interview with Sanders-Brahms, she stated that “...the first image of the film is a reflection, it is the reflection of a swastika in the dark water. So in a way, this is a means of a film image showing that this [film] is a reflection in the double sense of the word” (Reed 141). She goes on to say that, “[t]he reflection is a reflection of a memory. It’s not just the memory itself, [... but] it is a reflected memory, that is to say, the memory is shown to make you think about it, to analyze it” (142). Hence, through the film image of the Nazi flag reflected in the lake, Sanders-Brahms indicates that the greater part of her film is based on a refracted or indirect memory of mother’s war and post-war experiences. Sanders-Brahms, the filmmaker, would not have directly experienced the events in the film that happened before her birth nor would she have remembered what happened during her very early childhood. Rather, she would have created postmemories of these events through an imaginative investment in the stories passed on to her by her mother. Thus, her film is a personal reflection on a postmemory of her mother’s experience and she hopes that it might trigger analysis and reflection in the viewer.

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<sup>65</sup> In an interview with Peter Brunette in 1990, Sanders-Brahms states that she intentionally used the image of the flies crawling over the flag to establish the historical and political context of her film. Moreover, she explains that the image was serendipitous, stating: “An image like that can’t be planned. When we shot that scene it was a hot summer night and all the flies were sitting on the flag, and I asked them to shoot it that way. I felt it was a wonderful image of the historical and political situation. It reflects so much. It would have been very difficult to construct it, you know, to have 2,000 flies at the same time, making honey on the flag. I’d like to take credit for it, but it was just given to me” (Brunette 41).

Further, the absence or presence at two different points of the film of the iconographic postmemory of Hitler's image is significant. When Hans and Lene undress each other for the first time on their wedding night, Lene comments: "Wenigstens [gibt es] kein Bild vom Führer überm Bett" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 36).<sup>66</sup> Lene's comment regarding the absence of Hitler's image in the family home suggests that she harbours the false illusion that she and Hans will be able to shelter themselves from the historical and political realities of the era by concerning themselves with their individual happiness. Later in the film, a group portrait of Hitler, Goebbels, and Göring is shown hanging in the salon of the Berlin apartment belonging to Lene's wealthy uncle, Bertrand.<sup>67</sup> When Hans visits his family at this apartment on leave from the army, he is visually linked to the portrait. Feeling excluded from Lene and Anna's close mother-daughter relationship, he stands alone beside the fireplace over which the group portrait hangs. He announces to Lene, who is off-screen, that German soldiers will fight unto death, echoing the Nazi rhetoric as he states, "Siegen oder untergehen, das ist des deutschen Menschen würdig" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 68).<sup>68</sup> Hans' pronouncement and his position in front of the portrait of the Nazi leaders clearly align him with Nazi ideology and military order. Hence, in this scene, Sanders-Brahms effectively combines the portrait of Hitler, a postmemory of the Nazi era, with dialogue and mise-en-scène to illustrate how deeply the historical and political forces of the era have penetrated into and have disrupted Lene and Hans' marital relationship. The naïve belief Lene held in the earlier scene that private happiness is separate from history and

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<sup>66</sup> "At least there is no picture of the Führer hanging over the bed" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 36).

<sup>67</sup> The presence of the portrait of the Nazi leaders in Bertrand's apartment does not seem out of place in that he is an employee of the air transport ministry and thus most certainly would have been a party member.

<sup>68</sup> "Victory or destruction, the German people deserve it" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 68).

politics has been shown to be completely false. In an interview with Peter Brunette, Sanders-Brahms reveals her belief that personal relationships are affected by the historical, social, and political contexts in which they take place. She states, “The political situation we’re living in has enormous influence on our love life [...] Cinema has the tendency to make believe that the political situation has nothing to do with the love of a man for a women, but it’s not true” (quoted in Brunette 41).

In the fairy tale segment, the effect of images evoking postmemories of the Holocaust is heightened by their appearance in tandem with narrative elements of the fairy tale. In my opinion, the synergy of narration and images creates even more poignant postmemories of the Jewish genocide than the images would alone. Some of these connections are very explicit. One example of this takes place when Lene tells how the robber bridegroom directs the miller’s daughter to find his house, stating: “Und damit du auch den Weg findest, will ich dir Asche streuen” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 92).<sup>69</sup> When Lene recounts these lines, she and Anna happen upon the abandoned factory. The camera pans slowly up the length of a very tall smokestack. The literary reference to the path scattered with ashes, and the shot of the towering chimney could evoke in the viewer a postmemory of a concentration camp chimney blowing out ashes of cremated inmates. This allusion is reinforced by the image of heavy ovens reminiscent of a crematorium shown in tandem with Lene’s first telling of the fairy tale bird’s refrain, “Kehr um, kehr um, du junge Braut. Du bist in einem Mörderhaus” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 93).<sup>70</sup> As Davies suggests: “Just as ashes lead the Grimms’ heroine to the murderer’s house, in the film too, the motif of the cold ovens are emphasized and we

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<sup>69</sup> “And so that you find the way, I will spread ashes for you” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 92).

<sup>70</sup> “Turn around, turn around, you young bride. You are in a murderer’s house” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 93).

can imagine the chimney blowing out ashes as a visible sign of its location when it was still in use” (126).

While postmemories of the Holocaust are evoked through a combination of evocative images and fairy tale narration, the entire tale of “Der Räuberbräutigam” can be viewed as an allegorical account of the events of the Holocaust. As Davies explains, “The account that the film gives of the Holocaust is *allegorical* if we understand allegory to be a textual device which works on the figurative level alone” (130). In Sanders-Brahms’ film, the Holocaust is almost exclusively represented through the fairy tale segment alone. The exception to this is the brief scene where Lene’s Jewish neighbour Rahel is abducted by SA men. As Davies suggests: “All we see of the Holocaust is its prelude (Rahel’s deportation) and its aftermath (the Ducksteins’ empty shop and the empty industrial site) but not the events themselves” (130).

If, as Davies does, one understands the tale to be an allegory of the events of the Holocaust, then the National Socialists’ genocide of Jews and other victims is figuratively represented by the robbers’ murder of the young maiden. As previously mentioned, the connection between the murderous robbers and the genocidal National Socialists is emphasized by the fact that when Lene first mentions the path of ashes and the robber bridegroom’s house, she and Anna approach the abandoned factory reminiscent of a crematorium. The robbers’ band and the National Socialists are allegorically linked in a second way. As Lene beds Anna down for the night in front of an industrial oven in the factory, she narrates the section of the fairy tale where the robbers murder and dismember the maiden and steal her golden ring. Thus, the robbers’ killing of the maiden can be seen as allegorically representing the Nazis’ extermination of

the Jews in that the recitation of the murder in the fairy tale takes place in tandem with the appearance of industrial ovens in the film narrative. As E. Ann Kaplan asserts, “No better than robbers, the Nazis dismember citizens’ bodies as in the fairy-tale” (299). The robbers’ theft of the maiden’s ring recalls the National Socialists’ expropriation and plundering of Jewish property and bodies (Davies 126). Moreover, as Lene continues her narration of the tale, the viewer sees her and Anna traveling on a freight train. The image of the train and railway recalls the Holocaust as the Nazis used railways to deport Jewish prisoners to concentration camps. Thus, Sanders-Brahms skillfully combines plot details of “Der Räuberbräutigam” with images of her film narrative to figuratively make reference to the Nazi genocide of the Jews and other victims, showing Germany itself to be a “Mörderhaus” in which the shameful secret of mass murder is hidden.

#### **Chapter 4: Three Images of Woman in “Der Räuberbräutigam” and Lene’s Personal History**

The fairy tale in *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* not only describes Germany’s wartime history by encoding the events of the Holocaust, but it also mirrors Lene’s personal story. Sanders-Brahms makes use of the fairy tale segment to demonstrate how the realities of war, the post-war period, and the political environment of these eras shaped Lene’s personal experiences and individual identity. Naughton has noted that, “The tale of the robber bridegroom is one which [...] manages to integrate the biographical and familial components of the film, establishing parallels between the narrative function of the bride within the tale and incidents in Lene’s life” (n. pag.). I suggest that this claim can be extended to not only the fictional miller’s daughter but also to the old woman and the murdered maiden. In my view, the actions of the three female characters in the Grimms’ piece reflect and thus highlight how Lene reacts to hardship and the deportation of the Jews during the Nazi era, and to men’s oppression during the Economic Miracle. The following analysis will examine how the actions of the miller’s daughter, the old woman, and the murdered maiden of the Grimms’ tale mirror and thus underscore those of Lene in the film narrative.

#### 4.1 Lene and the Miller's Daughter

Several parallels link Lene's story to that of the miller's daughter. For example, both women take journeys deep into a forest, the miller's daughter while visiting her future husband's house, and Lene while crossing through the forests of Eastern Germany with her daughter Anna. Moreover, Lene's situation replicates that of the fairy tale bride who is told she will marry death and live in the house of a murdering husband. This macabre prediction in the fairy tale becomes a reality for Lene in the film narrative. During the war, her husband Hans assumes, as a soldier, the identity of a "murdering husband" albeit a politically sanctioned one, killing Polish peasants and members of the French resistance.<sup>71</sup> However, unlike the robber bridegroom, Hans is not a willing murderer. While Hans is sympathetically portrayed for most of the film, he becomes, against his will but without his resistance, part of a war machine that consumes people (McCormick, "Confronting German History" 202).

Lene and the miller's daughter are also similar in how they react to adversity. Both the bride-to-be in the fairy tale and Lene during the war years respond to contingency with courage, intuition, and purposeful rational thought. Such character traits are more often associated with male heroes than with female heroines in fairy tales (Morewedge 232). The miller's daughter exhibits courage when she makes her way through the forest to visit her husband to be, in spite of her inner aversion to him.

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<sup>71</sup> Sanders-Brahms casts Eva Mattes, the actress who plays Lene, in the role of a Polish peasant and a French partisan, both of whom Hans helps execute, in spite of his recognition that both look just like his wife. The triple casting is disorienting and unsettling for the viewer, because up until this point in the film, Mattes has been identified with Lene, in accordance to the naturalistic acting one expects in conventional films. Through this distantiating technique Sanders-Brahms makes an indictment of war: as a soldier Hans is forced to kill women who are 'just like' his wife but who happen to be on the other side of the conflict. Visually then it appears as though he *is* murdering his own wife and thus symbolically he becomes an uxoricidal husband (McCormick, *Politics* 199).



Moreover she demonstrates insight and independent thinking by strewing peas and lentils which will show her the way back in case the ashes, with which the bridegroom promises to mark the path to his house, should disappear.<sup>72</sup> Lene also relies on courage, intuition, and rational thought when dealing with the realities of war to ensure her daughter's and her own survival. For example, after her house is bombed, she collects the family silver, which she will later trade for food on the black market; to avoid the air raids in Berlin, she takes Anna to the East, where they survive off the land; and she removes clothing from dead soldiers to keep herself and her daughter warm during their trek through the German countryside. Moreover, as previously discussed in Chapter 2, Lene displays strength and courage by stoically enduring a sexual assault by two American soldiers in the presence of her daughter. She is able to survive the rape relying on the newly-found strength she has gained from her experiences outside the domestic sphere. Like the ingenious miller's daughter, Lene adapts and uses her wits to survive during the war years.

The model of the brave miller's daughter in the film's inner-narrative reflects and thus underscores the courageous, rational, and independent woman Lene becomes while surviving the war years with her young daughter. In the film script the director writes about the strength and skills that her mother developed during the war years:

Und nun im Krieg [war meine Mutter] gefordert in Fähigkeiten, von denen sie nicht wußte, dass sie sie besaß, nämlich wach zu bleiben auch nach vierzig durchwachten Bombennächten, zu überleben auch ohne Essen, ohne neue Kleider, Kartoffeln zu graben, Pilze zu sammeln, mit einem Koffer in der Hand und dem Kind auf dem Arm oder auf dem Rücken durch das brennende Europa zu gehen auf der Suche nach ihrem Mann [...] Sie hatte erfahren, wie weit ihre Kraft

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<sup>72</sup> The associations of peas and lentils with women and ashes with men in the fairy tale set up a gender paradigm in which women are equated with life, nourishment, and life-cycles and men are symbolically linked to death.

reichte, daß sie nichts brauchte als sich selbst und eine Hoffnung. (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 10)<sup>73</sup>

Sanders-Brahms goes on to suggest that the survival skills her mother gained are representative of the courage, determination, and tenacity of thousands of German women during the war years:

Dies ist die positive Geschichte Deutschlands während des Faschismus, des Zweiten Weltkriegs und danach. Die Geschichte der Frauen, die das Leben in Gang hielten, während die Männer zum Töten eingesetzt wurden [...] Die Frauen haben [die Kriegszeit] anders erlebt, sachlicher. Das Heldentum war ihnen egal, sie hätten lieber ihre Männer bei sich gehabt. Und dann, als sie lange Zeit auf sich allein gestellt, in brennenden Städten überlebt hatten, aus Bucheckern Öl gepreßt, Schuhe geflickt, Kühe gemolken, bekamen sie das Bewußtsein ihrer Kraft: der Kraft nicht zum Heldentum, sondern zum Überleben...[Diese Frauen lebten] ohne Selbstmitleid, ohne Gejammer, ohne Geschrei, sondern mit Witz, mit Spaß, mit der Unabhängigkeit eines freien Menschen. (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 25-6)<sup>74</sup>

As will be discussed in Chapter 5, Sanders-Brahms attributes her personal development as a feminist along with that of other second wave feminist authors and filmmakers of the 1980s as being rooted in their role models of resilient, independent, active and courageous mothers, mothers who discovered previously unknown strengths through their experiences of war-time survival.

The director also includes the figure of the miller's daughter in her film because the fairy tale heroine, like Lene, is both a victim and passively complicit in the

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<sup>73</sup> "The war demanded [from my mother] skills that she didn't know she possessed, namely to stay awake after forty sleepless nights of bombing, also to survive without food, without new clothes, to dig for potatoes, to collect mushrooms, to cross through Europe in flames with a suitcase in hand and a child in her arms or on her back in search of her husband [...] She had learned how far her strength could reach, that she didn't need anything else except herself and her hope" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 10).

<sup>74</sup> "This is the positive history of Germany under fascism, during the Second World War and afterwards. The history of the women who kept life going while the men were sent to kill [...] Women experienced [the war era] differently, more objectively. They were indifferent to heroism, they would have preferred to have their men at their sides. After they had relied on their inner-strength for a long time alone in flaming cities, had pressed oil from beech-nuts, had darned shoes, had milked cows, they developed an awareness of their strength which came not through heroism, but through survival... [Those women] lived with the independence of a free person— without self pity or self-indulgence, without complaining, but rather with humour and amusement" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 25-6).

victimization of another through her silence. The miller's daughter is a victim in the sense that she lives in a male-dominated society which gives her no control over her choice of marriage partner. She finds herself at the mercy of male interest and disenfranchised from the right to speak with her own voice (Cook 115). She is promised in marriage by her father although she is terrified of her bridegroom. Moreover, the bridegroom pressures her to visit him (because they have been engaged for such a long time) and she does so despite her fears. The miller's daughter yields to pressures exerted on her by masculine figures who control her life and her sexuality and who disregard her fears. Thus the fairy tale elucidates power structures of a patriarchal society that subjects women to men's control and that governs women's bodies and sexuality (Smith 249).

While confined in "the murderer's house," she silently witnesses the slaughter of another young maiden and does nothing to intervene. Although it is not clearly stated in the story, it seems fair to assume that the miller's daughter rationalizes not to assist the other maiden and hardens herself to the other woman's slaughter out of fear. Had the miller's daughter intervened in the band's murder of the Other bride, she would have likely precipitated the same gruesome fate upon herself.

The position of the fairy tale heroine as victim of her society as well as a bystander in the murder of the young maiden refracts and underscores Lene's dual status as a victim of an oppressive regime and as passive accomplice in a Jewish acquaintance's abduction by a group of unknown men. Lene is a victim of a tyrannical system in both a general and a specific way. Generally, she is victimized by Nazi policies and by the results of those policies, including war, bombardment, and invasion. Lene's husband is taken from her when he is drafted as a soldier to serve in Hitler's *Wehrmacht*, and Allied

bombing raids destroy her house and force her to flee with her daughter to the unspecified German East. Already in the opening scene, Lene is bullied by an SA man when he orders his German shepherd to attack her. He feels superior to Lene not only because he is an official in the Nazi political hierarchy whereas she is merely a civilian, but also because he is a male and she is a female in a society that tended to regard women as inferior to men. The officer exploits his political power and superior strength in the form of his dog to humiliate Lene. For her part, Lene does not berate the SA man for his outrage but releases her emotions by crying in private. In my opinion, Lene censors her emotions and responds to the SA man's transgression in a passive manner out of a sense of self-preservation. Had Lene berated the SA man for his actions, he might have encouraged his dog to continue the attack or, worse, he might have exacted revenge on her by reporting her to the authorities on false charges. Thus, to criticize Lene for her containment and self-censorship is to disregard the political and social realities of the Hitler era.

While Lene is a victim of an oppressive regime, she is also passively complicit in the victimization and abduction of a Jewish acquaintance named Rahel Bernstein. In a brief scene early in the film, an unmarried Lene comforts her lovesick sister Hanne. The sisters' bedtime conversation is interrupted by the noise of a shattering window and a woman's screams. The breaking of glass seems to be an acoustic symbol of the "Reichs-Kristallnacht," (9 November 1938) or the "night of broken glass," when organized mobs of Nazi supporters vandalized Jewish synagogues, homes, and businesses. The sisters rush to the window to see three unknown men drag a woman out into the street. While Hanne recognizes her classmate Rahel and shouts her name across the street, presumably

in an effort to help, Lene quickly closes the blinds and urges Hanne back to bed. Hanne tells her sister that she is hard-hearted.

Critics have commented on Lene's lack of resistance to the abduction of her Jewish neighbour. Hyams and Smith feel that Lene is a passive and silent accomplice in the crimes of the Nazi regime in that she does nothing to prevent the persecution of Jews (Hyams 47, Smith 246). Smith also suggests that Lene's unwillingness to help Rahel is representative of ordinary non-Jewish Germans' passivity to Nazi crimes against Jews. She feels that such passivity facilitated the Nazis' persecution of Jews and that witnesses like Lene simultaneously protected and incriminated themselves by means of silent complicity (247). Angelika Bammer goes further, criticizing Lene for "ignor[ing] the atmosphere of horror" which surrounds her (108). In fact, Bammer suggests that Rahel's abduction and a later scene depicting Lene's theft of thread from a boarded-up haberdashery shop whose Jewish owners have been deported, seem intended to beg "Lene's innocence (she is guiltless because she is ignorant)" (108). Instead, Bammer feels that these two scenes, "beg the essential questions of guilt and responsibility" (108).

However, questions of culpability, implication, and blame are more difficult to answer than Bammer infers. Sanders-Brahms avoids providing any simplistic answers. In my opinion, Lene's passive complicity with Nazi crimes was necessary for her personal survival. To view Lene's historical myopia as merely a moral issue is to disregard the milieu of political terror, fear, and persecution which typified the Nazi dictatorship of the "Third Reich" (Naughton n. pag.).

Likewise, to consider the miller's daughter's lack of intervention in the Other bride's murder simply from a moral perspective would be to ignore the danger in which

the heroine would have found herself had she interfered. It is her own fate that the miller's daughter sees enacted on the Other bride (Morewedge 232). Thus it seems fair to assume that both Lene and the miller's daughter harden themselves to the inhumanity they witness out of fear and a sense of self-preservation. Such behaviour appears to have been common for German bystanders during the Holocaust. As Oliner and Oliner explain, the majority of bystanders

were overcome by fear, hopelessness, and uncertainty. These feelings, which encourage self-centeredness and emotional distancing from others, provide fertile soil for passivity. Survival of the self assumes paramount importance. This was a characteristic response of most bystanders. (146)

The passive reaction of Lene and the miller's daughter to the slaughter they witness is representative of typical bystanders' responses to the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Through the scene depicting Rahel's abduction, Sanders-Brahms the filmmaker critiques Lene for her apolitical indifference. In this and other scenes, the filmmaker criticizes both Lene and Hans (albeit Lene more than Hans) for their naïve misconception that they could escape the forces of politics and history by retreating into the private happiness of their personal romance. In the accompanying film script, Sanders-Brahms wrote that her aim in *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* was to tell the story not of the "protagonists" of German fascism, but rather of those often-neglected ordinary citizens of the "Third Reich" who made the Nazis' rise to power possible. She counts her actual parents, Helene and Hermann Sanders, among those, "[d]ie Hitler wählten. Oder vielleicht nicht einmal wählten, aber auch nicht protestierten, nicht in den Untergrund, den Widerstand, die KZs, die Emigration gingen, sondern das einfache Leben wollten,

Liebe, Ehe, ein Kind” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 9).<sup>75</sup> Thus, the filmmaker wanted to concentrate on those politically unengaged citizens who had little involvement with the Nazi party but who wanted to concentrate on their personal lives. In the second sequence of the film set at the telegraph office where Hans works, Hans reacts to an argument about German politics between his socialist supervisor and his friend and colleague, Ulrich, a Nazi party member, by claiming that political debates are of no concern to him. He states, “Mir ist das eigentlich egal. Ich möchte meine Ruhe haben. Und die Schwarze. – Nur leben, verstehst du? Da kann der Führer doch nichts dagegen haben” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 30).<sup>76</sup>

Lene exhibits a similar apolitical attitude and, like her husband, tries but fails to evade political events and involvement by withdrawing into her private life. It is this attitude that allows her to become complicit with the crimes of the “Third Reich” by ignoring the plight of the Jews. In the scene depicting Rahel’s abduction, it is significant that Lene and her sister Hanne are discussing the personal matter of suitors when they are interrupted by the sound of breaking glass outside. The *mise-en-scène* of this scene emphasizes Lene’s desire not to involve herself in the historical and political realities taking place around her. The episode is filmed through the window from Lene’s perspective inside the house. This point of view has the effect of distancing Lene from the abduction taking place on the street, suggesting that it is something that is external to her life (Knight, *New German Cinema* 67). It is not Hanne, the Nazi party member, who closes the blinds on the violence being perpetuated against Rahel, but rather her apolitical

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<sup>75</sup> Sanders-Brahms counts her parents among those “who elected Hitler. Or perhaps didn’t vote, but also didn’t protest, or go underground, or join the resistance, or end up in concentration camps, or emigrate, but who wanted the simple life, love, marriage, a child” (*Film-Erzählung* 9).

<sup>76</sup> “I don’t really care. I want my peace. And the black-haired girl. – Just live, you understand? The Führer can’t have anything against that” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 9).

sister, Lene. Lene distracts Hanne from Rahel's abduction by continuing their personal discussion about boyfriends. Lene operates under the illusion that the forces of politics and history can be evaded by retreating into the private realm, a pretence that aids her complicity with the status quo (McCormick, "Gender" 253). A second scene where Lene's private concerns cause her to become complicit with the Hitler regime takes place when she is embroidering a new blouse to wear for Hans's return on his first leave from the army. Lene is so intent on finishing her personal project that she shows no emotional reaction when told that the Ducksteins, the Jewish owners of the haberdashery shop where she buys thread, have been deported. Apparently unconcerned at the elderly Ducksteins' fate, she goes to the boarded-up shop and pleads with an old woman who lives in the building to let her in. Together, the women rummage through the ransacked shop to find the red thread Lene needs and when they cannot find it, the old woman convinces her to take blue instead, bidding her goodbye with a "Heil Hitler!" Lene is so intent on her "private" goal of pleasing her husband, that she unwittingly takes part in the expropriation of Jewish property. In a voice-over commentary, the narrator takes her mother to task for this complicity, stating, "Du hast es alles nicht gewollt. Du hast es aber auch nicht verhindert" (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.).<sup>77</sup> Later in the film, the blouse with which Lene was so concerned is ripped off by Hans who barely notices her painstaking needlework, and whose attitudes towards women and sex have changed through his socialization in the army (McCormick, *Politics* 205). Sanders-Brahms thus shows that her mother's decision to escape politics by attempting to take refuge in private, personal, "apolitical" happiness is ultimately an illusion. The impossibility of pulling down the blinds to escape history is revealed by the fact that Lene continues,

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<sup>77</sup> "You didn't want any of it. But you also didn't stop it" (*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* n. pag.).



knowingly or unknowingly, to make political choices, choices that involve her in the crimes of fascism.

## 4.2 Lene and the Old Woman

In matters of complicity and victimization, Lene can not only be compared to the miller's daughter, but can also be closely identified with the old woman in the fairy tale. In "Der Räuberbräutigam," the elderly female figure who serves the robbers is depicted as being both oppressed by these male characters and passively complicit in their crimes. She is a victim of her domestic masters in that she is held captive and enslaved by them. The old woman is also indirectly implicated in the robbers' crimes in the sense that she knows that they murder and cannibalize young women yet she does not attempt to put a stop to the crimes by escaping the robber's house in order to raise the alarm (Davies 128). The fact that the old woman possesses a sleeping potion implies that she has a means to escape. Through her silence and inaction the old woman allows the robbers to continue perpetrating their misdeeds (Heidelberger-Leonard 53).

The old woman's position as victim of an oppressive male order but also as a passive accomplice in its crimes, mirrors and thus emphasizes Lene's dual status. As will be further discussed in the section on the Other Bride, Lene is physically brutalized by powerful agents of patriarchy several times in the film. First, she is attacked by the SA man's German shepherd at the beginning of the film. Second, she is accused of infidelity and is beaten by her husband Hans, who becomes desensitized by the German war machine. Third, she is raped by two American soldiers at the end of the war. Fourth, during the post-war period, she has her opinion and her authority over her own body overruled when her dentist, with Hans's approval, extracts all her teeth to stop the spreading of a facial paralysis. However, as it has already been shown, she is also

passively complicit in the crimes of the misogynist Nazi regime when she does nothing to resist or protest the deportation of her neighbour Rahel. Hence, in her dual status as victim of a repressive patriarchal order and as a passive *Mitläufer* in its brutalization of others, Lene closely resembles the old woman of the fairy tale.

Lene's existence as a *Hausfrau* further mirrors the fate of the elderly woman in the fairy tale in that both characters are confined to the domestic realm and expected to serve their male counterparts. Though not directly victimized by the violent acts of the robbers, the old woman is held captive by these men and is forced to wait on them. On a figurative level, the old woman symbolizes the collective status of German women in a society that gives men authority over women (Cook 115). Sanders-Brahms employs this theme of woman held captive in her own house to the stifling confinement women experience in the domestic sphere, even in periods of peace. Like the old woman who is limited to the robbers' house and forced to serve the murderous gang, Lene, in her role as a homemaker during the pre-war and post-war periods, is also confined to the domestic realm and expected to serve her husband.

Before the war, Lene unquestioningly accepts her new role as *Hausfrau* and even seems contented with this relegation to the private sphere. When Lene and Hans first marry, she seems happy and their shared abode is clean and orderly (Knight, *Women* 123). On her wedding day Lene eagerly tours her new home, touching the furniture and curtains, and idealizing her new circumstances with the statement, "Es ist wie im Film, hat Frau Meierholt von nebenan gesagt" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 36).<sup>78</sup> This statement could also be interpreted as an alienation effect, used by Sanders-Brahms to foreground the fact that her film is a constructed fictional narrative. The reflection of

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<sup>78</sup>"Mrs. Meierholt from next door said that it's just like a film" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 36).

Lene and Hans together in a three paneled mirror on their wedding day visually consummates the couple's idealized hope for their life together (Kosta 124). Yet while the central panel of the mirror shows the couple happily seated together, the side panels reflect each partner separately and thus fragment them (McCormick, *Politics* 190). The individual reflections of each partner juxtaposed to their unified image, can be seen as symbolically foreshadowing the separation and alienation which they will experience from one another later in the narrative.

Other cues that Sanders-Brahms uses to underscore the stifling and restricting effect of the domestic realm on her mother are Lene's behaviour within her home and an evocative reference to another German fairy tale. Within the confines of her house, Lene moves in a wooden and careful manner and speaks relatively little. Moreover, the director emphasizes the oppressive nature of women's confinement to the home in a scene where Lene pricks her finger on a needle left in the curtains. The pricking of the finger alludes to the Grimm fairy tale "Dornröschen" ("Sleeping Beauty"), in which a princess pricks her finger on a spinning wheel and is put to sleep for one hundred years. The reference suggests that the house will have a similar sedating effect on Lene (Knight, *Women* 124). Moreover, the fairy tale's prophecy of misfortune is depicted by Hans putting Lene's finger to his lips as though sucking the life force of out of her (Kosta 124). The pin prick and Hans' response also takes place in the scenes where Lene and Hans first make love. Therefore, it could also symbolize Lene's sexual maturation and loss of virginity. Hence, as Lene readily assumes the traditionally sanctioned role of married woman as homemaker during the prewar period, Sanders-Brahms already visually undermines the illusion of the domestic sphere as the seat of harmony and happiness.

Contrastingly, in the middle and last sections of *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*, the film mirrors “Der Räuberbräutigam” in that the domestic realm comes to represent the sphere of women’s oppression and discontent. Midway through the film, Lene and Anna’s home is reduced to a pile of rubble in an Allied bombing raid. Lene identifies the pile of rubble that was the former family home and Lene calmly assesses the situation saying, “Hier war unser Haus” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 58).<sup>79</sup> When she finds a panel of mirror protruding from the rubble she looks in it. Lene assesses her changed identity saying to herself, “Und das war ich mal” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 58).<sup>80</sup> This is the second time the mirror appears in the film and the unity promised by the first image has long been disrupted by Hans’ absence, and the family home, the physical locus symbolizing that togetherness, has been destroyed (McCormick, *Politics* 190). While forced outside of her home by circumstances beyond her control, Lene is at the same time freed from the confining constraints of an established order and able to create a new identity. Although she has nowhere to live and has lost almost everything she possesses, she experiences a sense of liberation. This joyful feeling of freedom is underscored by the director’s voice-over address to Lene, “Nach dem Ende der Wohnstuben wurdest du fidel. Da ging’s uns erst richtig gut, als alles hin war” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 113).<sup>81</sup>

The destruction of the domestic sphere signifies that Lene is no longer chained to those duties and expectation that define not only her roles as a wife and as a mother, but also her very identity (Cook 115-16). Lene’s story in this middle section of the film

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<sup>79</sup> “Here was our house” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 58).

<sup>80</sup> “And that was once me” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 58).

<sup>81</sup> “After the end of the living rooms you became merry. That’s when things first started to go really well for us, when everything was gone” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 113).

echoes that of the old woman in the fairy tale in that both characters experience liberation from their confinement in domestic realms where they are expected to serve men.

However, while the old woman disappears from the fairy tale after her exit from the robbers' house, Lene, upon being forced out of her home, gains strength outside the domestic sphere that she had not known she possessed when it was intact. Moreover, Lene experiences newfound strengths and skills when she enters the "public" realm by taking on jobs originally meant for men such as rebuilding the city out of rubble or conducting trade on the black market (Hyams 42). Yet, the invigorating independence Lene experiences while outside of the domestic realm during the war is short-lived.

In the last section of the *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* the private sphere becomes a locus of disillusionment and spiritual death. As discussed earlier in Chapter 2, Sanders-Brahms' emphasizes this idea with a scene in which documentary footage of the famed *Trümmerfrauen* ironically dramatizes women rebuilding the sites of their own demise (Kosta 129). With the post-war restoration of the home and nuclear family in the last part of the film, Lene once again finds herself enmeshed in gender hierarchies and roles, which had existed before the war and which deny her the kind of emancipation she had experienced during the years of conflict. When Hans returns, he reassumes the role of provider for the family, a role that he performs in stark contrast to the way Lene carried out the same function during the war years. As head of the family, Hans asserts his authority over his daughter, by commanding her to "Schreib sauber!" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 85).<sup>82</sup> For her part, Lene is expected to take up her former subordinate position within the family by reassuming her identity as a homemaker. The first scene marking Lene's re-entry into the home during the post-war era shows her acting out

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<sup>82</sup> "Write neatly!" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 85).

traditional gender roles and emphasizes her servitude. Kosta makes this clear when she states that in this scene “Lene appears fragmented; the camera focuses on her hands, metonymically signifying servitude as she carries a tray of coffee” (129). While Lene reassumes such domestic duties, she does not accept the relegation to this subordinate role in the unquestioning manner that she did before the war. Instead, Lene is oppressed by this post-war re-marginalization to the domestic sphere because during the war she discovered that she could survive independently and even thrive outside the home. When the strength and skills, which Lene develops caring for herself and Anna during the years of conflict, become irrelevant in the post-war era, Lene is disillusioned by the loss of her newfound autonomy. Lene’s spiritual paralysis is reflected in a sudden facial paralysis. The film’s mirror motif again appears as Lene examines the image of her face, disfigured on one side, in the mirror of her new home after the war. Lene’s palsied face manifests the crippling effects of the restoration of the private sphere, including the repression of the independence many German women gained through their experiences of wartime survival (McCormick, *Politics* 191). This suppression renders Lene bitter, depressed, and suicidal. Her facial paralysis is also a metaphor for her own personal silence as well as the silencing of women’s voices and experiences in post-war literature and film.

Lene’s suffering in the private sphere in the final section of *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* mirrors the fairy tale in that the domestic realm becomes synonymous with women’s confined servitude. Like the elderly female figure of “Der Räuberbräutigam,” who is confined by the robbers and forced to serve the murderous band, Lene is oppressively limited to the domestic realm and expected to serve her husband. In effect, during the years of the Economic Miracle, Lene becomes a representative figure of West

German women who are rendered “passive, victimized, silent and domesticated bourgeois housewives who carry out prewar rituals with chagrin in their living rooms” (Morewedge 235). The ending of the film is indeterminate, and appears to offer Lene no emancipation from her relegation to the private realm. After heeding Anna’s pleas not to kill herself, Lene emerges from the bathroom. Sanders-Brahms asserts in the closing voice-over: “Aber sie ist immer noch da. Lene ist immer noch da” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 114).<sup>83</sup> Thus, Lene remains bound to the roles prescribed for mother and wife in the patriarchal “Wohnstuben” culture of the Adenauer era.

While the role of the old woman as an indentured servant in the robber’s house mirrors Lene’s oppression in the domestic sphere, the two figures are also similar in their capacities as helpers of other women. As Mendelson has noted, “Der Räuberbräutigam” is one of the few Grimm fairy tales in which female characters work together in a supportive alliance (111-112). In this tale, the humanity of the wise old woman is emphasized when she warns the miller’s daughter of her husband’s murderous activities and decides to take pity on her. The elderly female figure assists the younger heroine in several different ways. First, she hides the girl behind a large barrel before the band of robbers enters the house. Next, she rescues the miller’s daughter from discovery by discouraging a robber to search for the hacked-off finger which has landed in the lap of the terrified heroine. Further she drugs the men’s wine with a sleeping draught, thereby permitting both herself and the miller’s daughter to escape the robber’s den. Hence, the wise old woman collaborates with the young heroine in order to secure their mutual safety.

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<sup>83</sup> “But she is still here. Lene is still here” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 114).



The old woman's constructive female alliance with the young maiden reflects and thus emphasizes the positive female symbiosis between Lene and her daughter Anna. Lene sustains Anna's life during the war years in myriad ways. For example, she carries Anna on her back throughout the war-torn country. Moreover, she breastfeeds her daughter past the age of one year because there is nothing else for the child to eat, even though she agrees with Hans when he warns her "Aber sie frißt dich auf" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 69).<sup>84</sup> Further, as previously discussed in Chapter 2, Lene reacts to her rape by two American soldiers in a detached and calm manner. She does not cry and or scream, but instead maintains her composure as she tells Anna, "Das ist das Recht des Siegers, kleines Mädchen. Man nimmt die Sachen, und die Frauen" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 79).<sup>85</sup> One explanation for Lene's stoic reaction is that she wanted to minimize the traumatic effect of the rape on Anna. In an interview with Peggy Parnass, Sanders-Brahms admitted that she would have behaved in the same way with her daughter in such a situation, because she would have somehow needed to explain the rape (36). When Parnass objects saying it would be better to comfort the child by telling it to be strong, Sanders-Brahms replies:

Aber das ist doch stark sein. Und das Kind ist doch nicht in der Verfassung, daß es getröstet werden müßte. Es hat, halb entsetzt, halb interessiert zugeguckt bei einer Sache, die es nicht kannte und die es jetzt kennt und benannt haben will. [...] Ich glaube, daß ich in so einer Situation so etwas sagen würde. Um mir zu helfen, um dem Kind zu helfen. Ich würde da unheimlich sachlich reagieren. Wohl gemerkt, im Krieg, in der Situation. (Quoted in Parnass 36)<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> "But she is eating you up" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 69).

<sup>85</sup> "That's the right of the victor, little girl. He takes possessions and women" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 79).

<sup>86</sup> "But that is being strong. And the child is not in a position that she needs to be comforted. Half horrified, half interested, she has witnessed a thing which she wasn't familiar with before and now is familiar with and wants to have named. I think that I would say something like that in such a situation. In order to help myself and to help the child. I would react in an incredibly matter-of-fact way. Mind you, in the war, in that situation" (quoted in Parnass 36).

Hence, Sanders-Brahms suggests that Lene's objective explanation of the rape to her Anna helps both mother and daughter keep the trauma of the sexual assault in check so that they may focus on surviving their long journey home.

The third and arguably the most significant way that Lene supports her daughter is by teaching her to speak, by empowering her through language to give form to her gendered experiences. In an interview, Sanders-Brahms revealed that she feels that the "greatest cultural deed in mankind –for the very survival of mankind [...] – is that women teach their children to speak" (Buitenhuis et al. 71). The director claims that if women did not pass the knowledge of how to speak from generation to generation, it would be very difficult for human beings to become human (Buitenhuis et al. 71). As will be discussed in Chapter 5, the first image of Lene in *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*, is accompanied by a voice-over commentary which emphasizes the importance of women's speech: "Meine Mutter. Ich habe schweigen gelernt, sagtest du. Von dir habe ich sprechen gelernt. Muttersprache" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 112).<sup>87</sup> On a concrete level, Lene is Anna's first language teacher, teaching the child her "mother tongue." However, on a symbolic level, the mother teaches the daughter the importance of narration, that women can improve their position in patriarchal societies only when they speak openly of their gendered experiences. The "Räuberbräutigam" fairy tale that Lene recites to Anna tells of a female heroine who manages to stop further acts of violence against women by telling publicly of what she has seen. The miller's daughter is able to gain control of the slaughter she has witnessed by telling of it in a public forum. Through her careful control of the story and her presentation of evidence in the form of

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<sup>87</sup> "My mother. I learned to be silent, you said. From you I learned to speak. Mother tongue" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 112).

the severed finger at the tale's culmination, the heroine is able to trap the robber bridegroom and to see that he is brought to justice for his crimes against women. From a feminist perspective, the emphasis of this tale could be that women can effectively expose, challenge, and resist female oppression in patriarchal societies by sharing their knowledge of women's victimization, telling of their personal experiences, and providing proof (McCormick, *Politics* 203). Lene helps her daughter by teaching her that women can effect positive change for themselves in male-dominated societies by telling stories of their gendered experiences. On the meta-narrative level of the film, Sanders-Brahms takes control of non-Jewish German women's history by telling it through the public forum of film. Thus, the wise old woman and Lene share similar roles in their capacities as helpers of other women. Both the fairy tale and the film suggest a positive paradigm in which women are able to better empower themselves and other women when they work in supportive alliances with one another.

### 4.3 Lene and the Other Bride

While in her positive collaboration with other women, in her existence as a housewife, and in her impassive reaction to the victimization of others, Lene resembles the old woman of the fairy tale, in her response to her own victimization she more closely mirrors the murdered maiden of the fairy tale. Both Lene and the murdered bride represent the passive woman abused by male aggression. By allowing herself to be coerced by the robbers into drinking three glasses of wine, the maiden lets herself become intoxicated and murdered. The Other bride's inaction in the face of men's violence can be linked to Lene's passive response to four episodes of violence perpetrated against her by male characters in the film. Both Lene and the murdered bride represent the passive woman abused by male aggression. Lene does not cry out when attacked by the SA man's German shepherd in the first scene, but instead cries in private. Lene's acceptance of the societal convention that women should "suffer in silence" curtails her agency and causes her to deny and censor her emotions, which in turn makes her react to situations of injustice and abuse with passivity and stoicism. Lene's compliance with social standards of acceptable female behaviour is further shown in her relationship with Hans. She is abused by her husband in a second instance of violence, this time domestic. When Hans returns from Poland on leave, he is frustrated by Lene's reluctance to be intimate with him and accuses her of having been with another man. He becomes increasingly agitated and, losing his temper, shakes Lene and slaps her in the face. The sound and camera movements play an important role in this scene. Periods of silence are interrupted only by a few statements and are emphasized through long takes

and calm camera movements. In contrast, Hans' violence is filmed in rapid camera cuts and close-ups of Lene's face. Lene turns the cheek Hans slaps to the camera, and notably, this is the same cheek that will later be affected by the facial paralysis. The focus of the camera on Lene's beaten face not only brings Hans' act of aggression closer to the audience, but it also emphasizes Lene's failure to react to the abuse (Smith 248). Lene's reaction to Hans' violence is almost identical to her reaction to being attacked by the German shepherd. Suppressing her emotions, she covers her face in her hands and runs out of the room in order to regain her composure in solitude. As has already been examined, the third time that Lene experiences male violence is when she is raped by two American servicemen. Her detached reaction can be likened to the passivity of the Other bride in the fairy tale. As Morewedge suggests, "Lene models the fate of the coerced mutilated Other bride as American soldiers rape her" (235). Though Lene does try to run away from her attackers, she responds to their violation of her with passivity and stoicism. Her dispassionate reiteration of the saying: "To the victor belong the spoils" could suggest that she has internalized the patriarchal myth that the chaos of war give men licence to rape enemy women (Smith 242). However, Sanders-Brahms may also be employing Lene's reaction as an ironic commentary on the expectations of post-war German society that German women were supposed to respond to wartime rapes by keeping their trauma private and by simply "getting over" them.

Upon my initial viewing of the film, I felt that Lene's tacit and resigned acceptance of her rape prevented her from taking any sort of action to bring her aggressors to justice. While the miller's daughter actively protests the murder of the Other bride by speaking out publicly against the robbers and thus bringing them to justice

(McCormick, *Politics* 203), Lene appears to passively accept her victimization in that she fails to make any attempt to publicly protest it. Instead she remains silent about the suffering she has endured and does nothing to ameliorate her situation. She does not even tell her husband Hans about the rape. However, upon viewing Sander's film *BeFreier und Befreite* I understood it was very uncommon for German victims of wartime rapes to attempt to receive any kind of legal recognition or compensation for the trauma they endured. As stated in Chapter 3, in her research for *BeFreier und Befreite* Sander discovered only one case where a rape survivor filed a claim to be official recognized as a war victim (Sander and Johr 168). Thus, one could argue that even if Lene had brought her rape to the attention of the authorities, it would have been virtually impossible to bring her aggressors to justice and very difficult for her to receive any sort of financial compensation.

A fourth example of Lene's passive reaction to male aggression can be found in the scene where Hans takes Lene to the dentist's office to seek a cure for his wife's partial facial paralysis. The dentist advises the extraction of all of Lene's teeth in order to stop the paralysis from spreading. When Lene objects to the procedure saying "Ich will nicht", the dentist addresses Hans, refusing responsibility for the spreading paralysis and Lene's possible death if he is not given permission to pull her teeth (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 86).<sup>88</sup> Hans avoids responsibility for the decision by delegating it back to the dentist. Hence this scene illuminates not only women's subordination to male hierarchies but also the power dynamics that rule male discourse. Hans' automatic acceptance of the dentist's drastic solution indicates a power hierarchy: the doctor's status and opinion are weightier than Hans' and Lene and her wants rank at the bottom.

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<sup>88</sup> "I don't want that" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 86).

The dentist and Hans completely override Lene's opinion and her authority over her body when they decide to go ahead with the procedure without her consent and in spite of her protest. Thus, the medical procedure can be read as a symbolic rape. Lene's body is invaded, she is humiliated, and her integrity and sense of self are violated. Lene passively accepts the decisions of the two men regarding her well-being in that she neither protests these decisions nor tries to leave the dentist's office. Again, she stoically endures a fourth violation of her body, this time decided upon by a medical authority and the head of the household. For his part, Hans places an unerring trust in the dentist's medical expertise. He tells the dentist "Sie müssen tun, was Sie für richtig halten" and silently watches his traumatized wife as all of her teeth are extracted (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 86).<sup>89</sup> Hans' unfaltering trust in the dentist's authority can be seen as a critical comment on post-war Germans' tendency to blindly respect authority. The scene suggests that the cult of obedience that characterized the "Third Reich" has extended into the Adenauer era.

As a result of the procedure, Lene's voice is sacrificed. Her voicelessness further compromises her agency and compounds her passivity. No longer able to speak clearly, she is effectively forced into silence. She drinks, takes prescription drugs, and becomes very depressed. In her emotional state she is unable to think rationally about how to improve her situation. During the war years she resembled the model of the proactive problem-solving bride by reacting to contingency with courage, intuition, and purposeful rational thought. However, after Hans' return, Lene comes to resemble the murdered maiden when she reacts to male aggression with passivity and helplessness. While the maiden in the fairy tale is so distressed that she cannot even attempt to think of a way to

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<sup>89</sup> "You must do what you think is right" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 86).

dupe the robbers in order to extricate herself from the dangerous situation and instead lets herself be coerced into drinking the wine, Lene is so distraught that she cannot think rationally about how to arise out of her depression and thus tries to escape her desperate situation through suicide. As Morewedge explains, Lene “becomes in effect, the Other bride of the fairy tale: intoxicated, drugged, screaming, and incapable of asserting herself when oppressed by her husband and patriarchal institutions” (235).



#### 4.4 Summarizing Remarks

Sanders-Brahms employs a self-reflective and historically-inflected retelling of “Der Räuberbräutigam” to underscore how her mother reacted to the historical, political, and personal circumstances that she experienced during the war and post-war era. The various roles of the miller’s daughter, the old woman, and the murdered maiden in the fairy tale emphasize the multidimensional and changing nature of Lene’s attitudes and behaviour at different points in the filmic narrative. With specific respect to Lene’s involvement in the crimes of the “Third Reich,” the ambiguous functions of the miller’s daughter and the old woman highlight Lene’s status as both a victim and a bystander of the Nazi regime. The wider implications of this paralleling technique are that non-Jewish German women’s roles in the “Third Reich” were not clearly-defined and static but were instead multidimensional and dynamic. During the Hitler regime, ordinary women and men became complex combinations of both victims and perpetrators. However, women’s complicity with the crimes of the Nazi regime probably exhibited gender-specific features as the social expectations for women under the National Socialists were different from those of men (von Saldern 157). For example, while men could hold powerful positions in the Nazi hierarchy women were usually confined to minor political offices. Moreover, after the war began in 1939, men tended to be drafted into military service whereas women more often remained at home in the less overtly Nazified domestic sphere or took on occupations which had been vacated by men such as factory work, agricultural labour, and so on. As von Saldern explains, “This meant that women were commonly co-observers, co-listeners, and co-possessioners of guilty knowledge rather than

co-perpetrators, their “complicity” consisted of passivity and tolerance in the face of an action, but not of the action itself” (157). Both women and men living under Hitler became victims of war, hunger, and political oppression. However, during the war years, women were generally more vulnerable to rape. Thus, Sanders-Brahms skillfully employs the roles of the fairy tale characters to emphasize Lene’s contradictory status in the “Third Reich,” and to imply that many non-Jewish German women living under Hitler found themselves in a similar complex and ambiguous situation in which they were simultaneously victims of the Nazi regime and bystanders in the face of its crimes.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

### Mother's Voicelessness / Daughter's Voice

The first close-up shot of Lene in *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* is accompanied by the narrator's voice-over address: "Meine Mutter. Ich habe schweigen gelernt, sagtest du. Von dir habe ich sprechen gelernt. Muttersprache" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 112).<sup>90</sup> On a concrete level, this comment describes the genesis of the narrator's language, of her ability to speak. However, on a more figurative level, it can be understood in terms of the creation of the film by Sanders-Brahms herself.

The film depicts Lene as a woman who is silenced by cultural, historical and personal forces. In Sanders-Brahms' narrative, Lene passes from silence to speech and then returns to silence (Kosta 144). The first sequence depicting Lene, shows her speechlessly struggling to fend off an attacking German shepherd that an SA man has set on her. Watching her from their boat, her future husband Hans comments: "Sie hat nicht geschrien" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 28).<sup>91</sup> To this the Nazi Ulrich answers admiringly: "Eine deutsche Frau. Eine richtige deutsche Frau" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 28).<sup>92</sup> Lene's culture has taught her that women should deal with anger and pain by keeping it to themselves, by 'suffering in silence.' In this sequence, as in the rest of the film, silence becomes a sign of Lene's suffering under patriarchy. During the war years, Lene comes to speech when she is forced out of her home when it is destroyed in a bombing raid, and required to use her voice in order to ensure the survival of herself and her daughter. As Kaes explains: "When her husband departs, Lene learns to speak for

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<sup>90</sup> "My mother. I learned to be silent, you said. From you I learned to speak. Mother tongue" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 112).

<sup>91</sup> "She didn't scream" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 28).

<sup>92</sup> "A German woman. A real German woman" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 28).

herself and teaches her daughter to speak as well” (151). It is at this point in the film that Lene is depicted as most vocal and active. She uses her voice not only to secure shelter and food but also to pass cultural information to her daughter in the form of a Grimms’ fairy tale. However, with the end of the war and the return to the domestic sphere, Lene is gradually rendered less and less vocal until her voice ultimately recedes into silence. Her voice, representing her independence and agency, is slowly stripped away by traditional family culture and by the patriarchal society of West Germany’s post-war culture. Lene’s loss of voice, her disempowerment, is further exacerbated by her facial paralysis and the extraction of all her teeth which can be seen as a further form of mutilation and silencing by a patriarchal agent. Nearing the end of the film, Lene is reduced to cries of despair and weeping. In the last scene of the film, she becomes completely silent. After Anna convinces her not to commit suicide, Lene embraces her daughter and speechlessly looks off screen.

The mother’s silence in the film is juxtaposed to the filmmaker’s speech in her portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship. Sanders-Brahms, the filmmaker, reclaims the enunciative role of woman as storyteller by articulating her mother’s story in a film, which she herself narrates. Through creating a fictionalized re-telling of the cultural, historical, and personal forces that silenced her mother, and of the horrors and disillusionments she experienced, Sanders-Brahms gives form to a part of German wartime history that is often neglected in traditional historical accounts of the period, that is, a woman’s experience on the home front. Sanders-Brahms suggests that the tragedy of her mother, and countless other non-Jewish German women like her, was that after the war, their newfound independence and strength were no longer required. They were

forced back into the oppressive dependency of the patriarchal nuclear family. Lene reacts to the loss of her agency by masochistically playing the part of the victim. She retreats from reality by escaping into physical sickness in the form of her facial paralysis, alcohol and prescription drugs, and finally an attempt to take her own life.

From the perspective of the feminist daughter creating a film about her mother's story in the late 1970s, the phases of Lene's spiral towards self-destruction must be shown and criticized. Thus, Sanders-Brahms depicts Lene in an increasingly negative light in order to diminish the sympathy the viewer feels toward her. Lene is shown withdrawing from active life, shutting out the reality of the world outside the domestic sphere by closing the curtains of her apartment and taking refuge from her depression in sleep. When Anna tries to encourage her mother to eat by preparing a cup of hot broth and carefully carrying it to Lene's bedside, Lene rejects her daughter's attempts to sustain her strength by throwing the hot broth into Anna's face and telling her daughter to leave her in peace. This scene marks a division and alienation between mother and daughter. This rupture is remarkable as in the earlier scenes of the film, Lene and Anna are almost always shown in close physical proximity to one another. Moreover, by showing Lene's brutal treatment of her daughter, Sanders-Brahms, the feminist filmmaker, rejects Lene's repression of personal trauma which leads to her self-destructive behaviour (Kaes 157). Her resistance at repeating Lene's tragic fate in her own life is evidenced in the voice-over comment earlier in the film, "Ich habe nicht geheiratet. Das habe ich von euch verlernt" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 112).<sup>93</sup>

While Sanders-Brahms rejects the model of the helpless, voiceless mother depicted at the end of the film, she suggests that the example of the resilient, resourceful

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<sup>93</sup> "I didn't marry, I unlearned that from you" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 112).

mother who survived the war years profoundly affected her personal identity as a woman. The filmmaker's speech is rooted in her positive memories of her mother as a figure of independence, personal agency, and strength. In the preface of the film script, Sanders-Brahms claims that daughters of the generation of German women who lived through the war developed a sense of independence and self-sufficiency from the role models of their strong mothers. She writes:

Aber wir, Kinder der Generation, die noch im Krieg geboren wurden, haben [die Kraft unserer Mütter] mitbekommen. Es ist kein Wunder, daß Frauen wie Gesine Stempel, Helke Sander, Margarethe von Trotta, Alice Schwarzer, Grischa Huber alles Trümmer Kinder sind, Kinder dieser Mütter. Frauen, die ohne Männer leben, wie sie es in den ersten Lebensjahren von ihren Müttern gesehen haben. Sie kriegen die Geschichte ihrer Mütter nicht mehr aus dem Kopf. Emanzipation war die erste Erfahrung ihrer Kindheit, eine viel weitergehende Emanzipation als die unsere [...] Nie wieder habe ich meine Mutter singen gehört. Damals sang sie viel. (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 26)<sup>94</sup>

As a female filmmaker working during the second wave of feminism in Germany, Sanders-Brahms makes use of the positive models of strength her mother handed down to her during the first years of her life to create a film of her mother's story. Sanders-Brahms' portrayal of her memories of her mother as a resilient survivor of war, homelessness, and sexual violence, and as an industrious *Trümmerfrau* gave her the strength to realize female potential that was often rendered ineffectual during the post-war years (Kaes 160). In *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*, Lene's retelling of the "Räuberbräutigam" is significant, because it is in her role as 'storyteller' that Lene possesses an influential voice and is able to transmit cultural and personal wisdom to her

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<sup>94</sup> "But we children of that generation, born during the war, realized [the strength of our mothers]. It was not surprising that women like Gesine Stempel, Helke Sander, Margarethe von Trotta, Alice Schwarzer, Grischa Huber are all children of the ruins, children of these mothers. Women who live without men, something that they learned from their mothers in the first years of life. They cannot get their mother's history out of their minds. Emancipation was their first childhood experience, a much more profound emancipation than ours [...] Never again have I heard my mother sing. At that time, she sang a lot" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 26).

daughter in what becomes an intergenerational dialogue. This passing of information between generations again resurfaces in the making of the film as Sanders-Brahms comes to speech articulating the hidden history of her mother's war and post-war experiences.

### 5.1 “Here is the Finger with the Ring”: The Importance of Physical Evidence

The motif of providing physical evidence of the truth of one’s story is a theme that is found in the tale of “Der Räuberbräutigam.” This motif of supplying tangible proof can be applied not only to Sanders-Brahms’ use of documentary footage and to her evocation of the Holocaust through the fairy tale segment, but also to the creation of the film itself. At the end of the tale, the miller’s daughter is able to see that her murderous bridegroom and his band are brought to justice for their crimes against women by telling publicly the story of what she has witnessed. The miller’s daughter shrewdly disguises her story as a dream until the last moment, when she produces tangible evidence – the severed finger of the young woman whose murder she witnessed, stating: “Hier ist der Finger mit dem Ring” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 96).<sup>95</sup>

The theme of offering concrete evidence can be applied to Sanders-Brahms’ use of documentary footage in the film. Sanders-Brahms confronts the fictionalized account of her mother’s personal gendered experiences of the war with the documentary record of the era, by showing authentic footage that illustrates the results of the war started by the Nazis: aerial bombings, parentless children, bombed out cities, burning airplanes, and dead soldiers. These images are the ‘tangible proof’ that the realities of war that shaped Lene’s personal story were real, not merely imagined. Just as the miller’s daughter can prove false her claim, “Mein Schatz, das träumte mir nur” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 96)<sup>96</sup> by producing the irrefutable proof of the severed finger and golden ring of the murdered bride, so too, Sanders-Brahms provides tangible proof in the form of

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<sup>95</sup> “Here is the finger with the ring” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 96).

<sup>96</sup> “It was just a dream, my love” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 96).



authentic documentary footage of the destruction and chaos caused by fascism (Kaes 149, McCormick “Confronting German History,” 206).

At the end of the fairy tale segment, Sanders-Brahms’ uses the image of a golden ring to indicate a ‘hidden history’ which has been repressed elsewhere in the narrative of the film: the Nazis’ programme of terror and extermination. As discussed in Chapter 3, poignant postmemories of the Holocaust are evoked through the interplay of evocative images of a chimney, factory ovens, and train tracks and their appearance in tandem with narrative elements of the fairy tale. In my opinion, Sanders-Brahms underscores the concept that the fairy tale segment is a repository in her film for Germany’s repressed history of horror through visually linking this section with an image of a gold ring. Midway through Lene’s retelling of “Der Räuberbräutigam” to her daughter, Lene is accosted and raped by two American servicemen. After the rape scene, a medium close-up shot shows Lene and Anna sitting on the connector between two bars of a moving freight train. Lene resumes telling the tale at the point of the narrative where at the wedding banquet the miller’s daughter reassures her bridegroom that the story she is recounting is a fiction she dreamed and not actual reality. A close-up shot shows Lene with one arm around Anna and the other arm holding onto the rail of the train. As Lene clasps the rail in her hand, her wedding band is clearly visible and it gleams in the sunlight. This prominent image of Lene’s golden ring is shown as she narrates the line from the tale: “Mein Schatz, das träumte mir nur” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 96).<sup>97</sup> Lene tells the remainder of the tale, including the section where the miller’s daughter provides indisputable evidence of her story in the form of the severed finger and the ring, while the camera pans past Anna’s face and to Lene and Anna’s feet, and then to

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<sup>97</sup> “It was just a dream, my love” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 96).

the train wheels moving rapidly over the tracks. At the very end of Lene's retelling, a close-up shot focuses on Lene's face, hand, and wedding ring. Lene coughs and covers her hand with her mouth so that her golden ring is shown in the center of the frame. Next, she leans over to Anna and kisses her daughter lovingly on the forehead.

In the fairy tale, the ring becomes proof of a suppressed macabre reality, the robber's brutal slaying of the murdered bride and untold numbers of other young women. If we understand the ring as a symbol of a dark suppressed history in the fairy tale, then it is significant that two conspicuous images of Lene's golden wedding band are shown at the end of the fairy tale sequence in which the Holocaust is evoked. From my perspective, Sanders-Brahms juxtaposes visual images of Lene's golden wedding band with the tale's symbol of the gold ring (and severed finger) as evidence of a horrendous crime in order to indicate that in her film the whole fairy tale segment acts as a narrative locus for the repressed history of the Holocaust. Sanders-Brahms does not remain silent about the Holocaust but instead evokes it in an indirect way through the synergistic use of visual images and plot details of the tale. She uses the image of the ring immediately after her evocation of the Holocaust to indicate to the viewer that she has not forgotten to represent the Holocaust, but instead has chosen to depict it as repressed history. In my opinion, Sanders-Brahms' representation of the Holocaust as a buried and unspoken history is particularly effective and historically apt if one considers the tendency in post-war German society to repress and conceal the painful and guilt-producing memory of the Nazi genocide of German Jews and other victims.

The motif of 'producing the finger and ring' or of supplying physical evidence can not only be applied to Sanders-Brahms' use of the documentary footage and

evocation of the Holocaust through the fairy tale segment, but can also be applied to the creation of the film itself. This connection between the image of the ring and tangible proof of one's story is evident in the last scene of the film. In the concluding scene, Lene pushes her daughter away from her, locks herself in the bathroom and attempts suicide by turning on the gas from the water heater. Unable to see or hear her mother, Anna pounds on the door repeatedly and begs Lene to open the door and to come out. The camera lingers on the back of Anna's head in a close-up shot, which has the effect of strengthening viewer identification with the child. Lene finally does emerge from the bathroom, presses Anna's head into her stomach, and strokes the child's hair. This shot is from the perspective of someone of Anna's height who is standing behind the child and therefore the frame only captures Lene's midsection, arms and hands and Anna's head. As Lene moves her hand up and down, her golden wedding band is highlighted. The voice-over of the adult filmmaker explains, "Es dauerte sehr lange, bis Lene die Tür aufmachte, und manchmal denke ich, sie ist immer noch dahinter, und ich bin immer noch davor, und sie kommt nie mehr heraus zu mir, und ich muss erwachsen sein und allein. Aber sie ist immer noch da. Lene ist immer noch da" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 113-14).<sup>98</sup> At this point, the camera pans up Lene's body and a close-up shot on her face shows that her eyes are glossy with tears. After a few seconds, Lene slowly looks down at her daughter and the camera glides back down to focus again on Lene's hands stroking Anna's head. In the last shot of the film, Lene's golden ring is centered in the frame and it glimmers with her hand movements. Finally, she moves her hand downwards into the darkness and the screen fades to black. It is replaced by a blue

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<sup>98</sup> "It took a long time for Lene to open the door. Sometimes I think she is still behind the door, and I'm still standing in front of it and she'll never come out and I have to be grown up and alone. But she is still here. Lene is still here" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 113-14).

screen showing the dedication “Diese Geschichte ist einerseits für Lene und andererseits für Anna” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 8).<sup>99</sup>

In my opinion, the image of Lene’s golden ring evokes the idea that the entire film is the symbolic “evidence” of Lene’s gendered experiences of the war and post-war era. If Sanders-Brahms had not told her mother’s story in the public forum of film or through some other media, it would, like countless women’s stories before it, have been suppressed from the historical record. Just as the ring in the final scene disappears into darkness, Lene’s story would have faded into historical and cultural obscurity.

In her voice-over commentary, Sanders-Brahms addresses the first close-up image of Lene, stating that while Lene learned to be silent, she, the filmmaker, learned to speak. While historical, cultural, and personal forces have conspired to silence Lene, her daughter finds a voice by creating a film recreating her mother’s story. In conclusion, a central message of *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* is that women must find a voice in order to take control of their personal stories and to share knowledge of their histories. Sanders-Brahms tells a story of a woman’s gendered experiences of the war and post-war period and gathers “physical proof” in the form of authentic documentary footage that the horrors of war that shaped this story were real. In so doing, she takes a small step to insure that an aspect of German women’s history heretofore considered peripheral and unimportant will be added to the historical and cultural discourse. By choosing the public medium of film to depict Lene’s story, Sanders-Brahms sees that Lene’s gendered experiences and the lessons of her personal story will not be forgotten, but will instead be accessible to her own daughter and to future generations of women. The story Sanders-

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<sup>99</sup> “This story is on one hand for Lene and on the other hand for Anna” (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 8).

Brahms articulates represents an active intervention in history with a feminist message for the present: women must share knowledge of their gendered experiences in order to find a way out of the silence imposed upon them in patriarchal societies; women must use their voices to learn from the past and to create a better future.

### **Appendix: Personal Interview with Helma Sanders-Brahms**

Note: This interview took place between Helma Sanders-Brahms and Rebecca Reed, Thursday 5 March 2009 at the Café Einstein in Berlin, Germany. The vast majority of this conversation has been transcribed verbatim so as to authentically document Sanders-Brahms grammar and speech patterns. The exception to this is that some thinking words such as "um," "uh" or "ah" have been omitted.

Rebecca Reed (R.R.): What factors (personal, political, or artistic) inspired you to make a film about your mother's experience of the war and post-war era?

Helma Sanders-Brahms (H.S.-B.): Well, it was when I was pregnant that I felt closer to my mother, about how she might have lived [through] this experience, having a child, in the middle of the war. I mean, it was 1940; I was born in November 1940. It was still the time when Germany was victorious. But my parents were not at all Nazis and they were not very happy...well, of course they were happy that the war was not yet inside the country, but it was all around. And my father was convinced that one day or another victory would be over and we would all become victims ourselves. And that's what finally happened.

R.R.: Where do you see this film, *Germany Pale Mother*, fitting into the history of German film? Or, another way to ask the same question is which *Tendenzwende* or trends in German literature and film influenced the creation of this film?

H.S.-B.: Well, one answer to this question would be to tell you that at that period when I started to think about this film, my generation of filmmakers were about to reflect German history very much. That is to say, quite a number of films about German history were made at that time, like, for example, *Blechtrommel*, *The Tin Drum*. And I felt that there were so many films about the male vision of war and Nazism, that it would be really something new and special to make a film about the female vision of these things like war and fascism. Because I felt that war is mostly a thing of men, men fighting for resources of all kinds, those could be fertile soil, or diamonds, they could be coal, or steel, or iron, or gold. But women, normally, they are not related to that other than being the victims of this, that means the women have to care for the wounded, for the children, for the old, especially in the First and Second World Wars, it was the case where women not only had to suffer, civilians had to suffer more than ever from these wars, but also that they, after the war was over, and even during the war, were already replacing men in all the professions. And, not only that, they had to rebuild the cities that men had destroyed and especially this is shown also in the film, how the women were rebuilding after the war, and saving the stones, and putting them in order again so that the towns could be rebuilt and that people could live in these ruins. This was the idea and another idea that I had was that the relationship of mother and child under these circumstances is very special and had not yet really been exploited in cinema so far and not so very much in literature either. That is to say, we had not really reflected, neither the Germans, nor the English, what happened to children and to women, living under these circumstances. One of the good things that this film, when it came out and when it was shown all over

the world, was that many women, not only women that had lived through Second World War, but many women who had lived through other wars, in India, in Japan, for example, or in countries like Iran, they loved the film because it showed what the women had lived through themselves. Of course, in Iran, the film cannot be shown officially, but there are many people who know the film. The same in Russia...And, you know, it's a film that really, for many women, was a discovery because, for the first time, they saw their experiences reflected in a film.

R.R.: It's certainly true that it was one of the first films that showed women's and children's experiences of war. Okay. So, the third question is actually really along those lines. In my thesis, I argue that your film makes our understanding of German history richer, because it shows the war and post-war period from a woman's perspective, a point of view which has, for much too long, been ignored or suppressed in traditional grand narratives of German history. This film, in my opinion, shares a goal with oral history because it tells a history from below. What do you think of this description of your film?

H.S.-B.: That's very nicely seen (put) and I agree. And this is also why the voice-over of the child is there. Because, it's to show that oral history is transported. The voice of the grown-up child tells the story to her daughter in a way. So this is really already a way of showing oral history, oral history transported in a film.

R.R.: So, my supervisor's question is about the daughter. Her question was: "Which girl in the film is your daughter?"



H.S.-B.: There is a very small baby that the mother has in her arms. This is not my daughter. But there is a child who is a little bit taller, with her hair sticking out [on end]. That is my daughter. We called her dandelion at that time because somehow her hair looked like dandelions when they fly away...

R.R.: Has your daughter also promoted this film? Has she also spoken about this film?

H.S.-B.: Oh yes, many times in Japan, especially in Japan. She has accompanied me to Japan, and Japanese people were so fond of her, and she was so fond of Japanese people that she started to learn Japanese. So, she was invited several times to present the film.

R.R.: That's great. So, one of the main themes of this film is a dialogue between generations. In my opinion, the Brecht poem at the beginning of the film, your voice-over comments to Lene, the fact that your daughter plays Anna at one point in the film, and also the fact that you dedicate the film to Lene and Anna all contribute to this dialogue. What are your thoughts on this?

H.S.-B.: That's right. Very good. It's very nicely seen (put). It's especially what I wanted to do with this film. We live in a period of human history where the generations, and the messages that they transport from one generation to the other, have been destroyed. I mean, we have separated the old from the middle age, the middle age from the young, and the young from the children. So what happened throughout thousands of

human histories, that the old were the teachers of the young, and the young helped the old, unfortunately, is now destroyed. This is very sad. I think if humanity is willing to survive, human beings have to find a way to get back to this organization, because it's the only one that really works.

R.R.: And also, in the film, you say to your mother Lene: "Meine Mutter. Ich habe schweigen gelernt, sagtest du. Von dir, habe ich sprechen gelernt. Muttersprache." ["My mother. I learned to be silent, you said. From you I learned to speak. Mother tongue" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 112)]. Can you talk a little bit about the idea of Muttersprache and the intergenerational dialogue?

H.S.-B.: Mothers are normally the people that teach children to speak, which, in a way, is the greatest step a human being does in its life. Learning to speak is an incredible process in the life of a child. I have seen that when I started to teach my child how to speak. And when my child taught me how difficult and also how complex also this process of learning is. It is incredibly rich and beautiful and it's an incredibly private lesson. It is almost an exchange of love between two human beings at the same time, because love is understanding each other, and teaching the languages, teaching understanding. This is very different from what normal teachers do in schools and universities; it's a very different work [task], because it's not possible to use a scientific approach. The approach has to be sensual, it has to be loving, it has to be listening, and out of living, and being sensual and touching, and feeling, and listening again, and forming again, and also using hand and the touching of hands, and fingertips. It's very important; all this counts. And

only when you forget about scientific things, and when you really learn to read the eyes and movements of the child, what the child really wants to say, and then you can help.

R.R.: So it's a very physical process.

H.S.-B.: It's a very physical process and a very spiritual process at the same time. It's both.

R.R.: So, do you have grandchildren?

H.S.-B.: No, not yet. I'm dying to have them (laughs...)

R.R.: So, about the Brecht poem. Why did you include the Brecht poem at the beginning of the film? How did you decide to include it? How did that come about?

H.S.-B.: It's a poem that impressed me very much when I was young because it was written in 1933, which was the moment when the Nazis came to power and in an incredibly prophetic way it spoke about what was about to happen. And I wanted to confront this Brecht vision of the mother with my own vision of my mother.

R.R.: So, my next question is related to that last question. Brecht used scene titles at the beginning of his plays to introduce the historical and political setting of the action, which is about to happen. Does the poem act as a scene title for the film because it tells

the viewer that this story will happen in Germany during the Third Reich and deal with a mother figure?

H.S.-B.: Yeah, right. Exactly.

R.R.: So, some critics have said that by using the Brecht poem at the beginning of the film, you are equating or saying your mother's history represents the history of all German women during the war period and Economic Miracle. How do you answer these critics?

H.S.-B.: It's not all...I just confronted the poem of Brecht with my personal experience with my own mother. But, of course, this personal experience, as you said, is set in this setting that the Brecht poem gives, so it is an exchange between the Brecht poem and my own experience. It was my own experience, which is told in the context of a fictional film, it is not a documentary; it tells a story. But of course, one idea of Brecht that is very important for the film is that Brecht wanted to create reflection in the spectator, and the voice-over is also a means to stimulate reflection. And, if you remember, to underline this, the first image of the film is a reflection, it is the reflection of a swastika in the dark water. So in a way, this is a means of a film image showing that this [film] is a reflection, in the double sense of the word.

R.R.: So an example of that would be in the love scene with your parents you say, “But I am your daughter. I can’t imagine how your skin touched yours.” So that is to break the story?

H.S.-B.: Yes, these lines, in a way, are breaking the story, they are reflecting the story. That is to say that these scenes that are shown as emotional scenes for the audience, are, at the same time, reflected through the voice-over, saying “I don’t know whether it was really like this or not. I don’t know how I am formed by what came out of this.”

R.R.: Is it also a comment on memory?

H.S.-B.: Yes. Reflection and memory. The reflection is a reflection of a memory. It’s not just the memory itself, you know, making you cry, or making you laugh. But it is a reflected memory, that is to say, the memory is shown to make you think about it, to analyze it.

R.R.: Another critic said that, by using the poem in your film, you are comparing the German people to the Pale mother (who was both a victim and guilty of hiding a crime) and the Nazis to the sons who murder their brothers, in the poem. What do you think of this critic’s opinion?

H.S.-B.: Yes, I think it’s necessary to think about the difference of these sons murdering each other and the mother fighting for her and her child’s survival. This is the difference.

Brecht's pale mother is a mother of sons. The daughters are not mentioned. Somehow the poem doesn't describe the feelings of this mother and how much she suffers herself from what her sons have done to her. It's not really shown, it's not really said...He mentions it...Whereas my film speaks about the child and the mother in the context that they are mother and daughter, out of a line of women.

R.R.: Okay. So you're taking up where the Brecht poem left off.

H.S.-B.: Yes, and I take up my own experience as a woman.

R.R.: Did you have difficulty finding some kind of poem or some piece of literature that described the relationship between mother and daughter? Is that why you chose the Brecht poem?

H.S.-B.: No, I have known this Brecht poem for a very long time. I was very fond of Brecht in my youth, very very fond of him. I knew all of his theatre plays; I still know a lot of his poems and songs.

R.R.: I learned my German in Augsburg which is where Brecht was born, but he didn't stay there very long. He didn't like Augsburg very much I think.

You use documentary footage and radio in this film in a very interesting way. In my opinion, the documentary footage and radio broadcasts help create the historical and

political context of the fictional scenes. Also, in the other direction, the fictional scenes contextualize the documentary footage and radio broadcasts because they show the effect the bombings and radio broadcasts had on civilians (mostly women children and older men). So, the documentary footage and radio broadcasts and the fictional scenes are like two sides of the same coin. Do you think this is an accurate description?

H.S.-B.: It has this side to it. But concerning the documentary footage and the film footage, I have to add one aspect. This is that I found that the scenes that I had tried to write and create, you know, they just showed how the war affected the women, what it made out of the women, and they were not enough. As I have lived through the war myself, I felt that they were somehow artificial and not in a good sense. Artificiality can be wonderful, but in that sense it was not convincing. That's why I changed an entire part of the film. I replaced the scenes I had first written in my screenplay with different scenes of the mother telling the fairy tale in a field of rubble that still existed in Berlin at that time. And I intercut that with the documentary footage, as you can see. And, with that, I felt that somehow a strange thing happened. It looked almost surrealistic, although it was documentary, it was the real thing that I showed, and not something that I had created out of some art design stuff, but it was true. It was true like the fairy tale, just in another sense. That was very important for me and also for the actress, and we both decided to do it this way and not to use the other footage that had already been shot, you know, about the women trying to get water, milking cows and that kind of stuff.

R.R.: The next question is about the *Maikaifer flieg!* song. The *Maikaifer flieg!* song was first heard during the Thirty Years' War in Germany. From my research I found that it came from that period. Later people sang it at the end of WWII when the Russians invaded the east of Germany. Why did you include the *Maikaifer flieg!* song in the film? Does Lene sing this song to Anna to help her daughter deal with the trauma of war in a way a child can understand?

H.S.-B.: Um...no...this was to show the relief of the war being over. It happened that while we were shooting these scenes I talked to you about, these scenes that had to replace the scenes I had already shot, there was a may beetle, and it was sitting on [Eva Mattes's] hand and she said, "Oh, there's a may beetle, the first may beetle of this year." I said, "Let's film it." We brought the camera and we were shooting and at the moment when we were shooting the May beetle started to fly. And while I was shooting, I said, "Why don't you sing this song?" It was not something that I had planned for a long time and carefully reflected upon...It just happened. And in my opinion this song is a very old one; it's older than the thirties. It's at least from the 19<sup>th</sup> century or even older, because there has always been war in Germany.

R.R.: So this May beetle coming, was this also similar to the flies on the flag at the beginning?

H.S.-B.: The flies happened to be on this swastika banner and on that evening while we were shooting, and I asked the director of photography to shoot that because I felt that it



was a wonderful image, like the May beetle. There were things that happened like that while we were shooting.

R.R.: So it was serendipitous, it was lucky, that you had these beautiful images.

H.S.-B.: Yes.

R.R.: Okay. Next question. Lene is raped by American soldiers in the film. She reacts by telling her daughter, “Das ist das Recht des Siegers, kleines Mädchen. Man nimmt die Sachen und die Frauen” [(“That’s the right of the victor, little girl. One takes possessions and women“)] (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 96)]. Some critics were shocked by Lene’s calm and stoic reaction. Why did you choose to have Lene respond in this way? Did you use the response as a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* [alienation effect]?

H.S.-B.: No. I think when you are alone and with a child and there are two soldiers with weapons who are victorious, you can do nothing against them. You will have a sense in your mind not to fight against them, because they can shoot your child. I mean, it’s rather senseless of the critics to think that a woman in that situation should behave by fighting...no.

R.R.: And the way that she explains the rape to Anna?

H.S.-B.: Yes, of course, this is a Brechtian style. I tried to create a line that is understandable for a child, but maybe not for a child of that age. Anyway, children watching things like that, they cannot reflect, they see that something happens. But if the mother would react by crying and fighting against the soldiers, and the soldier fighting against her, the child would be much more traumatized than it is in this scene.

R.R.: So is this a way that Lene helps her daughter through the war?

H.S.-B.: Yes.

R.R.: That was my interpretation.

H.S.-B.: It was my idea that I would have reacted that way. Well, I think it is a typical male reaction to say that she should fight and scream because maybe men want to see that. Maybe rape is also made for that. I know from critics that they usually think that women have to scream, and cry, and show themselves as really weak.

R.R.: I understood Lene's answer to Anna as an ironic critique or on how post-war German society expected German women who had been raped to be silent about the rapes. This is emphasized by the next line of the fairy tale where Lene says, "Mein Schatz, das träumte mir nur" ["My dear, it was only a dream" (Sanders-Brahms, *Film-Erzählung* 96)]. What do you think of this interpretation?

H.S.-B.: Yes, you're right, it's ironic. She's dreaming of revenge, she's dreaming of justice, but it's a dream. Justice doesn't exist.

R.R.: Especially in that situation. I did some research on Helke Sander's film *Befreier and Befreite* and only one woman who was raped during the war claimed that she was a war victim. Most other women were silent because that is what society expected of them.

H.S.-B.: Yes, I think so. I mean, in front of a normal man in the street who tries to rape you it makes sense to cry or to shout because there might be a policeman or other people to help you. But when the soldiers are up to their necks in weapons and machine guns, it's useless. And it stimulates them! The horrible thing is that to cry stimulates them and makes them more cruel.

R.R.: Yes. In an interview with Renate Möhrmann you said that the fairy tale "Räuberbräutigam" is important to the film because it describes German history and Lene's story in a very transparent metaphor. Germany becomes a house of murderers and Lene, like the miller's daughter in the fairy tale, has deep fears of men, especially male warriors. I interpreted the fairy tale in a different way. I felt that the actions of the three female characters in the fairy tale, those being the miller's daughter, the old woman and the murdered girl, mirror the way Lene acts in the war and post-war years.

H.S.-B.: Hmmm?

R.R.: Maybe I can explain a little bit better. Both the miller's daughter in the fairy tale and Lene survive difficult situations with courage and intelligent thinking. For example the miller's daughter plants peas and lentils to find her way back home in case the ashes her bridegroom has spread should blow away. Lene survives the war by taking Anna to the east, by selling the silver on the black market, etc. In this way they are similar because they are very strong proactive women. On the flipside, both Lene and the miller's daughter see a murder and do not stop it because they are afraid they will get murdered too. In this way they are like Germans of the war era who couldn't do a lot to stop the crimes of the National Socialist because they were afraid that they would also be punished. What do you think of this idea?

H.S.-B.: Yeah. That's right. It's reflected in the fairy tale. The content of the fairy tale is that there is the crime and somebody watches the crimes and is unable to stop the crime. She might also be a victim if she would stop it. So it was safer to do nothing and stay alive.

R.R.: Some critics have criticized Lene for not having agency in the film, for not having power in the film, as a woman. But, in my opinion, she wouldn't have had a lot of historical power.

H.S.-B.: No.

R.R.: Some critics say that she is “outside of history.” But in my opinion, at that era, in that time, with that government she wouldn’t have had a lot of power.

H.S.-B.: No, and I think this way of criticizing is very dangerous because it comes out of an opinion that people can be courageous under all circumstances. Sometimes it’s not courageous to be courageous. And when you are with a child, like Lene is, when you are with a child, to be courageous, in the sense of these critics, would put this child into terrible danger. And also, this is a question of why would you want to set the life of a child at risk just for a courageous action. To me, it seems very uncourageous. It seems like easy thinking. Yesterday I saw a film that is now playing in Germany. *Effi Briest*, a version of *Effi Briest*. Well the Effi Breist of Fontane is just a victim. In this film they try to make her into a kind of non-victim, just following these kinds of critics who would all be very happy [with this depiction]. But I feel that this is destroying the special character of this woman. I had the impression that the actress is fighting with the difficulties. She is set up to be courageous, and actually, when you see what happens to her, she isn’t. One gesture that shows that she is courageous is that she smokes... Well, I mean... (laughs).

R.R.: Is smoking courageous? (Both laugh)

H.S.-B.: I think this is a very important point and we have to go a little further to understand it. What I feel is that our society, the Western industrial society, is about to have, as the ancient Chinese would have said, far too much *yang* and far too little *yin*. Do

you know this famous drawing, the circle of life? One side is black with a white point in it and the other side is white with a black point in it. That means that even in the white is something black and even in the black is something white. You understand? [H.S.-B. draws the *ying-yang* symbol in R.R.'s notebook].

R.R.: Yes.

H.S.-B.: I don't know whether you have studied this old Chinese philosophy, but the thing is that I feel that our life today is too much influenced by the ideas of *yang*; the bright, courageous, and the fighting existence. But in order to create harmony, there has to be the dark side, the side of relaxing, reflecting, the Chinese would have said the female side because it is also the side of creation. Out of the darkness comes the creative, not out of the bright. You understand?

R.R.: Yes.

H.S.-B.: In my opinion we are too much in this [points to the *yang*] and we are forgetting about this [points to the *yin*]. And this creates too much brightness, too much light, too much noise, too much fight and too little reflection, too little time for reflection. I think this is something that is about to destroy this planet. We all feel it, we call it the *Klimakatastrophe* [climate crisis] but it's not only the *Klimakatastrophe*, it's also a catastrophe going also inside human beings in their lives, in the way they live, in the way they create their works. I told you about these two scenes, the May beetle and the flies.

They just appeared during shooting. They happened to be there. And it was just by being aware and using them that I found two of my nicest images. I could have just ignored them and they wouldn't be in the film. This is the way creative processes should happen, I feel. When you think about jazz or Indian music, the part of inventing [improvising] plays an enormous role. The rule is just that you invent in the moment itself. But it's only out of a completely quiet mind that you can invent in the moment. We think that everything has to be carefully prepared. It's true, it's good, but it's not enough. If something is to really touch you profoundly, then it is already there. You just have to find it.

R.R.: So it's taking the time to look for those moments?

H.S.-B.: Not taking the time, but just being open to those moments, not only speaking but also listening.

R.R.: Okay. So, would you say that Lene is like the old woman because both women are prisoners in the houses of men and are expected to serve these men? On the other hand, both Lene and the old woman help other women. The old woman helps the miller's daughter escape with the sleeping potion and Lene helps Ana survive the war. What do you think about this idea?

H.S.-B.: Yes. True. I like it.

R.R.: Also, to go further into that, Lene is a prisoner at the beginning and at the end of the film, but in the middle she experiences freedom, whereas the old woman disappears from the story.

H.S.-B.: Yes, but it the freedom of destruction. Destruction has a part of itself that is creative. I mean, just think of the Indian god Shiva. He destroys the world under his feet and is creating a baby at the same time. That's how the world functions. We all know that. Someone dies and a child is born at the same time. That's how life works. But we try to ignore it because it belongs to that part that happens and that we cannot influence.

R.R.: And you have the idea of the child talking about how she wanted to be a witch with Lene and fly over the rooftops. So is that an idea of freedom through the destruction?

H.S.-B.: Yeah, but it also means that in this destruction, the house of men is destroyed. The walls and doors and windows are open. You can fly. And of course witchcraft is something that is related to strong women, that has always been related to strong women since the beginning of mankind. Men have always been afraid of witchcraft. Because witchcraft comes from here (points to her stomach). It's not a thing of the head; it's a thing of the *Bauch*, the belly, the womb. Ourselves, we are constructing children and destroying food at the same time.

R.R.: So, the last woman of the fairy tale is the murdered bride, the woman that the miller's daughter sees murdered. So, both the murdered bride and Lene at the end of the



film represent the woman who responds to men's violence in a somewhat passive way. For example, the murdered maiden is forced to drink so she cannot stop the men from murdering her. She becomes hysterical. Lene, for example, does not stop the dentist from pulling her teeth by leaving the dentist's office. At the end of the film Lene starts drinking, she takes drugs, and then tries to kill herself. Do you feel that the murdered maiden and Lene are similar in how they react to men's violence?

H.S.-B.: Not really similar... Yes, but in a way there is an analogy in that. Yes, right. There is this analogy between the woman who has to drink the red wine, the white wine, the yellow wine, and Lene who is drinking at the end and destroying herself, yes. Of course, it's the result of what Lene has lived through that is now haunting her.

R.R.: Okay, that was my next question.

H.S.-B.: Because now she is in the cage somehow. She is locked in the cage. The doors are closed and the walls are there.

R.R.: In your film, you say that when she lost the ability to use the skills she developed in the war, she lost her face. Is that the idea of returning to the cage and not feeling useful anymore? Of feeling depressed?

H.S.-B.: I think she lost her face but somehow she found her face also. I mean the face that she had at the end of the film is her face. It's her face, but it's a distorted face, and

it's showing, again, what happened to her. And that she did not cry while she was raped, that she did not cry, that she did not protest, that she did not try to free herself. That is now coming back.

R.R.: So, in a way, through showing Lene's face, you are showing her story. Are you also in a way criticizing that passivity, that stoicism of women of that generation?

H.S.-B.: That's a good question. I'm not criticizing. I'm not a critic. I'm a storyteller. I don't criticize the people of my film, my characters. I'm not criticizing them. I think I try to understand. You see, in the *Arabian Nights* there is a wonderful thing. The rule of the game is that people have to tell their stories and when they have told their stories, they're free. They could have committed murders and many other atrocious things, but when they tell their stories, or Scheherazade tells their stories for them, they are free. And this is somehow what happens when a film really works. By telling and by showing how something happened, you set your nightmares free. You open the door and you open the window. This is what is happening in the fairy tale; it's what is happening in the film. This is quite different from what happens when people tell their life stories in an interview. This is not the same thing. This kind of storytelling of the *Arabian Nights* or of, let's say, James Joyce, or Dostoyevsky, or Virginia Wolf, is setting the people free in the end because they have understood what happened to them and why they react in their way. And this is wonderful.

R.R.: So, by telling your story, you take control of it, and you integrate it into yourself. Is that sort of along the lines of what you are saying? By telling about trauma and fear, you take control of that story because you are integrating it. You are the writer, you are the teller.

H.S.-B.: Yes, I'm the writer, I'm the teller, because I am the one who knows the story. In a way it's my story.

R.R.: So, in a way, traditionally, women have been storytellers.

H.S.-B.: Yes. The saint of my life is Scheherazade because when she starts to tell her tales, before she started to tell her tales, it was said that she was one of the most widely-read women of her time. She had knowledge of all the astrologers of her time, the historians, and the philosophers. And she lives in a time where the ruling king is a terrible butcher. Every night he murders a woman. You know that story?

R.R.: Yes.

H.S.-B.: He marries a woman, he sleeps with her, and then he kills her. And the wonderful line Scheherazade says in the *Arabian Nights* is the line of my life, "Let's put an end to this barbarism." She goes into the very bed of the butcher and starts telling tales. And as her tales are so interesting, he doesn't kill her. And so she goes on and on and on. And she replaces murder by culture, she replaces murder by storytelling, she

replaces murder by creating understanding. And it's a process you can compare to a mother teaching her child how to speak. It's creating out of something that is in the darkness, bringing it to understanding, to civilized, cultural behaviour. That is to say, to understand other people, to approach them, to love them, to help them.

R.R.: So could you say that for example, in the fairy tale, through storytelling, the miller's daughter brings the murderers to justice. Could you say that through telling your mother's story...you don't bring the murderers to justice, but you show another side of German history and ensure that the lessons of this history will not be lost for future generations? Do you agree?

H.S.-B.: Maybe. It depends on how long the film will survive. Normally film is not a very long-lasting material. But, actually, in France, the film has been re-released on December 10<sup>th</sup>. And it had the nice support from the press.

R.R.: I only have a few more questions. Did you intend Lene's *Gesichtslähmung*, her facial paralysis, to represent the paralysis of her spirit?

H.S.-B.: Yes, in a way it was. But what happens to our body is always a reflection of what happens to our soul.

R.R.: And also, Lene's face is divided. She wears this *Tuch*, this cloth over her face...

H.S.-B.: This happened to my mother, this really happened to her. And my childhood is traumatized by this vision of her. Losing her beautiful face, and again, losing her teeth. That was terrible.

R.R.: Some critics have said that through the division of Lene's face, you are trying to show the divided Germany. What do you think of this?

H.S.-B.: Somehow it is too easy.

R.R.: Too easy. That is what I thought. To continue, the idea of showing the finger, of showing proof is very important in the fairy tale. In my thesis I argue that this whole film, in a sense, is a finger in that you show "proof" of a side of history that is often forgotten, a German woman's experience of the Second World War. Also, the documentary images are like the finger because they are the historical proof of the war. What do you think of this idea?

H.S.-B.: Nice idea. I like that. I like that very much.

R.R.: Is that what you intended?

H.S.-B.: Maybe (smiles).

R.R.: Maybe? There are so many different ways to interpret the film. Okay, last question. You are probably getting tired. Oh, actually, I have two more questions from my supervisor, but this is the last question from me. Why do you think some West German critics reacted negatively to the film when it premiered at the Berlinale in 1980? Why do you think the film had a more positive reception in France, Italy, the USA, and Japan, Iran, etc.? Do you think it is fair to say that German critics reacted negatively to the film because you broke a social taboo by dealing with National Socialism through a personal story?

H.S.-B.: Yes. But on the other hand, several films were made that were personal stories. But they were personal stories that were more or less about people who had behaved well during fascism. This is a constant theme... You always show the well-behaved man who fights against Nazis. And then, of course, there were men's stories, mostly men or boys' stories. Like for example, *Die Brücke* [*The Bridge*] by Bernhard Wicki. And, to me, all these films did not really convince me because I felt that things were much more complex. I lived through them as a small child. I understood them as more complex. What made *Germany, Pale Mother* to be so well received in France, Italy, Canada, the United States, and all over the world, actually, India, was the fact that this film, is a very complex film. It is not just telling a nice story about something in a brutal and horrible time, but it's very complex. I think this complexity that Lene is not a Nazi, but she is not a fighter against fascism either. Her husband is not a Nazi, but he is also not a fighter against Nazism. And, at special times, he also uses phrases of the Nazis for himself. This complexity was seen as something that you shouldn't really do in a film. So it

irritated the critics terribly. It also irritated them to see that the friend [Ulrich] is a Nazi. I can imagine how they would react today. Even today they would be irritated. They are still irritated about what I make and they do not feel quite comfortable about what I am doing.

R.R.: Could you say that it was a defensive reaction, in a way?

H.S.-B.: Yes. Because, in a way, to react to this film is difficult for a German.

R.R.: Do you think it's easier for a non-German to watch the film because they are more distant from it?

H.S.-B.: Yes.

R.R.: My supervisor's question was: "How do you see the film fitting into notions of feminism at the time?" How does your film fit into feminism?

H.S.-B.: Very little. I did not at all want to make a feminist film. I wanted to make a true film, a film that was true to what I have seen and lived through. My mother's reaction when she saw the film for the first time was wonderful because she said, "This is not correct, but it is true." Which I would have wanted as an answer to my film.

R.R.: So you're a storyteller in the sense that you are not judging what happened. You are just presenting it.

H.S.-B.: Yes.

R.R.: Her last question is: "Were you trying to move discussions of feminism, history, and memory to a new level in this film?"

H.S.-B.: Yes. I think film is a wonderful tool to stimulate people. Film, in the way I want to use it, should be stimulating, and give not only information, or just emotion, but it should give them a complex and wonderful sight [view] of the world. And this can be, in this film, putting together pieces [of different media] like fairy tale, and documentary, and fiction, like in a mosaic...different colours also...This can also happen in a very strictly told story. It's not a question of form; it's a question of truth. A search for truth. It's not a question of whether there are dragons or coffee glasses in the frame. It's not important. It's important that the sense of what is happening is true. And truth is also always a very complex thing. As you can see from the *yin-yang* structure, it is a complex thing. There is always a point of black in the white and a point of white in the black. It's always turning. The black replaces the white and the white replaces the black, like day is replaced by the night and night is replaced by the day. Summer is replaced by autumn, and autumn is replaced by winter, and winter is replaced by spring. That is the way our lives function. In a way, when it's summer, we have the impression that the world is



opening up, but actually, the struggles of life, inside the trees and inside the earth, happen when winter comes, only you can't see it. This is also what nature teaches us.

R.R.: And you also show that with Lene, too, because you show many sides to her. You know, she is very active, she is singing a lot in the war period, but she becomes depressed in the post-war period. So you show that there are many sides to the same person, that they are multifaceted.

H.S.-B.: Yes.

R.R.: One more question. Can you watch this film now?

H.S.-B.: Rarely. Not really. It's very difficult for me to see my films after I finish them.

R.R.: Why is that?

H.S.-B.: I don't know. It's just something that is behind me. I can talk about them, but I can't judge them. Once it starts, I'm inside them. I have the impression I get back inside my own history.

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