Selbstbestimmt: The Woman in Contemporary German Women's Filmmaking

by

Myrto Provida

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Examining Committee Membership

The following served on the Examining Committee for this thesis. The decision of the Examining Committee is by majority vote.

External Examiner	ANGELICA FENNER Professor, University of Toronto
Supervisor	JAMES M. SKIDMORE Professor, University of Waterloo
Internal Member	PAUL M. MALONE Associate Professor, University of Waterloo
Member	ANN MARIE RASMUSSEN Adjunct Professor, University of Waterloo
Internal-external Member	BRIANNA I. WIENS Assistant Professor, University of Waterloo

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

Women's representation in film has become an increasingly relevant topic in gender and film discourse, challenging the postfeminist claim that gender equality has been achieved and feminist critique is no longer necessary. German cinema in particular has recently experienced renewed scrutiny for its evident gender inequality, with scholarship pointing to the underrepresentation of women both on and off the screen, a pattern that reflects enduring structural barriers within the industry. Despite graduating in equal numbers as men from film schools, women direct fewer than 25% of the feature films released in Germany, receive less than 20% of all available funding, and are significantly underrepresented as directors, writers, and producers. At the same time, female figures in German films are "visible but not diverse:" the average German cinematic woman is slim, white, heterosexual, in her teens, twenties, or thirties, and more likely to be shown in the context of relationships or partnerships than in work environments. Yet when women occupy key filmmaking positions, not only do they work with more women behind the screen, but they also construct more complex female characters, foregrounding female subjectivity in diverse contexts.

This dissertation attaches itself to questions of women's representation in German cinema by examining three contemporary films directed by women in order to to explore how they engage with womanhood through their female protagonists. The first, both chronologically and analytically, is Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann* (2016), which centres on the relationship between business consultant Ines and her father, who unexpectedly visits her. An international critical and commercial success, *Toni Erdmann* has exerted wide influence on the German cinematic landscape, drawing significant attention on its portrayal of gendered subjectivity. The second is Annika Pinske's *Alle reden übers Wetter* (2022), which follows doctoral candidate Clara's return

to her hometown to celebrate her mother's birthday. Despite being the most recent of the three films analyzed, *Alle reden übers Wetter* is placed after *Toni Erdmann* due to its contextual and aesthetic parallels to Ade's film, as Pinske—the only director among the three who hails from the former East, a rarity among German women filmmakers—worked closely with Ade and adopts a similarly realist aesthetic in her debut feature, which presents a range of multidimensional female characters. Finally, the dissertation examines Sherry Hormann's *Nur eine Frau* (2019), which dramatizes the life of Hatun "Aynur" Sürücü, a German woman of Kurdish background who was murdered by her brother at a Berlin bus stop in 2005. The film is discussed last not only because it diverges from Ade's and Pinske's works through its highly stylized form, but also because it engages with a distinct subject matter—migration and Islam—through a real-life case that remains central to German debates on cultural difference and integration.

A close reading of the formal and narrative strategies in these films reveals a multifaceted engagement with gendered subjectivity by contemporary German women directors, whose protagonists are constructed as complex characters navigating intersecting pressures and gendered demands. Central to these trajectories is the pursuit of self-determination, which emerges across all three works as an ongoing process marked by the continuous negotiation of often conflicting roles—as daughters, mothers, partners, and friends. While these films stop short of articulating a collective dimension of self-determination, instead adopting an individualized lens reflecting postfeminist discourse, they nonetheless articulate a shared feminist consciousness by exposing and challenging gendered scripts and essentialist notions of womanhood. By foregrounding self-determination as an analytical lens, this dissertation demonstrates how these films articulate feminist modes of resistance on screen while their production contexts reveal parallel struggles for autonomy off screen. Moreover, by bringing two

largely unexamined films into scholarly conversation—*Alle reden übers Wetter* and *Nur eine Frau*—the project expands the representational and analytical space of German women's filmmaking and illuminates the diverse ways women directors intervene in, reshape, and critically reimagine dominant cultural narratives about womanhood. Ultimately, the analysis shows that contemporary German women filmmakers and their protagonists enact a mode of agency and resistance that foregrounds their struggle to live and create s*elbstbestimmt*.

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List of Abbreviations

ADEFRA	Afrodeutsche Frauen
AfD	Alternative für Deutschland
ARD	Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland
ARTE	Association Relative à la Télévision Européenne
BKA	Bundeskriminalamt
BMFSFJ	Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend
BPW	Business and Professional Women
BVR	Bundesverband Regie
DEFA	Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft
DFD	Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands
DFFB	Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin
DFFF	Deutscher Filmförderfonds
EJF	Evangelisches Jugend- und Fürsorgewerk
EWA	European Women's Audiovisual Network
FFA	Filmförderungsanstalt
FFF Bayern	FilmFernsehFonds Bayern
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GDR	German Democratic Republic
HFF	Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen (GDR)
HFF München	Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film München
IFFF	Internationales Frauen Film Fest

ISD	Initiative Schwarze Deutsche
ITW	Into the Wild
PEGIDA	Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes
PQF	Pro Quote Film
PQR	Pro Quote Regie
RBB	Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg
SWR	Südwestrundfunk
VdF	Verband der Filmarbeiterinnen
WDR	Westdeutscher Rundfunk
ZDF	Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen

Introduction

The twenty-first century has seen women make remarkable gains in film authorship and visibility, evidenced in both big budget Hollywood successes, such as Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023) and Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* (2017), and award-winning independent features such as Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020) and Justine Triet's *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023). This trajectory appears to redress, at least in part, women's historical underrepresentation in film authorship, which has been documented across national contexts, with women consistently marginalized in key filmmaking positions such as directors, writers, and producers. In recent years, one national film industry that has experienced a revival of scrutiny for its evident lack of gender parity has been Germany: studies analyzing gender representation in German cinema reveal that, despite graduating in equal numbers as men from film schools, women direct less than 25% of feature films on German screens, receive less than 20% of all available funding, and are significantly underrepresented as directors, writers, and producers (Hochfeld et al.; Prommer and Loist). Although women-directed German films have gained increasing visibility and recognition in recent years, as illustrated by the critical and commercial success of Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann* (2016) or, most recently, Mascha Schilinski's *In die Sonne schauen* (2025)—with Schilinski becoming the first German woman to receive the Jury prize at Cannes—women's authorship remains a marginal activity in the German film industry despite women's films frequently earning more awards and demonstrating stronger festival runs, pointing to the prevalence of structural gender bias in German cinema (Loist and Prommer 104-06).

Evidence of gender bias is found not only behind the camera in the German film industry but also in front of it. While visible on screen, women have less speaking time and are less diverse than both cinematic men and real-life population figures: the majority of female

characters on German screens are young, white, slim, heterosexual, and more likely to be shown in the context of relationships than professional environments (Prommer and Linke, *Ausgeblendet;* Prommer et al.). Additionally, female characters are less complex than their counterparts, undergo less character development, and are typically associated with a narrower range of attributes, with social and emotional competencies foregrounded (Prommer and Linke, *Ausgeblendet* 80). Yet this pattern shifts markedly in the context of women's film authorship: when women occupy key creative positions such as director, writer, or producer—often collaborating with other women in the process—female characters tend to be more complex and multi-dimensional (Loist and Prommer 107; Prommer et al. 26). Given the gender bias prevalent in the German film industry and the challenges women face in securing funding and distribution, it becomes essential to examine women's films and the representations of women they produce.

This dissertation aims to examine how contemporary German films authored by women respond to and participate in broader gender discourse, with particular focus on questions of women's representation, authorship, feminism, and agency through a close analysis of their female protagonists. Central to this investigation is the recognition that cinematic discourse does not exist in isolation but is embedded in broader cultural and political negotiations of gender. As such, this project situates women's filmmaking within contemporary German debates on feminism, gender equality, women's roles, as well as the intersection of gender with vectors such as race and class, while also considering the legacies of earlier filmmaking practices. Importantly, given the contested nature of feminism in the German cultural imaginary—a tension traced throughout this study—the analysis does not treat women's films as inherently feminist but asks to what extent they can be read as feminist interventions, both through the images they construct and through their respective production contexts, which often rely on collaborative

modes of authorship along gendered lines. What emerges from this approach is an exploration of how women filmmakers not only construct images of womanhood but also articulate negotiations of gendered identity, agency, and resistance that both resonate with and challenge dominant discourse.

In pursuit of this aim, this dissertation analyzes three women-directed films that received theatrical releases in Germany in the past decade and centre on female protagonists: Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann* (2016), Annika Pinske's *Alle reden übers Wetter* (2022), and Sherry Hormann's *Nur eine Frau* (2019). The rationale for this selection lies in several interrelated factors. First, the films collectively illuminate diverse modes of women's film authorship, having been produced in distinct contexts and with varying budgets while also representing different stages in their directors' careers—dimensions examined in greater detail in the respective chapters. Second, they address a range of gendered experiences and subject positions through their respective protagonists: Ines in *Toni Erdmann* navigates corporate life as a German woman abroad, Clara in *Alle reden übers Wetter* grapples with belonging as a woman from the former East in Berlin's academic circles, and Aynur in *Nur eine Frau* embodies negotiations of gender, culture, and migration as a Turkish-German woman in Berlin. Third, all films are available on major streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime and Apple TV, making them accessible to a wide audience and facilitating their continued relevance in cultural and scholarly discourse.

The selected films' respective positions in the German cinematic landscape informed the order of analysis. *Toni Erdmann* comes first, not only chronologically but also because of its significance as a landmark in German cinema: an international critical and commercial success, Ade's film has been hailed as opening new possibilities for German filmmaking while also attracting scholarly attention for its portrayal of gendered subjectivity. Despite being the newest

of the three, *Alle reden übers Wetter* follows due to its contextual and aesthetic parallels to *Toni Erdmann*: Pinske had worked as assistant director on Ade's film and adopts a similarly realist aesthetic in her feature debut, utilizing natural settings, pared-down editing, and a predominantly diegetic sound. A critically acclaimed film not yet taken up in scholarly writing, *Alle reden übers Wetter* introduces Pinske as a significant new voice in German cinema. Notably, Pinske is the only filmmaker of the three to hail from the former East—a rare trajectory among women directors that invites exploration of how regional origins and politics shape cinematic representations. Another film as yet underexplored in scholarly writing, *Nur eine Frau* concludes the sequence as the only film based on a true story, presenting a dramatized retelling of the life and 2005 murder of Hatun Sürücü—a case central to German debates on Islam and migration. The film is thus firmly situated at the intersection of cinema and public discourse, a positioning further complicated by its self-presentation as a pedagogical tool intended for a young German audience. Produced by prominent journalist Sandra Maischberger, the film has been widely circulated through television broadcasts since its theatrical release, inviting a closer look at how this latest retelling of Sürücü's story engages with questions of gender, culture, and migration.

In order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the selected films, this dissertation first examines issues informing contemporary German discourse on women. Accordingly, chapter one maps German discourse on women since the turn of the millennium, situating the films studied here within key debates on feminism, family policy, women's participation in the workforce, sexual harassment, migration, and motherhood. These debates are shown to both reflect and challenge cultural narratives about womanhood, which form the discursive backdrop to contemporary women's filmmaking. Chapter two turns to women in the German cinematic landscape, examining their representation both on and off the screen as well as the ways

women's filmmaking has been theorized, while considering the enduring legacies of women's film traditions in West and East Germany. The chapter also highlights contemporary interventions by women filmmakers in the German film industry, from advocacy groups to production collectives and mentoring initiatives, which lay the material foundations for women's sustained film authorship in Germany today. The chapter closes by outlining the current state of scholarship on women's filmmaking in Germany, which identifies the emergence of a feminist film practice among women directors who critically engage with gendered subjectivities—an insight that frames this dissertation's contribution, which builds on and contextualizes these discussions through close readings that illuminate how the selected films engage with current understandings of feminist film practice.

Chapters three through five each provide a close reading of one of the selected films, analyzing narrative and formal elements to trace how the films construct their female protagonists. Chapter three examines Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann,* focusing on how Ines negotiates the pressures of corporate culture, familial expectations, and gendered subjectivity. Despite Ines' renunciation of feminism, the chapter argues that the film performs a feminist intervention through its formal strategies and narrative arc, exposing the persistence of structural sexism while charting Ines' subtle yet significant assertion of agency. In chapter four, Annika Pinske's *Alle reden übers Wetter* is analyzed as a multilayered exploration of self-determination, with Clara navigating intersecting pressures of class, region, gender, and generation. The chapter highlights how the film's realist aesthetics and production context reflect feminist commitments, positioning Clara's search for recognition within broader debates about women's autonomy and East German identity. Chapter five turns to Sherry Hormann's *Nur eine Frau*, foregrounding the film's engagement with gender, religion, and tradition in a German migration context. While

considering the film's attempt to restore voice and agency to its protagonist, the chapter ultimately argues that its reliance on an individualizing framework risks obscuring the structural conditions that shaped Hatun Sürücü's life and death. The insights gained from these three case studies are then synthesized in the conclusion, which situates them within wider developments in German gender discourse and women's cinematic representation as explored in the first two chapters, drawing out both continuities and divergences between these developments and the films' approach to issues of gender and womanhood. The dissertation closes by arguing that, despite differences in context and approach, the films collectively illuminate how women filmmakers navigate an industry that systematically disadvantages them and, through their work, respond to dominant representations of womanhood while articulating feminist modes of resistance and expanding the possibilities for women's cinema in contemporary Germany.

Chapter 1. Contemporary German Discourse on Women

In a 2020 essay for *Deutschlandfunk*, journalist and author Barbara Sichtermann commented on the status of gender equality in Germany:

> Zu Beginn unseres Jahrhunderts sah es so aus, als sei die Emanzipation vollendet und man könne erleichtert zu anderen heißen Fragen übergehen. Dann stellte sich heraus: Es stimmt nicht, der gleiche Lohn ist nicht durchgesetzt, die Gewalt gegen Frauen nicht gestoppt und der Anteil praktizierender Väter und Hausmänner verschwindend gering. So wie auch der Anteil von Frauen in Spitzenpositionen. Woran lag das? Die Quote wurde erneut Streitthema, Antidiskriminierungsgesetze wurden erlassen, Gelder im Bildungswesen an Frauenförderung geknüpft. Unruhe und Unzufriedenheit kehrten zurück mit der Einsicht: Die Gleichheit ist nicht durchgesetzt. (Sichtermann)

Sichtermann's retrospective offers a brief yet largely comprehensive account of Germany's engagement with issues of gender since the turn of the millennium—an engagement which is by no means unique to Germany, since similar processes can be observed in many countries influenced by the gains of Western feminism, but which displays several characteristics unique to German culture and society. One of the most visible turning points in German gender discourse of the new millennium was sparked when statistical data pointing to the country's falling birthrates unleashed a "demography debate" in the mid-2000s, with women being blamed for choosing career over family. This sparked a renewed interest in feminism and gender equality that informed much of the subsequent public discourse on equal pay, gender quotas in the workplace, and childcare, among other issues, as Sichtermann points out. These debates are of interest because they both reflect and construct dominant cultural narratives about womanhood,

while also revealing patterns that signal where contemporary gender discourse—including that articulated by women themselves—may be heading.

The following chapter maps out key debates that have shaped German gender discourse since the turn of the millennium, with particular attention to the images of womanhood they produce. These will serve to both situate the films within the broader discourses that informed their creation and to provide a reference point for the subsequent film analyses, which explore how contemporary women filmmakers respond to, reflect, or challenge dominant representations of womanhood through their films. While not exhaustive, the selected debates represent some of the most visible and widely discussed discursive threads, offering insight into the dominant frameworks shaping German perceptions of women today. Though the issues frequently intersect, they are presented here in thematic strands to enhance clarity and to mirror a recurring feature of German gender discourse: the tendency to negotiate gender issues in individual rather than structural terms. As Aleksander et al. observe, this framing was particularly evident in the context of the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, where gender questions, though more visible than in earlier years, were addressed sporadically rather than as central elements of political or collective discourse (12-13).

This uneven visibility of gender issues during the thirtieth anniversary of reunification points to a broader dynamic: more than three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the long-standing division between the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) continues to shape contemporary debates on gender and women's roles. The FRG and GDR fostered markedly different conditions and expectations for women, producing divergent gender norms that still reverberate in public discourse. These historical differences were particularly evident in the dominant concerns of the women's movements in each state: in

the West, access to abortion was one of the core issues of the 1970s and 1980s, while in the East—where abortion had been legal since 1972—the focus fell more on reconciling paid employment with family life, a tension born from the socialist state's ideological and economic emphasis on women's full-time work. In 1989, 89% of women were employed outside the home in the GDR, supported by a robust childcare infrastructure; in contrast, only 55.5% of West German women were in paid employment, with many either leaving the workforce after having children or remaining childless in order to pursue a career (Lang 562; Miethe 123; Scharff, *Repudiating* 19; Stitz). Those who, even after having children, wished or attempted to continue working, were stigmatized as "Rabenmütter"—heartless mother ravens who leave their chicks to be cared for by others—echoing what American theorist Betty Friedan termed "the unpardonable sin of working outside the home," a sentiment that would resurface in the twenty-first century with the demography debate (Ferree 207; Friedan 1). Theoretical impulses also differed between the two states: while East German discourse was shaped by Marxist figures such as Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg, who linked women's emancipation to economic structures and class struggle, West German feminists drew on figures such as Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir, whose work became foundational for what was later termed second-wave feminism in the Anglo-American context—a period of feminist activity spanning roughly the 1960s to 1980s with a focus on systemic inequality, sexuality, and reproductive rights (Stitz). It is important to note, however, that the wave metaphor is less common in the German context; instead, this period is more typically referred to as the "old" women's movement or "1970s" feminism, reflecting different historical trajectories and political frameworks (Scharff, "The New German Feminists" 266).

In light of this divergence, it is unsurprising that gender discourse in the early years following reunification often centered on the differences between the two former German states—particularly given how little most East and West Germans knew about one another's lived realities. Women's movements from both sides frequently found themselves at odds over key issues such as employment, motherhood, and reproductive rights, with tensions also extending to questions of political strategy. For instance, Eastern feminists' emphasis on cooperating with men to advance feminist goals was often met with skepticism, if not outright disapproval, from their Western counterparts (Miethe 123). These frictions were further compounded by conflicting theoretical foundations: West German feminists, grounded in the view of their society as fundamentally patriarchal, focused on the systemic dominance of men over women. East German feminists, by contrast, framed inequality in terms of geopolitical power—specifically, the subordination of the East to the West. As a result, "Western women, much to their disappointment, were seen primarily not as women, but as representatives of the dominant West German society," a perception that not only strained feminist solidarity in the early 1990s but continued to shape East-West gender dynamics in the years that followed (Miethe 124).

With reunification, this perceived imbalance between East and West quickly materialized into structural dominance. The West increasingly became the normative framework against which the East was measured, owing not only to demographic proportions but also to an increasing displacement of East German academics in the early 1990s. What that meant for gender discourse in the new republic was that, even though East German feminists were still involved in the dialogue—or rather, polylogue—they were now underrepresented and acted from

a more defensive position (Miethe 125).[1] This reinforced the culture of Western dominance in the country and meant that the majority of the debates and initiatives starting in the 1990s centred on issues championed by West German feminists, such as child-rearing and violence against women. At the same time, starting in the late 90s and continuing into the early 2000s, a gradual stagnation in explicit East-West discourse can be observed as the differences between the two sides became more diluted, East German feminists were underrepresented in politics and academia, and West German women avoided addressing differences out of fear of committing a faux pas in the eyes of their Eastern counterparts (Miethe 127-28).

Importantly, the failure of East and West German feminists to mobilize collectively in the early years of reunification contributed to widespread political disengagement among women and reinforced public narratives portraying East German women as the "losers of unification" (Lang 559, 562). This perception was especially tied to employment: as noted earlier, nearly 90% of women in the GDR were employed in 1989, with self-actualization closely linked to full participation in the workforce. With the collapse of this model, many women faced sudden unemployment, their professional and academic qualifications were delegitimized, and they were forced to integrate into to a West German system that placed greater emphasis on women's domestic roles. This structural redefinition of female identity was not only systemic but also discursively reinforced, as Katrin Wolf, advisor to the first and only *Gleichstellungsbeauftragte*[2] of the GDR, Marina Beyer,[3] recalls: "Ich kann mich sehr gut an den Satz erinnern: Die

[1] As Heffernan and Stone note, German public discourse is characterized by a "culture of debate" (338), in which academic impulses and controversies are often reflected in mainstream media.
[2] The *Gleichstellungsbeauftragte* (gender equality commissioner) was a position created by the first and only freely elected GDR government in 1990 with the goal to assess the situation for women and gender equality in the GDR prior to unification. Marina Beyer was appointed as *Gleichstellungsbeauftragte* on 9 May 1990, with the position dissolving on 2 October 1990, one day before the official unification. Her work resulted in the creation of the "Frauenreport '90," a comprehensive 250-page policy document outlining women's status in the GDR.
[3] Later Marina Grasse.

Erwerbsneigung der ostdeutschen Frauen ist doch sehr übertrieben und die muss auf ein Normalmaß herunter geschrumpft werden. Dann haben wir auch wieder anständige Arbeitslosenzahlen. Das sind so Sätze, die vergisst du nicht als Frau" ("Geschichte im Ersten"). The effects were immediate and devastating: by 1990, only half as many women were employed in the former East as before the fall of the Wall, with many forced to fundamentally reorient their lives, cut off from the values and structures that had once anchored their identity (ibid.).

Though not entirely unrelated to the legacy of the East-West divide, a further defining feature of German discourse on gender lies in the unified nation's amalgamation of state identity with family politics. Unlike other Western nations with a history of strong women's movements, German politics has drawn on "both conservative views of patriarchal authority and social democratic ideals of justice to forge a social welfare state that prioritizes family support and the social reproduction of the nation" (Ferree 15). Despite social democrats being decidedly more influential than free-market liberals in Germany, they have historically found themselves in the political opposition. More importantly, Christian conservatism has been the leading force in the country's development both post-World War II and post unification. Crucially, a by-product of this process was the discrediting of East German policies promoting gender equality goals by the West due to their association with a repressive government; at the same time, similar policies were far more difficult to realize both in West Germany and in the early post-unification years (Ferree 16).

The prevalence of Christian conservatism in German politics has shaped its gender regime as one dominated by a male breadwinner/female homemaker model, where a social democratic paradigm would see a dual-earner model. Conservative social policies were reinforced during the long tenure of Christian Democratic chancellor Helmut Kohl, with changes

in parental leave policies and care insurance solidifying the role of women as providing family care (Shire and Nemoto 442). However, the 2005 election of Angela Merkel as chancellor and the first "grand coalition" saw the beginning of a reform agenda that was to gradually move Germany away from the male breadwinner model and towards the social democratic approach of a dual-earner model (Henninger and von Wahl). The degree to which these policies were informed by a drive for state-supported gender equality has been contested, as the following section will discuss—which is also where the demography debate of 2006 comes in.

1.1 Demography Debate and Family Policy

The year 2006 saw Germans come face to face with a demographic crisis: the country had recorded its lowest birth rate since World War II with 1.33 births per woman (Pötzsch; Statistisches Bundesamt). At the same time, an increase in life expectancy meant that a pension crisis might be on the horizon, leading some to dramatically declare that "die Deutschen sterben aus" (Radisch 15). Germany was not the only (Western European) country with a marked decrease in births, but it was also not the first time that Germany was experiencing a low birth rate—decreases in the number of births had been recorded both in the early twentieth century and since the mid-1960s (Beck-Gernsheim 9). However, the looming pension crisis and apparent cracks in the future of the German nuclear family created a storm of debates and publications trying to locate the causes of this demographic change and, more often than not, blaming women for the gloomy future of the German population.

The data were quickly inflated by Germany's largely "conservative media network" to cause a national crisis (Klaus 176). Various culprits were named; for example, a substantial drop in births in the former GDR led to accusations of a "birth strike" by East German women (Ferree 162). In reality, the birth drop in the former East had little to do with a deliberate protest by

women and more to do with the fact that these women were essentially assimilated into a West German family policy system whose institutional support for working parents was far less robust than the one they were used to under socialist rule (Adler). Hence, what the "birth strike" really suggested was that, when faced with the choice between forsaking employment or limiting childbearing, East German women chose the latter. Young East German women also identified their desire for travel, fun, and self-realization as a reason for not having children, suggesting that these goals were incompatible with starting a family (ibid.).

Early reports on the demographic crisis also pointed the finger at women's use of contraceptives, with the "Pillenknick" being responsible for the fact that "[die] nicht geborenen Mädchen fehlen jetzt als Mütter" (Wenkel). This accusatory rhetoric reached its zenith with prominent news presenter Eva Herman's 2006 article "Die Emanzipation – ein Irrtum?" as well as her subsequent bestseller *Das Eva-Prinzip: Für eine neue Weiblichkeit,* in which she advocates a return to traditional gender roles and openly criticizes feminism for the waning normative family. Herman's theses became one of the central triggers for what the demography debate ended up centring around, namely whether feminism has corrupted family dynamics encouraging women to pursue a career over starting a family. This polemic approach not only reduced women to vessels but at the same time, as Alexandra Hill notes, "fundamentally undermined the right to choose a career, children, or both" ("Female Sobriety" 212). Crucially, the image of the selfish woman who chooses career over family reveals two underlying principles of this line of argumentation: first, that reproduction is a woman's duty, and second, that work and family are inherently incompatible. It also reinforces the centrality that motherhood retains in German thought, a product of the aforementioned and deeply ingrained conservatism in family matters which will be explored later in this chapter. Feminism's role in

this constellation is hence that of a disruptor, an "Irrtum" to borrow from Eva Herman, that encourages women to put their own needs before their implied duty as child bearers.

While the demography debate was raging, Angela Merkel's first grand coalition cabinet of 2005-2009 began working on policy measures which would gradually weaken the male breadwinner model dominating German politics, and which were heralded by many as promoting gender equality in Germany (Henninger and von Wahl). In 2006, the government passed an antidiscrimination law (which the EU had demanded for a decade), preventing discrimination on the basis of gender, among other factors, thereby affirming gender equality in the eyes of German law. The year 2007 then saw the introduction of Elterngeld, a paradigm shift in German family policy that replaced previous child-rearing benefits, which had largely encouraged new mothers to stay out of the labour market. Under the new laws, paid leave was shortened to fourteen months with a high level of replacement for parents' wages during that time (67% of their net income), with one spouse only able to claim up to twelve of those months. This caveat not only presented an incentive for fathers to take parental leave as well, but also meant that Elterngeld primarily benefitted dual-income couples, thereby encouraging mothers to compete in the labour market (Botsch 20; Nill and Shultz 379; Veil 226).

While Elterngeld was largely hailed as a win in promoting gender equality as well as the compatibility of work and family, critics have pointed out that the reform mainly benefitted parents of good financial standing while largely disregarding lower-income families and single mothers (Stöckle and Davison; Veil). It is also worth noting that the increase in leave allowances has been read as a way to incentivize childbirth, with some going so far as to claim that this was the primary motivation behind the new law (Nill and Shultz 379; Ferree 162).[4] Given the

[4] Ferree (163) also draws attention to the fact that Elterngeld was introduced by then-Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth Ursula von der Leyen, a working mother of seven.

decrease in paid leave duration, however, it is more likely that Elterngeld was introduced to incentivize both childbirth and a subsequent return to work for mothers, ultimately aiming at increasing the percentage of Germans who contribute to the labour market and thus avoid a pension crisis (Trzcinski and Camp).

The modernization of family policy in Germany slowed down considerably during the Christian Democratic-Free Democratic coalition of 2009-2013, as it was internally contested by the more conservative voices in Merkel's cabinet (Henninger and von Wahl 464). Still, 2013 saw the introduction of a childcare law guaranteeing every child aged 12 months or older a place in a public daycare facility. The law was passed in response to years of debates over the reported difficulty of securing a daycare slot in German facilities, with many parents (especially mothers) forced to stay at home to care for their children after being repeatedly turned down (Heine). Not only was the new childcare policy aimed at facilitating the return to work for mothers of young children, but it also carried with it the hope that this would contribute to a higher birth rate since parents would be guaranteed a daycare spot once the child turned one—that is, once the Elterngeld ran out and they could rejoin the workforce. With a government-commissioned study confirming a positive correlation between daycare availability and birth rate, it seemed that Germany's investment in childcare (and parental leave benefits) would pay off financially (Bonin et al.). And pay off it did—at least initially. In the years since the introduction of Elterngeld and the daycare guarantee, Germany's revised family policy contributed to the rise in births "almost certainly" (Martin): the 2010s saw a steady increase in births year over year, with 2016 reporting the highest birth rate in more than 40 years with 1.59 children per woman—even if the figure remained insufficient to offset the long-term decline of the working-age population, whose contributions are essential to sustaining the pension system (Statistisches Bundesamt). Yet the

effects proved short-lived: since 2021, the country's birthrate has declined year over year, reaching 1.35 children per woman in 2024—a figure strikingly close to the one that triggered the demography debate of the mid-2000s (ibid.).

What this closer look at recent changes in German family policy confirms is that "the days of the conservative breadwinner model are definitely past" (Henninger and von Wahl 474). Both Elterngeld and the childcare guarantee have shifted the (nuclear) family away from the male breadwinner/female carer model and towards a dual earner-dual carer model by presenting women with tangible solutions to reconcile family and work, and men with incentives to contribute more to childrearing. Of course, what largely informed this policy shift was not a drive for state-sanctioned gender egalitarianism, but rather the pressing economic factors which can be traced back to the demographic crisis. Where less conservative governments may have invoked gender equality goals to push for such changes, the continued influence of conservatism in German politics along with a complex relationship towards feminism led Merkel's governments to invoke values of modernization and family friendliness to legitimize the shift away from the male breadwinner model (Ferree 162).

1.2 Feminist (Dis)identification

Though ambivalence toward feminism exists beyond national borders, reaching a consensus on what feminism means in the German cultural imagination proves particularly difficult. Invoking the term is frequently met with skepticism or outright refusal to adopt the label. In one 2020 video from *Deutsche Welle*'s "Meet the Germans" series, a British journalist takes to the streets of Cologne and asks passers-by whether they identify as feminist (Stewart). Of the ten people asked, six say no (four women and two men), three women say yes, and one man responds with "teils, teils" (05:15). These responses are representative of broader public

attitudes toward feminism in the country: not only are Germans reluctant to identify as feminist, but such rejection is found to be the norm even among women (Scharff, *Repudiating*). Accordingly, understanding why Germany presents such a complex case for feminism requires a closer look at what the term signifies in the German cultural imaginary. "Feminismus ist für mich halt 'ne Extremposition," declares one of the men who rejects the label in the *Deutsche Welle* video (05:18). And he is not alone in this: as Christina Scharff argues in *Repudiating Feminism,* those who distance themselves from the label typically view it as either outdated or extreme (1). While the former position echoes a postfeminist logic that assumes gender equality has been achieved in modern (Western) societies, rendering it obsolete, the latter often conflates feminism with its most visible or polarizing representatives; in the German context, that figure is Alice Schwarzer.

Arguably Germany's most prominent feminist, Alice Schwarzer played a central role in the West German women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s and is widely regarded as its figurehead. As founder of the feminist magazine *EMMA*, she has long shaped feminist discourse in the country, advocating across a broad range of issues, from abortion rights to prostitution, pornography, and Islam. Despite her polemical style—or perhaps because of it—and the many controversies surrounding her, Schwarzer "continues to embody the feminist movement in the public imagination of post-reunification Germany" (Spiers, "The Long March" 69). Her significance for the West German movement and for post-unification feminist activism cannot be overstated, nor can her contribution to keeping feminist perspectives visible in German public discourse through *EMMA*. However, equating German feminism with Schwarzer—especially in the twenty-first century—is problematic in two key ways. First, it risks framing her views as universal and representative of all feminist positions, even when many feminists strongly

disagree with her, particularly on more contentious issues such as her rejection of Islam and support for banning the hijab in public spaces. Second, this narrow association sidelines the broader and more diverse landscape of contemporary German feminism, particularly the perspectives of younger generations who came of age in a different sociopolitical context and often advocate for different causes using different strategies.

Beyond Schwarzer as a figure, German understandings of feminism have been heavily informed by a hostile media landscape that has downplayed or even outright attacked feminist concerns for decades. During the West German student movement (which gave rise to the West German feminist movement), politically vocal women were consistently denigrated as "Emanzen" and their concerns ridiculed; women's groups were deemed insignificant and their activism portrayed merely as "private" and "personal" despite their instistence that "das Private ist politisch" (Becker-Cantarino 610-11). Barbara Becker-Cantarino argues that this very media distortion, along with the prevalence of traditional femininity in the German paternalistic mind, are to blame for the "lack of memory in present-day Germany of second-wave feminism as a social movement (and in the low visibility and esteem of present-day feminism)" (606). In their survey on antifeminist views in Germany, Schnabel et al. come to a similar conclusion:

> Wir finden in unseren Daten starke Korrelationen, die zeigen, dass Antifeminismus hochgradig assoziiert ist mit fundamentaler Kritik an (institutionalisierten) Gleichstellungspolitiken sowie der normativen Überzeugung von der Richtigkeit eines traditionellen, hierarchisch-binären, heterosexuell geprägten Geschlechterverhältnisses, das als „natürlich" und „richtig" ontologisiert wird. In diesem Sinne ist Antifeminismus fester Bestandteil eines umfassenderen (geschlechter-)konservativen Einstellungssyndroms. (191)

Viewing antifeminism as part of Germany's wider conservative "Einstellungssyndrom" is a useful tool in understanding the country's apparent discrediting of feminism, from the media consistently downplaying women and their concerns, to a lack of memory of second-wave feminist activism (whose gains have had a direct impact on subsequent generations of women) and a low visibility of contemporary activism, and finally to Germans' dismissal of the feminist label as exemplified in the *Deutsche Welle* video. With feminist concerns downplayed, ridiculed, or even deemed dangerous for the prosperity of a paternalistic German society, feminism has become an "Unwort" with a "peinlichen Beigeschmack" in the German context (Gebhardt, "Frauenbewegung"). Given these conditions, it comes as little surprise that feminism was quickly thrust into the discursive limelight as a (if not *the*) culprit of the 2000s demographic crisis.

The renewed interest in feminism in early-2000s Germany did not just result in it being named an "Irrtum" à la Eva Herman, however; it also led to efforts to reclaim feminism by women who saw themselves as proponents of women's rights but did not identify with the dominant feminist image. It is not difficult to see why: beyond feminism being named responsible for making women too selfish to fulfill their duty as child bearers by choosing career over family, conservative voices also argued for a direct correlation between feminism and lesbianism, with the latter painted in a negative light (Thorn). With feminism under attack in such an overt and homophobic manner, the years following the emergence of the demography debate saw the publication of a number of pro-feminism volumes by young German women whose titles are a testament to feminism's complex status in the German collective mind, such as novelist Thea Dorn's *Die neue F-Klasse: Wie die Zukunft von Frauen gemacht wird*. In this 2006 volume, Dorn presents a collection of interviews with eleven prominent German women who, in

her eyes, constitute the new "F-class" —a clear attempt to avoid feminist identification. Indeed, already in her introduction to the volume, Dorn distances herself from 1970s feminism and its figurehead Alice Schwarzer by deeming *EMMA* "hardly worthy of even cut-and-paste art projects" (Dorn 24; McCarthy 39).

This overt and polemic dismissal of West German feminism also forms one of the defining qualities of the two volumes which are especially characteristic of this cluster: journalists Meredith Haaf, Susanne Klingner, and Barbara Streidl's *Wir Alphamädchen: Warum Feminismus das Leben schöner macht* (2008), and novelist Jana Haensel and journalist Elisabeth Raether's *Neue deutsche Mädchen* (2008). In their attempt to rebrand feminism for a new generation of German women, both volumes make sure to explicitly distance themselves from 1970s feminism which they view as being personified by Alice Schwarzer, the "Oberboss des Feminismus" (Haaf et al. 196). Masculinist language aside, the alpha girls and new German girls not only conflate Schwarzer with the feminist movement as a whole, as Spiers ("The Long March" 77) notes, but their portrayal of 1970s feminism is largely "simplistic, generalising, and historically inaccurate" (Scharff, *Repudiating Feminism* 121), mirroring the negative perception feminism endures in the public arena. In self-identifying as "Mädchen," furthermore, the authors of these volumes draw a strict line between themselves as a younger generation of feminists and the older and, in their eyes, redundant feminism of the 1970s:

> To some extent, a focus on the girl results not only from the pervasive representations of girlhood and girlishness but from the extent to which generational metaphors are so central to postfeminism. Both helpful and limiting, the generational construction of girls and young women as enjoying the freedoms secured by the activism of their mothers and grandmothers is a repeated trope of postfeminist culture. (Tasker and Negra 18)

Indeed, the term "generation" features prominently in both *Wir Alphamädchen* and *Neue deutsche Mädchen*, as well as in statements on their first-edition covers (Mikus and Spiers 21). When combined with the dismissal of 1970s feminism in general and Schwarzer in particular, what this repeated engagement with generational feminisms and self-identification via othering confirms is the lingering dominance of a reductionist view of second-wave feminism by the self-appointed "new" or "alpha" girls—a view they reject in an effort to make feminism more appealing to their younger peers. A similar effort to rebrand feminism for a younger generation can be found in two volumes published in 2007: Mirja Stöcker's *Das F-Wort: Feminismus ist sexy,* and Sonja Eismann's *Hot Topic: Popfeminismus heute.* However, unlike the former examples, these edited collections do not outright reject Schwarzer's feminism; instead, they incorporate academic work and critical approaches to explore the diverse forms and manifestations of feminism in contemporary German-speaking society. Although these two volumes present an exception to the "anti-1970s outlook of mainstream new feminisms," they constitute further proof of the renewed interest in (re)claiming feminism by and for German women in the early twenty-first century (Scharff, *Repudiating* 111).

As striking as these volumes are in terms of their engagement with German feminism, of equal note is the critique they have received, which is indicative of a wider thematic shift in contemporary feminist discourse. Critical engagements with the "F-class," "New German girls," and "alpha girls" reveal that, while the authors of these volumes proclaim a new feminist politics, their negotiation of feminism relies on "discarding its 'older' variants" (Scharff, *Repudiating* 112). In dismissing earlier feminist activism as outdated, they invoke a narrative of linear progress that not only positions second-wave feminism as belonging to the past, but also as something to be relinquished for the "new" feminism to takes its place (Spiers, "Attitudes to

Futurity"). While this tactic can be attributed to an effort to make feminism palatable for a new generation of women who view it as either redundant or extreme, it is itself problematic, as it reveals a simplistic and monolithic view of earlier German feminisms (McCarthy 42). Beyond reducing 1970s feminism to the single figure of Alice Schwarzer, the alpha and new German girls are either blind to or purposefully omit common ground between the two generations, evident for instance in both generations' attention to the gender pay gap. Instead, they repeatedly cite Schwarzer's more controversial and recent initiatives on issues such as prostitution, eating disorders, and the role of women in Islam to argue that second-wave feminism does not speak to their own lived experiences, as these issues have "mit einer dreißigjährigen Frau in Deutschland, nicht einmal mehr ansatzweise etwas zu tun" (Hensel and Raether 14). Not only does this claim seem implausible, it also reveals a troubling consequence of the alpha and new German girls' self-indentification via othering: as Spiers puts it, "[the new German girls'] indifference towards the above issues implies an indifference towards the kind of women who might be affected by them" ("The Long March" 79).

Indeed, discussions of the new German feminist texts often point to their "uncritical engagement with difference" (Scharff, *Repudiating* 114). Not only are the authors of these texts young, white, middle-class, educated, heterosexual cisgender women, but this also seems to be the demographic for their target audience. As Scharff observes, a feminism for the many thus becomes a feminism for the few, mirroring broader heteronormative tendencies dominating German gender discourse, exemplified, for instance, in the demography debate (ibid. 116). By framing each person as wholly responsible for their own success or failure, irrespective of structural conditions, the authors disregard the lived realities of German women who do not share their privileges but nonetheless inhabit the same cultural context and face many of the

issues the texts claim to address. This approach becomes even more troubling considering the authors' insistence on individual choice as the ultimate determinant of a woman's life: "Schließlich trifft jede ihre Entscheidungen doch am Ende selbst" (Haaf et al. 45). Such reasoning not only undermines the impact of societal, cultural, and economic factors, but also implicitly shifts responsibility—and therefore blame—onto women for overcoming adversity and achieving the life they want. Systemic barriers to the advancement of women, particularly those faced by older, non-white, and queer women, remain unacknowledged, since doing so would challenge the notion of absolute individual agency—an approach Angela McRobbie terms "aggressive individualism" (5). Through this rhetoric, collective struggle and structural critique are dismantled, and collective forms of organizing become meaningless, rendering feminism itself ultimately redundant.

In an effort to further distance themselves from Schwarzer and the feminism she represents (which did acknowledge systemic barriers through its focus on patriarchal constraints), the new feminist authors claim that the "old" feminism regarded all women as victims—a position which they themselves strongly reject. Identifying rather as "self-responsible," the new German feminists dismiss a female image characterized by "passivity, victimhood, and a denial of responsibility" (Scharff, *Repudiating* 118). Despite the argument's obvious generalization, it is worth noting that the image of the passive woman is present in 1970s feminist thought. Alice Schwarzer's view of women, for instance, often boils down to two distinct categories—the strong feminist versus the weak victim of the patriarchy:

> die starken Frauen, die feministisch Vorbildlichen, Politikerinnen, Karrierefrauen, Spitzensportlerinnen, Islamkritikerinnen – und die schwachen Frauen, die vom falschen Bewusstsein Infizierten, die Opfer des Patriarchats: Prostituierte, Pornodarstellerinnen,

verwöhnte Macchiato-Mütter, Essgestörte, Verschleierte, Vergewaltigungsopfer.

(Gebhardt, *Alice im Niemandsland* 301)

Ironically, the new German feminists may have more in common with Schwarzer and her generation than they realize, as both sides invoke a binary framework that places women either into the category of empowered, self-actualized subjects or relegates them to the role of oppressed, passive victims. In an interview with the women's magazine *Brigitte, Neue deutsche Mädchen*'s Elisabeth Raether claims: "When Alice Schwarzer is talking about honour killings and [female] circumcision, then this does not have anything to do with our daily life" (qtd. in Scharff, *Repudiating* 113). This remark not only distances Raether's generation from Schwarzer's perceived moralizing universalism but also draws a sharp boundary around the kinds of feminist concerns deemed relevant or legitimate. In presenting themselves as modern, self-actualized subjects, Raether and her co-authors position themselves against two "others:" first, the 1970s feminist figure who is cast as outdated, and second, the racialized or immigrant woman who is marked as oppressed and in need of rescue. This double act of self-identification via othering constructs their own feminism as pragmatic, implicitly positioning themselves as the more empowered alternative to the victimized cultural other.

That both Schwarzer and the new German girls position themselves as the diametrical opposite of a victimized cultural other is in line with one of the key findings of studies of women's engagements with feminism, namely that women's identity construction as independent managers of their lives is intertwined with the construction of a reverse cultural other who takes the form of the "oppressed" or "imperilled" Muslim woman (Scharff, *Repudiating* 59-66). Not only does the oppressed Muslim woman stand for passivity and victimhood, but she is also a manifestation of the pervasive belief of an ethnically homogenous German nation—and she is

definitely not the target audience of the new German feminist volumes despite the considerable number of Muslim German citizens. The oppressed Muslim woman thus becomes an archetype of woman on one end of the spectrum of freedom and independence, with the strong—and presumably ethnically German—feminist on the opposing end. This mirrors the juxtaposition of "the west and the rest," which largely centres around gender and the degree of sexual freedoms granted to women (Scharff, *Repudiating* 61). In the German context, this often translates to a "liberated Germany" and a "patriarchal Turkey" with the Turkish/Muslim constructed as the cultural other and the veil as a marker of difference (ibid.). That German feminists point the finger at Muslim women as the manifestation of their cultural other is of course neither an isolated characteristic of feminist discourse nor unique to Germany but rather informed by larger discursive tendencies on race and family politics which see ethnic minorities in Europe (particularly those from Islamic countries) as a threat to the egalitarian family ideal embraced even by conservative policymakers, as the recent modernization of family politics in Germany demonstrates (Ferree 158).

Admittedly, the authors of the new German feminist texts of the mid to late 2000s do recognize the lack of intersectional approaches in their writing, albeit largely in passing. In their introduction to *Wir Alphamädchen,* for instance, Haaf and her co-authors state that some readers "werden vielleicht die spezifischen Perspektiven lesbischer Frauen oder etwa Migrantinnen vermissen," which is why "dieses Buch hat nicht den Anspruch, sämtliche Sichtweisen zu vereinen" (8). What these "perspectives" and "viewpoints" might be is not elaborated on, nor is the reason identified as to why lesbian "oder etwa" migrant women might be affected by different challenges. By professing a recognition of the difference in lived realities between themselves and "other" women, the authors of these texts claim understanding of intersectional

approaches but at the same time relieve themselves of the burden of having to engage with these issues despite proclaiming a feminism for all (Mikus and Spiers 23).

While it would be easy to dismiss the alpha and new girls' performative stance towards intersectional concerns solely as a manifestation of white elitism, it is important to contextualize their comments by considering the role of intersectionality in the German gender constellation. Ahrens and Meier remark that Germany is a "less likely case for intersectionality" (68); as a category, gender has historically been treated in the same way as class, i.e. by focusing on structural forms of exclusion and by prioritizing women's unity as a "political choice" (Ferree 172). This approach has rendered other forms of inequality largely subordinate—when immigrant women, for instance, become targets of feminist concern, it is only with regard to gender oppression in their communities, as both Schwarzer's and Raether's earlier comments demonstrate. Intersectional structures of inequality are thus trampled under the weight of prioritizing a shared collective identity (Ferree 172). Germany being a less likely candidate for intersectionality is also informed by the aforementioned pervasive belief of an ethnically homogenous German nation; notably, Germany had strongly rejected identifying as an immigrant country integrating new citizens until the "migration crisis" of 2015. Additionally, any deviation from ethnic German heritage usually receives the established descriptor "mit Migrationshintergrund," a hierarchizing term for the "non-white German Other [which] keeps the non-white body constantly trapped in a perpetual impossibility: one ought to be a white German body" (Hirschauer 66).

At the same time, it is important to recognize that work on intersectionality has been present among feminists in Germany since the 1980s, with the majority of this work carried out by migrant women and women of colour yet largely neglected by mainstream white West

German feminists, who avoided sustained engagement with race and did not fully acknowledge the ethnic and cultural diversity within their movement (Florvil 15; Weber, "Gender, Race" 26). Despite the general lack in explicit uses of the term, questions of intersectionality have been addressed in (West) German feminism since at least 1984, when Audre Lorde's academic visit to Berlin to teach a poetry seminar created a space for expressions of race and gender among black German women (Weber, "Gender, Race" 26 ff.; Yekani et al. 32 ff.).[5] Lorde's influence proved a catalyst for the emergence of the Afro-German movement, which led to early academic work on black people in Germany, as well as to the founding of organizations such as the Initiative Schwarze Deutsche (ISD)[6] in 1985 and Afrodeutsche Frauen (ADEFRA)[7] in 1986. Alliances with non-black German feminists produced further work on the intersection of gender with ethnicity, class, and race in the 1980s and 1990s, though these were for the most part marginalized in academic discourse (Weber, "Gender, Race" 26-27; Yekani et al. 33). As the late 2000s saw "intersectionality" emerge as a buzzword, the roots of intersectional work in Germany—which was carried out by non-white, anti-racist, and queer activists—were largely erased, and intersectional concerns portrayed almost as an "import" from Anglo-American feminisms and postcolonial theory (Weber, "Gender, Race" 26). The new German feminist authors' performative stance towards intersectional approaches is therefore not only a product of aggressive individualism but also reflects a decades-long history of marginalizing intersectional work in favour of the white "default position" of Western feminism (Broeck). While Lorde's role in shaping German intersectional thought has received increasing attention in the 2010s and 2020s—particularly as younger feminists, many of them second- or third-generation migrants,

[n]See Tiffany Florvil's chapter "Black German Women and Audre Lorde" in her 2020 volume *Mobilizing Black Germany.*

[6] Later renamed *Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland*.

[7] Later renamed *Schwarze Frauen in Deutschland*.

enter the discursive space—the legacy of this marginalization continues to shape their voices, exemplified in Fatima El-Tayeb's (one of this generation's most influential figures) observation that intersectional scholars remain underrepresented and undervalued in German academic discourse (20-22).

1.3 Women in the Workplace

While a younger generation of German women was proclaiming a new feminist politics in the wake of the demography debate, the latter half of the 2000s also saw the reinvigoration of discourse concerning the challenges women face in the workplace. Chief among them was (and continues to be) the gender pay gap, the figure representing the discrepancy in pay between men and women and which in most cases favours men. Germany has consistently had one of the highest gender pay gaps in the EU. In 2021, while the European average stood at 13%—meaning that women earn on average 13% less per hour than men—and had changed minimally over the previous decade, Germany stood at 18%, the fourth-highest figure in the Union ("2022 Factsheet"). Gender pay gap figures in Germany are available dating back to 1995, with the earliest figure standing at 21% in 1995 and remaining between 21% and 23% for two decades (*Unbereinigter*). The year 2015 marked the beginning of a turning point in the data, with the figure consistently dropping by around 0.5-1% annually and dropping to below 20% for the first time in 2019 (ibid.). It should be noted, however, that this decrease is largely attributed to the introduction of a statutory minimum wage, which came into force in January 2015 (Ahrens and Scheele, "Game-Changers"; Bergmann et al.).

The gender pay gap has been a consistent feature of German discourse on women in the workplace and frequently makes headlines with the annual publication of the updated figures (Rooks). The issue was further brought into the mainstream in the second half of the 2000s

starting with the "Initiative Rote Tasche" in 2007, a campaign spearheaded by the German arm of the international organization Business and Professional Women (BPW), mirroring the American BPW's Red Purse Campaign of the 1980s, which encouraged women to wear red or carry a red purse as a visual reminder of the "red numbers" in women's wallets (*Historie)*. The German campaign led to the establishment of an annual Equal Pay Day in Germany, which was first observed in 2008 and marks the period a man would not need to work to achieve the same annual income as a woman. Furthermore, 2006 marked the first year with gender pay gap data available not only for the entire Federal Republic, but also differentiating between states of the former East and West. The first such figures showed that, while the 2006 average stood at 23%, former FRG states demonstrated a gender pay gap of 24% compared with just 6% for former GDR states (*Unbereinigter*). The considerable difference between the two clusters is in line with the historically higher rate of labour participation and full-time employment for women in the East as well as a more established network of childcare infrastructure, as mentioned previously. Additionally, the GDR's egalitarian ideology meant that "at least in public debate, women and men were considered equal as workers, and therefore, discrimination in payment was not considered legitimate" (Lang and Groß 3). In contrast, the conservatism of the former West has long seen women's involvement in the labour market as "sometimes necessary but unwanted" (ibid.), with women generally working fewer hours and for lower pay. Gender pay gap data appear to confirm this dichotomy even after unification: in the states of the former East, the gender pay gap has consistently stood between 6% and 9% compared to a range of 19-24% for the former West (*Unbereinigter*).

Owing largely to the annual publication of gender pay gap statistics, discussions of the topic often prioritize quantitative measures and attempt to identify possible influencing factors.

Among the most-cited statistics is the fact that German women earn less than men in almost every economic branch despite the rise in female employment rates in recent decades (Pfahl and Unrau). Women are also more likely to be employed in lower-paying jobs; they represent more than 80% of employees in the five lowest-paid occupations and, with the exclusion of doctors, are the minority in the best-paid occupations. Additionally, women are more likely to work fewer hours: every second employed woman works part time, while the majority of "Minijobs" employ women (*Lohngerechtigkeit*). Attempts to identify the reasons for such persistent and marked discrepancies in both employment and pay between men and women largely attribute them to family leave—following which women are more likely to return to work part-time, if at all—women's underrepresentation in top positions, and the fact that "Frauen wählen andere Berufe als Männer" (ibid.).

A fixture of the gender pay gap discourse, the ascription of gender to different sectors and jobs, leading to perceived "Männerberufe" and "Frauenberufe," reflects a problematic hierarchical valuation of gender which traditionally sees a lower value in traits attributed to women and, by extension, to their work output. This devaluating framework, which posits that certain tasks are socially and economically depreciated precisely because they are performed by women, is often reflected in lines of argumentation that present women as less productive than men and their work as easier (Lillemeier). Indeed, recent research comparing gender pay gaps in Germany and Austria finds that "in the classification of a sector as 'female', the sectoral income level combined with different wage-setting mechanisms have a crucial impact on wage inequalities between women and men" (Bergmann et al. 668). Further research on Germany confirms the link between traditional gender ideologies and women gaining less labour experience or working less often in full-time jobs and supervising positions, implying that

"gender pay gaps likely persist as long as cultural contexts prescribe divergent behavior for each gender or female-dominated occupations are culturally devalued even when women and men have equal opportunities" (Hamjediers 15). The same conclusion was reached by a study conducted by the Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut, confirming the correlation between the devaluation of female work and its lower compensation relative to men for the same work (Klammer et al.).

Further insight into how gender ideologies influence the discrepancy in pay between the sexes in Germany is gained by considering the just gender pay gap, i.e. the belief that the pay difference between men and women is justified—an attitude which, surprisingly, is held by both men and women.[8] Recent scholarship has established that a critical factor driving the just gender pay gap in Germany is the prevalence of the male breadwinner model which, as discussed above, defined gender perception in pre-unification West Germany and continues to dominate family policy in the unified country (Lang and Groß; Ahrens and Scheele, "Game-Changers"). Because the male breadwinner model sees men in the role of the material provider and women in that of the domestic labourer, women's labour contributions are considered an "add-on" to the household income, leading to the belief that women's work does not necessarily have to result in pay equal to that of the men (Lang and Groß 2). Additionally, considering the care challenges facing women in states of the former West, "women often have to make a choice between children and a career and mothers tend to exit the labour market (work-or-care)" (Grönlund and Magnusson 100). This is further confirmed by the finding that the relevance of the male breadwinner model (and, consequently, attitudes towards the renumeration of women's work) is

[8] For a list of population surveys on the just gender pay gap, see Lang and Groß.

significantly lower for former GDR states—the same states that consistently demonstrate a markedly lower gender pay gap than the former West (Lang and Groß).

What makes gender pay gap discourse particularly striking is that women are generally aware of the pay discrepancy between the sexes, yet do not frame it as a collective equality issue. In her 2012 study of rejections of feminism, Christina Scharff interviews 40 women, the vast majority of whom acknowledge gender inequalities (most often citing the gender pay gap) yet this awareness rarely translates to a critique of workplace gender discrimination (*Repudiating* 47, 51). Instead, it is neutralized through an individualist rhetoric that frames inequality as a matter of personal circumstances rather than systemic patterns, thus erasing the need for feminist intervention:

> This individualist outlook renders a feminist perspective meaningless: if gender ceases to be a category that significantly shapes one's experiences, a critical stance which would involve some recognition of gender – and its intersections with class, race, and sexuality – as a structuring principle becomes difficult to think and articulate. (Scharff, *Repudiating* 51)

Here, individualism refers not simply to self-reliance, but to the logic evident in the new German feminist volumes discussed earlier, by which each person is seen as wholly responsible and accountable for their own success or failure, regardless of structural conditions. This rhetoric, which, as Baer notes, reflects the influence of neoliberal politics in post-unification Germany, ultimately promotes the idea that structural inequalities—even if acknowledged as such—can and should be addressed on an individual basis ("German Feminism"; Scharff, *Repudiating* 67). Feminist interventions and collective bargaining are thus not only made redundant but constitute a sign of the failure of individual autonomy, leading to "the all too familiar disavowal: 'I am not

a feminist, but . . .'" (Callahan 4). The *Deutsche Welle* program cited earlier confirms this duality: when two of the four women who reject the feminist label are questioned on gender equality, they nod in agreement and exclaim: "Das soll schon auch sein, da bin ich auch dafür" (Stewart, 05:57-05:59).

In another iteration of gendered work inequalities, the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions has been a salient issue for political and media discourse in Germany since the mid-1990s, starting when women's organizations across the country organized a joint strike on International Women's Day in 1994. Despite the strike not receiving much attention at the time, the following years were marked by the beginnings of a political and public debate on the persistent gender inequality in the German corporate world. Until 2010, female representation on company boards remained below 15%, and women were especially underrepresented on the executive and supervisory boards of larger companies (Ahrens and Scheele, "Mobilizing" 288). The issue was first taken up at the government level during the SPD/Greens coalition of 1998, when then-Family Minister Christine Bergmann introduced a draft law aimed at enforcing gender parity in the workplace. However, the proposal failed to gain traction, thwarted both by lobbying from industry groups and by then-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's devaluation of Bergmann as a "Fachfrau für Familie und das ganze Gedöns" (von Barsewitz and Haufe; Biermann et al.). In the place of binding legislation, an agreement was reached in 2001, according to which companies would voluntarily pledge to foster the advancement of women, particularly their representation in leadership positions. A 2010 report commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) found that the agreement had failed to increase the number of women in top positions (Wippermann).

Public debates over women's representation in leadership positions gained momentum alongside the onset of the demography debate of 2006. While early discussions focused on broader calls for legally mandated gender quotas, from 2010 onward the emphasis increasingly shifted toward the inclusion of women on executive and supervisory boards (Müller). These demands were met with heavy resistance from the private sector as well as from the majority of the ruling CDU/CSU, citing unwarranted interference in the internal affairs of companies and instead arguing for a voluntary self-commitment evocative of the 2001 agreement (Ahrens and Scheele, "Game-Changers" 164). Angela Merkel was opposed to a legal quota as well and had rejected a 2011 suggestion by then-Minister for Employment Ursula von der Leyen for a 30% board quota. The CDU/SPD coalition of 2013 marked a turning point in the issue, with the corporate-board quota emerging as one of the core proposals of the newly formed government and the two SPD-led ministries involved starting to draft it soon after the election. Heavy public debates erupted following the election, with women's organizations and advocacy groups pressuring the government to hold its promise (Ahrens and Scheele, "Mobilizing" 297).

Despite companies and employer associations lobbying the government to forego legislation, a federal law was passed in 2015 setting a 30% quota for women on supervisory boards of publicly traded companies with over 2,000 employees; this amounted to 105 companies in 2022 (Ahrens and Scheele, "Game-Changers" 164). Companies of between 500 and 2,000 employees were urged to set their own targets, although they could also simply mention that they have set targets and did not have to report if and how these were achieved. Despite the law's limited scope and heavy criticism as a "disappointing end" of a long road for legal parity in representation, the numbers of women in board positions steadily increased in the mid to late 2010s (Ahrens and Scheele, "Mobilizing" 297). Even in the early 2020s, however, the

30% goal has yet to be reached ("Weniger als ein Drittel"). Furthermore, in 2021 and prior to the federal elections, the parliament passed an additional quota law requiring at least one woman on the executive boards of companies with more than three members on the board—a move which faced considerable resistance from business groups, who claimed a lack of suitable female candidates for senior management roles (Chazan).

While the 2015 and 2021 quota laws have received mixed evaluations in terms of their direct effect on women's representation in top positions (largely due to their limited scope), the debates surrounding them provide valuable insight into the discursive construction of women in the German workplace. A study of the political discourse surrounding the passing of the first quota law between 2000 and 2013 found that, in the process of legitimizing the need for a quota law, women were constructed either as "wasted" economic potential in accordance with the German imperative of a competitive economy or as a "special" human resource exhibiting different characteristics to men (Müller). In their construction as wasted human capital, women were portrayed as skilled workers whose economic potential would benefit the German economy; hence, the enforcement of a quota was seen as a smart business policy rather than an equality imperative. This type of "strategic" feminism (Schmincke 151) follows the context of economic rationality—which sees both men and women as carriers of human capital resources—and was made even more relevant in the mid-2000s following the demography debate and the need for skilled workers to boost the German economy. At the same time, women were constructed as carriers of different skills and qualifications to their male counterparts; most often, these include soft skills such as communication, emotiveness, and conscientiousness (Müller 142-43). Women's "special" skills are thus presented in a context of morality which, aside from being largely associated with femininity rather than masculinity in business contexts, is also

presented as beneficial to companies' positive transformation. Economic utility is thus supplemented by gender stereotyping "by way of creditworthiness, which is to say women's dependability and conscientious handling of resources." (Müller 143)

The construction of women as wasted human capital with special skills and qualifications in the political arena mirrors media discourse on the quota law, though the latter exhibits even more explicit gender stereotyping and othering of women in the workplace. Although limited in its scope, a study of quota articles from *Bild* and *Die Welt* between 2011 and 2013 found that both supporters and opponents of a gender quota contribute to the reproduction of stereotypically gendered representations of women managers, which largely revolve around the duality of male versus female as well as the duality of family versus work—with both pairs in natural opposition (Lang and Rybnikova). Women managers are often constructed as a marginal group in the German workplace, whose outsider status sees them as victims of a hierarchical order in which their male counterparts not only prevail but actively inhibit women's advancement; women managers are thus "homogenously constructed as sufferers" who require support (ibid. 368). Women who have managed to achieve success in their managerial or leadership positions are portrayed as special cases of "superwomen" in a manner that reproduces the myth of individual performance as the only way to overcome the systematic underrepresentation and underappreciation of women in higher positions (ibid. 369). Crucially, this dynamic is presented as natural and a given in the cutthroat world of business, thereby reproducing gendered stereotypes and erasing the need for systemic intervention:

> Pronounced individualism and neglect of any structural conditions, be it organizational, social or political circumstances, turns out as one of the main features of different argumentations. At this point, images of gender quota and women managers as fostered

> by the considered newspapers display their common background: the ideology of individual performance which renders any state intervention obsolete and needless. (Lang and Rybnikova 370)

Additionally, women who have managed to hold top positions in their companies or fields are portrayed in a stereotypically masculine way, with the traits most often ascribed to them being "self-consciousness," "persistence," and "hardness" (Lang and Rybnikova 369). Women managers are constructed as aggressive and at times even threatening; however, not only does this not inhibit them but it actually facilitates their managerial careers since it directly mirrors the behaviour ascribed to men. In this context, the traits most often ascribed to women—people-oriented, conflict-avoiding, emotional—are assigned a negative value in the business world, leading to the all-too familiar message: if you want to succeed in your work as a woman, act like a man.

This demand that women adopt traditionally masculine behaviours to succeed extends beyond the corporate sphere into the portrayal of women politicians, most notably Angela Merkel. Analyses of German media coverage of Merkel reveal that she is framed in a position of masculinity, attributed qualities such as power, strength, and competitiveness—a reflection of a political culture in which the male remains the unspoken norm and the female its constitutive Other (Beck 263; Lünenborg and Maier 192–93). While Merkel largely relied on a political performance that minimizes overt identification with and positioning as "as a woman," her dominance-oriented approach is still evaluated in gendered terms, demonstrating that even a masculine-coded performance cannot neutralize such bias (Lünenborg and Maier 192). In German political discourse, ambition itself is unequivocally coded masculine: women who display it are more readily labelled "abnormal," "ruthless," or "vain" (Beck 274–75). Conversely,

failure in male politicians is commonly attributed to weakness, vulnerability, naïveté, or reluctance—traits systematically employed to devalue women's political performance (Lünenborg and Maier 193). As with women in business leadership, political success for women thus remains framed as possible only on an individual, exceptional basis, and largely contingent on the performance of masculinity, yet always carrying the risk of being penalized for it.

1.4 #aufschrei

In late January 2013, while discussions on the gender pay gap, quotas on supervisory boards, and insufficient access to daycare facilities were raging, journalist and feminist activist Anne Wizorek responded to a Twitter[9] user's account of having been sexually assaulted by a male doctor with the following tweet: "wir sollten diese erfahrungen unter einem hashtag sammeln. ich schlage #aufschrei vor" (Wizorek, "@vonhorst"). Wizorek's suggestion quickly spread through the German Twittersphere: on the day after the tweet was posted, it received over 38,000 replies and, within two weeks, over 25,000 people were using the hashtag to report their experiences of sexual discrimination, harassment, and assault (Drüeke and Zobl; Stokowski). Earlier on the same day, *Stern* had published an article by journalist Laura Himmelreich accusing then-FDP chairman Rainer Brüderle of sexual harassment, while another report a few days prior to Himmelreich's had exposed misogynistic behaviour within the Pirate Party (Himmelreich; Meiritz). In the wake of these reports, the sheer volume and shock factor of the experiences shared under the hashtag #aufschrei achieved widespread public resonance and triggered a national debate on sexism in Germany, marking the first time a feminist topic (especially one born out of online activism) had spilled over to conventional media (Sadowski; Baer, "Redoing

[9] The online platform was rebranded "X" in 2023; to avoid confusion and due to this research using data predating 2023, the identifier "Twitter" will be used throughout.

Feminism"). As a recognition of the campaign's significance in German discourse, in June 2013 #aufschrei was awarded the Grimme-Preis, the highest German distinction honouring journalistic quality online. It was the first time a hashtag had been awarded the prestigious award, with the jury declaring: "Aus dem Netz wanderte das Thema zurück in die etablierten Medien und in die Politik, eine Wirkung, die zuvor noch kein Hashtag in Deutschland hatte" ("Gegen Sexismus").

Much like the #MeToo campaign of 2017, the resonance of #aufschrei lay in its unique capability to compile personal stories of sexist oppression under one hashtag and thus illuminate how individual experiences (in large part owing to their sheer magnitude) demonstrate a collective experience of gendered structural inequality. Collectively, the #aufschrei posts underscored the ubiquity of misogyny in contemporary German society and provided women not only with a tool to share their personal experiences, but also with a space to see and connect with others who had been the targets of similar discrimination or assault, thereby also validating one's own experiences. Of course, this space was not always welcoming towards those involved in the discourse, with both initiators and supporters of #aufschrei receiving hateful messages and threats of violence (Bücker; Sadowski). Similarly, conventional media reporting on the sexism debate unleashed by the #aufschrei campaign demonstrated problematic and often sexist approaches to the issue; women sharing their experiences were even framed as perpetrators themselves, either through mechanisms of victim blaming or by being accused of purposefully trying to undermine men through false accusations ("Sexismus-Debatte"). The majority of reports, however, constructed women as victims, with major newspapers such as *Die Zeit* publishing articles with advice on "Wie man sich würdevoll gegen Herrenwitze wehrt" (Groll). While these pieces did contribute to the recognition of sexist behaviour as such, they failed to engage critically with the systemic nature of sexist oppression by focusing on individual

problem-and-solution scenarios as well as by downplaying the problem itself with toned-down descriptors such as "Herrenwitze." Attention was also drawn to the fact that women were often encouraged to not respond to or report sexist behaviour at work in order to not jeopardize their careers, the overwhelming majority of which are in the hands of male supervisors. A response to this problematic rhetoric would be offered by Anne Wizorek herself in the first chapter of her 2014 book inspired by the #aufschrei campaign:

> Sexismus, das sind nicht einfach nur ein paar alte Herren mit ihren Witzen am Stammtisch, die sich »danebenbenehmen«. Sexismus ist etwas, das sich durch unsere zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen, Arbeitsumfelder etc. zieht – eben ein strukturelles Problem. (Wizorek, *Weil ein #aufschrei* 19)

This shift in perception becomes even more noteworthy considering the agents driving it, i.e. individual women sharing their personal experiences of everyday sexism and discrimination "ohne Nachrichtenagenturen und journalistisches *Gatekeeping*" (Bücker 120). By means of a public and accessible forum which functioned as a "simple public," women seized the opportunity to relate their stories directly to each other and the public, thereby actively shaping the discourse (Drüeke and Zobl 48). In creating a discursive space to tell their own stories directly, women reclaimed their agency in the sexism discourse in a move that „befreite die Erzählenden aus der so genannten Opferrolle, die immer wieder von denjenigen Kritiker_innen angeführt wird, die das Narrativ von #aufschrei als wenig emanzipatorisch begreifen" (Bücker 120). The #aufschrei campaign's reach and its immediate resonance with women across the German-speaking world is then not only a testament to the urgency of a nationwide dialogue on the ubiquity of sexism in German society, but also proof of the power of women's collective agency.

While recent scholarship has argued that feminist Twitter campaigns such as #aufschrei "lay the groundwork for re-establishing a collective feminist politics" as they "literally 'redo feminism' in a public context" (Baer, "Redoing Feminism" 29), it is important to note that neither the word feminism nor the (self-)identification of the women posting under #aufschrei as feminists was a significant fixture of the discourse surrounding the campaign. That is not to say that #aufschrei was not an expression of feminist activism but, given the aforementioned repudiation of feminism by a large portion of the German population and the negative stereotyping associated with feminists in the country, the conspicuous absence of the term could be partially credited with the campaign's wide reach and women's willingness to share their experiences. Feminist (dis)identification notwithstanding, #aufschrei's impact on the German gender discourse is undeniable, as exemplified by Laura Himmelreich's observation in a conversation with *Der Spiegel* in 2017: "Damals wurde immer wieder über die Grundsatzfrage diskutiert: Gibt es Sexismus in Deutschland? Das fragt jetzt niemand mehr. Nun geht es eher darum, wie weit Sexismus in der Gesellschaft verbreitet ist." ("Viele Männer")

While the #aufschrei campaign was characterized by an almost instantaneous wide reach and deep resonance for Germany's understanding of the prevalence of sexism, the same cannot be said for #MeToo, the transnational protest movement created in the wake of allegations against former Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein in 2017. German reactions to the #MeToo campaign were overall limited, with some posts contributing to the discourse using the hashtag #ichauch; yet these numbers were significantly lower than in the case of #aufschrei (Krimmer and Simpson). #MeToo would not reach the German mainstream until early 2018, when prolific television director Dieter Wedel was accused of sexual assault by several female actors who had worked with him in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite questions raised about longstanding cover-ups

of sexual abuse by men in the German entertainment industry, Germany's tepid response to the #MeToo movement can be partially attributed to the #aufschrei campaign's "success," (especially given the relatively short amount of time between the two movements) as well as to an increasing skepticism in Germany towards "trends" originating in the United States (Kirschbaum).

Additionally, the influence of feminism's negative perception in the German cultural imaginary should not be overlooked. In a 2017 opinion piece for *Deutsche Welle*, cultural editor Julia Hitz calls on German women to "setzt euch in Bewegung!" and attributes the lack of a German response to #MeToo to a "Latzhosen-Komplex" left over by feminist activism of the 1970s and 1980s: "Wir müssen ihn hinter uns lassen, diesen 'Latzhosen-Komplex'. Wir müssen Feministinnen sein können, ohne uns dafür zu schämen" (Hitz). In addition to exemplifying the negative stereotyping associated with feminist identification in Germany, Hitz' comment builds on earlier calls for a "new" feminism by a younger generation of German women who, despite being aware of the ubiquity of sexism in their everyday lives (be it a lower salary compared to their male colleagues, being denied the chance at a promotion, or being sexually assaulted) might not speak up due to the shame associated with being perceived as a feminist—even if one may not identify as such.

1.5 New Year's Eve Attacks and Islam

Among the most consequential flashpoints in shaping German gender discourse in the 2010s were the New Year's Eve attacks of 2015/16, the majority of which occurred in the city of Cologne during public New Year's celebrations, sparking a widespread debate about migration, sexual violence, and cultural integration. On the night of 31 December 2015 to 1 January 2016, a number of sexual assaults were reported to local police in Cologne by young women. While the

reports were initially only picked up by local newspapers, by 4 January nationwide media outlets were reporting on the "Horror-Nacht" (also termed "Terror of Cologne") and almost unanimously identifying the perpetrators as "North African" (Boulila and Carri 287-88). Following calls by Cologne police for victims who had not come forward to do so, the number of recorded offences rose substantially. In July 2016, the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) reported that the assaults on New Year's Eve had affected an estimated 1,200 women nationwide—roughly 650 in Cologne, more than 400 in Hamburg, and others in Stuttgart, Düsseldorf, and additional cities (Mascolo and von der Heide).

Discussions of the "Cologne attacks," as they became collectively labelled, were marked by reproductions of both racialized and sexist tropes with a heavy focus on the perpetrators' ethnic and religious backgrounds. The attacks were preceded by a historic rise in the number of migrants admitted to Germany, with around one million migrants arriving in the country in 2015 to welcoming locals and volunteers offering aid and social services. Germany's altruism and "Willkommenskultur" were praised on the national and international stage—that is, until Cologne. In the immediate aftermath of the Cologne attacks, early reports by national news outlets such as *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Focus* set the tone for the debate by focusing on the perpetrators' "North African" backgrounds and reproducing images depicting white German women being attacked by black or brown men[10] (Boulila and Carri 287; Weber, "We Must Talk" 68-69). The incidents were not only framed as shocking and abhorrent, but also as a betrayal of Germany's "Willkommenskultur," reinforcing narratives of the refugee influx as a "Migrationskrise" and contributing to a growing public perception of refugees and migrants as a

[10] The "African rapist" is an established trope in German discourse whose origins can be traced to the French and Belgian occupation of the Ruhr in the 1920s, during which time white women were depicted as under threat by black colonial soldiers (Boulila and Carri 288; Weber, "We Must Talk" 69).

threat (Gerhards 324). Dietze's summary of the overall message projected in the discourse is apt: "Die Bürgerkriegs-Flüchtlinge sind gefährlich für deutsche Frauen, die Flüchtlinge müssen wieder weg" ("Das 'Ereignis Köln'" 93). In this context, sexual violence and public harassment were framed as cultural imports associated with newly arrived migrants, who were constructed as ethnically and culturally distinct from—and implicitly in opposition to—a perceived homogenous German mainstream (Weber, "We Must Talk" 74-75). Not only is this approach xenophobic, it also follows an established discursive maneuver of shining a spotlight on non-native perpetrators of rape and sexual assault, thereby deflecting from the prevalence of sexual violence in the native culture by placing it strictly in the hands of a racialized Other who is invading a space that has allegedly overcome such blights (Krimmer and Simpson 6; Selfe 33). This became particularly clear when anti-racist feminists problematized the racism surrounding post-Cologne debates, arguing that the sudden interest in sexual violence after decades of political and media indifference was itself a product of racist narratives, and were met with familiar anti-feminist rhetoric:

> What followed was the post-feminist emergence of a consensus that German sexism had long been overcome and that only extremists (read feminists) claim that Germany has a deep-rooted problem with misogyny. With this line of argument the post-Cologne debate connects to the anti-feminist discourses that have informed recent 'gender' debates in Germany. (Boulila and Carri 289)

As Boulila and Carri observe, the reactions to anti-racist feminist interventions after Cologne reproduced familiar patterns from recent German gender debates, where feminism is routinely dismissed as an extreme or overly ideological position—a framing that not only delegitimizes feminist critique but also sidelines structural analyses of gendered violence. At the same time,

however, mainstream media outlets were quick to declare what happened in Cologne an attack on German gender norms (Dietze, "Das 'Ereignis Köln'"). In this way, gender equality becomes a site of negotiation and is only then deemed defendable when perceived as under attack by a racialized Other—with the caveat that those who raise this point are denounced as ideological, extreme, and even dangerous for the nation (Boulila and Carri 286).

Importantly, the events of Cologne were interpreted through entrenched discursive frameworks that racialize the cultural Other, particularly through perceptions of Islam. While initial reports identified the perpetrators primarily by their North African origin, they were ultimately defined by religious affiliation, specifically as Muslim, thereby reinforcing long-standing Orientalist tropes of hypersexualized, violent Muslim masculinity (Gerhards 327; Weber, "We Must Talk" 74). In Germany, religious difference is deeply racialized: Islam is largely constructed as "premodern, unchanging, and unchangeable," and cultures in which it predominates are presumed inherently different from and inferior to "European" societies, which are idealized as gender egalitarian and sexually liberal (Ferree 158; Weber, "Gender, Race" 29). In the Cologne discourse, this binary intensified: white German women were framed as victims of a monolithic, dangerous Islam—a narrative bolstered by the anti-Islam rhetoric of PEGIDA (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes) and the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland). Depicting Muslim men as inherently violent and Muslim women as either victims of or complicit in this violence, the prevailing imagery reinforced a national self-image in which gender equality is presumed to have been achieved, positioning Islam as fundamentally incompatible with democratic, egalitarian values (Weber, *Violence and Gender* 60; Weber, "We Must Talk" 74). Against the backdrop of an imagined, homogenous German culture, Islam is primarily cast as intrinsically patriarchal and incapable of achieving gender equality.

In turn, these perceptions are largely rooted in earlier debates, particularly in the headscarf debate of the early 2000s and in the discourse surrounding honour killings of the mid-2000s. The first widely publicized headscarf case in Germany involved Fereshta Ludin, a German citizen of Afghani heritage, who in 1998 challenged the state of Baden-Württemberg for barring her from teaching while wearing a hijab; media coverage of the case centred on the symbolic meaning of the headscarf and the degree of agency afforded to women who wore it (Weber, *Violence and Gender* 58–59; Selfe 19-21). The debate framed all Muslim immigrants as adhering to gender norms fundamentally at odds with the "modern European values" of personal autonomy, secularism, and sexual freedom, rendering feminist movements in Muslim-majority contexts invisible and foreclosing transnational solidarity; the headscarf thus came to symbolize a static tradition of patriarchal control, lumped together with arranged marriages and gender-based violence as proof of Islam's systemic subjugation of women (Ferree 168; Selfe 20-21). Many feminists adopted this stance, portraying Muslim and immigrant women not as political agents in their own right, as an intersectional approach would, but as passive victims of an immutable Islamic culture (Ferree 168). This tendency reflects what Selfe terms "hegemonic" feminist discourses, which centre the perspectives of white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual, and cisgender women, and consistently construct the Muslim woman as an imperiled, oppressed Other, reinforcing the moral and cultural superiority of the Western female subject (Selfe 21).

Similar discursive patterns and representations of Muslim men and women dominated the mid-2000s debate surrounding so-called "honour killings," sparked by the 2005 murder of Hatun Sürücü, a German citizen of Kurdish-Turkish heritage who was fatally shot by her youngest brother in Berlin. Described as "one of the most disturbing crimes" in recent German history, the murder was quickly labeled an "Ehrenmord" (honour killing)—a term heavily contested for

potentially implying a justifiable motive (Schwickert). The media narrative emphasized Sürücü's choices, including removing her headscarf, taking up paid work, and raising her son as a single mother, as provocations that allegedly compelled her brother to restore the family's "honour." The case drew intense media scrutiny, was picked up by international outlets, and remained a focus of public attention for months, especially after several Turkish-German schoolboys publicly blamed Sürücü for her own death in the wake of the murder, referring to her as a "whore" for living "like a German" (Berghahn 130; Ewing, *Stolen Honor* 151). These remarks came to symbolize a broader indictment of Turkish masculinity as fundamentally incompatible with German norms; as a result, the murder was widely interpreted as a manifestation of Turkish Muslim culture, prompting an outpouring of public condemnation directed at the Turkish community for allegedly failing to uphold German legal and moral values, with the Muslim woman cast as the victim of a culturally determined male violence (Ewing, *Stolen Honor* 152, 177).

Although Islamic organizations in Germany emphasized that Islam prohibits murder in the name of honour, attributing such acts to rural traditions and Anatolian customs—Sürücü's family, like many Turkish immigrants since the 1960s, came to Germany from rural Anatolia—the dominant public narrative placed collective blame on the family as representatives of Turkish Muslim culture (Berghahn 130; Ewing, "Between Cinema" 269; Ewing, *Stolen Honor* 159–60). The Sürücüs thus came to symbolize the threat of a "parallel society" and the perceived failure of Muslim integration into German modernity, which was labelled a "wake up call" for German society (Ewing, *Stolen Honor* 175). Turkish, Muslim, and immigrant identities—terms often used interchangeably—were portrayed as inherently patriarchal and culturally alien, with gender-based violence attributed to a monolithic tradition rooted in Islam and Turkish custom (ibid. 153;

Ferree 167). Mirroring post-Cologne discursive tendencies in which gender violence is appropriated to reinforce racist stereotypes, the cultural bias underlying the public outcry was evident in the lack of comparable concern for women killed by their German partners during the same period; the focus on "honour killings" thus functioned less as a feminist critique and more as a vehicle for cultural stigmatization (Ewing, *Stolen Honor* 153).

What emerges from these debates is a dominant construction of Muslim women primarily as victims of Muslim male violence—a framing that erases their political agency and foregrounds intra-community oppression, obscuring their vulnerability to other forms of harm, particularly racialized and Islamophobic violence (Weber, *Violence and Gender* 3). In this context, Islam is positioned as an inherently oppressive force from which Muslim women must be rescued, while the figure of the veiled Muslim woman is widely perceived as the antithesis of democracy, freedom, and gender equality (Ewing, "Between Cinema" 269). Simultaneously, the "oppressed Muslim woman" operates as a discursive tool in constructing notions of Germanness and female subjectivity: as evidenced in the contemporary feminist discourse mapped above, she is cast as a counterpoint to the empowered Western woman, thereby affirming a vision of German society as emancipated and protective of gender equality (Scharff, *Repudiating*; Selfe 17-18, 24). This binary is reflected in the celebration of the assimilated Turkish youth as a cultural hybrid and of the young Turkish woman who distances herself from her family—such as Hatun Sürücü—as heroic and attributed with a German identity (Ewing, "Between Cinema" 271–74). Underlying these representations is an assumption that Western models of female emancipation are universally valid and desirable—a framing which not only hinges on constructing the Muslim woman as a devalued Other, but also marginalizes Muslim women's own voices and erases decades of intersectional theorizing.

1.6 #regrettingmotherhood

In the spring of 2015, a few months before the events of Cologne, freelance journalist Esther Göbel published a short article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* about a study by Israeli sociologist Orna Donath titled "Regretting Motherhood: A Sociopolitical Analysis." Donath's study explores the experience of maternal regret by interviewing women who in some way or another express qualms over their decisions to become mothers. Both Donath and the women interviewed stress that the remorse they feel is not directed at their children but rather at the institution of motherhood, which they perceive as detrimental to their time and autonomy; in doing so, the participants "are opposing the very essentialist presumption of a fixed female identity that, come what may, naturally befits mothering, or progressively adapts to it and evaluates it as a worthwhile experience" (Donath 345).

Göbel's account of Donath's study triggered a heated debate on maternal regret on social media, which was subsequently picked up by major regional and national news outlets, sparking numerous follow-up publications and remaining at the forefront of national consciousness throughout the spring of 2015 (Heffernan and Stone). Following Göbel's article, German women took to Twitter to share their own experiences of maternal regret using the hashtag #regrettingmotherhood, and to express appreciation of Donath's research for validating an emotion felt by many yet largely treated as taboo. At the same time, those who related their experiences with maternal ambivalence and regret faced extensive backlash; they were lambasted as "self-centered, shameless, and cold-hearted" (Heffernan and Stone 341) and chastized as "Rabenmütter" (ibid. 344), the all-too familiar descriptor that continues to find its way to discourses of the maternal in Germany. The virulence of this debate is especially

noteworthy given that responses to Donath's study were fairly limited in other countries,[11] which suggests that discussions of maternal regret (and it being experienced by German mothers) "exposed localized sensitivities about the cultural construction of motherhood in Germany and its effect on the lived experience of women" (Heffernan and Stone 338).

As evident in the response to the demography debate, with women condemned as selfish and blamed for falling birthrates, motherhood occupies a central and uncompromising position in German culture (Hill, "Motherhood"; Vornmoor). Any deviation from normative maternal models is fiercely criticized, as the #regrettingmotherhood debate demonstrates, even—and often especially—when advocated by women. This is in large part rooted in German perceptions of maternity, which idealize the biological mother as the primary care giver and attribute her with a supposedly "innate" maternal nature (Heffernan and Stone; Nossett). This "Mutterkult" or "Muttermythos" (Scharff, *Repudiating* 110) is further strengthened by the propagation of a lifelong union based on marriage and a resulting family model with the mother staying at home or pursuing a part-time job as the norm and, indeed, as the culmination of one's role as a woman (Nill and Shultz). In this context, expressions of maternal regret (even when targeted at the institution of motherhood as opposed to individual children) are deemed an affront to women's purported self-actualization via motherhood—not to mention their duty as child bearers for the reproduction of the nation, as the responses to falling birthrates prove.

Adding to the pressure brought on by a long history of maternal mythography, mothers (and those who wish to become mothers) in Germany face additional contemporary pressures that might either deter them from having children or lead them to express remorse over doing so, as they have done in the context of the #regrettingmotherhood debate. Hester Baer remarks that,

[11] For reactions to the #regrettingmotherhood discourse in other countries, see Heffernan and Stone 338n3.

because of the gradual privatization of caregiving and social reproduction since the 1970s, this responsibility has shifted from the state to the individual—and specifically to women (*German Cinema* 15). Coupled with inconsistent family politics, reclamations of feminism, and recognitions of gender inequality in work and care, it is not surprising that the compatibility of work and family has emerged as the primary challenge faced by women in twenty-first-century Germany (Allmendinger). Not only can expressions of this incompatibility be found in women confessing their regret towards the institution of motherhood as it significantly limits their autonomy, its echoes can also be detected in the (relative to European numbers) high levels of intended childlessness in Germany (Sobotka and Testa).

1.7 Continuities and Renegotiations

The debates presented in this chapter, while not exhaustive, are broadly representative of the complex mosaic of factors that have shaped German discourse on women in the twenty-first century. From the legacy of the East-West divide, through shifting family policy, to the contested meaning of feminism and ongoing struggles around representation, intersectionality, and gendered violence, the thematic strands traced here reveal a discursive field marked by both continuity and transformation. Continuities can be seen in the endurance of structural inequalities, the slow pace and limited scope of institutional change—including policy reforms which, overall, neither fully support mothers' employment nor adequately recognize their care work—and the persistence of essentialist gender assumptions that reinforce women's marginalization, particularly in the workplace (Veil). Adding to these enduring factors is the ongoing contestation over what feminism signifies in the German public imaginary, which has contributed to a widespread resistance against the feminist label even among women who acknowledge gender inequality. At the same time, transformations are evident in the ways these

debates have expanded to accommodate new voices, address previously marginalized perspectives, and renegotiate the meanings attached to womanhood in contemporary Germany. The emergence of younger feminist authors in the late 2000s signalled an attempt to make feminism more palatable to a younger generation, yet this project has often been grounded in an individualist rhetoric that frames inequality as a matter of personal circumstances rather than systemic patterns, positioning each woman as responsible for her own success or failure regardless of structural constraints. While this insistence on individual choice as the ultimate determinant of a woman's life reflects a desire to understand one's path as self-determined, such reasoning obscures systemic barriers to the advancement of women, particularly those whose lives intersect with vectors such as race, religion, and sexuality. Such "aggressive individualism" implicitly shifts blame onto the individual if they fail to achieve the life they want, regardless of the structural forces at play (McRobbie 5). Across political, professional, and domestic spheres, women are thus repeatedly called upon to answer systemic problems with individual solutions, and their advancement continues to be framed not as the product of collective struggle or change, but as the rare achievement of exceptional individuals.

Crucially, what the debates also point to is a wave of efforts by women to renegotiate dominant understandings of womanhood and societal expectations. Whether through reclaiming the feminist label, exposing the ubiquity of sexism in German society by sharing experiences of discrimination and assault, or challenging compulsory motherhood via public discussions of maternal regret, these interventions mark attempts to shift the cultural terrain on which gender identities are negotiated. In a discursive climate still strongly shaped by essentialist presumptions about gender, such interventions signal a determination to question, complicate, and ultimately reframe these presumptions. The thematic tendencies and constructions of womanhood traced in

this chapter—from persistent structural inequalities to the individualist reframing of feminist politics—provide a framework against which the following chapters will examine women's filmmaking in contemporary Germany. The ensuing analyses will consider how female filmmakers respond to, reflect, or contest these dominant cultural narratives, and whether their work offers alternative imaginaries of German womanhood that disrupt or expand the boundaries set by the discourses explored here.

Chapter 2. Women in Contemporary German Cinema

> … the topic of representation is so crucial right now. We have to think about it both as a question of scopic regimes but also of political representation, of women actually having a seat at the table—both on-screen and behind the camera.
>
> Tatjana Turanskyj (Baer and Fenner, "Representation Matters" 143)

While the "right now" German filmmaker Tatjana Turanskyj refers to in this 2017 interview are the mid-to-late 2010s, the issue of women's representation in cinema has gained increasing attention in Germany and internationally, particularly in the wake of #MeToo, which would emerge only two months after Turanskyj's comments. Gender has been steadily claiming space as an important analytic for cinematic production and reception, evidenced in growing advocacy for gender parity in film production and festival distribution, calls for higher visibility and complexity for female characters, as well as in renewed historical interest in women's film culture and heritage (Carter). Turanskyj herself was at the forefront of one of the most prominent initiatives advocating for women's film authorship in Germany as a founding member of Pro Quote Regie (PQR) in 2014, an advocacy group seeking gender parity in the funding of directorial projects. PQR, renamed to Pro Quote Film (PQF) in 2017 to expand its reach across the film industry, is one of a number of women-driven initiatives aiming to revitalize women's film authorship in Germany which will be explored later in this chapter as evidence of gender's growing relevance in the German cinematic landscape of the twenty-first century. This chapter will map out the status of women's representation on and off the screen in the contemporary German film industry while considering its intersections with global cinema as well as the lingering influences of West and East German cinema traditions. The insights gained from this exploration will inform the analysis of the selected films, as the portrayal of their respective

female protagonists will not only be examined against the public discourses explored in chapter one, but also against cinematic discourses of gender and women's film authorship.

To discuss questions of women in film and its production, it is imperative to recognize feature filmmaking not only as an aesthetic form, but also one that requires considerable financial investment and access to technology. German film production relies primarily on a complex and diffuse network of government funds, with a total of 360-400 million Euros made available annually by federal, regional, and local film funding agencies (Prommer and Loist, "Where Are" 44). On average, a German film takes around 3 million Euros to finance, with only small differences between films produced explicitly for theatrical distribution and big television film productions (Hennig-Thurau and Henning 30-31). This is indicative of the deep interconnectedness between film and television in Germany, with the (predominantly public) television industry constituting an important source of film funding ranging from pre-sales agreements to full co-productions, the latter often with independent production companies. Additionally, the relatively limited film production output in Germany—owing to the fact that German films are primarily targeted at German-speaking audiences—means that the vast majority of film creatives turn to television production to supplement their income (Prommer and Loist, "Where Are" 44). Accordingly, in most cases, the same people are found both in cinema and in television on and off the screen, further blurring the distinction between the two (Hochhäusler 26).

In terms of what gets funded, recent scholarship points to an overwhelming tendency within the German film industry to emulate the popular entertainment and commercial ethos of Hollywood when allocating funds by focusing on a film's capacity to make money (Baer, *German Cinema* 22; Cooke 42-43). In this context, a film's aesthetic qualities or function as a

site of cultural representation often either take a back seat or are measured in terms of their potential to generate profit—although, as both Hester Baer and Paul Cooke note, cultural representation and aesthetic form remain central to both audience reception and the aspirations of filmmakers (Baer, *German Cinema* 22; Cooke 30ff.). Considering the necessity of securing funding to realize film projects, what impact does Germany's (primarily) commercially-driven film financing culture have on women on and off the screen?

2.1 Women behind the Screen

When twelve women directors met in 2013 to discuss their frustration with the male-dominated film and television industry in Germany—the meeting that would later lead to the founding of Pro Quote Regie—limited statistical data were available about the gender distribution of directors in the country ("Geschichte von PQR/PQF"). A 2013 report by the Bundesverband Regie (BVR) had just unveiled a shocking truth: only 11% of the films and series broadcast on ARD and ZDF between 2010 and 2013 were directed by a woman (*Erster Regie-Diversitätsbericht)*. When PQR was officially founded in 2014, one of their core demands was a study analyzing the situation for women directors in Germany. A year later, these data came in the form of a report by Elizabeth Prommer and Skadi Loist at the University of Rostock's Institut für Medienforschung. Titled *Wer dreht deutsche Kinofilme?*, the report analyzed all German feature films released between 2009 and 2013 and found that women are markedly underrepresented in German film production: despite making up nearly half of film school alumni in the country, women directed only 22% of films released between 2009 and 2013 and received 17% of the total available funding. The report also found that, in sum, women-directed feature films receive only 65% of the funding that films with a male director receive; in turn, this lower budget translates into distributors perceiving the films as having less commercial potential.

At the same time, however, films directed by women were found to win more awards and have a more successful festival run compared to male-directed films—a remarkable feat given women's underrepresentation in film production and the fact that they work with considerably smaller budgets (Prommer and Loist, *Wer dreht).*

Since the publication of the first reports mapping the situation for women in the German film industry, subsequent studies have confirmed women's underrepresentation in the industry and pointed to the prevalence of a gender bias disproportionately affecting women. In a 2016 study by the European Women's Audiovisual Network (EWA), a questionnaire was distributed to both male and female directors from seven European countries including Germany to assess their work within and attitude towards the industry (Aylett et al.).[12] Not only did over half of the respondents feel that a female director negatively affects a film project's chances of being financed, but perceptions of gender inequality were also far more widespread than the European average: 95% of German respondents reported that gender inequality exists for directors in the German film industry, the highest figure among the countries studied (ibid., Appendix IV 7-8). Additionally, when asked what discourages women from directing, the most oft-cited factor for German respondents were challenges of leadership, with 84% of the (majority female) respondents feeling their leadership ability challenged compared to 60% for the European average (ibid., Appendix IV 22).

These findings paint a bleak picture for women directors in Germany: only a small percentage of women direct films despite graduating in equal numbers from film schools; it is harder for women to receive funding and, when they do, it is considerably less than that of their male counterparts despite making critically acclaimed films; additionally, more often than not,

[12] Of the 162 respondents working in Germany, 89% were female and 11% male.

women find their leadership abilities challenged. So what is behind this evident gender imbalance in the German film industry? A 2017 study by the Filmförderungsanstalt (FFA) titled *Gender und Film: Rahmenbedingungen und Ursachen der Geschlechterverteilung von Filmschaffenden in Schlüsselpositionen in Deutschland* provides a number of key insights (Hochfeld et al.). Based on an analysis of all German feature and documentary films released between 2011 and 2015, the study finds a clear predominance of men in above-the-line positions such as directing, scriptwriting, and producing, with women overrepresented in costume design. In terms of potential causes for this imbalance, the study finds that the German film industry is marked by sector-specific barriers that disproportionately affect women, most notably risk aversion on the part of funding structures as well as precarious working conditions. For the latter, long or irregular hours and heavy workloads necessitate a high degree of flexibility, which is difficult to reconcile with housework and caregiving responsibilities—the majority of which falls to women.

As to why risk aversion on the part of funding bodies constitutes a systemic barrier that disproportionately affects women in German cinema, the answer lies with stereotypical gender assumptions. On the basis of questionnaires and interviews with both male and female industry members, the 2017 FFA study found that women are predominantly associated with characteristics that make them be perceived as unsuitable for key positions, while men are more associated with attributes relevant to success (Hochfeld et al. 9). Traits more likely to be attributed to men than to women include assertiveness, perseverance, and risk affinity, all of which are described as success factors for a career in the industry. Risk affinity in particular is perceived as a success factor because not only are the working conditions in the industry highly precarious, but the conditions for realizing film productions are considered uncertain and a large

financing budget is required (ibid. 42). Accordingly, the fact that women are perceived (by both male and female respondents) primarily as conflict-averse and security-oriented puts them at a clear disadvantage (ibid. 42-3). Women—and, even more so, mothers—are predominantly described as less focused on their careers and even as less resilient than men in the film industry, which, given the high degree of risk aversion on the part of funding bodies, makes them seem less suitable for key filmmaking positions. As a result, men remain "die risikoärmere und selbstverständliche Wahl" for appointments in above-the-line positions, with women often relegated to supporting roles (ibid. 44).

Additionally, women in the German film industry report finding themselves targets of sexist discrimination in the workplace. Unlike men, women report being on the receiving end of comments about their appearance as well as comments with sexual connotations (Hochfeld et al. 44). Young women in particular report sexualized perception by their male colleagues as a challenge, especially when shooting on location, and report that they are often not taken seriously but rather reduced to their physical appearance, a particularly troubling phenomenon—though unsurprising in the post-#MeToo era—considering the power imbalances stemming from the overrepresentation of men in key positions. What's more, women report feeling as if there is no "right" way to act in the industry: they are either perceived as too masculine or too feminine, both of which are seen in a negative light. Comments like "Du hast zu viele männliche Hormone" are often targeted at successful women or women who in one way or another do not conform to stereotypical female attributes, mirroring the stereotypically masculine treatment of women in top managerial positions discussed in the previous chapter (ibid.). It comes as little surprise, then, that the (majority female) respondents of the 2016 EWA Network study cited above report challenges of leadership as the number one factor discouraging them from

directing: in the eyes of the German film industry, women are deemed unsuitable for decision-making positions (Aylett et al., Appendix IV 22).

This gender bias in the German film industry is explored further in a 2019 article by Skadi Loist and Elizabeth Prommer (authors of the 2015 report *Wer dreht deutsche Kinofilme?*) aptly titled "Gendered Production Culture in the German Film Industry." In the article, the authors utilize data from both the 2015 report and subsequent years to find that the underrepresentation of women remains a constant fixture of the industry, with women underrepresented as directors, producers, scriptwriters, and cinematographers (ibid. 97). In aggregate terms and across all funding schemes, female directors receive only 15% of the overall available funding yet use it more effectively; on average, women need only one-third of the amount of funding compared to men to attract cinema visitors, while their films frequently earn more awards and have more successful festival runs (ibid. 103-05). Accordingly, women's underrepresentation in the industry cannot be an issue of a lack of talent or success, as is often argued by key industry figures and policymakers (Loist). As this growing body of research shows, the German film industry is characterized by a pervasive gender bias that fails to sustain women's careers and is present across all stages of realizing a film project:

> Bias begins at the development and scriptwriting stages, and runs through all stages of production, from funding through to implementation for all trades, and is also visible in sales and marketing. There is a pervasive gender bias in a variety of work contexts, and as a result, a "gendering" of the production cultures along stereotypical gendered lines in the creative process. (Loist and Prommer 108)

This "gendering" of the production culture in the German film industry is especially evident when looking at the three key creative roles involved in filmmaking: producer, director,

and writer. Of all German films released between 2009 and 2013, 42% had no women involved in any of the three roles (Loist and Prommer 107). Conversely, no men were involved only 13% of the time, meaning that men work three times as often only with men (ibid.). Producers especially play a crucial role in this constellation: a female producer will work more often with female directors, who will then work disproportionately more with female cinematographers as well as with female screenwriters. Female directors are ten times more likely to work with female scripts, whereas male directors almost never do—83% of films directed by men are based on scripts by male screenwriters (ibid.). Given the importance of networking in the film industry, these numbers point to the prevalence of gendered networks that encourage team building of largely homogenous groups, which affect women's representation both behind the screen and on screen, as the following section will demonstrate.

2.2 Women on Screen

Similar to women's representation behind the camera, little statistical data were available about the visibility and nature of women's depiction on German screens until the mid-2010s. What data were available, however, pointed to the necessity of undertaking more systematic research on women's representation by revealing striking differences between cinematic women in Germany and in other national cinemas. In a study conducted by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, the researchers looked at films released between 2010 and 2013 from the most profitable countries internationally: Australia, Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Russia, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Smith et al.). One of the study's most striking findings concerning the German context was that women are considerably more sexualized than in any other national cinema studied: of all countries studied, Germany exhibited the highest rates of female characters in both sexually revealing attire (39.9% of

characters compared to a global average of 24.8%), and nudity (39.2% of female characters appear with some degree of nudity compared to a global average of 24.2%) (Smith et al. 10). While the study found that male characters are also significantly more sexualized in German cinema compared to other countries, there is a notable gap between the respective figures: 13.8% of male characters appear in sexually revealing attire (compared to 9.4% globally) and 16.2% of male characters appear with some degree of nudity (compared to 11.5% globally) (ibid. 10-1). Although the authors of the report do not comment further on the high degree of sexualization of women in German cinema, Sebastian Heiduschke in his 2018 article "Women's Interventions in the Contemporary German Film Industry" reads the disproportionate sexualization of female characters as yet more proof of the widespread gender inequality present in German cinema (152-53). Yet this conclusion is complicated by Prommer and Linke's analysis of German films released between 2011 and 2016, which reported no sexualized portrayals of female characters on German screens (*Ausgeblendet* 78). While the divergence may reflect differences in film selection or in the criteria used to define sexualization (though both studies foreground sexualized attire), this discrepancy underscores the need for more systemic methodologies and standardized criteria when assessing women's on-screen sexualization.

The first comprehensive study aiming to determine gender representation in German television and cinema productions since the 1990s came in the form of the 2017 report *Audiovisuelle Diversität? Geschlechterdarstellungen in Film und Fernsehen in Deutschland*, which analyzed over 3,000 hours of television from 2016 as well as all German films released between 2011 and 2016 (Prommer and Linke, *Audiovisuelle Diversität*). The study produced similar results for TV and cinema, finding that women are overall "deutlich unterrepräsentiert" across German audiovisual media (ibid. 8). In terms of visibility, 42% of German films have a

female protagonist compared to 58% for men, with the gap widening for TV: there are two men shown for every woman on German television screens. At the same time, when women do appear on the screen in TV and film, not only are they more likely to be shown in the context of relationships and partnerships compared to male characters, but they are also considerably more likely to be young. Unlike men, women are predominantly shown in their teens, twenties and thirties; after the age of forty, one woman is shown for every two men and, after the age of fifty, that figure goes down to one woman per three men. This is true for both film and television across all formats and genres, providing evidence of an established age gap between men and women in German film and television that disproportionately portrays women in younger ages.

The prevalence of a gendered age gap on German screens was further confirmed by the 2021 follow-up study to *Audiovisuelle Diversität* titled *Sichtbarkeit und Vielfalt* (Prommer et al.). Picking up where the former left off, the authors of *Sichtbarkeit und Vielfalt* analyzed all German films released between 2017 and 2020 and found that, for the most part, women continue to be portrayed as "jung, schlank und Partnerin" ("Frauen auf der Leinwand"). Despite a 5% increase in women's overall visibility compared to previous years, women continue to be underrepresented in higher age groups while female protagonists are on average eight years younger than their male counterparts (Prommer et al. 13). Female protagonists are also twice as likely to be thin compared to men and, of the 100 films closely analyzed, there were no female protagonists in the overweight category (the same figure stood at 3% for men). Additionally, the study found that women continue to be portrayed more often in the context of partnerships and relationships, whereas men tend to have more recognizable professions and are portrayed more often in higher positions compared to women in work environments. Finally, an analysis of female protagonists' ethnic backgrounds and sexual identities revealed that the majority of

female characters in German cinema are "sichtbar, aber nicht vielfältig" (Prommer et al. 25): compared to both cinematic men and to real-life figures, cinematic women are far less likely to be non-white, non-heterosexual, have a migration background, or have a disability. It seems, then, that the typical woman on German screens is only representative of a fraction of the population: she is a slim, white heterosexual woman in her teens, twenties, or thirties and is more likely to be shown in the context of relationships or partnerships with other characters than in work environments—and, if she is shown in the latter, she typically has a male boss.

In their 2019 book *Ausgeblendet,* whose title is a nod to the state of the cinematic woman on German screens, authors Elizabeth Prommer and Christine Linke offer further insight into their analysis of TV and film between 2011 and 2016. Not only are female characters less visible—even in years like 2016, which was often hailed as the year of strong women thanks to hits such as Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann*—but they also have considerably less to say. On average, female protagonists of German films have around 25% less speaking time compared to male protagonists, a number which is consistent with studies on Hollywood films (Anderson and Daniels; Prommer and Linke, *Ausgeblendet* 73-74). The significance of this imbalance becomes clear when looking at the depth of the portrayal of either gender— what Prommer and Linke term "die eindimensionale Filmfrau—der vielschichtige Kinomann" (Prommer and Linke, *Ausgeblendet* 78). A qualitative analysis of male and female protagonists in a sample of twenty films revealed not only a gendered divide between the traits ascribed to men and those ascribed to women, but also an overwhelming tendency towards more complex male characters and less complex female characters. Female characters' social and emotional competencies are frequently foregrounded, with the traits most associated with them being nice, good-natured, caring, open-hearted, emotional, and motherly. They are almost always positive and rarely exhibit negative

characteristics such as arrogance, ruthlessness, or a loss of temper. While negatively portrayed female characters do exist, they often remain in these roles and show no character development; in fact, this is true for the majority of the female protagonists analyzed. Not only are female characters largely one-dimensional, they are also considerably more static compared to the men: "[es] gibt kaum eine Entwicklung in ihrer Persönlichkeit und sie haben keine Ecken und Kanten" (Prommer and Linke, *Ausgeblendet* 79). Male characters, on the other hand, exhibit both more character development and can be associated with a much larger variety of characteristics: they can be independent, self-confident, good-natured, patronizing, dominant, sociable, fatherly, and caring, though never submissive, gossipy, or childlike (ibid. 80). The prevalence of social traits for female characters as well as the fact that men appear twice as often in work environments than women (who are rarely portrayed in higher positions and are much more likely to talk about relationships than work) confirms the presence of a problematic gender bias in the portrayal of male versus female characters in German cinema.

In *Ausgeblendet,* Prommer and Linke also reflect on the German media's reaction to the publication of their 2017 study *Audiovisuelle Diversität*. Crucially, the authors point out two fixtures of the media discourse surrounding the results of the study, the first being the conspicuous absence of terms such as "sexism," "discrimination," and "feminism" (Prommer and Linke, *Ausgeblendet* 129). Prommer and Linke attribute the absence of such terminology to a disinclination on the part of German media to engage in feminist media critique as well as to a general skepticism towards feminism in Germany due to the term being primarily associated with Alice Schwarzer—a valid assessment given what we know from chapter one to be a largely conservative media landscape on the one hand, and Alice Schwarzer being a highly polarizing figure with a waning relevance for contemporary feminist issues on the other. What Prommer

and Linke find most striking, however, was a sudden reversal in tone, with media discourse following the publication of their study suddenly gaining an "ungeahntes Maß an Selbstverständlichkeit" (*Ausgeblendet* 129). Media coverage of the study largely treated the connection between images in film and television and real social inequalities as self-evident, with even traditionally skeptical outlets such as *Bild*—frequently criticized for sexist and misogynistic reporting—now claiming that a more equitable portrayal of men and women on screen could help dismantle entrenched gender clichés (ibid. 130). While this reception may seem surprising to Prommer and Linke, who note the unusually swift embrace of feminist-critical perspectives in mainstream discourse, it aligns with the broader shift in German gender discourse since the mid-2010s observed in chapter one, particularly in the wake of #aufschrei. To quote from Laura Himmelreich's 2017 interview once more (the same year that Prommer and Linke's study was published): "Damals wurde immer wieder über die Grundsatzfrage diskutiert: Gibt es Sexismus in Deutschland? Das fragt jetzt niemand mehr. Nun geht es eher darum, wie weit Sexismus in der Gesellschaft verbreitet ist" ("»Viele Männer«").

2.3 Women's Cinema

As this brief analysis of women's representation on and off the screen in the German film industry demonstrates, gender is a crucial metric for discussions of film culture and production, from pervasive gender biases in financing and production to the prevalence of stereotypical gender assumptions in the construction of male and female characters. Women form nearly half of all film school alumni in Germany yet are dramatically underrepresented in the industry; when women do occupy key positions, however, they are more likely to work with other women and to construct more complex female characters (Loist and Prommer 107; Prommer et al. 26). In the absence of a hypernym that encompasses films made by, addressed to, or concerned with

women, discourse on women in film invariably turns to the term "women's cinema"—of which, as with the majority of generalizing descriptors, there is no one definition or even a consensus on what it designates. Women's cinema is an elusive concept to define; as Alison Butler writes, it is "neither a genre nor a movement in film history, it has no single lineage of its own, no national boundaries, no filmic or aesthetic specificity, but traverses and negotiates cinematic and cultural traditions and critical and political debates" (1).

A natural extension of their involvement in theatre, women have been involved in filmmaking since the invention of cinema and have been portrayed on screen since the early days of silent pictures, yet the term "women's cinema" only arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s parallel to the explosion of the women's movement into Western political and social consciousness. The concept of a women's cinema was brought into existence and is maintained by those interested in women's representation in film culture and production: audiences, filmmakers, academics, journalists, and curators who recognize the impact of gender in film. Yet the term's plurality need not constitute a barrier; rather, the overlapping discourses and practices it encompasses reveal the depth of gender's roots across all aspects of cinematic production and reception. Erica Carter and Claudia Sandberg's definition of women's film culture illustrates this interconnectedness:

> By its very nature heterogeneous, multidirectional, discontinuous, plural and internally conflicted, women's film culture is best conceived instead as an always fluid set of networks as well as circuits of production, distribution, and exchange that intersect at points with both institutional and activist feminism, but converge at other moments around nodal points in other cultural and cinematic circuits and movements, as well as state and industrial formations. (Carter and Sandberg 399)

Naturally, to speak of women's cinema is to also speak of women, a sociosymbolic category that is by no means homogenous, representing "neither a unified site of political agency nor a stable and coherent gender designation" (Baer and Fenner, "Introduction" 8). While the category of woman continues to be contested, its centrality in the cultural imaginary invites a closer look at how gender shapes perception in shared cultural contexts. For instance, what is it about "women's cinema" or "women's films" that might lead mainstream audiences and critics to expect love stories or "chick flicks"—and why is the latter often evoked in a derogatory context? (White 8-9, 200) As the previous sections of this chapter demonstrate, essentialist identity ascriptions continue to play a significant and often harmful role in how we perceive each other and the kinds of opportunities we extend to one another. With that in mind, it is important to recognize gender as an influencing force in cultural production and reception, and the category of women's cinema is one tool to do so.

Crucially, analyzing film through the lens of women's cinema also allows for distinctive qualities of films made by and about women to emerge that might otherwise remain invisible, from gender-based budgeting decisions that affect a film's production or distribution to continuities in the representation of gendered experiences across generations of women filmmakers and beyond national borders. Thus, in allowing women's films to come into dialogue with each other across time and space, the category of women's cinema can function to "highlight the projection of a marginalized group, rather than the expression of an essentialized perspective" (Baer, "The Berlin School" 45).

Despite the category's usefulness in bringing to the foreground the diverse experiences of a marginalized group whose access to the means of production has been historically restricted and whose on-screen representation remains largely stereotypical and one-dimensional, many

practitioners of women's cinema have deliberately distanced themselves from the notion, from Chantal Akerman and Larisa Shepitko to Maren Ade (Ade, "Feministin"; Butler 2).[13] It is not difficult to see why: with women already at a disadvantage in financing and production decisions, combined with the prevalent notion that women's films are inherently different (or less monetizable) than those by men, distancing oneself from the category of women's cinema is a way to avoid both controversy and further marginalization. Unsurprisingly, women filmmakers are especially cautious in approaching their relationship to feminism for the same reasons; in a postfeminist climate which champions individualism, embracing the feminist label often leads to ideological controversy and a labelling of feminists as extreme. Nonetheless, the fact that women filmmakers bring gendered experiences to the forefront of their films by focusing on female protagonists and addressing issues raised by the women's movement leads to their work being continually pulled into discursive spaces delineated by parameters of gender, such as women's festivals and publications sympathetic to feminist politics, thereby reinforcing the centrality of gender as a common denominator for their work (Butler 2; Knight 67). Additionally, feminist politics often have a direct impact on women's film culture and vice versa, whether through institutional support for women filmmakers or through a discursive emphasis on women's on-screen representation. This holds especially true for German cinema: writing in 1992 on an "emerging feminist film culture"—later termed the West German feminist film movement—Julia Knight remarks that "feminism has been an enormous influence on women's film production in Germany" (67). Indeed, the institutional and financial successes of the West German feminist films of the 1970s are not only a testament to the relevance of feminist politics for film culture

[13] This also applies to women writers in Germany, many of whom consistently attend to questions of gender in their works yet reject the notion of categorizing their work as "women's literature." For examples, see Baer and Hill 3.

but form an important basis for contemporary cinematic production by women in Germany, as the following sections demonstrate.

2.4 West German Feminist Filmmaking

Women's film authorship in West Germany grew not only in the context of the New German Cinema, but was also heavily influenced by the encounter of women filmmakers with the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite producing a significant body of work in the late 1970s and 1980s, women filmmakers go largely unmentioned in accounts of West German filmmaking. This marginalization is largely owed to the focus on authorship that has dominated discourse on New German Cinema, which has been primarily discussed as a *cinéma des auteurs*, with some of the most recognizable names associated with it being Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, or Wim Wenders. Despite New German Cinema's embeddedness in social movements and collaborative practices, this overwhelming focus on authorship has effectively inhibited serious consideration of women's work who, on the whole, have not been discussed as auteurs in the same way their male counterparts of the time have (Hake 153-54; Knight 68-69). This marked emphasis on individual creativity in historiographies of the New German Cinema has also contributed to the neglect of directors who adopted collective working methods—which, as this section demonstrates, was a common occurrence among women filmmakers—or revised genre conventions in a way that is not compatible with dominant perceptions of films associated with the New German Cinema (Hake 153; Knight 66). As a result, women's contributions to West German cinema are viewed largely as minimal and highly marginal, despite their central role in the emergence of feminist film scholarship as well as in performing a gendered critique of the male-dominated "Autorenkino" of the time (Hake 153-54; Knight 68-69).

Despite their later inroads, women's contributions to West German cinema were indeed minimal until well into the 1970s, owing to institutional hurdles and a persistent gender bias in the film industry. In the wake of the 1962 Oberhausen manifesto, a complex system of subsidies was established to revive cinema in West Germany; this strong subsidy system would fund the many New German Cinema productions of the late 1960s and 1970s, but would not extend that same courtesy to project proposals by women. During the 1960s and early 1970s, women filmmakers often found their proposals routinely rejected or underfunded, relegating them either to "the traditionally 'female' job of film editor" ("Verband der Filmarbeiterinnen") or to areas "highly peripheral to or quite separate from the new cinema" (Knight 10) such as working for companies making television documentaries, series, or news reports. Additionally, when women's project proposals did receive funding from the subsidy system, they were given considerably smaller budgets which only allowed for a relatively low production value, which in turn fed into established skepticism about women's technical proficiency (Butler 93).

Obstacles notwithstanding, female directors emerged early in the post-Oberhausen generation of West German filmmakers. Ula Stöckl, May Spils, Helma Sanders-Brahms, and later Margarethe von Trotta all belonged to a wartime generation who started their work in film at a time informed by the student movement of the 1960s and simultaneously at the threshold of the emerging women's movement, leading to their films exhibiting a critical engagement with both (Carter and Sandberg 396; Hake 176). Early women's films in West Germany employed biographical and autobiographical approaches as a way to validate individual experiences while also showing a preference for melodramatic forms that "[reaffirmed] emotionality as a female strength, but this time from a female point-of-view" (Hake 177). In the early years of women's film authorship in West Germany, filmmakers such as Stöckl, Spils, and Sanders-Brahms also

emphasized the power of female solidarity and explored the female body as a site of both oppression and liberation, thereby showing signs of an emerging feminist film culture among women's cinema despite the filmmakers themselves maintaining distance from feminist activism (Carter and Sandberg; Hake).

It was precisely that encounter with feminist activism, however, that would create a "snowball-like" effect for women's film authorship in West Germany from the mid-1970s onwards ("Regisseurinnen")—so much so that, by 1989, film historian Thomas Elsaesser would profess that "West Germany possesses proportionally more women film-makers [*sic*] than any other film-producing country" (*New German Cinema* 185). The mid-1970s to mid-1980s saw a boom of filmmaking by women thanks to a series of interventions by female filmmakers themselves, aiming to increase women's representation in cinema production as well as their access to the means to produce their own films. The feminist character of these interventions is exemplified by one if its leading figures, Helke Sander, who was at the forefront of the most impactful initiatives to support women's filmmaking in West Germany. A staunch feminist activist, Sander was a co-founder of the Aktionsrat zur Befreiung der Frauen, the West Berlin-based feminist group credited with kicking off the West German women's movement, as well as the first female student at the then newly-founded Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (DFFB) (Baer, "Feminist Film and Media" 214; Carter and Sandberg 397). In 1972, Sander along with six fellow directors founded Coop der Filmerinnen, a co-op of women filmmakers who sought to collectively produce, support, and distribute films dealing with the issues raised by the budding women's movement (Baer and Fenner, "Gender Equality"; "Regisseurinnen"). The distribution of these films would be realized through Arsenal, the West Berlin cinema that

would later provide a "consistent institutional base for German independent cinefeminism" (Carter and Sandberg 397).

Indeed, it was in Arsenal that the "1. Internationales Frauenfilm-Seminar" would take place in 1973, organized by Helke Sander and fellow filmmaker and co-op co-founder Claudia von Alemann. The four-day seminar brought together more than 300 participants, 33 films, and panel discussions on four core themes: women in labour struggles, women's representation in the media, gender roles and sexuality (including abortion), and the women's movement in Europe and the US (Carter and Sandberg 397; "Regisseurinnen"). The seminar's success was instrumental in bringing wider public attention to issues related to women and film, prompting nationwide events which included a follow-up seminar in Munich a month later that would contribute to the emergence of a new filmgoing public for women's films and films on women's issues.[14] Building on the seminar's success, Helke Sander founded the first European feminist film journal, *frauen und film,* in 1974, for which she would serve as chief editor for the next decade (Carter and Sandberg 397; "Frauen und Film"). The journal provided an important venue for critical engagement with women's cinema and contributed actively not only to the emergence of a West German women's film culture, but also to the development and advancement of feminist film theory, in turn establishing West Germany as an important locus for transnational theoretical work by feminist film scholars (Baer and Fenner, "Introduction" 5; Hake 176).

The snowball created by early feminist initiatives, most notably the 1973 seminar, would culminate in a series of institutional interventions in the second half of the 1970s which had tangible effects in women's participation in film production. In 1975, *frauen und film* distributed leaflets at the annual Berlinale demanding funding parity for women in the film industry; a year

[14] For a more detailed breakdown of the 1973 seminar as well as its two revisitations in 1997 and 2023 respectively, see Baumeister et al.

earlier, *Spiegel* would estimate that, of the 5,000 filmmakers working in West Germany, only 150 were women ("Besonderer Blick"; Carter and Sandberg 397). These calls were eventually formalized through the founding of the Verband der Filmarbeiterinnen e.V. (VdF) in 1979, with Helke Sander, Claudia von Alemann, and Margarethe von Trotta among its founding members. The VdF sought to establish gender parity in the West German film industry, demanding that women receive half of all available funding, jobs, and employee training programs, and that women occupy half of all decision-making committees in the film sector (Baer and Fenner, "Introduction" 4; Carter and Sandberg 397). One of the "strongest professional associations" of its time, the VdF was remarkably successful in making headway in its demands (Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 185). Throughout the 1980s, funding opportunities for women expanded, women's participation in jobs and traineeships increased, and their presence on key committees grew significantly (Baer and Fenner, "Gender Equality").

Though the 50% quota demand was never achieved, VdF's advocacy created a flurry of opportunities for women in the West German film industry by achieving a high degree of institutional and financial support for women filmmakers, from funding sources opening up specifically to women filmmakers and films on women's issues, to production and distribution schemes that ensured the visibility of these films (Baer and Fenner, "Introduction" 4; Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 185). This institutional support also enabled individual directors to make multiple feature films—a rarity for women filmmakers in other film industries of the time—providing theorists with robust bodies of work that continue to facilitate inquiry into questions of women's film authorship and feminist aesthetics (Baer and Fenner, "Introduction" 5). It is safe to say that this explosion of creativity and productivity in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s would not have been achieved without the tireless activism by VdF members and the collective

modes of production adopted by women filmmakers to combat their lack of access to fully-funded means of production. Adding to his statement that, by 1989, West Germany possessed proportionally more women filmmakers than any other film-producing country, Thomas Elsaesser emphasized that "these opportunities were themselves the result of organised struggles and campaigns" and that, despite there being women filmmakers before the 1970s, "a common forum, or at least the sense of a common project, was necessary in order for their presence to be acknowledged" (*New German Cinema* 185). Thanks to the common platform offered by the encounter between New German Cinema and the women's movement, activist feminist film culture shaped West German cinema into a key site for considering women's film authorship and feminist aesthetics in the 1970s and 1980s (Baer, "Feminist Film and Media" 214).

Because of the central role that feminist activism played in women gaining broader access to the means of film production, the women's movement remained an important reference point for the films produced in the context of (what has come to be termed) the West German feminist film movement by serving as a source of inspiration for their narratives and characters. In an attempt "to tell different stories and to tell stories differently" (Hake 177), many films produced by women during this time not only had female protagonists but utilized these characters to perform a political and social critique of the dominant patriarchal society (Baer, *German Cinema* 161ff.). Guided by the feminist tenet that "das Private ist politisch," this critique was primarily performed through a focus on personal stories and relationships, often drawing on autobiographical material:

> Rejecting the narrow understanding of politics prevalent even on the radical left, Helke Sander, Helma Sanders-Brahms, Jutta Brückner, and Margarethe von Trotta focused their attention on personal relationships as the starting point for all social and political

> changes. Making films for these women represented a form of self-expression, consciousness-raising, and political activism. Some enlisted their stories of discrimination and oppression in feminist critiques of a male-dominated society, whereas others addressed public issues such as unequal pay, job discrimination, sexual violence, and reproductive rights, and yet others explored intimate relationships among women, including lesbianism as a personal and political choice. (Hake 176)

Crucially, unequal pay, job discrimination, sexual violence, and reproductive rights have all persisted at the forefront of German gender discourse since the turn of the millennium, as discussed in chapter one, a testament to their continuing relevance and the pervasiveness of gender biases that disproportionately put women at a societal disadvantage. Female solidarity, single working mothers, and women immigrants are also among the issues tackled by women directors during this time; however, instead of offering political explanations or solutions to the gender-based discrimination portrayed in their films, filmmakers such as Sander and Sanders-Brahms utilized space (often the unique setting of West Berlin) and the gendered body to examine the challenges faced by women in the sociopolitical climate of the 1970s and 1980s (Hake 177). This tendency for description over prescription is also reflected in the realist aesthetics shared by many of these films, which are often characterized by a relatively low degree of stylization and a "documentary-style" approach (Baer, *German Cinema* 161). This is not by accident: many women filmmakers were already noted documentary directors prior to funding sources opening up to women for feature film production, and filmmakers such as Sander and Stöckl produced documentaries on issues related to the women's movement in the early years of the feminist film movement ("Frauenfilm").

Shared thematic and formal approaches eventually led to a grouping together of these films as "Frauenfilme," an umbrella term used to refer to films directed by women, films about "women's issues" such as relationships, marriage, or motherhood, or films with a pronounced feminist orientation ("Frauenfilm"). Much like "women's cinema," "Frauenfilm's" essentialist connotations render the term problematic—especially considering the critical reception of these films. Mainstream press in West Germany was largely dismissive of the women's films produced during this time, often criticizing them as "one-sided," "self-indulgent," "boring," and "depressing" (Hake 176). Ironically, this dismissive stance only served to confirm the gender biases challenged by many of these films, as Sabine Hake notes, while also highlighting the marginal status of women's cinema outside feminist circles even during a period of high institutional support (ibid.). This marginalization is also evident in the trajectory of female directors' careers, especially those who chose to put aside their careers as independent auteurs in favour of collective organizing and were then relegated to creating content for television, in turn leading their films to be pigeonholed as trivial (Baer, *German Cinema* 160). Their scope was further restricted by restrictions in West German television charters, with broadcasters such as ZDF prohibiting the broadcasting of programmes which question or challenge the institution of marriage and the family—restrictions sharply criticized by Helke Sander in the inaugural issue of *frauen und film* in 1974 (Sander 31-32). As a result, even when women filmmakers gained access to television production, their ability to articulate feminist critique remained structurally constrained by the very institutions providing them visibility.

Despite the inroads women made in feature film production in the 1970s and 1980s and the rich body of work this produced, West German feminist film was ultimately short-lived. Experiencing a gradual decline already in the 1980s due to growing divisions within the

women's movement, women's film culture shrunk dramatically in post-unification Germany, as political and economic changes—particularly in the form of media conglomeration —reversed many of the gains of the feminist film movement (Baer and Fenner, "Introduction"). The Verband der Filmarbeiterinnen, never having reached its 50% goal for women's involvement in the film industry, eventually disbanded in 2009 (Heiduschke, "Women's Interventions"). Anti-feminist sentiment in the 1990s only added to the marginalization of women's film culture, reducing its audience to feminist and lesbian circles and contributing to the ever-present disavowal of feminism which, as chapter one discussed, was especially pronounced in the country (Hake 176).

Its eventual decline notwithstanding, the West German feminist film movement not only enabled women to produce a rich and diverse body of cinematic work but also provided a powerful model for the importance of collective organization in the face of a systemic lack of opportunities. Collective modes of production and distribution among women filmmakers have resurfaced in the post-unification cinematic landscape as have institutional interventions, as the final section of this chapter will demonstrate. What's more, with German cinema coming under scrutiny since the mid-2010s for its evident gender inequality and with feminist discourse experiencing a boom in the wake of #aufschrei and #MeToo, recent years have seen a revival of interest in women's films of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Starting in the mid-2010s and particularly between 2017 and 2019, a surge of retrospectives and film series emerged celebrating women's filmmaking in both West and East Germany throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, from film screenings and restoration projects to seminars and larger retrospectives (Carter). Most notable among these was the aptly titled *Selbstbestimmt: Perspektiven von Filmemacherinnen*, curated by the Deutsche Mediathek for the 2019 Berlinale's Retrospektive

series, the festival's film history section. Encompassing almost fifty films between 1968 and 1999, from narrative and documentary features to short films and experimental productions, *Selbstbestimmt* highlighted women's film authorship across three decades and three Germanies, showcasing the richness of women's cinematic legacy and encapsulating it in two companion volumes (Herbst-Meßlinger and Rother; Klauß and Schenk). It can only be hoped that this recent revival will rectify the underrepresentation of women filmmakers in historiographies of West German cinema and might eventually disprove Julia Knight's assessment that "[while] most cinema enthusiasts, especially followers of the European art movie circuit, have heard of Fassbinder, Herzog and Wenders and are relatively familiar with their work, very few can name a single West German woman film director" (Knight 69).

2.5 Women and DEFA

Contemporary cinematic production by and about women in Germany does not just build on the gains (and losses) of the West German feminist film movement; in fact, a closer look at female filmmakers as well as "Frauenfilme" in the GDR reveals striking similarities in women's representation between the two former German states. In the GDR, cinematic production was realized through the Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA), the state-run film studio founded in 1946 and liquidated in 1992. During its run, DEFA produced some 700 feature films as well as numerous short films, animated films, documentaries, and newsreels (Schenk, "Bilder"). The 1970s and 1980s in particular saw a surge in "Gegenwartsfilme," i.e. films dealing with contemporary issues, a large portion of which thematized everyday life in the GDR as seen through the eyes of a female protagonist. Indeed, more than half of the roughly ninety Gegenwartsfilme produced between 1972 and 1988 had either a female protagonist or a male-female relationship at the heart of their stories (Rinke, "From Models" 183-84). These stories,

however, were being overwhelmingly told by men: in the course of DEFA's 46-year history, only five women sat in the director's chair for fiction films: Bärbl Bergmann, Ingrid Reschke, Hannelore Unterberg, Iris Gusner, and Evelyn Schmidt—with the former three directing children's films (Heiduschke, *East German Cinema* 117; Stewart 27).

This discrepancy in women's representation on and off screen was largely the product of the GDR's relationship to female labour as well as of the prevalence of men in decision-making positions at DEFA. While women enjoyed formal equality in both postwar states under the new constitutions, the West German model of gender equality largely saw the home and the family as women's primary domains; by contrast, East German state socialism viewed gender equality in terms of labour participation, with women's emancipation achieved through their economic independence, in turn a result of their full participation in the socialist workforce. Accordingly, waged labour outside the home figured as the primary route to emancipation for East German women, who were further incentivized to participate in the workforce through a series of measures introduced in the early to mid-1970s, from enhancing childcare provisions and extending paid maternity leave to the introduction of the "Babyjahr" in 1975, a full year's paid leave for working mothers (Carter and Sandberg 391). Crucially, however, it was still expected that women perform domestic labour on top of their waged work, with housework and childcare continuing to be perceived primarily as women's responsibilities. Indeed, the official picture of the modern woman as painted by the Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands (DFD), the official voice of East German women propagating the benefits of the ruling socialist party's politics, was that of someone able to effortlessly juggle work, family duties, and political engagement (Heiduschke, "Inspiring" 26). This assumption of women's dual responsibility for waged work and domestic labour not only put tremendous pressure on East German women, but

also affected their ability to climb up the career ladder. As a result, despite women's equal participation in the workforce, gendered labour hierarchies were left intact —including in the film industry.

With women's emancipation seen as a fait accompli in the GDR since women had the right to work and could achieve economic independence, there was no perceived need for an explicitly feminist approach to filmmaking or for a cinema directed by women (Rinke, "From Models" 183; Stewart 26). This does not mean that women were not employed at DEFA; rather, much like in the post-unification film landscape discussed earlier in this chapter, women were not found in above-the-line positions such as directing but "frequently occupied middle-range positions (dramaturgy), often in traditional female careers (design or editing), or found employment either in television or in children's film" (Frölich 43). This was not due to a lack of female talent for above-the-line positions, as, by the 1980s—again in direct parallel to contemporary conditions for women's film authorship—the numbers of male and female students graduating from the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen der DDR (HFF), the East German film academy, were almost equal (ibid.). However, next to the challenge of reconciling housework and child rearing with a demanding career that led to women being unable to move up the ranks, all managerial positions in the DEFA studio structure were occupied by men, which likely resulted in decision-making processes that fostered established networks along gendered lines (Meurer 207). In fact, the East German film industry was not without gender bias: Iris Gusner, perhaps the best-known of DEFA's women directors, speculates that, during her time at the HFF, the (male) head of the directing department believed that Gusner did not fit in with the other students because she was a woman pursuing work in a male profession (Heiduschke, "Inspiring" 25). Next to following gendering patterns familiar from the gender pay gap discourse

discussed in chapter one, this designation of directing as a male domain comes as no surprise given the prevalence of men in director's chairs and the leadership role inherent in the directing profession. This dynamic is still evident in the post-unification film landscape, as discussed earlier in this chapter: not only do women directors working in Germany today report disproportionally high levels of gender inequality in their profession, but they also find that the main factor discouraging them from directing are challenges of leadership (Aylett et al.). As Carter and Sandberg note in reference to the Hochfeld et al. report *Gender und Film* commissioned by the Filmförderungsanstalt: "If the FFA's 2017 gender report laments the absence of women in leading industry positions, then the situation was no better in the purportedly gender-neutral labor conditions of GDR film" (391).

Despite women being largely absent behind the camera—at least in key positions—in DEFA films, there was no shortage of female characters on the screen. With the turn to contemporary stories in the 1970s and 1980s, female characters frequently dominated the screen; in fact, almost fifty of the roughly ninety Gegenwartsfilme of the time had female protagonists (Heiduschke, *East German Cinema* 118). The construction of these female characters merits particular attention precisely because filmmaking in the GDR was a highly political issue. Not only were all films commissioned by the state and a high degree of control exercised over their production, but film was seen as a powerful tool to propagate socialist ideology, and "the GDR rarely missed an opportunity to emphasize how progressive its society was in terms of gender equality" (Heiduschke, "Inspiring" 24). Female characters were thus frequently utilized by filmmakers who, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s, tended to portray them in terms of the "ideal 'socialist personality,'"i.e. as working mothers often seen at their workplace and avoiding glamorous extremes—DEFA's female protagonists rarely appear as sex objects or

femmes fatales (Rinke, "From Models" 185, 200). In fact, the majority of female characters in DEFA films are working mothers, more often single than married, and are almost never in the role of the passive housewife dependent upon her husband, thus reinforcing this model of life as unacceptable for the socialist state in which women's emancipation is synonymous with economic independence (ibid. 183).

In line with the state-sanctioned focus on how progressive East German society was in terms of gender equality, many DEFA films of the late 1960s and early 1970s not only constructed their female protagonists as "ideal" socialist citizens, but often portrayed them as highly qualified and in prestigious jobs, even in traditionally male-dominated professions such as engineers or university lecturers (Heiduschke, *East German Cinema* 117; Rinke, "From Models" 185). Yet the reality was that the majority of East German women were on the lower end of the employment scale doing mostly menial jobs; this was reflected more accurately in the films of the later 1970s and 1980s, which saw an increasing number of DEFA heroines as shop assistants, factory workers, cooks, cleaners, nurses, and other "ordinary, traditionally female, jobs" (Rinke, "From Models" 185). This shift was accompanied by a higher degree of nuance afforded to female characters, who were increasingly portrayed as less accepting of the double burden of work and family and of the challenges they faced in their personal and professional lives (Heiduschke, *East German Cinema* 117-18). Films with female protagonists in particular foregrounded their heroine's gendered experiences, addressing issues such as equality in the domestic sphere, violence and sexual harassment, or patronizing male behaviour, thereby criticizing the state of gender relations in the GDR—but never directly confronting them so as to avoid censorship (Heiduschke, *East German Cinema*; Rinke, "From Models"). Additionally, the

cinematic women of the GDR often exhibited emotional strength and moral superiority over their male counterparts, even when operating under conventional patterns of gendered attributes:

> Women were perceived to make more rigorous demands of their partners and of life in general, all of which led to dramatic conflicts which made them appear more powerful protagonists in the cinema than their male counterparts. In a great many DEFA films there seems to be a binary opposition of male and female qualities, in which the masculine stands for external authority, the public sphere, stability and stagnation, entrapment and denial; by contrast the feminine stands for a more personal psychological reality, the private sphere, openness and spontaneity, indulgence and emotional excess. Yet even within this traditional scheme of gendered attributes, the female protagonists manage to question and qualify manifestations of institutionalised power where they confront them. (Rinke, "From Models" 201)

Strength and determination appear to be defining characteristics of DEFA's female protagonists, much in the same way that constant challenges in their personal and professional lives appear to be defining fixtures of their narrative arcs—whether that is Sonja's volatile marriage to her husband in Heiner Carow's *Bis daß der Tod euch scheidet* (1979), Margit's multiple failed attempts at successful relationships in Egon Günther's *Der Dritte* (1972), or Sunny's repeated personal and professional disappointments leading to a suicide attempt in Konrad Wolf's *Solo Sunny* (1980). The sheer number of obstacles these characters must face may give the impression that they are fighting a losing battle, yet the (mostly) positive endings to their stories suggest that it is rather their resilience and determination that will prevail: Sonja's marriage may be saved after all, Margit enters into a new relationship, and Sunny survives her suicide attempt. Female protagonists in DEFA films are thus defined both by their strength and by their insistence on

improving the personal and societal structures around them; and, by critiquing them in the first place, these characters "make important points about where things were going wrong in GDR society and … point the way forward to a utopian vision of a better future" (Rinke, "From Models" 201-02).

Although limited in number, the feature films directed by women during DEFA's run expanded the cinematic gender discourse by spotlighting the realities faced by East German women, especially with regard to the tremendous pressure of having to succeed both at work and at home. Not only were the directors themselves also under this pressure but, as discussed above, gendered labour hierarchies and the perception of directing as a male profession constituted significant barriers to their careers and creative expression. The achievement of gender equality in the GDR through equal work opportunities also disallowed the development of an overtly feminist movement at DEFA, as mentioned earlier; this was also manifested in the state-controlled journal *Film und Fernsehen,* which ignored issues of feminism (Heiduschke, *East German Cinema* 117). Additionally, even when DEFA's female directors received approval and funding for a film project, those films were not always guaranteed to be distributed widely, especially compared to films by male directors, thereby adding another layer of disadvantage to their work (Heiduschke, "Inspiring" 24).

Nonetheless, few elements in the GDR ecosystem presented as much of a challenge for filmmakers, male or female, as state censorship. In fact, Iris Gusner's directorial debut, *Die Taube auf dem Dach* (1973) was banned upon its completion, never to be theatrically released, and its copies ordered to be destroyed—the only film to receive a ban that year (Heiduschke, "Inspiring" 25). The story of a female construction manager oscillating between two work colleagues, the film was lambasted by DEFA management for "spitting in the face of the working

class" because it featured working class characters in crisis or deeply dissatisfied with their lives (Schenk, "Der Spatz"). Although she was then relegated to television and children's films, Gusner eventually broke through with 1980's *Alle meine Mädchen,* an intricate film-within-a-film about a brigade of female factory workers who become the subject of a documentary by male film student Ralf. From its opening scene, which highlights Ralf's reluctance to film "brigades" and especially "women," the film exposes the problem of representing collectives in socialist cinema while also foregrounding questions of gender representation, spectatorship, and identification, thereby critiquing both the persistent gender bias of the East German film industry and the disjuncture between socialist ideals and social realities (Carter and Sandberg 392; Creech 149-153). Gusner's later films continued to challenge GDR gender ideology, most notably 1984's *Kaskade Rückwärts* with its narrative of a single mother who struggles to reconcile a healthy personal life with her responsibilities as a worker and a mother. While Gusner's criticism is veiled in subtle ways in both narrative and form to avoid censorship, her oeuvre reflects her sustained engagement with filmmaking from a distinctly female point of view, further articulated in her explicit acknowledgment of the impact of gendered perspectives on storytelling: "Der Blickwinkel als Frau bringt eine andere Betracht-ungsweise [*sic*], eine andere Art des Erzählens" (qtd. in Rinke, *Images* 205).

As the only other woman in the director's chair beyond children's films, Evelyn Schmidt's path echoes that of Gusner in both thematic foci and systemic challenges. The first female student to graduate from the HFF, Schmidt enjoyed success with her debut *Der Seitensprung* (1980), leading DEFA management to present her as a poster child for gender equity in GDR filmmaking (Stewart 27). Schmidt's second feature, *Das Fahrrad* (1981), tells the story of Susanne, a single mother who quits her factory job and falsely reports her bicycle as

stolen to collect the insurance money. *Das Fahrrad* is especially noteworthy as it performs in protagonist Susanne a radical departure from the state-promoted ideal of the socialist woman as a full-time working mother whose fulfillment comes through her work. Susanne is a profoundly non-conforming character; she quits her factory job because of how monotonous and unfulfilling it is and instead seeks emotional fulfilment despite an apparent lack of zeal and effort. In constructing this character and by way of her relationship to Thomas (a young, promising engineer who is celebrating his promotion when they first meet), the film implicitly draws attention to the fact that women were far more likely to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy in the GDR, often working menial jobs like Susanne's—a far cry from the East German state's political self-understanding, according to which gender equality was a fait accompli by virtue of women's equal participation in the workforce (Frölich 51; Rinke, "Women on Film" 206-07). Because of the social critique implied in it, *Das Fahrrad* was harshly criticized and, though not banned, the film was subjected to measures of indirect censorship, with its release postponed and its distribution severely limited (Rinke, "Women on Film" 208). This fate was also largely attributed to the infamous "Vater-Brief," a reader's letter published prominently in the socialist party's official newspaper *Neues Deutschland* in November 1981—shortly before *Das Fahrrad*'s scheduled release—which harshly criticized DEFA filmmakers for depicting "belanglose Problemchen" without any "gesellschaftliche Wirkung" (Rinke, "Women on Film" 207-08; Schieber 266). Ostensibly written by car mechanic Hubert Vater, the letter's tone and prominent placement suggested authorship from the party elite, with prevailing speculation attributing it to Erich Honecker himself (ibid.). The fact that Schmidt was thereafter effectively blacklisted at DEFA confirms the situation for women's filmmaking in the GDR as a tale of talents constrained

by gendered labor hierarchies as well as censorship of works that challenged state-sanctioned notions of the gendered experience (Carter and Sandberg 393).

To speak of an emerging women's cinema in the GDR on the basis of Gusner's and Schmidt's films would be an exaggeration given the low number of films directed by them (relative to their male colleagues) as well as the censorship their titles faced—after all, they were dependent on structures that prevented the development of an overtly feminist cinema. However, both Schmidt and Gusner created films that drew attention to the state of women's emancipation in the GDR, emphasizing the discontinuities between the idealised model of the East German woman and the reality of carrying the double burden of work and family while mostly working tiring, menial jobs and, against all odds, striving for personal fulfillment. The nuanced construction of their female protagonists along with explorations of intersectional concerns such as class difference and parenthood in *Das Fahrrad* enrich their subtle critique of the state of gender equality in East Germany, showing evidence of a feminist sensibility in late GDR film—and this despite their rejection of the feminist label (Carter and Sandberg 395). As the final section of this chapter will demonstrate, these lines of inquiry are extended in the post-unification films of a number of women directors working in the context of a post-unification German cinema in which "distinctions between East and West may have become less apparent but nonetheless remain visible and formative" (Stewart 41).

2.6 Women in Contemporary Cinema

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification, cinematic production in Germany has been significantly shaped by the deregulation and privatization of media industries which, along with pro-corporate policies which paved the way for accelerated mergers and acquisitions, have resulted in media conglomeration (Baer, "The Berlin School"; Baer and Fenner,

"Introduction"). Not only have these processes put major financing decisions in the hands of a select few, but they have also exacerbated gender disparity in media industries "both materially and ideologically by downsizing women and by abandoning redistributive policies" (Baer, "The Berlin School" 40). Women's overall participation in media production and decision-making is far from equal to men's, with a 2014 analysis of major European media organizations finding that only one third of decision-making positions in public service broadcasting and only one-fourth of positions in the private sector are occupied by women (Ross). A direct result of media conglomeration according to Hester Baer, women's underrepresentation in decision-making positions in the media sector is then reflected in their underrepresentation as writers, producers, and directors, as earlier analysis in this chapter has demonstrated ("The Berlin School" 40). Consequently, by restricting the number of voices participating in key positions in media industries, processes of media conglomeration have contributed to limiting the diversity of aesthetic representations and political perspectives available in German mainstream media.

At the same time, Germany's cinematic landscape following reunification has been marked by a shift to a funding regime more favourable to commercial production by focusing on a film's capacity to make money, as noted at the beginning of this chapter. Carter and Sandberg point to Doris Dörrie's hit comedy *Männer* (1985) as the starting point of this shift, which not only signalled the end of the era of arthouse women's cinema in (West) Germany but also set the stage for the commercially focused relationship comedies of the 1990s, collectively referred to as New German Comedy (Baer, *German Cinema* 38; Carter and Sandberg 399). Throughout the 1990s, New German Comedy films largely dominated the box office as well as media discourse, with the top domestic box office draw of the 1990s being Sönke Wortmann's *Der bewegte Mann* (1994) about a man looking for a place to live after his girlfriend catches him cheating (Cooke

and Homewood 2). The early films of Sherry Hormann—the director of *Nur eine Frau*, discussed in chapter five—such as *Frauen sind was Wunderbares* (1994) and as *Irren ist männlich* (1996) reflect the commercially oriented relationship comedies typical of the New German Comedy, relying on conventional gender constructions within narrative-driven frameworks. Despite its eventual decline after the 1990s, the New German Comedy's focus on (overwhelmingly heterosexual) relationships is reflected in the cinema of the new millennium which, as previously discussed, continues to portray women largely in the context of relationships and partnerships with male characters (Prommer and Linke, *Audiovisuelle Diversität*).

While the 2000s saw the critical and commercial successes of films dealing with the country's totalitarian past, such as Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Der Untergang* (2004), Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006), and Uli *Edel's Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* (2008), the new millennium also saw the rise of a form of filmmaking with a higher degree of aesthetic experimentation practiced by filmmakers who would come to be collectively referred to as the "Berliner Schule." The Berlin School's growing acclaim, from successful festival runs to (inter)national award recognition, has situated the School as "arguably Germany's most significant filmmaking moment since the New German Cinema of the 1970s" (Abel and Fisher 2). Discourse on women's on- and off-screen representation in the German cinema of the new millennium has largely focused on Berlin School films, and with good reason: not only do female protagonists predominate these films, but the Berlin School boasts a significant number of women director-producers. This is not to say that women's films (or female protagonists) exist only within the confines of the Berlin School—one need only point to Maria Schrader's recent hit *Ich bin dein Mensch* (2021) or Caroline Link's *Nirgendwo in Afrika* (2001), a massive critical

and commercial success both at home and abroad, sweeping the German Film Awards and winning the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film—the first German film to do so since Volker Schlöndorff's *Die Blechtrommel* (1979). However, the sheer number and growing acclaim of women's films and films with female protagonists associated with the Berlin School demonstrate a sustained engagement with gendered subjectivity among its practitioners, which is especially noteworthy given their insistence on—often contemporaneous—narratives which "reject the notion that the most compelling German stories come from its totalitarian past" and, in so doing, "inhabit the present tense" (Roy, "Introduction" 11).

More of a critics' designation than an artists' declaration, as Rajendra Roy notes, the Berlin School moniker was originally coined to describe the early oeuvres of filmmakers Thomas Arslan, Christian Petzold, and Angela Schanelec, all of whom studied at the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (DFFB) and began collaborating in the late 1990s ("Introduction" 11). The label has since been significantly broadened to encompass a number of filmmakers, many of whom are not associated with Berlin: Christoph Hochhäusler and Benjamin Heisenberg met as students at the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen München, for instance, where Maren Ade also studied; Ulrich Köhler and Henner Winckler studied together at the Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg; Maria Speth attended the Filmuniversität Babelsberg Konrad Wolf, while Valeska Grisebach studied at the Filmakademie Wien (Abel and Fisher 4). In place of a spatial allegiance, what unites these filmmakers and their films, particularly since the turn of the millennium, are frequent collaborations with one another—evidenced by the fact that many Berlin School films rely on a recurring pool of professionals in key creative positions such as camera operators, casting directors, editors, and production designers—as well as narrative and form approaches associated with a realist aesthetic (Hennessy 49-50; Hochhäusler 27). To

varying degrees, depending on the film and director, many Berlin School filmmakers utilize long takes, sparse usage of non-diegetic sound, restrained editing, and slow pacing, leading to a perceived "earnestness" or "seriousness" of their films (Abel 5-6; Hochhäusler 22-3).

At the same time, Berlin School films take part in a transnational cinematic discourse; not only do Berlin School filmmakers often identify non-German directors as their influences, but they situate their films within a global art cinema exploring related terrain, as filmmaker Christoph Hochhäusler reflects:

> As for stylistic influences, recent Asian cinema … plays an important role, from Abbas Kiarostami to Hsiao-hsien Hou (whom Arslan names as an important influence), from Apichatpong Weerasethakul (on whom all of us are more or less in agreement) to Lav Diaz (an important discovery for Grisebach), from Sang-soo Hong (a key figure for Köhler) to Edward Yang. … In fact, the Berlin School, despite what the label suggests, is not a specifically German phenomenon. All over the world there are filmmakers exploring related terrain. In Austria (Jessica Hausner), in Argentina (Lisandro Alonso, Lucrecia Martel), in the United States (Lance Hammer, Kelly Reichardt), in Japan (Naomie Kawase, Hirokazu Kore-eda), and in many other places. (Hochhäusler 24-25)

Their global ties notwithstanding, the German spatial and cultural context plays a crucial role in Berlin School films, many of which explore the changing constellations of post-unification Germany. Made by directors who almost exclusively grew up in the former West, Berlin School films focus on characters struggling to adapt in a time of societal change, which is often exemplified in the merging of East and West; in this way, they "strive to provide a cinematic expression of the search for a new German identity" (Roy, "Introduction" 11).[15]

[15] See also Hochhäusler 22; Roy, "Women's Lab" 47-8.

Insights into this fluctuating identity are primarily provided through the eyes of the protagonists of Berlin School films who, as Roy notes, are "almost invariably women" ("Women's Lab" 47). From the title character in Christian Petzold's *Yella* (2007) to Maren Ade's Ines in *Toni Erdmann* and, more recently, to Annika Pinske's Clara in *Alle reden übers Wetter*, the prominence of female protagonists has remained a constant fixture of the Berlin School cinematic landscape. Frequently finding themselves in the midst of personal or professional crises—if not both—these women "struggle, fail, or refuse to self-manage properly:" Yella gets caught in a web of deceit following her departure from the former East, Ines' professional façade is shattered when her father visits her at work, and Clara cannot seem to fit in either at work or at home (Baer and Fenner, "Introduction" 7). A preference for female protagonists who face constant challenges in their personal and professional lives thereby links the Berlin School with DEFA cinema; the latter utilizes female protagonists to diagnose the shortcomings of life under East German socialism and point the way forward, while the former's female protagonists "[function] as sites for making visible the problems of agency and subjectivity in the present" (Baer and Fenner, "Introduction" 7). Indeed, female characters in Berlin School films often reflect the challenges faced by women in post-unification Germany; Roy has noted the reflection of the demography debate discourse of the 2000s on films such as Ulrich Köhler's *Morgen kommen die Fenster* (2006) and Maria Speth's *Madonnen* (2007), both of which centre on mothers who either struggle with or fully reject traditional maternal responsibility:

> The active denial of paternal responsibility would seem commonplace in contemporary cinema—even sadly documentary. But the image of a mother abandoning her children and family still shocks, and it can be manipulated to create social pressure to conform to traditional roles. Such was the case with the Rabenmutter (raven mother) [*sic*] debates of

> the 2000s, which pitted East German traditions of collective child care and working mothers against a declining birthrate and Western individualism and conservatism. This image of maternal abandonment can also serve as a metaphor for rupture with a socially prescribed role. (Roy, "Women's Lab" 53)

This rupture with a socially prescribed role—or what Baer and Fenner call "socially contested behaviors" ("Introduction" 11)—is especially common among female characters in women's films of the Berlin School, which largely focus on female protagonists (Baer, "The Berlin School"). Boasting a "remarkably equal mix of women and men," the Berlin School is home to a number of female directors, many of whom also act as producers and often writers for their films, with some of the most recognizable names being Angela Schanelec, Valeska Grisebach, Maria Speth, and Maren Ade (Roy, "Women's Lab" 47). Women's film authorship in the context of the Berlin School is often supported by gendered networks and alliances: Annika Pinske, for instance, who also studied at the DFFB, was assistant director to Maren Ade on *Toni Erdmann* prior to directing her debut *Alle reden übers Wetter.* As the following will demonstrate, cooperative practices as well as activism for gender equity in filmmaking have also played key roles in fostering women's film authorship among Berlin School practitioners, thereby further supporting the argument for casting a gendered lens on German cinema's "most significant filmmaking moment" in decades (Abel and Fisher 2).

Women's film authorship has been a consistent element of Berlin School filmmaking, and it ought to be recognized as an essential component of its development; this is best exemplified in the "founding" figure of Angela Schanelec, who "pioneered and perfected a number of techniques that have since been identified as signatures of the Berlin School" (Roy, "Women's Lab" 48). Schanelec's pared-down films, characterized by a general economy of slowness

achieved through long takes and strictly diegetic sound, place the emphasis on ordinary, seemingly mundane elements of life, as well as on her characters' psyches, as is the case with lonely student Mimmi in *Plätze in Städten* (1998) or distraught mother Astrid in *Ich war zuhause, aber…*(2019). Indeed, female protagonists predominate women's films of the Berlin School, which often focus on (mostly young) women struggling to adapt to changes in their personal and professional lives, such as 22-year-old student Lynn in Maria Speth's *In den Tag hinein* (2001) or 27-year-old teacher Melanie in Maren Ade's *Der Wald vor lauter Bäumen* (2003). This preference for female protagonists in crisis, along with formal choices that highlight their experiences, solidify gender as a crucial analytic for women's films of the Berlin School:

> The formally austere, dedramatized films of contemporary women directors in German-speaking Europe—with their focus on female protagonists, gendered subjectivity, and ordinary life … open up spaces for making visible the paradoxes of our contemporary moment, with its rhetorical commitment to equality politics and simultaneous undoing of collective social movements. (Baer and Fenner "Introduction" 8)

While it would be tempting to read women's films of the Berlin School as feminist due to their sustained engagement with gender, a closer look reveals the relationship of these films—and their filmmakers—to feminism as rather ambiguous (Hennessy 50). This is in large part due to the way gender and women's issues are treated in these films; by and large, films such as those of Ade, Speth, and Schanelec do not offer political explanations or solutions to the challenges to gendered subjectivity presented in their films. Instead, much like the films of West German directors such as Helke Sander and Helma Sanders-Brahms a few decades earlier, their realist aesthetics allow them to approach these issues in a more implicit way, preferring description over prescription (Landry 161-63). In fact, even when the term feminism is mentioned in these films,

this is often done in passing and even imbued with a critical tone, as the analysis of *Toni Erdmann* in the following chapter will demonstrate. This implicit approach is also emblematic of a number of other Berlin School films, which often skirt around explicitly political themes and representations and whose practitioners generally reject the notion of making political films (Abel 18; Landry 161). Nevertheless, Berlin School films' narratives and their commitment to realism "affectively confront us with their characters' lived refusals to either embrace the clichéd desires of individual and social security or pursue the bourgeois demand for upward social mobility" (Abel 18). In the case of women's stories, this translates to "socially contested behaviours" among female characters, as these cinematic women often refuse to conform to gendered expectations (Baer and Fenner, "Introduction" 11).

Next to their implicit approach to feminist politics, the other reason why it would be misleading to label women's films of the Berlin School as feminist is their directors' relationship to feminism, which they renounce more often than not. Filmmakers such as Maren Ade, whose success after *Toni Erdmann* has propelled her to the limelight, publicly reject the feminist label or the notion that they make feminist films. In a 2014 essay titled "Feministin sein war uncool," Ade writes:

> Wenn zu meiner Zeit an der Filmhochschule eine Studentin gesagt hätte „Ich bin Feministin", wäre das uncool gewesen. Ich hätte damit verbunden, dass jemand sich auf eine bestimmte Art gegen Männer stellt und das Gefühl hat, sich wehren zu müssen, sprich: ein Opfer zu sein. Auch heute würde ich mich nicht als Feministin bezeichnen, weil ich den Begriff überfrachtet finde, aber ich denke mittlerweile sehr in diese Richtung. (Ade 423)

While Ade goes on to align herself with feminist thinking by stressing the importance of gendered alliances and by acknowledging the glass ceiling in the film industry, as Hester Baer notes (though Ade in the same breath claims that the glass ceiling in the film industry is far less apparent than other sectors), her rejection of the feminist label is symptomatic of the tendency towards a repudiation of feminism discussed in the previous chapter, in turn informed by a cultural context in which feminism is seen as an extreme and outdated position ("The Berlin School" 42). Indeed, Ade's reference to victimhood echoes Alice Schwarzer's rhetoric of women as either strong feminists or weak victims of the patriarchy—though Ade here seems to reverse Schwarzer's argument by equating feminists with victims (Gebhardt, *Alice im Niemandsland* 301). Ade's renunciation of feminism also reflects the hesitation among women filmmakers to align themselves with women's cinema, as discussed earlier in this chapter, in an effort to avoid controversy or a negative impact on their potential to secure financing for their projects. Ade herself admits that what convinced her that the glass ceiling in the film industry is real was that, despite an equal number of men and women during her student years, when it came to securing funding, she found herself in a position of having to justify her material more strongly than her male colleagues (Ade 423).

This resistance to feminism among women filmmakers has also led to an obfuscation of the West German feminist film movement and its legacy, even among those who identify as feminist. Such is the case of Tatjana Turanskyj, one of the few German directors to explicitly embrace feminism as a political and aesthetic project, and a staunch advocate for gender parity in the German film industry, earning her a posthumous recognition as "*the* German feminist filmmaker par excellence of her generation" ("In Memoriam"). While Turanskyj was not affiliated with the Berlin School, Baer notes that her films are "cousins" to the Berlin School's in

both formal and narrative approaches, with her key films being *Eine flexible Frau* (2010) and *Top Girl* (2014), two installments of an intended trilogy on women and work (*German Cinema* 180). Despite becoming familiar with films by Sander, Stöckl, and Sanders-Brahms during her studies, Turanskyj admits to only being half-conscious of the connection to her feminist precursors when making *Eine flexible Frau*—which has since been noted for its remarkable similarities to West German feminist films in both form and narrative (Baer, *German Cinema* 178; Turanskyj 307n3).

Beyond their directors' stance towards feminism, women's films of the Berlin School (and beyond, as the example of Turanskyj shows) engage with gender discourse through their narrative and formal approaches, centring female protagonists and their struggles, underpinned by an affective mode of realism that Mary Hennessy reads as constitutive of the Berlin School's feminism (68). Tatjana Turanskyj—who described herself as a lifelong feminist because "was soll man anders werden" (Turanskyj 307n3)—has also echoed this sentiment when expressing her bewilderment with her fellow filmmakers' rejection of feminism: "Was ich interessant finde ist, dass die Meisterinnen unter den Filmemacherinnen z.T. explizit keine Feministinnen sind. Dabei sind ihre Filme so kämpferisch, so analytisch, wild, experimentell – feministisch?!" (ibid.). Despite their (largely political) reasons for rejecting feminism, a number of women filmmakers working in the German film industry today craft films which centre on women's stories and engage critically with gendered subjectivity, largely accentuated by realist techniques, resulting in what Hennessy calls a "feminist politics of realism" (53). This embeddedness underscores the need for a close reading of these films, which this dissertation project will undertake for the selected works while considering the conditions for women's film authorship as well as evolving discourses on women and feminism.

The conditions for women's film authorship, and particularly access to the means of production, are also a key factor when considering questions of diversity and intersectionality. Not only are all women filmmakers discussed so far white, but contemporary German films by women largely focus on "white female protagonists predominantly of the middle class," and this in a heteronormative constellation (Baer and Fenner, "Introduction" 11). With women already at a significant disadvantage when it comes to financing and distribution decisions, along with the predominance of gender bias in a film industry that sees women as the inherently riskier choice, the underrepresentation of marginalized groups behind the camera correlates with women's on-screen representation as "sichtbar, aber nicht vielfältig" (Prommer et al. 25). A notable exception to this pattern is Angelina Maccarone, a writer and director whose oeuvre demonstrates a consistent engagement with issues of race, migration, and sexuality. The daughter of an Italian immigrant and a German mother, Maccarone has been active since the 1990s and often works together with industry professionals affiliated with the Berlin School, most notably editor Bettina Böhler and camera operator Judith Kaufmann—the latter also worked on Feo Aladağ's *Die Fremde* (2010) and Sherry Hormann's *Nur eine Frau*, which will be analyzed in chapter five. Maccarone's films often centre on marginalized female characters, such as gay Iranian asylum seeker Fariba in *Fremde Haut* (2005). Like *Die Fremde* and *Nur eine Frau*, *Fremde Haut* attaches itself to a German cinematic discourse of migration, also exemplified in films such as Fatih Akın's films *Gegen die Wand* (2004) and *Auf der anderen Seite* (2007); at the same time, *Fremde Haut*'s non-heterosexual protagonist establishes a connection to queer cinema, represented in Germany by filmmakers such as Ulrike Ottinger and Monika Treut (Carter and Sandberg 400). Additionally, Maccarone's pioneering work includes intersections with black cinema: her 1998 film *Alles wird gut* (1998), co-scripted with intersectional scholar Fatima El-

Tayeb and focusing on the love story between two Afro-German women, was the first German comedy to feature non-white protagonists (Mukhida). While these constitute important intersectional contributions by women to the German cinematic landscape, thereby expanding its engagement with race and sexuality, the fact that these films are few and far between is not representative of a lack of diversity in German society, but rather of women's limited access to the means of production which, along with the aforementioned risk aversion on the part of funding bodies, likely results in women-directed films which centre on marginalized characters receiving fewer or no funds.

2.7 Women's Interventions

The twenty-first century has seen women make inroads in gaining access to the means of production in the German film industry by developing new production models which, crucially, rely on collaborative practices. A significant number of women-directed films since the turn of the millennium have relied on production collectives founded by (majority female) filmmakers in the late 1990s and 2000s, which have helped establish the material conditions needed to foster women's film authorship. The production company Komplizen Film, founded in 1999 by Maren Ade and fellow student at the Munich Film Academy Janine Jackowski, is an especially prolific example: since its founding, Komplizen Film has (co-)produced a total of 48 films, 25 of which are (co-)directed by women ("Fertiggestellte Filme")[16]. Ade's company has not only produced her own films, including *Toni Erdmann,* but also numerous contemporary films by her peers, including fellow Berlin School directors Ulrich Köhler and Benjamin Heisenberg, and fellow female directors such as Barbara Albert, Sonja Heiss, and Valeska Grisebach.

[16] Data for both Komplizen Film and coop99 taken from their respective websites and include films released up until August 2025.

Another prominent example of a production collective committed to gender equity in the German-speaking filmmaking landscape is the Austrian company coop99, founded in 1999 by filmmakers Barbara Albert, Jessica Hausner, Antonin Svoboda, and cinematographer Martin Gschlacht, and born out of their collaborations at the Filmakademie Wien (Albert et al.). Like Komplizen Film, coop99 has (co-)produced a total of 44 films since its founding, 20 of which feature women in the director's chair, and with women serving as producers for the majority of the films ("Filme"). The company's catalogue includes such titles as Hans Weingartner's *Die fetten Jahre sind vorbei* (2004) and Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann,* co-produced with Ade's Komplizen Film; in fact, Komplizen Film and coop99 have collaborated extensively, both formally and informally by sharing actors and technical personnel, and encouraging work on one another's films (Baer and Fenner, "Introduction" 11). These practices not only save costs—which is crucial given that women are given smaller budgets to work with than men—but also foster a shared aesthetic vision, evident in the realist techniques employed by many of the filmmakers (Baer and Fenner, "Introduction"; Prommer et al.) Additonally, these collaborative practices foster the exchange of technical know-how, especially among women in the industry, and support their employment in a wide range of roles, as the credits to many of these films can attest to—a direct reflection of Loist and Prommer's finding that women tend to work more often with other women, especially when occupying key filmmaking positions (107).

The innovative, independent production model practiced by companies such as Komplizen Film and coop99, with their commitment to gender equity and reliance on collaborations between film professionals, has been decidedly successful, producing highly acclaimed films and establishing both Komplizen Film and coop99 as leading production companies for independent cinema in the German-speaking room. Admittedly, this model of

production is not without its challenges, as it is both laborious and precarious, and results in a relatively lower film output compared to other production companies, with long wait times between features. Unsurprisingly, the question of funding can also be difficult to tackle, as these companies rely on a complex combination of funding packages, typically involving a range of regional, national, and international subventions (Baer, "The Berlin School" 47). Despite these hurdles, the success of the production model practiced by Komplizen Film and coop99 constitutes a significant intervention against media conglomeration; not only does it enable filmmakers to realize new projects by consolidating control over all aspects of their filmmaking, it also allows directors such as Maren Ade and Maria Speth—who also founded her own production company, MadonnenFilm, in 2009—to participate in decision-making about financing and distribution deals.

More importantly for women's film authorship, Komplizen Film and coop99's commitment to gender equity—evidenced by the fact that roughly half of the films in their respective catalogues are directed by women, itself a reflection of the equal numbers of men and women in film schools—develops the material conditions to facilitate women's filmmaking, thereby laying the groundwork for a resurgent women's cinema in German-speaking Europe (Baer, "The Berlin School"; Baer and Fenner, "Introduction"). Despite individual filmmakers' renunciation of feminism, Hester Baer points out that these practices draw on the kinds of strategies pioneered by the West German feminist filmmaking movement ("The Berlin School" 45-6). Filmmakers associated with West German feminist filmmaking relied heavily on a collective context and cooperative material structures, from the aforementioned Coop der Filmerinnen to the distribution company Basis-Filmverleih, which played a significant role in promoting the work of women filmmakers in West Germany (Elsaesser, *European Cinema* 221-

22). Accordingly, Baer sees in contemporary women filmmakers "a simultaneous refutation of feminism and embrace of its legacy"—an assessment which rings even truer when considering women's recent interventions in advocating for gender parity in filmmaking ("The Berlin School" 42).

Undoubtedly the most prominent among women's initiatives to revitalize women's film authorship in the German film industry through political lobbying, Pro Quote Regie was inaugurated at the 2014 Berlinale as an advocacy group seeking gender parity in the funding of directorial projects. The group had its informal start a year earlier, when twelve directors met to discuss their frustration with losing their footing in the male-dominated film and television industry despite creating acclaimed films (Baer and Fenner, "Representation Matters" 142). In 2017, Pro Quote Regie changed its name to Pro Quote Film (PQF) to expand its reach across the film industry; that same year, their membership reached nearly 400 women (Heiduschke, "Women's Interventions" 151). Next to gender parity on film boards, equitable pay, and equitable on-screen representation, PQF's core demand is directly reflected in their name: a 50% quota in the allocation of production funds to women. As founding member Tatjana Turanskyj stated in 2018, PQF's mission is to affect change in the existing funding structures rather than working separately from them: "It's not a choice about working outside these funding structures. It's more about changing the funding structures. That's the campaign of PQF—for everyone to be able to make the kinds of films they envision, including experimental ones or those that develop new forms" (Baer and Fenner, "Representation Matters" 140). Interestingly, PQF's demands directly reflect those of the West German Verband der Filmarbeiterinnen (VdF), from the 50% funding quota to gender parity on film boards, and whose advocacy created a flurry of opportunities for women in the West German film industry, ultimately creating the material

conditions for what became known as the West German feminist filmmaking movement. While the VdF disbanded in 2009 (just five years before PQF's founding), the fact that PQF took on the same demands is not only a testament to the continuing challenges for women's film authorship in Germany, but also to filmmakers acknowledging the necessity of collective action and political advocacy in the face of material structures that disproportionately disadvantage women (Heiduschke, "Women's Interventions").

More than a decade after its founding, PQF has seen a rapid membership growth and established itself as a prominent lobby for equity and diversity across the film industry by advocating for quotas as well as broader issues of gender and representation in media; more recently, it has sought to reflect the range of its members by addressing nonbinary and queer identities and incorporating intersectional approaches into its advocacy (Fenner and Mennel 10-12). Through sustained lobbying of production companies, broadcasters, funding agencies, and political representatives, PQF has achieved several key successes: the Filmförderungsanstalt (FFA) has introduced gender parity across all its committees, from its governing body to its subsidy-granting juries; the states of Berlin and Brandenburg have adopted a long-term goal of gender equity in regional broadcasting contracts starting; ARD has announced a 20% goal for women-directed programming; and ZDF has adopted an eight-point plan to improve gender equity, including childcare provisions and support programs for young female directors (Baer and Fenner, "Gender Equality"). While these gains signal progress, political change has been slow: in December 2024, Culture Minister Claudia Roth presented a revised Film Funding Act (Filmförderungsgesetz) that removed a previously proposed diversity clause which would have established a "Diversitätsbeirat" within the FFA— an advisory board tasked with promoting diversity with regard to gender, age, race, religion, and sexual identity. Although the revision did

include a brief clause on gender equality stipulating that the FFA create funding incentives to foster gender parity, the removal of the diversity clause despite its limited authority—the advisory board would have no decision-making authority over funding—was regarded as a major setback for the visibility of marginalized groups on German screens. PQF, which had participated in the multi-year consultation process alongside other associations, called the last-minute change "incomprehensible" and "disappointing," interpreting it as a signal that diversity will not be prioritized in the German film industry at the legislative level in the near future (Pro Quote Film). In response, PQF drafted a written self-commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, inviting production companies, funding agencies, broadcasters, filmmakers, and industry organizations to sign; presented at the 2025 Berlinale, the initiative secured twenty signatures, indicating at least an industry-level willingness to advance diversity despite political setbacks ("Pro Quote Film setzt").

Next to PQF, another example of what Fenner and Mennel call a "gradual but visible" reorientation toward forging gendered alliances among women in the German film industry is the mentoring program Into The Wild (10). Launched by filmmaker and PQF member Isabell Šuba, Into the Wild (ITW) is a one-year mentoring program for young female filmmakers, bringing them together with established female professionals to help them gain a foothold in an industry where "die männlichen Kollegen … einfacher und schneller den Berufseinstieg schaffen" ("About"). Beyond boosting the résumés and professional skills of its participants, ITW's approach fosters collective agency among young filmmakers in Germany, while at the same time formalizing and expanding networks across generations of women filmmakers. Its founder, Isabell Šuba, is no stranger to feminist interventions: when her short film *Chica XX Mujer* (2010) was invited to the Cannes film festival in 2012, she took note of the absolute lack of women-

directed films in the main competition and decided to use the festival itself as material for a project. She handed her official name tag to actress Anne Haug, who then performed as "Isabell Šuba," allowing the filmmaker to stage Cannes as the backdrop for a mockumentary about a young director confronting the sexism of the industry. The resulting guerrilla-style feature, *Männer zeigen Filme & Frauen ihre Brüste* (2013), Šuba's debut, starred Haug as the fictionalized Šuba navigating what proves to be a decidedly sexist professional landscape, as the title bluntly suggests. Šuba's film received favourable reviews from both feminist outlets and mainstream media, with *Der Spiegel* going so far as to call it "genau der Weckruf, den die deutsche Filmbranche gebraucht hat" (Pilarczyk).

Having fostered multiple rounds of mentorships since its inception, Into the Wild has enabled alumnae to bring their films to both theatrical release and festival audiences. A notable example is Aslı Özarslan's feature debut *Ellbogen* (2024), an adaptation of Fatma Aydemir's acclaimed 2017 debut novel of the same name, a layered coming-of-age story about a Turkish-German teenager. Özarslan's film premiered at the 2024 Berlinale before opening in German cinemas later that year, with *Die Zeit* praising it as "the best youth film in recent German film history" (Lorenz). *Ellbogen* also opened the 2024 Internationales Frauen Film Fest (IFFF) Dortmund+Köln, Germany's most prominent women's film festival, which emerged in 2006 from the merger of *femme totale* and *Feminale*—festivals founded in the mid-1980s by West German women in response to women's underrepresentation at film festivals and with the aim of making women's films visible while disseminating the feminist film theory articulated in outlets such as the journal *frauen und film* discussed earlier in this chapter. With more than four decades of combined history, the IFFF now constitutes the largest German forum dedicated exclusively to women's films and has played a crucial role in increasing the visibility of women's film

authorship in Germany, thereby underscoring the continuing importance of women's interventions within the national film industry.

2.8 Singular Plural

In exploring the status of women's representation in contemporary German cinema, what emerges is a complex picture that converges around questions of authorship, gendered subjectivity, and female imagery that both reaffirms and contests socially prescribed roles. Access to the means of production remains a central concern for women's film authorship, and interventions such as advocacy groups, production collectives, and mentoring programs demonstrate a gradual yet intentional reorientation toward forging gendered alliances, echoing the processes that gave rise to a flourishing of women's cinema in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s. These women-driven initiatives have been crucial in expanding the output of women-directed films—exemplified by the catalogues of Komplizen Film and coop99—and in generating sustained engagement with women's representation through studies and reports. Such research has helped fill what remained an underexamined area until the mid-2010s, while simultaneously documenting the persistent gender bias confronting women in the industry. As these studies confirm, women's representation in the upper echelons of the film industry remains marginal, with their leadership abilities challenged in much the same way as broader discourse around gender quotas, as discussed in the previous chapter. In both cases, essentialist assumptions are used to justify exclusion, assigning negative value to perceived "feminine" traits such as people orientation and conflict aversion, thereby reinforcing a gendered hierarchy in which women remain structurally disadvantaged.

The same essentialist logics that underpin women's structural marginalization in the industry are mirrored on screen, with female characters—who are decidedly less complex than

their male counterparts—frequently defined through social and emotional competencies such as (motherly) care, emotionalism, and open-heartedness. Although studies from the 2020s register an overall increase in women's on-screen visibility compared to previous years, women continue to be "sichtbar, aber nicht vielfältig:" they are predominantly slim, white, heterosexual, in their twenties or thirties, appear more often in relational than professional contexts, and they continue to have less speaking time than their male counterparts (Prommer et al. 25). Yet this pattern has been shown to shift when women occupy key creative positions such as producer or director: not only do such films tend to feature more complex female characters, but women in leadership positions are also more likely to collaborate with other women. These findings underscore the importance of gendered alliances in the film industry—not only for women's authorship behind the camera but also for broadening the representational space available to women on screen in the German cinematic landscape.

As a result of the contemporary initiatives mapped above, women are increasingly staking their claim to the German film industry and telling stories that centre on complex female characters who are struggling with the changing constellations of what it means to be a woman in the twenty-first century. At the same time, and despite its critical engagement with questions of feminist politics, this emerging women's cinema has largely not been framed in the context of feminism, with many directors refusing to accept the feminist label or align themselves with gendered authorship. This reluctance is unsurprising given the dominant perception of feminism in the German cultural consciousness and the reproach feminist directors suffered even at a time of high institutional support in 1970s and 1980s West Germany, with pioneering filmmakers such as Helke Sander accused by broadcasters of lacking objectivity in documenting social realities (Baer and Fenner, "Introduction" 12-13). With contemporary women filmmakers needing to

navigate an already narrow funding window and an industry still marked by a pervasive gender bias, not aligning oneself with feminism emerges more as a financial choice to avoid even narrower funding prospects than a political one.

Their renunciation of feminism notwithstanding, women's recent interventions in the film industry demonstrate an awareness that gender remains a political tool. This heightened awareness, along with making films that critically engage with gendered subjectivity and embed their feminist critique in realist aesthetics, have converged in what Angelica Fenner and Barbara Mennel have termed the "singular plural of feminist film practice" (itself the title of their 2022 guest edited special edition of *Feminist German Studies*), i.e. individual impulses in women's filmmaking that have gained a collective momentum (1-2). Additionally, the oeuvre of these filmmakers—with their intricate portraits of female characters in crisis and embeddedness of their feminist critique in realist aesthetics—both extends the lines of inquiry found in the films of their West and East German predecessors, and links them to a global women's cinema, practiced by filmmakers such as Kelly Reichardt, Claire Denis, and Andrea Arnold, whose work "attests to and combats the ongoing (and renewed) marginalization of women in contemporary societies and cinematic representations" (Baer, "The Berlin School" 39).

Given this resurgent focus on women's film authorship and the increasing number of films produced by, directed by, and starring women, a crucial question arises: what kinds of women are constructed in these films? In other words, how do women portray women? In her introduction to *Women's Cinema, World Cinema,* Patricia White argues that, much like the way silent cinema of the early twentieth century offered an alternative public sphere for heterogeneous groups of women coming into modernity, so too does contemporary women's cinema offer a countersphere for women of the early twenty-first century—only this time not just

as media consumers and representational support but, crucially, as *producers* of a contemporary public social vision (3). Since this vision is projected onto the bodies of their predominantly female protagonists—as was the case in DEFA films a few decades earlier—a closer look at these characters will enrich our understanding of how they interact with both cinematic and public discourses on gender. From the suit-wearing businesswoman Ines in Maren Ade's smash hit *Toni Erdmann* to doctoral candidate and mother Clara in *Alle reden übers Wetter* by emerging director Annika Pinske (who, just like her protagonist, hails from the former GDR), and finally to "just a woman" Hatun Sürücü in Sherry Hormann's *Nur eine Frau*, the following analysis will seek to dissect the portrayal of these characters in the course of the stories presented. Which traits are ascribed to these women and how? How do they view themselves and other women? To what degree are the challenges they face gender-specific, if at all? How do they view motherhood? These and other questions will guide the analysis with the goal of crystallizing the female images projected in these films. After all, as director Jutta Brückner proclaimed when awarding the 2018 Grand Prize for Screenwriting by the Austrian organization FC Gloria—yet another example of a gendered alliance with the goal of promoting gender equality in the German-speaking cinematic space— "Neue Frauenbilder sind neue Gesellschaftsbilder" (17).

Chapter 3. Taking the Long View: Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann*

Toni Erdmann (2016) is Maren Ade's third feature film after *Der Wald vor lauter Bäumen* (2003) and *Alle Anderen* (2009), both of which focus largely on female protagonists in their late twenties and thirties navigating personal or professional crises. Written, directed, and produced by Ade, whose own company Komplizen Film co-produced the film along with Austrian company coop99, *Toni Erdmann* chronicles the attempts of retired music teacher Winfried Conradi (Peter Simonischek) to puncture the façade of his daughter Ines' (Sandra Hüller) life, who works as a business consultant in Bucharest. The film was realized on a €3 million budget, patching together a number of funding sources, spanning federal and state-level funding bodies (FFA, DFFF, Ministry for Culture and Media, Film- und Medienstiftung NRW, Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, Filmförderung Hamburg-Schleswig Holstein, Filmfernsehfonds Bayern und Media), public broadcasters (SWR, WDR, ARTE), the EU funding body Eurimages, as well as the Austrian Film Institute and the Austrian Film Commission ("Toni Erdmann"). Spurred on by an interest in father-daughter relationships and "Frauen in Führungsrollen," Ade spent two years researching and working on the script before casting the main roles and deciding on Romania as her filming location, followed by further refining of the script and a three-month shooting period in Germany and Romania in 2014 (Jüttner; von Heidsiek). Ending up with over 100 hours of material, Ade then spent a year and a half editing the film, "stretching" out the editing right up to the film's premiere at Cannes in spring 2016 (Peranson). This time lapse is a testament to Ade's complete creative control over her work from idea to finished product, acting as a screenwriter, director, and producer who is also involved in the distribution of her films—a luxury rarely afforded to women filmmakers, and a direct result of the independent production model she pursues through Komplizen Film (Cormican, "Willful Women" 104-05).

Toni Erdmann premiered at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, having initially been accepted into the Un Certain Regard competition, a parallel section functioning as a "low-key mirror image of the main competition" without the marketing or prestige that the Palme D'Or selection carries (Kenigsberg). However, the night before the premiere and press conference were scheduled to take place, the Cannes selection committee informed Ade that the film had been withdrawn from Un Certain Regard and instead accepted into the main competition for the Palme D'Or—the last time a German film had been in competition for the prize was 2008 with Wim Wenders' *Palermo Shooting* (2008). Though the reasons for the last-minute change can only be speculated, with international press at the time interpreting it as a reappraisal of a national film industry thought to be in decline, this switch was both rare and an indication of what was to follow (Worthy). *Toni Erdmann* debuted at Cannes to overwhelming enthusiasm, setting jury records, earning a rare mid-film ovation, and quickly becoming an audience favourite and critical darling of the festival (Glasenapp; Grater). Ade herself amassed thirty interview hours with sixty correspondents yet, as Blythe Worthy notes, the director was given the "standard press junket treatment for women filmmakers"—she was repeatedly asked how much of the film was autobiographical and how much inspiration she drew from other filmmakers, with some correspondents circulating hyperbolized rumours about her creative process (such as claiming she shot 700 hours of footage) in a manner representative of a history of liberties taken with female directors (188).

Despite *Toni Erdmann* becoming an immediate contender for the Palme D'Or at Cannes, it ultimately lost to Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) in a much-criticized move; at the time, the festival's top prize had been awarded to a woman only once: Jane Campion for *The Piano* (1993). Notably, two more women have gone home with the big prize in the time since, both in

the 2020s: Julia Ducournau for *Titane* (2021) and Justine Triet for *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), the latter also starring Sandra Hüller. While this signals the rising visibility of women's filmmaking in the post-#MeToo entertainment industry, with the Academy Awards' coveted Best Director Oscar also going to women in 2020 and 2021 despite only one pre-2020s win,[17] the shift at Cannes is also symptomatic of the festival's heavy criticism for the lack of gender parity in its long history. In 2018, Cannes made headlines when 82 women working in the film industry, including then-Jury president Cate Blanchett, locked arms on the red carpet to protest gender inequality in their field—at the time, only 82 films by female directors (including seven in mixed-gender teams) had premiered in the main competition since 1946 compared to 1,645 films by male directors (Nayeri).

Following the tone set by its Cannes debut, *Toni Erdmann* proved a massive critical and commercial success both in Germany and internationally, being sold to over 100 countries and boasting the highest ticket sales of any film made by a director associated with the Berlin School (Baer, *German Cinema* 293; Gemünden ch. 2). Among its many accolades, the film swept the German Film Awards as well as the European Film Awards, becoming the first film directed by a woman to win Best Film at the latter,[18] and was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Celebrated by German and international critics as a "großartiger Film" (Liebrand) and "by a wide margin the funniest almost-three-hour German comedy you will ever see" (Scott), the success of Ade's film heralded new possibilities for German cinema "as a Germany comedy that travels *and* as a blockbuster art film" (Baer, *German Cinema* 293)—

[17] Kathryn Bigelow for *The Hurt Locker* (2009), Chloé Zhao for *Nomadland* (2020), and Jane Campion for *The Power of the Dog* (2021).

[18] Since Ade's win, two more women have had their films recognized with the prize in the 2020s, Jasmila Žbanić for *Quo Vadis, Aida?* (2021) and Justine Triet for *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), in a direct reflection of the Palme D'Or and the Academy Award for Best Director wins.

though its status as a comedy has been contested by various voices, not least by Ade herself who, despite admitting to welcoming audiences' response to the comedic aspect, maintains that *Toni Erdmann* is "a very long and sad film" (Glasenapp 37).

A highly unstylized film employing natural settings and an exclusively diegetic sound, *Toni Erdmann* fills its runtime of 162 minutes with long takes, a handheld camera, and unobtrusive editing to present a narrative rife with generational conflicts, the depersonalizing effects of globalization, and workplace sexism in a sober tone undercut by moments of much-needed comedic relief offered by Winfried's antics. The film's resounding success despite subverting "all das, was vorhersehbar und damit gut verkäuflich wäre" (Bernold 351) pushed the envelope of what was expected of German cinema and, in doing so, "broke a mold," as chief film critic at *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Tobias Kniebe notes:

> To be able to make this kind of movie with that kind of complexity and accuracy and still get the big laughs and be the toast of Cannes, and sell it to more than 100 countries, that's kind of like saying now, if you're German, you can do anything. It's up to you, there's no prejudice anymore. (Donadio)

Following its premiere and in the years since, much of the discussion surrounding Ade's film has centred on the issue of gender. As the following analysis will demonstrate, questions of gender and feminism are raised both implicitly and explicitly in *Toni Erdmann*, as Ines "takes over" the film and makes it "her story," in Ade's words (Ratner 50-51). This has elicited several feminist scholarly responses to the film, which focus primarily on Ines as a representation of neoliberal subjectivity and postfeminist values. The following analysis builds on the established discourse and, while it also explores Ade's own understanding of gender and feminism with regard to her film, ultimately uses the film itself as its primary source, performing a close reading

of the film's formal and narrative language to explore *Toni Erdmann's* engagement with gender and womanhood. Drawing on this approach, the chapter argues that Ade's film exposes the ubiquity of casual corporate sexism, which is framed as a systemic obstacle that hinders women's advancement regardless of skill or ambition. In a decidedly male-dominated environment, Ines is portrayed as having to constantly perform masculinity—a performance that is gradually revealed as futile, as she is persistently devalued, marginalized, and dehumanized by her exclusive male bosses and colleagues. In response, she enacts an increasingly subversive set of acts of defiance, which ultimately strengthen the case for reading *Toni Erdmann* as a feminist intervention, one that subverts the gendered and corporate gazes that constrain its protagonist, and gestures toward a renewed sense of agency.

3.1 "Sie *berät* da nur 'ne Ölfirma"

The first mention of Ines in *Toni Erdmann* does not come until almost seven minutes into the film, following an opening sequence focused on her father Winfried, a retired music teacher who lives in Aachen with his deaf elderly dog, Willi, and has a penchant for practical jokes. When a mailman rings his doorbell with a delivery in the film's opening scene, Winfried pretends to fetch his brother Toni, who supposedly just got out of jail for mailing bombs and has a fondness for pornographic magazines. Winfried then returns to the door dressed in a bathrobe, a pair of handcuffs around his right hand, a peeled banana in his left, and donning a pair of sunglasses and a set of fake teeth, pretending to be the film's titular Toni (00:02:24). A few minutes later, we follow Winfried as he visits his mother Annegret's house to drop off Willi before heading to a school celebration, wearing black and white face paint meant to resemble a skeleton—a grim ode to a fellow retiring teacher, whom the school celebration is meant to honour. At Annegret's, Winfried mentions that he might be coming by with Ines tomorrow, as

“die ist wohl auf der Durchreise” (00:06:49). A medium close-up shot of Winfried as he delivers the news provides an unobstructed view of his slouched shoulders, dropped head, and gaze travelling from the floor to Annegret and back to the floor, communicating a sense of melancholy and shame, while his use of the particle “wohl” subtly establishes his detachment from his daughter’s life, which will become all the more apparent on their first encounter.

Winfried and Ines first come together at a gathering at Renate’s house, Winfried’s ex-wife and Ines’ mother, which also includes Renate’s husband Gerhard, Gerhard’s son Oliver with his partner Babette, as well as Bärbel, a family friend. Upon greeting the guests, Winfried asks Renate whether Ines has arrived, to which Renate replies “doch, doch, telefoniert noch” and glances to the left of the frame (00:10:36). As Winfried’s head turns, a cut transitions to a medium shot positioned a few steps behind him, and the handheld camera tracks his movements as he spots Ines through the window and moves closer to greet her. Dressed in a form-fitting blue pantsuit, blazer, and high heels, Ines cuts a contrasting figure to her shabby-looking father with his unkempt hair and smudged face paint, whom she only acknowledges with a brief nod without disrupting her phone call (see fig. 1). Separated from her father by both a physical barrier and her decision to take a (presumably business) call over engaging with him and the rest of the party, the first shot of Ines immediately casts her as both “spatially and psychologically removed,” as Gerd Gemünden observes in his 2021 monograph on the film (ch.1).



Fig. 1. First glimpse of Ines in Renate's house (00:10:41).

While waiting for Ines to finish her call, Winfried learns from Gerhard that Ines has just flown in from Shanghai. Confused, Winfried asks Gerhard whether Ines is not based in Bucharest anymore; Gerhard then confirms that she is in Bucharest hoping to lead the new office her company is opening in Shanghai. Gerhard, who is clearly more in the know about Ines' life than Winfried, comments that Ines was meeting with new clients in Shanghai, including the executive board of Siemens, before adding: "Das ist schon ein Wahnsinn, mit welchen Schwergewichten sie da im Ring steht" (00:11:31). The use of a boxing metaphor frames Ines' work environment as one of aggression and confrontation, with Ines herself taking on the role of a fighter, the implication being that Ines has to fight in order to succeed in her work. While the viewer is at this point not privy to the exact nature of Ines' work beyond that she works in a high-

status environment and deals with the German business elite, her role is cleared up in the ensuing conversation:

BÄRBEL. Und in Bukarest, was macht sie da?

GERHARD. Öl. Öl-Business.

OLIVER. Na, also sie *berät* da nur 'ne Ölfirma. Also sie ist immer noch Unternehmensberaterin.

BÄRBEL. Ach so. A ja. (00:11:36-00:11:49)

Oliver's interjection is likely the result of jealousy: he has spent the past few minutes listening to his father expressing admiration for his stepsister's professional achievements, and he looks visibly uncomfortable while Gerhard discusses Ines' work (00:11:40-00:11:43). However, Oliver's comment goes beyond mere exposition: his emphasis on the verb "berät," followed by the adverb "nur" and an audible laugh while delivering the word "Unternehmensberaterin," effectively devalues Ines' position as a consultant compared to being an oil industry professional, thereby undermining her status. While Oliver's devaluation of his stepsister's work cannot be attributed solely to her gender, it is important to note that this is the first instance of Ines' professional life being addressed. This exchange thus sets the tone for the perception of Ines' work, a theme which Ade frequently revisits throughout *Toni Erdmann*.

Ines enters the frame a few seconds later, coming into the dining room to greet her father and join the rest of the group. The camera follows Winfried as he stands up to hug his daughter, wrapping his right arm tightly around her, while Ines remains stiff and tries to minimize the amount of physical contact by extending her upper body and hovering her hand over her father's back in what *Die Zeit*'s Thomas Assheuer aptly calls a "Business-Umarmung" (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Ines and Winfried hug at Renate's (00:12:16).

Ines is quick to move away from her father's embrace and, as she does, a medium close-up shot positioned behind Winfried's right shoulder allows the viewer a closer view at her outfit: a dark blue structured suit paired with a light blue shirt, with minimal make up and her shoulder-length hair tucked behind her ears. Ines' formal attire, evocative more of board room meetings than family dinners, stands in stark contrast to her casually dressed family and friends, and suggests that she either has not packed any casual clothing or that she deliberately chose this outfit for an early birthday celebration with her family. In both cases, Ines' physical appearance is clearly structured around her professional identity, solidifying her introduction as a woman whose career is at the forefront. Not only does Ines use her physical appearance as a marker of self-identification, she also wears her professional identity as armour against unwanted interactions—a "Rüstung aus Bluse und Businesskostüm" (Kniebe). When Winfried catches her

staring at her phone in the garden in a later scene, for instance, she quickly pretends to be on a business call to throw him off (00:14:31-00:15:08). When Winfried later raises his hand to presumably hug her goodbye a few moments later, Ines awkwardly shakes his hand, reverting to the level of physical contact she is used to in her work environment, much like the earlier "business hug" (00:15:40-00:15:43). On both occasions, Ines blurs the line between personal and professional interactions, positioning herself as a detached, career-focused woman, who would much rather be on a business call than interact with family.

This impression is solidified in the next scene involving Ines, during which Winfried unexpectedly shows up at her office lobby in Bucharest and approaches her in his sunglasses and fake teeth as she walks into the building accompanied by two men and a younger woman (see fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Ines runs into Winfried at her Bucharest office lobby (00:19:12).

Donning another dark suit and heels and with her hair in a tight updo, Ines is virtually indistinguishable from the two suit-clad businessmen in her group, cutting a visual contrast to both her father and the younger woman walking behind them with her long hair down, loose yellow shirt, and knee-length skirt. Ade, who worked on the film's costumes with frequent collaborator Gitti Fuchs, has noted in interviews that the team went to great lengths to find the right business suits for the film, even making a few not fit quite right, as "the suits are a question of status and hierarchy" (Ratner 50). In this brief scene, the medium full shot of Ines and her company approached by Winfried along with the lack of audible dialogue focus the viewer's attention on the costumes and mannerisms of the characters, with the suits visually positioning Ines as equal to the men but above the young woman. While Ines recognizes her father with a startled glance, she continues her conversation with the man to her right and promptly disappears into an elevator with the party. As Rhiannon Harries observes, Ines' quiet rejection of Winfried constitutes a decisive moment in the narrative: a child's rejection of their parent and, by extension, one generation's contempt for the other (231). Importantly, Ines rejects Winfried to continue her (presumably business) conversation with the man to her right, whom she later identifies as one of the executive heads of Dacoil, her consulting client (00:23:38-00:23:42). Aligning herself in this moment with her suit-clad business acquaintance rather than with this casually clothed "other" infiltrating her professional space, Ines thus clearly positions herself as a professional first, daughter second.

As her costume choice suggested earlier, the younger woman accompanying Ines in the office lobby is her Romanian assistant, Anca, who catches up to Winfried as he walks out onto the street. At her boss's request, Anca talks Winfried through hotel recommendations and relays Ines' instructions to meet her that evening after work at a reception at the U.S. embassy, acting as

a "cross between substitute daughter and travel guide" (Harries 231). Eager to know more about his daughter from someone who spends more time with her than he does, Winfried asks Anca how she would describe Ines as a boss:

> WINFRIED. Und wie ist meine Tochter so als Chefin? As your chief?
>
> ANCA. Sie ist sehr … honest und sie gibt mir sehr viel Feedback about my performance.
>
> WINFRIED. Performance, this means the … this is … describes your job?
>
> ANCA. Nein, Performance ist also mein Arbeit im Allgemein. Zum Beispiel im … im Meetings, mit dem Team, im Kontakt mit dem Klient.
>
> WINFRIED. Und was ist da wichtig, ich meine das Wichtigste im Kontakt mit dem Klienten?
>
> ANCA. Dass kein Konzept macht Sinn, wenn der Klient das nicht will. Also, man muss dem Klient … Die Kunst ist dem Klient zu erklären, was er eigentlich will.
>
> WINFRIED. Das kann meine Tochter bestimmt gut. (00:21:41-00:22:31)

While Anca's description of her boss as "honest" hints at Ines' already established cold and pragmatic nature, it is the assistant's commentary about "performance" that offers true insight into Ines' world. Winfried, who comes from the world of music and the occasional practical joke, has trouble equating performance to the workplace, yet Anca explains that performance goes beyond merely fulfilling one's duties and instead refers to one's ability to obey the norms and protocols of the corporate workplace. To Ines and Anca, performance is conformity; to Winfried, it is anarchy, a rupture with societal codes and expectations, as his pranks and performance as "Toni Erdmann" throughout the film demonstrate. As if reciting an oft-repeated proverb, Anca lets Winfried in on the "art" of a good consulting performance: explaining to the client what "er"—a telling masculine form that reflects the naturalization of the corporate elite as male—

actually wants. Winfried's reply that Ines is sure to be an expert in that department betrays a sense of resentment towards his daughter's convincing (if not manipulative) character—one which is not only an asset but a requirement in the cutthroat world of business consulting.

Ade's choice to set her story in the milieu of business consulting was both intentional and the result of extensive research, with the element of gender being a focal point of investigation for the narrative. When asked about her inspiration for the story in an interview, the director replied "[m]ich hat das Thema 'Frauen in Führungsrollen' interessiert," adding that she can relate to the experience, being a film director and thus in a position of leadership herself (Jüttner). Drawing a parallel between women's film authorship and women in leadership positions is especially noteworthy given the challenges to her leadership Ade has her protagonist face throughout the film—issues which echo those faced by female directors working in the German film industry, as discussed in the previous chapter, with challenges to leadership cited as the most discouraging factor by the majority of women filmmakers in Germany (Aylett et al.).

While Ade concedes that there are elements of herself in her protagonist, she insists that Ines had to have a very different job than her, landing on business consulting because of how significant the elements of performance and building up a strong façade are in the field (Jüttner; Ratner 46). Prior to writing the script, Ade spent months performing extensive research by shadowing German business consultants working in Bucharest, most notably Lotte Brauns, who is credited as "Fachmännischer Beirat" in the film. Brauns, who has since quit her consulting job, was at the time based in Bucharest and working for a German consulting firm in the oil and gas field, much like Ines, which she describes as a "dreckiges Business, in dem Frauen nichts zu suchen haben" because, as a woman, "man wird nicht richtig ernst genommen" (Hermsmeier). In interviews, both Brauns and Ade have called attention to the challenges faced by women in a

male-dominated work culture, further solidifying that gender is both central and intentional *Toni Erdmann*, with the aspect of performance driving the diverging self-understandings of Ines and Winfried (Gemünden ch. 1; Hermsmeier; Zeitchik).

To Ines, a good performance is the foundation of professional success and spans everything from command over one's facial expressions and body language to an immaculate business attire. The intentionality behind Ines' work performance and the lengths to which she goes to perfect it are revealed during a brief scene around the midpoint of the film, where Ines is shown being on a video call at work (01:11:32-01:12:25). The person on the other end is a personal coach, whom Ines is debriefing about an important presentation she gave the day before to the CEO and executive board of her client company, Dacoil. Framed in a medium close-up with countershots of the coach on her laptop screen, Ines starts by listing what went well during the presentation, namely "das Sprechen" and that "ich konnte mir den Raum gut nehmen" (01:11:33-01:11:43). The coach asks whether she used the breathing technique they have been practicing which, along with the fact that they address each other in the informal "du," establishes that Ines has employed the coach for some time. Ines responds that she did not have need of the breathing technique this time, though she would like to work on her body language, as it "entgleitet mir manchmal" (01:11:59-01:12:01). Ironically, Ines' body language while delivering this assessment betrays her embarrassment at her weak performance: her head is lowered, her gaze pointing down, and she scrunches her brows in concern while delivering the word "Körpersprache" (01:11:57). The values driving her workplace culture and, by extension, dictating her performance, are illuminated once the coach asks for clarification:

> INES. Ich würde aber gern an der Körpersprache arbeiten. Die entgleitet mir manchmal.
>
> COACH. Hast du da ein konkretes Beispiel?

INES. Es ist eher an Momenten des Zuhörens.

COACH. Ich vermut mal, dass du wirklich zuhörst.

INES. Ja, klar.

COACH. Ja, das ist natürlich ehrenvoll, aber vielleicht musst du noch mehr bei deiner Aussage bleiben.

INES. Ja, klar. Okay, verstehe. (01:11:54-01:12:20)

Ines' admission that the "slip-ups" in her body language occur when she is listening to others does not prompt further questions from the coach, suggesting that there is a set of body language rules she has to adhere to in order to give the impression of being in control of the situation, whether she is the one speaking or not. However, the coach is quick to remind Ines that in the upper echelons of business consulting, appearing in control also means foregoing signs that you are actively listening to your speaking partner in favour of focusing on your own message. Accordingly, Ines nodding her head while listening to the Romanian executive Dascalu during her earlier presentation is considered a faux pas, a sign of weakness and subordination that in no way makes for a good performance (00:58:14).

The coach's assessment of Ines' active listening as "ehrenvoll" is especially noteworthy, as it assigns moral value to soft skills most often ascribed to women, such as communication and people orientation. As discussed in chapter one, however, these traits are assigned a negative value in the business world in favour of traits like persistence and assertiveness, which are overwhelmingly ascribed to men (Lang and Rybnikova). Not only does this exchange then confirm the relevance of the "if you want to succeed in your work as a woman, act like a man" credo, it also allows for a reading of Ines' request for feedback on her body language as a "thinly veiled plea to eradicate signs of 'female' weakness or vulnerability" (Gemünden ch. 5). Having

to navigate a male-dominated field where women are not taken seriously, as former consultant Lotte Brauns admits, Ines has assumed an appearance that is clearly gendered as male in her work, from her attire to her mannerisms to the way she interacts with colleagues—for instance by taking part in sexist comments about her assistant Anca with her male colleagues (00:55:16-00:55:19). The precarious nature of occupying a top position as a woman in this field means, then, that a large part of Ines' performance is performing gender—more specifically, performing maleness. Tellingly, the only advice the personal coach has for her is to listen less and focus more on her own agenda, much like her male colleagues, who are frequently shown interrupting Ines while she speaks throughout the film (00:53:43; 00:53:49; 00:58:27).

3.2 "This is your specialist"

As much effort as Ines puts into performing maleness in order to be taken seriously as a professional, *Toni Erdmann* quickly identifies being a woman as a liability in this corporate context. During the reception at the U.S. embassy to which Ines brings Winfried on the evening of his arrival, Ines is eager to approach Henneberg, the CEO of Dacoil, to whom she will soon be presenting a business plan in the hopes of extending her consulting firm's contract with the company. Soon after initiating a conversation with him, Ines informs Henneberg that she has reviewed their business case and is optimistic that her upcoming presentation will offer a robust statement on their contract extension. Henneberg, however, barely acknowledges Ines' attempt at engaging in a business conversation and instead turns his head away from her to call over his wife Natalja, to whom he introduces Ines as a "specialist" (00:26:50). Visibly confused by the interjection but maintaining her professionalism, Ines greets Natalja with a polite smile. Once the two meet, Henneberg reveals the "special" skills his wife has need of:

HENNEBERG. Natalja needs to do some shopping tomorrow. You are working in Bucharest for how long now?

INES. Oh, it's been almost a year now. You keep me busy.

HENNEBERG. Ah, then I guess you can ask her any shopping questions. (00:26:57-00:27:08)

While the interaction between Ines and Henneberg largely follows a shot-countershot structure with respective over-the-shoulder shots offering medium close-ups of each speaker, the film does not cut away from Ines after she responds that she has been working in Bucharest for a year. As a result, the audience's attention is focused on Ines' facial expressions during this exchange, initially conveying pride over her year-long contract with Henneberg (00:27:05), then shock at hearing herself be presented as an expert on shopping (00:27:07), and finally resignation at seeing Henneberg exit the conversation thereafter (see fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Ines's reaction at being introduced as a shopping specialist by Henneberg (00:27:09).

Barely half an hour into the film, this is the first time the viewer follows Ines as she interacts with others in a professional capacity. Whereas the viewer's impression of her so far has been that of a high-status professional moving in the upper ranks of the German business elite, this scene lays bare the reality of existing in these spaces as a woman. Instead of acknowledging Ines' attempt at discussing their shared business project, Henneberg ignores her not once but twice; when Ines tries to shift the conversation toward work by joking with her contractor that he "keeps her busy," Henneberg again redirects his attention to his wife. Disregarding Ines' efforts to engage professionally, Henneberg reduces Ines' identity to her gender by introducing her as a shopping specialist and asking her to take his wife shopping—an unmistakable gesture laying bare the reality of corporate sexism, with ambitious women routinely undermined by being assigned private errands for their bosses (Druxes 255).

Despite her visible frustration at this sexist humiliation, Ines quickly dons a polite smile and not only engages in a shopping conversation with Henneberg's wife at the embassy, but also takes her on a three-hour shopping trip later in the film, demonstrating awareness of the fact that part of her job is to appease men who hold power. As a result, Ines appears not only resigned to being gazed at in a dehumanizing way, but also actively trades on her ability to please others by embracing her own subordination in what Muriel Cormican calls a "professionalization of femininity" ("Toward a Theory" 35). Aware—though not thrilled—that her gender constitutes a liability that cannot be shaken off no matter how many suits she puts on or how tightly she wears her hair, Ines submits to the male gaze that subordinates her, justifying it as a business tool. When her boss later asks how things went with Henneberg over the weekend, Ines describes her shopping trip with Natalja as "langweilig" and "nervig," yet in the same breath relates her

impression of Henneberg's stance towards their shared consulting project, implying that the shopping trip was necessary to gain this insight (00:53:24-00:53:42).

Ines' precarious position as a woman in this male-dominated corporate world is further illuminated through Winfried's presence. As they are leaving the embassy reception, Ines and Winfried run into Henneberg and his company, who are deciding where to get drinks after. Henneberg, who briefly met Winfried at the reception, spots them and asks Winfried whether he would like to join them for a drink, addressing only the father without looking in Ines' direction (00:29:44-00:29:52). After Winfried rejects his offer by saying he is too tired, Ines is quick to jump in and offer to come along instead. Hennneberg, however, sternly responds that Ines should join her father, chastizing her for not fulfilling her role as a daughter, before extending the offer once again to Winfried (00:30:03-00:30:20). Henneberg's paternalistic alignment with Winfried is all the more noteworthy considering Winfried's earlier comment to Henneberg about his wife, Natalja, a Russian woman considerably younger than Henneberg. Natalja's tan skin, gold jewelry, and sleeveless blue top accentuating her athletic physique visually distinguish her from both her husband and the rest of the attendees and cut a stark contrast to Ines' dark suit. At a later point in the film, Ines herself will refer to Natalja as "very Russian, very skinny, very blonde"—a characterization that implicitly reduces Natalja to the status of a trophy wife by devaluing her femininity, subtly signalling how Ines has internalized the misogynistic values that permeate the world she moves in, where femininity is penalized and masculinity is rewarded (01:04:26). Upon meeting Henneberg at the embassy, Winfried jokes with him that he has hired a substitute daughter to replace Ines, who is never there; Henneberg awkwardly entertains the joke, after which Winfried gestures to Natalja and asks Henneberg "Aber sie ist ja nicht Ihre Tochter, ne?" (00:28:43-00:28:46). Winfried's jab at Henneberg for his much younger wife is not only not

received as a faux pas by Henneberg, but results in a pat on the arm as Henneberg leaves and an invitation to get drinks after. In the first half hour of the film, then, Ade quietly but firmly delivers the message that, as much as Ines tries to perfect her performance of maleness in this male-dominated work culture, she will never be seen as an equal; rather, she will be relegated to running "women's" errands for her boss and chastized if she is perceived as not fulfilling her duties to a male authority figure.

Unsurprisingly, the challenges Ines faces in her work environment along with the stress that comes with her high-status job paint her as tense, strained, and constantly on edge, an impression which is amplified during a sequence that takes place the day after Winfried's arrival in Bucharest. At a spa visit the morning after the embassy reception, Winfried watches as Ines complains to the manager about a weak massage and demands a rather excessive compensation. When Winfried points this out, Ines responds that her company spends a lot of money at the spa; picking up on the fact that this is yet another business transaction to his daughter, Winfried poses a seemingly innocent yet loaded question:

WINFRIED. Na… Bist de eigentlich auch ein bisschen glücklich hier?

INES. Was meinst'n mit Glück? Glück ist'n sehr starkes Wort.

WINFRIED. Ja... Ich meine, ob du mal so'n bisschen zum Leben kommst auch.

INES. Mal ins Kino gehen oder so?

WINFRIED. Na ja. Halt auch mal was machen, was Spaß macht.

INES. Schwirren jetzt ganz schön viele Begriffe rum hier, ne? Spaß, Glück, Leben… Sollen wir mal bisschen ausdünnen? Was findest'n du lebenswert? Wenn du schon die großen Themen hier hochbringst.

WINFRIED. Das kann ich jetzt so spontan gar nicht sagen. Ich wollt eigentlich nur wissen, wie es dir geht.

INES. Ja, is' mir schon klar. Aber dann musst du auch 'ne Antwort haben. (00:40:40-00:41:36)

Refusing to engage with Winfried on his terms, Ines responds with a defensiveness that takes the form of offense: she seizes on the conceptual imprecision of his vocabulary, dissects his language, and then redirects the burden back onto him by demanding definitions. This tactic betrays both a long-standing irritation with her father's inability to recognize their diverging notions of self-fulfillment—for Ines, this appears to rest in excelling at her demanding job—and the fact that his question has struck a nerve. The film consistently frames Ines as exhausted and alienated: rushing between appointments, belittled by male clients and colleagues, engaging in hollow sexual encounters, and repeatedly falling asleep, suggesting symptoms of burnout. At the same time, the market-driven, hyper-competitive work values dominating Ines' work have bled into her personal life, foregrounding autonomy and dictating that self-optimization and self-fulfillment are the responsibility of the individual, echoing the individualist rhetoric permeating recent German discourse on feminism and women in the workplace, as explored in chapter one. Within this context, admitting that she is unhappy would amount to confessing her failure to succeed at self-fashioning—a failure she forcefully wards off by refusing to accept her father's framing of the discussion (Gemünden ch. 6). Although the viewer's alignment at this point remains with Winfried, the camera lingers considerably longer on Ines, registering her growing discomfort and inviting the audience to glimpse the pain beneath her composure. The interruption of their exchange by a phone call leaves the conversation unresolved, yet its centrality to *Toni Erdmann* becomes clear in the film's final scene, as the analysis will

demonstrate—though only after the narrative's perspective has shifted decisively from father to daughter, inviting the viewer to register the pressures and contradictions that shape her self-presentation.

3.3 "Ich bin doch keine Feministin"

Roughly an hour into *Toni Erdmann,* Winfried's visit to Bucharest comes to an abrupt end, and father and daughter make vague plans to meet again when Ines has more time on her hands (00:49:15-00:49:18). Ines shows Winfried to her building's hallway where they share a quick hug and wait for the elevator, whose delayed arrival results in a long take of the pair sharing an uncomfortable silence marked by awkward looks and nervous shifts in body language (00:50:39-00:51:05). Perhaps the most striking element of her directorial style, Ade's long takes, which are central to the texture of *Toni Erdmann*, are often the result of letting the camera roll and capturing the raw reactions of her actors, who are instructed not to break character until the director ends the scene by saying "thank you" (Ratner 47). Indeed, the long take while waiting for the elevator, which Ade herself timed to arrive late, makes the viewer feel as if they are intruding on an awkward yet intimate moment, glancing from Winfried to Ines and back to Winfried as if begging them to say what their awkward glances suggest has been left unsaid (ibid.).

As Ines waves goodbye to her father from her apartment balcony a few moments later, Ade lets her camera linger again, only this time the focus is solely on Ines (00:51:20-00:52:15). Not only does this mark a shift in perspective from Winfried to Ines that will persist until the end of the film, it is also the first time the viewer sees Ines break completely out of her façade, allowing herself to cry once she is out of her father's visual field and can finally release the tension that has been building up over the weekend. Notably, this emotional release is conveyed

through a medium shot with the camera positioned behind Ines, thus obscuring her facial expressions. The shot lasts almost 15 seconds, making the audience feel as if they are invading her personal space and witnessing an unguarded moment, amplified by Ines' dropped head, audible sobs, and the movement of her shoulders as she lets herself cry (see fig. 5; 00:51:55-00:52:08) It is a defining moment for Ines in the film, effectively humanizing an otherwise cold and calculated character while confirming her father's worries that she may not be doing as well as she pretends to be. Ines may still be a capable and ruthless professional, yet at the same time she is one unexpected visit away from crumbling under pressure—pressure that is partly self-inflicted because of her choice of profession and partly the result of the challenges she has to navigate as a woman in this profession, as *Toni Erdmann* continually suggests.



Fig. 5. Ines cries on her balcony after watching Winfried leave (00:51:58).

Following Winfried's departure, a sequence that takes place at Ines' work leads up to the film's halfway point and provides deeper insight into her character and the gendered dynamics that dominate her workplace. Introducing the sequence is a scene set in a company car on the morning of Ines' presentation to Dacoil, during which she briefs her boss Gerald and coworker Tim on her proposal for a last-minute change of strategy for the upcoming presentation (00:52:44-00:55:46). While Ines gives her reasoning for the change to Gerald, she is interrupted first by Gerald and then by Tim, both times while trying to deliver the same sentence (00:53:43; 00:53:49). She initially does not react to Gerald's interjection, who is both higher in the work hierarchy and whose interjection expressed disbelief in Ines' news of Henneberg being cautious of their plans to propose an outsourcing project; yet, when Tim interrupts her as she is about to present her change of strategy to offer his own take, she pauses for a second to look at him, followed by a biting "Kann ich den Gedanken kurz zu Ende führen? Danke" (00:53:51). The camera stays on Ines during both interruptions, capturing her increasing annoyance at being robbed of the opportunity to deliver her proposed strategy uninterrupted, registering that both interruptions undercut her authority and undermine her expertise. After the strategy change is reluctantly approved by Gerald, Ines presents the final point on her briefing agenda ahead of the meeting—but Gerald's mind is already elsewhere:

> INES. Letzter Punkt: Dascalu. Es bleibt schwierig mit ihm und er wird definitiv einer unserer Gegner sein.
>
> GERALD. Hm. Sag mal, ist diese kleine Anca da eigentlich heut' dabei, gibt's sie?
>
> INES. Ja, die drückt dann die Knöpfe, Gerald. (00:55:04-00:55:19)

Gerald's remark is belittling on multiple levels: referring to Ines' assistant as "diese kleine Anca" infantilizes her and diminishes her professional role, while the phrasing "gibt's sie" reduces her

presence to something marginal or decorative. Delivered in the context of a strategic business discussion, his comment abruptly shifts focus from a work matter to a flippant, gendered aside, trivializing both Anca and the broader professional environment. That Gerald directs the comment to Ines, rather than Anca herself, positions the film's protagonist as someone who would not only tolerate but reinforce such sexist behaviour, and Ines indeed accepts this positioning by acknowledging and replying to Gerald's lewd question. At the same time, the scene's visual language communicates Ines' annoyance at the remark, glancing away from Gerald after answering the question as if wanting to immediately forget it; a cut to a close-up of Tim right after, who is smiling at Gerald, accentuates the difference in reactions between the two coworkers (00:55:20). Crucially, despite Ines' veiled disapproval of Gerald's casual sexism, she still chooses to become complicit in it, once again performing maleness to achieve as close of an identification with her male colleagues as possible.

As the viewer follows Ines navigating her high-pressure job, it quickly becomes clear that she will go to extreme lengths to perfect her performance and leave the smallest possible room for error, aware that her gender already has her starting at a disadvantage. Right before her big presentation to Dacoil, Ines is shown in a bathroom stall at work painfully tugging out a damaged toenail, which she stubbed the day before putting away Winfried's hideaway bed, to be able to walk around in her high heels—another tool in her arsenal of professionalized femininity that exudes control and brings her both literally and figuratively closer to the men around her. Ade reinforces Ines' harshness by having her almost self-mutilate, tugging at her nail so hard that she pokes a blister and accidentally stains her white shirt with blood (00:55:57). A cut then transitions to Ines changing into her assistant Anca's clean blouse in front of the sinks in the women's bathroom, with Anca wearing Ines' bloodied one. A few moments later, another woman

comes into the bathroom to offer her blouse to Ines as well, yet Ines promptly rejects it—presumably due to its yellow colour and lace details that are even further removed from her own plain white shirts than Anca's white satin blouse with minimal detail— in an effort to appear as masculine and, by extension, as professional as possible (see fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Ines rejects a coworker's yellow blouse in favour of Anca's white one (00:57:05).

The frame's visual composition, separating Ines from the two women forced to give up their clean blouses, underlines their positions as lower in the work hierarchy than Ines, whose high heels place her above their eye level. The visual contrast is intensified by Ines' dark suit and tied up hair, whereas the two Romanian women's flowing wavy hair, semi-colourful wardrobes, and more pronounced accessories accentuate their femininity, reinforcing the message that, the higher up on the work hierarchy a woman is, the more masculine she has to appear. Indeed, as

Gemünden observes, Ines' exchanges with Anca demonstrate her internalization of modes of male superiority: she repeatedly bosses her assistant around and makes her run private errands, such as dealing with Winfried, much in the same way that Henneberg has Ines take his wife shopping (ch. 5). In doing so, Ines not only mirrors the gendered hierarchies that constrain her but also actively perpetuates them, enacting on Anca the very dynamics of subjugation that hinder her own advancement.

Ines' big presentation to Dacoil is introduced right after the bathroom scene, with a seven-second opening shot positioned over Ines' shoulder showing her boss, Gerald, and the Dacoil CEO Henneberg listening to Ines present (00:57:12-00:57:19). The scene's visual language, comprised primarily of over-the-shoulder shots of the four men that make up Ines' audience watching her present and only briefly cutting to medium shots of her, emphasize her precarity as she is scrutinized by her male audience, much like the options she is presenting and her young assistant clicking through the presentation slides. Once again, Ines' authority is undermined when both the Romanian executive Dascalu and Gerald interrupt her presentation (00:57:54; 00:58:26). Gerald's infraction is significantly more noticeable, stopping Ines mid-sentence to align himself with Dascalu's concerns before putting an end to Ines' presentation by thanking her and turning to Henneberg for directions, simultaneously devaluing and othering her against the all-male group of decision-makers the rest of the discussion is aimed at. Indeed, Ines is not addressed for the rest of the meeting and, while she does eventually interject to make one last point, her presence is all but erased when Henneberg calls the group "gents" as he gets up to leave (00:59:48). The presentation scene, which *Toni Erdmann* has been leading up to for close to an hour with Ines repeatedly emphasizing its importance to Winfried and the audience, ultimately reinforces Ines' marginalization both formally and diegetically, as she is

systematically undermined, silenced, and excluded from the upper business echelons—an exclusively male privilege.

In one of the film's most telling characterizations of its female protagonist, Gerald congratulates Ines on her work after the presentation, delivering the assessment "Du bist ein Tier, Ines" (01:00:42). Ines, who has spent considerable time and effort delivering a presentation on the benefits of outsourcing the maintenance of Dacoil's oil installations by essentially firing the Romanian field workers and bringing in cheap labourers from other countries (dressed up in the business jargon of "strong" competitive rates), reacts with a reserved smile and a nod, accepting this dehumanizing and defeminizing characterization as the required mode for recognizing her talent in this environment. Both a disavowal and a caricature of her gender, Gerald's praise of Ines as a ruthless predator reaffirms Ines' performance of maleness and serves as a reminder of the perception of her sex as a liability in this male-dominated business (Cormican, "Willful Women"; Osborne). Lotte Brauns, the former business consultant who was shadowed by Maren Ade and also wrote the Dacoil presentation, has admitted that she warned Ade against including the line, citing that her own boss would have never used it on her; its inclusion is thus a conscious narrative choice serving to underscore the degree of Ines' dehumanization in this macho environment (Hermsmeier).

At the same time, *Toni Erdmann* invites the viewer to critically reflect on Ines' harshness and internalized dehumanization through narrative and visual devices. When Ines takes Henneberg's wife shopping, she takes Winfried along but leaves him to wander through the mall alone for the entirety of the three-hour shopping trip. After Natalja leaves, Winfried looks Ines square in the eye and asks "Bist du eigentlich ein Mensch?" chastizing his daughter for her lack of empathy towards him by questioning her humanity (00:43:53). Humanity, Winfried suggests,

is measured by whether one demonstrates the "traditionally feminine attributes of compassion, care, and accommodation," qualities which Ines's performance of maleness and disciplined self-regulation have led her to relinquish (Naiboglu 147). Following the Dacoil presentation and being called an "animal" by Gerald, a medium full shot tracks Ines as she walks towards the boardroom window and gazes out; the film then cuts to a shot of the yard of an adjacent haphazardly built settlement, where an old woman, several young children, and a dog are visible, separated from the neatly asphalted road next to them by a tall metal fence (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. The view from the boardroom window at Ines' office building (01:01:09).

This shot, which was not in the script but rather the exact view from the office building Ade was filming in and decided to include on the spot, lasts almost twenty seconds and commands the viewer's gaze to take in the precarious living conditions of the local lower classes, who are—in a

literal sense—fenced off from the mobile, affluent class profiting from their labour (Ratner 48). Strikingly, Ade does not have her protagonist look directly at the scene, instead looking further away at the horizon and ignoring what the camera points the viewer's attention toward. The camera thus adopts a third perspective in this moment, inviting the viewer not to identify with Ines' gaze but to "acknowledge what it fails to, or chooses not to, take into account: the humanity of others" (Cormican, "Toward a Theory" 36). The sequential placement of this shot, concluding a scene that cements Ines' marginalization and dehumanization by her superiors as well as her indifference to proposing ruthless business practices with great human cost, underscores how Ines is both instrumentalized herself and rewarded for instrumentalizing others, constructing her as victim and oppressor at the same time.

Ines' own precarity and its inescapability on account of her gender are once again brought before the audience when Gerald pulls her aside for a conversation the day after the presentation. Informing her of his impression that their team has lost morale and is no longer as united as it used to be, Gerald asks Ines to do something for the team spirit to prevent a gap between them and the Romanians (01:12:28). Charging Ines with the emotional responsibility of managing her colleagues' morale, Gerald effectively forces Ines into a position of mothering her—exclusively male—colleagues, mirroring the discursive perception of women as a "special" human resource benefitting a company's moral transformation as the prime carriers of soft skills such as communication, emotiveness, and conscientiousness (Müller 142-43). Ines accepts this positioning by offering to host a brunch for her upcoming birthday and invite the whole team; Gerald welcomes the idea as "was Persönliches," applauding Ines' willingness to offer up her personal life to benefit a business transaction in yet another instance of Ines being relegated to running a private errand to appease her boss (01:12:49).

Yet, even with Ines' stellar work performance for the Dacoil project and willingly bearing the burden of performing emotional labour for the team, the news Gerald brings her of Henneberg's decision about the future of their project catch Ines off guard despite the project being "her" partner case, as Gerald points out (01:14:43). Employing a shot-countershot structure for the scene, the camera lingers on Ines ever so slightly longer than it does on her boss, capturing her quietly stunned reactions at being told that Henneberg is now ordering the radical outsourcing option she had purposefully presented as unfeasible—and the one that he had decided against in front of Ines. When she questions the logistics of the new plan, including how she is supposed to work with the Romanian oil site manager Iliescu given the new mandate, Gerald's response forces Ines to once again confront the reality of being a woman in this line of work:

> GERALD. Also das wird jetzt bestimmt die Feministin in dir ärgern, aber O-Ton Henneberg war: Frau Conradi hat doch genügend Charme, das mit Iliescu alleine hinzukriegen.
>
> INES. Ich bin doch keine Feministin. Dann würde ich es mit Typen wie dir gar nicht aushalten, Gerald.
>
> GERALD. Gut, das nehme ich mal als Kompliment. (01:13:52-01:14:08)

Notably, it is not Henneberg's lewd and degrading suggestion that Ines approach a business contact in a personal or even sexual way that causes Ines to push back; rather, it is her boss's suggestion that the comment might anger the "feminist" in her. While Ines' disavowal of feminism comes with a reliance on the category to imply that Gerald is sexist, as Muriel Cormican notes, this repudiation ultimately seeks an alignment with her sexist boss rather than a rupture, which is confirmed by Gerald's ensuing smile and welcoming response ("Towards a

Theory" 36). This alignment is unsurprising given the machismo-drenched environment Ines has to navigate in her work, which *Toni Erdmann* shows as necessitating her complicity in both her own dehumanization and that of others. Ultimately, disavowing feminism is a necessity for Ines in this environment: not only would she not be able to endure ("aushalten") working under these conditions, but she would get nowhere near the positions she is after if she pushed back against corporate sexism. Ironically, the film follows Ines' repudiation of feminism and alignment with her sexist boss so as to not jeopardize her career with Gerald denying Ines the promotion he has promised her and browbeating her into staying at her current post, thereby exposing the futility of Ines' efforts to succeed in an environment which will systematically undermine and undervalue her (01:14:20-01:14:45).

Even with her renunciation of the label, we are left to wonder what the notion of feminism means to Ines. Given the parameters of her exchange with Gerald, a feminist is a woman—since Henneberg's comment apparently did not annoy the feminist in Gerald—who pushes back against sexist treatment, subtly mirroring the association of feminism with a certain militancy dominant in gender discourse as explored in the previous chapters. Indeed, Ines' reservations about the feminist label echo Maren Ade's own, who has rejected identifying as a feminist herself due to the term's "loaded" connotations despite thinking "very much in this direction" since running her own production company (Ade, "Feministin" 423). While the reservations of *Toni Erdmann*'s creator against the connotations of the feminist label should be taken into account, they will be revisited at the end of this chapter, following a close reading of the film's second half to illuminate its potential to perform feminist interventions through formal and diegetic devices.

3.4 “Mein Biss ist mir wirklich wichtiger”

Undoubtedly the driving force behind Ines’ character development throughout the film, Winfried’s antics as the titular Toni Erdmann propel the film’s plot and push his daughter to face the toll that her rigid, rule-following, performance-oriented façade has taken on her mental and emotional state. The intentions behind Winfried’s performance are largely opaque, obfuscated by the shift in perspective that foregrounds his daughter’s experiences as he continually invades her personal and professional life “in a bizarre attempt to ... what? Bully her? Make her laugh? Make her cry?” as *The Guardian*’s Peter Bradshaw questions (Bradshaw). As Toni, Winfried appears to be inviting ridicule, forcing Ines into a dilemma: she can either align herself with her friends and colleagues in mocking him and so effectively reject her father in public, or she can engage with his chaotic act in a show of loyalty and amusement, thereby proving his earlier critique of her wrong by showing him that she can indeed have the kind of fun he deems indicative of someone who is leading a “happy” life.

At a dinner with friends the evening after the Dacoil presentation, after Ines has shared that she just had “the most horrible weekend of [her] life,” a man standing behind her turns around to offer her and her friends champagne, only for Ines to register in horror that it is her father who never actually left Bucharest, this time appearing before her in a full suit, wig, and with his false set of teeth protruding from his mouth (01:03:43-01:04:35). By introducing himself as a businessman, consultant, and personal coach, Winfried “apes the behaviours of Ines’ corporate world,” abandoning social conventions as if to challenge Ines to call him out on his lies (Harries 232). For the first time in the film, however, amusement trumps embarrassment and the viewer watches as Ines plays along with “Toni Erdmann” and even cracks a couple of smiles at

seeing her friends be entertained by him, signalling a shift in her acceptance of her intrusive father that will gradually gather momentum as the second half of *Toni Erdmann* unfolds.

Prior to the dinner scene, Ines' evening plans are discussed when Ines goes to brief Tim, her coworker who is also part of the Dacoil project, on her presentation. During the brief scene, Ines and Tim are captured in medium close ups sharing reserved yet suggestive looks, hinting at a romantic relationship between the two —subtly foreshadowed earlier in the film, when Tim placed his hand on Ines' waist to help her into the company car, followed by Ines giving him a stern look as if to remind him of the boundaries of their relationship (00:53:08). Their involvement with each other is subtly confirmed when Tim asks Ines what her evening plans are after the presentation, which leads to a striking dialogue:

TIM. Und, was machst du heute Abend?

INES. Ich treff Steph de Boer und Tatjana.

TIM. Frauengruppe?

INES. Ja.

TIM. Was hat man da so für Themen?

INES. So, Frauenquote, sexuelle Belästigung am Arbeitsplatz, solche Sachen.

TIM. Businessnagellack?

INES. Genau.

TIM. Schick. (01:02:20-01:02:39)

Despite disavowing feminism, Ines' instinctive response to being asked what women discuss with each other is to cite gender quotas as well as sexual harassment at work, two of the most prominent talking points in German gender discourse in the years leading up to *Toni Erdmann*'s release, as chapter one demonstrated. The delivery, however, is tinged with irony: while the

mention of sexual harassment can be read as an inside joke alluding to her sexual relationship with Tim (supported by her slight smile after delivering the phrase), her invocation of gender quotas both plays into the irony of the exchange and gestures toward a genuine structural concern, being a highly qualified professional whose ambitions are routinely thwarted by sexist treatment from her exclusively male superiors. The layered tone underscores Ines' ambivalence: she momentarily voices the feminist critique that her position invites, yet does so in a manner that allows her to remain palatable to Tim, a male colleague and sexual partner. Tim's trivializing dismissal of women's systemic marginalization as "Businessnagellack" serves to underline the ubiquity of casual sexism in this male-dominated environment, further exacerbated by Ines' positive response to the comment which, despite its flirtatious tone, once again lays bare Ines' complicity in her own dehumanization.

The relationship between Ines and Tim is further explored in a seven-minute scene that takes place at an unnamed hotel after work (01:17:35-01:24:46). Introduced after Ines' conversation with Gerald on the future of the Dacoil project, the scene's sequential placement, along with the film's realist aesthetics of long takes, hard cuts, and exclusively diegetic sound, converge to foreground Ines' fraught emotional state at this point in the narrative. Towards the end of her conversation with Gerald, after she has endured another sexist humiliation and been denied yet another chance at a well-deserved promotion, Ines and Gerald get interrupted by Winfried in his Toni Erdmann disguise, who has now obtained a farting pillow and approaches them on the roof of their office building. After Ines saves face in front of her boss by pretending to be in touch with "Mr. Erdmann" about a potential workshop, she returns to the roof to scold her father for this gross invasion, only to be met with "Toni" suggesting she give him a call if she ever needs to work on her charisma and hurriedly leaving the roof. The camera lingers on Ines as

she watches her father leave and is left alone on the rooftop; framed in a medium shot lasting for thirteen seconds, the audience's attention is focused on Ines' emotional turmoil as she, for the first time in the film, becomes aware of her own powerlessness (see fig. 8; 01:17:22-01:17:35). No matter how hard she works to perfect her performance of maleness, disavowing her gender and aligning with the very structures that dehumanize her, Ines is powerless against the male-favouring hierarchies dictating her work and against the men who enforce them, who routinely devalue her and deny her hard-won professional advances. Adding insult to injury, Ines is also powerless against her own father who, by drawing her into his act, not only ends up multiplying her labour instead of liberating her from it but also implicitly confirms the futility of her efforts by being welcomed by her bosses and superiors despite his flagrant violations of social conventions (Harries 233).



Fig. 8. Ines gets emotional on the roof of her work building after Winfried leaves (01:17:30).

Following this emotionally laden shot, a hard cut transitions to the corridor of an unnamed hotel, with Ines exiting the elevator (01:17:35). A full shot creates a degree of emotional distance from Ines compared to the scene prior, although her lowered head, slumped shoulders, and arms swinging loosely at her sides communicate a sense of detachment and resignation. Foregoing her usual form-fitting suits and tight updos in favour of a loose, colourful, sleeveless dress and with her hair down, Ines is clearly on her way to a personal appointment. The camera tracks her as she walks to a hotel room door but remains safely a few meters behind her, as if to reinforce the need for privacy this outing calls for. As a result, the viewer watches from a distance as Ines walks up to a hotel room, audibly exhaling and stopping to roll her shoulders back before she knocks on the door, and then leaning against the doorway while she waits to be let in (see fig. 9). It is an almost thirty-second scene that serves no expository function yet succinctly captures the loneliness and exhaustion that permeate Ines' life, quietly underscored by the subtle shakiness of the handheld camera and the near-total silence, commanding the viewer's attention and communicating a sense of emptiness both within and around Ines (01:17:35-01:18:00).



Fig. 9. Ines leans against the doorway of a hotel room (01:17:59).

As foreshadowed earlier in the film, the person meeting Ines on the other side of the door is her coworker, Tim. Their playful smiles upon seeing each other and the ease with which they move through the space of the hotel room, which blends the domesticity of a bedroom with the anonymity of a hotel, suggest that this is not the first such meeting between the two. Despite the intimate sphere of the hotel room, Ines initially moves to sit in front of a large glass window, which takes up the majority of the frame for close to a minute while the pair share their initial kisses (01:18:19-01:19:17). The busy street and surrounding streetscape visible behind them gesture toward the global economic hierarchies that shape the relations between the city's local inhabitants and their international "guests," further highlighted when a hotel employee is let in to deliver room service. The private is thus rendered public in this scene, as Gary Schmidt remarks,

with Ines' private affair contextualized in a public space which is directly impacted by her mandate to devalue the locals' labour in the name of modernization (155-56).

For the majority of the hotel room scene, the camera is directed at Ines, occasionally leaving Tim off-frame. When he goes to the door to accept room service, the camera stays on Ines, tracking her as she moves from the window to the couch, initially sitting down straight and then sliding her waist down, extending her legs, placing her arms in front of her and resting her head on the couch pillow, vacantly staring out the hotel room window (see fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Ines on the hotel room couch (01:19:51).

In yet another example of Ade's slow pacing, Ines remains in this pose for more than ten seconds, inviting the viewer to take in this display of exhaustion and disengagement that reflects the cumulative toll of navigating both the relentless demands of her work and the strained

dynamics with her father (01:19:42-01:19:53). After Tim enters the frame to bring the petit-fours and wine delivered by room service, he initiates a conversation to let Ines know that their boss has caught on to the affair:

TIM. Gerald hat's übrigens gecheckt mit uns.

INES. Ja und?

TIM. Er hat gesagt, ich soll dich nicht so oft vögeln, damit du deinen Biss nicht verlierst.

INES. Aha.

TIM. Ich hab gesagt, deshalb vögel ich dich überhaupt. (01:19:59-01:20:12)

Tim's revelation comes with the admission that a conversation took place between him and Gerald about the physical relationship between Tim and Ines, the parameters of which see Tim lessening Ines' "bite" by having sex with her. Following a patriarchal sexual economy according to which women can be dispossessed of their traits through intercourse with men, Tim's comment reinforces his and Gerald's dehumanization of Ines as well as their construction of her as other: in their eyes, Ines is "neither entirely masculine like them nor completely legibly feminine" (Cormican, "Willful Women" 110). As a result of this expropriation, Ines is robbed of her agency: sex is not something she does with Tim, but something *he* does to her, epitomized in Tim's use of the active voice. Notably, the "bite" in reference is not only a running theme throughout the film, owing to Winfried's fake teeth and Ines' characterization as an "animal," but also one of the traits listed verbatim by Lotte Brauns, the former consultant shadowed by Ade, when discussing sexism in the consulting branch: "Der Kunde schätzt zwar dein Engagement, Biss, deine Strukturiertheit, aber man wird nicht richtig ernst genommen" (Hermsmeier).

While Ines initially laughs off the comment and allows Tim to come close to her, who kneels down between her legs and kisses her to initiate sexual contact, she becomes increasingly

reluctant to return his kisses, dropping her hands down in apathy and staring vacantly at her lover as he undresses, prompting him to ask her if something is wrong. Ines initially responds that she needs to catch up and would rather watch Tim first; however, after he unbuttons his shirt and throws his body on top of hers again, Ines raises her torso to reach the wine glass next to the couch, crosses her legs in front of him, and declares "Ich will meinen Biss nicht verlieren" (01:20:47-01:20:51). Rejecting Tim's advances, Ines resolves to not let herself be penetrated by her lover, explicitly reclaiming her "bite" and, by extension, her sexual agency. Reflecting this change in power dynamics, the scene's choreography has Ines deliver her refusal looking down at Tim, who is now sitting on the floor, in a literal gaze reversal—Tim's initial "bite" comment was delivered standing up, looking down at Ines (see figs. 11 and 12).



Fig. 11. Tim tells Ines that Gerald has caught on to their affair (01:20:11).



Fig. 12. Ines refuses sex with Tim (01:20:51).

Upon hearing her reason for not wanting to engage in sex with him, Tim accuses Ines of being "humorlos," an accusation frequently cast at feminists for calling out sexist behaviour (Schmidt 155). Retroactively masking his sexism as humour, Tim exemplifies the use of irony to shield oneself from accusations of political incorrectness while still making statements that can be read as such—an approach frequently employed by Ade's characters and typical of the generation that came of age amidst Germany's *Spaßkultur*, a post-unification cultural shift which prioritized fun, humour, and entertainment against the perceived rigid moralism and political correctness of the previous decades (Abel 251; Schmidt 155). Accordingly, Tim's "joke" serves as a vehicle for expressing misogynistic values under the guise of irony—in this instance, the idea that a woman can be deprived of a character trait through sexual activity, thereby affecting her perceived femininity.

Following Tim's reframing of his misogyny as humour, he tries to initiate sexual contact with Ines again, only for her to reject him once more and ask that he satisfy himself while she watches because "mein Biss ist mir wirklich wichtiger" (01:21:11). Doubling down on her refusal to be penetrated, Ines also refuses to offer up her "bite" as something that can be taken from her, and in doing so reclaims her agency in the context of this sexual act. Aware of the power her refusal holds, Ines delivers it with a faint smile, which is subtly highlighted through cinematography by bringing the viewer closer to the pair through a medium shot (01:21:09-01:21:14). In one of *Toni Erdmann*'s most notorious moments, Ines then challenges Tim to ejaculate on one of the petit fours on the floor next to him, which she promises to eat if he hits his target. After a brief moment of hesitation, Tim accepts the challenge; indeed, it is precisely the recognition of Ines' request as a challenge that gets him to forego penetration, as Monika Bernold points out (359). As colleagues in a highly competitive field where one's downfall is another's promotion, Tim and Ines' relationship is one governed by competition, rivalling each other on who can outperform the other; to them, sex is just another form of performance (Fuchs 172-73). This competitive understanding of sex is evident in Ines' gaze as Tim masturbates in front of her, ranging from distant to amused to even surprised to see her colleague and lover comply with such an absurd request.

Beyond a refusal to be penetrated, Ines' insistence on watching Tim masturbate also constitutes a reversal of the voyeuristic gaze usually directed at the female body; keeping her own clothes on, Ines' counter-gaze puts the spotlight on Tim's male body (Bernold 360). The scene's cinematography reinforces this inversion, with the camera tracking Tim's movements as he ejaculates and rolls on his back to reveal a penis already becoming flaccid (01:22:41-01:22:55). By the end of his "performance," Ines knows that she has succeeded in reclaiming her

sexual agency: in a symbolic confirmation of her powerful "bite," she eats the petit four Tim has ejaculated on, confidently licking her fingers and maintaining eye contact with Tim until he lets out an exasperated sigh and heads to the bathroom to clean up. In the aftermath of their "encounter," the camera lingers on Ines as she sits almost motionless on the couch, swallowing the last few bites of the petit four and looking straight ahead with a determined, almost stern look. Ines then reaches into her bag to perform her next emancipatory "micro-act," to borrow from Muriel Cormican: calling her friend Steph to suggest inviting "the Tiriaç coach"—meaning Winfried as Toni Erdmann, who had earlier introduced himself to Ines and her friends as Ion Tiriaç's tennis partner—to their night out ("Toward a Theory" 36).

Abruptly breaking the intimate sphere of the hotel room, a hard cut transitions to the outdoor reception area of a nightclub, where Ines and her coworkers mingle with Bucharest's professional elite (01:24:47). Winfried's attempts at gauging Ines' mood and reason for bringing him to the event fall through; in a complete reversal of the prankster-prankee dynamic of the previous scenes, Ines only addresses her father as "Herr Erdmann," asking him about the whereabouts of Ion Tiriaç and playing along when he introduces himself to a Romanian woman as the German Ambassador. Insisting he accompany her and her friends to a car where they snort cocaine and then to the adjacent nightclub, Ines is clearly indulging Winfried's question of what she does for fun—except that we barely see her have any. Instead of dancing with her friends, Ines spends the majority of her time in the club slumped on the sofa, mirroring the position she had in the hotel room, and becoming increasingly teary-eyed as she looks at her father. The final straw comes when Tim suggestively pours her champagne while holding the bottle in front of his pelvis in what Gary Schmidt calls a "hyperphallic caricature of masculinity" (156). Witnessed by

her father, this transgression makes Ines depart the club soon after, rejecting Tim's pleas to stay and avoiding his kisses.

In an otherwise quiet film, the manipulation of sound in the club scene underscores the lack of emotional fulfillment in Ines' supposedly desirable lifestyle, utilizing the club's diegetic sound of loud electro-house music (which was loudly playing during filming instead of being added in post-production)[19] to drown out conversations and draw the viewer's attention to the figures' gazes and gestures. Most notably, during a medium shot of Ines on the club couch tearing up while looking at Winfried, the DJ transitions into an electro-dance remix of the hit "Safe and Sound" by Capital Cities, whose upbeat tempo and uplifting lyrics starkly contrast Ines' silent distress (01:33:00). The song heightens the scene's emotional weight, reflecting Ines' outwardly glamorous lifestyle yet one which is completely devoid of attachment through its pre-packaged pop sound and generic lyrical composition (Harries 234). The lack of intimacy is further communicated through the mise-en-scène, with the characters standing a few feet apart from each other for most of the scene. As Ade notes in the DVD audio commentary, she modelled the scene after the clubs she scouted for the film: despite being relatively full, they gave the appearance of being empty, as the majority of people were neither dancing nor standing close together with their company—instead, it was more about being seen and ordering expensive bottles of alcohol, paralleling the impersonal, performative dynamics of Ines' professional world (01:29:00).

3.5 "Ist ein Nacktempfang"

In *Toni Erdmann*'s final hour, a series of increasingly awkward encounters culminates in a surreal party sequence, but not before Ines and Winfried challenge each other once more on the

[19] Mentioned by Sandra Hüller in the DVD audio commentary (01:30:57).

incompatibility of their respective worldviews. A prank involving handcuffs makes Ines take "Toni" along for a visit to a Dacoil site to discuss the upcoming layoffs; crucially, however, Ines has her father leave his wig behind and introduces him as a businessman who works together with the CEO Henneberg. In doing so, Ines calls Winfried's bluff and forces him into an uncomfortable limbo, as Dora Osborne observes: he is both unable to fully hide behind his alter ego and personally implicated in the outsourcing project (323). This role reversal becomes evident in their initial conversation at Iliescu's office, with Winfried now being the one who has to save face while Ines breaks the rules of decorum by laughing at her father's attempts to appear professional—an early crack in her rigid corporate façade that foreshadows the more radical transgression in the film's climax (01:45:53-01:46:14).

At the oil site, Ines, who is dressed in her usual dark suit and walking on gravel in high heels, distances herself from the oil workers by staying close to the car, while Winfried immediately approaches the workers to greet them. When he accidentally gets one of the workers fired for breaching safety protocols by pointing out that he is not wearing any gloves, Winfried asks Ines to intervene, to which Ines coldly points out that the more workers are fired now, the fewer she will have to fire later. Treating this as an opportunity to make Winfried confront the reality of what his daughter does for a living, Ines delivers this callous remark in a casual yet assertive stance, placing her left hand in her pocket and raising her chin as if to dare Winfried to drop his disguise and reveal the disapproving father by finally calling her out as inhumane; opposite her, Winfried's dropped shoulders, wide open eyes, and slightly agape mouth communicate his shock at registering the extent of his daughter's harshness (see fig. 13). It is a moment that succinctly captures the generational tug-of-war between the two: Winfried embodies a distinctly German iteration of the now-fading 1968 generation—a "very typical

German character," in Ade's words—whose anti-authoritarian, progressive values influenced how he raised his daughter, only to find that she has now internalized the norms of global capitalism, prioritizing profit and ruthless competition over human cost (Romney).



Fig. 13. Ines confronts Winfried with the reality of her work at a local oil field (01:48:47).

In the car on their way back from the oil field, Ines and Winfried clash once again over a remark Winfried made to a local man who will soon lose his home to the "modernization" project managed by Ines' contractor. The confined space of the car physically traps the two together, with the tight framing accentuating the entrapment they both feel in their relationship to each other. When Winfried asks for a truce, Ines rejects his plea and instead calls him out on his own complicity in the system he so adamantly disavows: "Ich kann dir in jedem Schritt, den du machst, ganz genau erklären, wie direkt deine ökonomische Verbindung zu diesen Leuten ist. Da

hilft dir deine grüne Gesinnung auch nichts" (01:53:04). Crystallizing the film's critique of the depersonalizing effects of global capitalization processes, Ines' remark unmasks the complicity of the everyday consumer in the unequal and exploitative operations we rely on for basic goods and services. Crucially, her scathing critique of her father is not for his own implication in these processes, but rather for his naïveté in remaining oblivious to it: Ines recognizes that no one is innocent under these conditions but, unlike her father, sees herself as at least having more resolve. When Winfried offers a condescending response that confirms the insurmountable chasm between the two, the camera lingers on Ines for fifteen seconds, capturing a mix of grief and despair at realizing the futility in trying to bridge the divide, which is only accentuated by the ensuing silence (01:53:17-01:53:32). Formally and diegetically, Ines' harshness is thus once again juxtaposed with her vulnerability, while her unmasking of Winfried—a character the viewer is largely invited to sympathize with—as naïve and complicit in the dehumanization with which he attributes Ines exemplify Ade's masterful skill in crafting multidimensional characters; in the words of *The Guardian*'s Mark Kermode, Ade refuses to allow either Ines or Winfried to become caricatures, "instead painting both in sympathetic shades of grey" (Kermode).

After the oil field visit, a mentally and emotionally exhausted Ines wakes up in the car to find that Winfried has led them to the home of a new Romanian acquaintance, Flavia, who is hosting an Easter get-together for family and friends. Disregarding Ines' quiet pleas to leave, Winfried instead signs her up to learn how to paint Easter eggs and, as Ade points out in the DVD audio commentary, father and daughter are for the first time seen engaging in an activity unrelated to Ines' work (01:53:35). Visibly uncomfortable, Ines quickly excuses herself and tries to leave, thanking the hosts for their time and kindness—two gifts she is likely not used to giving or receiving freely (Osborne 324). Winfried, however, interrupts her exit when he spots an

electric keyboard in the living room and suggests that he and Ines sing a song as a "thank you" to their hosts. What follows is one of the film's "most excruciating" scenes, which earned *Toni Erdmann* a rare pre-credits ovation at Cannes, with audience members bursting out in both laughter and tears during press screenings (Osborne 324; Glasenapp 36). Without waiting for Ines to accept his plea to "doch einmal wenigstens höflich was zu Ende bringen," Winfried sits at the keyboard and starts playing the opening notes to Whitney Houston's 1985 version of "The Greatest Love of All," introducing Ines as his secretary, "the fabulous Whitney Schnuck" (02:00:02-02:00:33). Once again, the camera is not directed at the prankster during the introduction of this stunt but on his unwilling subject, who reluctantly approaches the keyboard, puts her hands on her hips, and drops her head facing away from the crowd in a moment of quiet embarrassment mixed with rising anger, as if weighing the challenge before her against the looming humiliation should she choose to accept it. This delay causes Winfried to look up at Ines, replaying the same chord progressions as if to cue her in, accentuating the sense of unease. At the same time, the pair's familiarity with the tune and their respective parts hints at an earlier closeness, a time once fondly shared as father and daughter. After casting one last defiant look at her father, Ines tucks her shirt in, adjusts her stance to face the crowd, and starts to sing.

Ines' performance is at once absurd, passionate, ironic, and profoundly sad. The film stops the clock for it, having Ines sing every verse in the remarkably long song and only skipping a couple of verse repetitions, resulting in an almost three-minute rendition of the Houston version of the song that is equal parts amusing, embarrassing, and emotionally charged. The extended performance also results in a heightened emphasis on the song's lyrics, focusing the viewer's attention on a song whose creation context speaks to a uniquely women's issue: written by songwriter Linda Creed during her battle with breast cancer, the lyrics are a hymn to self-

reliance, inner strength, and learning to love oneself. At the same time, "The Greatest Love of All" is a "crushingly sad song about a self-sufficiency that can admit no companionship"—a sentiment that resonates all the more strongly given Ines' portrayal as a profoundly isolated individual throughout the film (Kreilkamp). Yet amidst the palpable irony—she sings of learning to love oneself while clearly still struggling with self-acceptance—it is the song's declaration of self-sufficiency that appears to resonate the most with her. While she delivers the first verse in a more subdued tone, she amps up the volume for the pre-chorus: "I decided long ago / Never to walk in anyone's shadow / If I fail, if I succeed / At least I lived as I believed / No matter what they take from me / They can't take away my dignity" (02:01:50-02:02:12). Delivering an impassioned declaration of autonomy and determination, Ines momentarily positions herself as the autonomous, dignified figure the lyrics describe—a vision that is both empowering and bittersweet in light of the film's repeated emphasis on her devaluation as a professional.

Crucially, it is the way Ines chooses to perform the pop ballad that gives the scene its greatest impact: she sings loudly and confidently, making vivid use of her facial expressions and hand gestures by closing her eyes and clenching her firsts at key moments; by the chorus, her face is flushed and she is singing at full volume—a take Sandra Hüller had nicknamed "Vegas" during filming (Macfarlane). In a film largely built on muted exchanges of words and looks, the sheer energy of Ines' delivery contrasts her reserved business appearance and unseats her from her social and professional conformity, which she has so fiercely protected thus far. While this is likely the goal of Winfried's stunt, Ines adds an intensity and irony to her singing that is difficult to read as anything other than anger, cursing out her father for turning her into a spectacle and demanding yet another performance of her. This rebellion is most evident in Ines' delivery of the final lines in the chorus, "Learning to love yourself / Is the greatest love of all," which she

comically draws out while extending her arms and looking straight at the crowd as if to mock the song's clichéd message, exaggerating its sentimentality and simultaneously reclaiming the moment for herself (see fig. 14).



Fig. 14. Ines sings "The Greatest Love of All" at a Romanian family's home (02:02:57).

Overall, the tragicomic hyperbole in Ines' performance turns it into an act of defiance. She may have consented to perform the on-the-nose song but, in her interpretation of it, she rejects the song's—and her father's—simplistic imperative to "love herself" or "be happy," as he had enquired at the spa earlier in the film. The emancipation Winfried had hoped for with this stunt, then, does not occur; instead, Ines rejects his claim on her and, in Ade's words, uses the performance to ultimately say "fuck you" (Macfarlane). At the end of her impromptu rendition, Ines holds the final note of the outro for a full seven seconds, looks at Winfried to make sure they

coordinate the final beats, nods briskly to the guests, and exits the apartment almost before the applause begins (02:03:23-02:03:37).

The song performance is followed by a brief scene of Ines arriving at her apartment to find the catering company she has hired for her birthday brunch the following morning waiting for her. Another hard cut transitions to the morning in question, which introduces arguably the most infamous scene in *Toni Erdmann*; the near twenty-minute scene was shot over a period of three days and has been likened to a play by Ade, with Ines "very much" taking the lead (Ratner 46; Zeitchik). The scene begins with a medium shot of Ines in her apartment kitchen struggling to zip up a tight, colourful dress, with her hair up in an equally tight bun, not unlike the ones she wears at work. An upbeat electronic melody is playing at medium volume in the background—a diegetic sound whose generic, repetitive arrangement is more evocative of shopping malls and corporate buildings than intimate birthday celebrations. A view of the buffet with its metal trays, neatly arranged baked goods, and printed tags for each item reinforces the sterile and impersonal character of the event, which Ines has repurposed as a team-building exercise to strengthen morale amongst her colleagues. Costume, sound, and mise-en-scène thus converge to create a rigid, business-like environment in the intimate sphere of the home, once again foregrounding Ines' corporate identity and reminding the viewer that Ines' performance is all about "the alignment of all aspects of her life with her professional interests" (Fuchs 180).

This calculated setup is, however, quickly disrupted when Ines tries to reach down to complete her immaculate outfit by putting on a pair of high heels. The tightness of the dress constricts her movements to such an extent that she cannot properly bend down to put them on, forcing her to pull the dress up to her hips and crouch on the floor for better reach. The camera follows this movement, tilting down to offer a full view of Ines literally making herself small in

response to the constraints imposed on her body (see fig. 15). The near fifteen-second shot invites the viewer to reflect on the largely invisible labour needed to produce "an adequate feminine self for social consumption," laying bare the essentialist narrative of femininity as a pleasurable choice that women naturally embrace, while exposing it as a demanding and often exhausting expectation that constricts women's bodily autonomy and necessitates their subjugation (Cormican, "Willful Women" 119-20).



Fig. 15. Ines crouches on her apartment floor to put on her high heels (02:08:09).

In a last-minute change, Ines decides to head into her bedroom to change out of the dress and into one of several outfits she has neatly arranged on the bed. Once again, however, it is the tightness of the dress that stifles her efforts, making her comically struggle to take it off; the piercing sound of the doorbell momentarily stops her in her tracks but then accelerates her

efforts. As she frantically struggles to escape the unyielding dress, the doorbell rings again, increasing her frustration; realizing the precarity of her position, she briefly puts her hands on her face in a gesture of despair and humiliation (see fig. 16). Naked, late, and emotionally drained from the past week's events, Ines once again finds herself in a state of powerlessness, this time heightened by the vulnerability of her near-naked state. The camera maintains distance from its exposed subject, framing Ines in a full shot as she grows increasingly desperate, while the repetitive sounds of the upbeat music filling the silence once again make for a poignant contrast to Ines' growing emotional turmoil.



Fig. 16. Ines despairs as she tries to take off her tight dress (02:08:55).

When Ines finally manages to take off the dress a few seconds later, she throws it on the floor and hurries to the door, casting off her one remaining heel in the process. She looks through

the peephole, pats her hair down, and, in an act that subverts her obsession over following the rules of decorum and presenting a "blank, bland, and inscrutable" exterior, she opens the door dressed only in her underwear (Gemünden ch. 1). The first guest to arrive is Steph, whom Ines welcomes in; as she walks in front of Steph and heads into the living room, the viewer briefly catches a mix of surprise and embarrassment on Ines' face, as if she herself cannot believe this flagrant rupture with social conventions on her behalf (02:09:37). Without accounting for her nudity, Ines shows Steph around and pours her a glass of wine; when Steph presents her with an easy way out of this faux pas by offering to help her choose something to wear, Ines tersely turns her down. This refusal communicates to both Steph and the viewer that Ines is asserting control over the situation, deliberately rejecting the expectation to cover herself and conform to conventional decorum. At the same time, Ines' communicative style in her interaction with Steph, consisting largely of curt responses and avoiding excessive niceties, suggest that her refusal to be clothed is also a refusal to inhabit the version of herself that must constantly put up a performance—as Ade puts it, Ines has reached a point in this scene where it is "almost physically not possible for her to put on her clothes and go into that role again" (Donadio). For the past two hours, the audience has seen Ines caught in a relentless cycle of performance, constricted by the rigid norms of her corporate workplace and aggravated by her father's invasive antics; the tight dress thus becomes a symbol of the suffocating expectations placed on her, which she sheds in an act of "parodic iconoclasm" (Druxes 256).

When the doorbell rings again, Steph volunteers to open the door to give Ines time to get dressed, only for Ines to turn her down once more with a loud and determined "no" (02:11:10). Positioned behind Ines, the camera follows her as she walks to the door, when she suddenly decides to swiftly remove her underwear as well, casting off her only remaining piece of clothing

in a deliberate gesture of defiance and liberation. Standing on the other side of the door is her boss, Gerald, who instantly freezes in his tracks upon registering his employee's nudity; a subsequent cut to a shot positioned to the left of Gerald's shoulder captures Ines' initial embarrassment, briefly hiding behind the door to escape his gaze but then stepping out to bare her body before him. As she does so, she lets her arms hang and raises her chin in a defiant stance, as if daring her boss to gaze upon her naked body (see fig. 17).



Fig. 17. A naked Ines opens the door to her boss at her birthday brunch (02:11:27).

Ironically, Ines' presentation of her nude body results in her becoming less the object of the male gaze than she has otherwise been in the film. Stunned, Gerald frantically attempts to look away from Ines' nudity rather than at it, switching his gaze between the floor and the doorframe while Ines explains that she came up with the idea of a "Nacktempfang," a naked

reception in the interest of team building—an idea she has clearly come up with on the spot given her borderline hesitant delivery. Any hesitation, however, quickly dissipates upon seeing Gerald's continued embarrassment at this unexpected manoeuvre and, in an even more disruptive move, Ines demands her boss's nudity in exchange for letting him in. In a covert appeal to Gerald's competitiveness and the corporate ethos, Ines goes on to state that he does not have to participate and hands him a paper bag to put his clothes in should he change his mind; she then politely accepts his gift and closes the door on him. Framing Ines in a medium close-up shot, the film directs the viewer's attention to her facial expressions after closing the door, which convey a mix of surprise and pride at what has just transpired: she managed to turn her impromptu naked appearance—the result of overwhelming despair at having to put up a constant performance—into a "self-reflexive" form of performance that seemingly upholds her professional façade while subverting her conformity with the system (Fuchs 180). It is a decisive moment of quiet triumph for Ade's protagonist, who finally sheds her internalized, corporate-mandated compulsion to constantly perform in order to conform and accommodate in favour of performing to challenge and provoke, effectively creating her own "Toni Erdmann" in the process.

After dismissing Steph for refusing to undress, Ines welcomes the next guest to arrive, her colleague and occasional lover Tim. While Ines presents the idea of the "Nacktparty," going so far as to say it was Gerald's idea, the camera stays mostly on Tim, highlighting his rising discomfort at being asked to appear naked in front of his colleagues. While Tim is more comfortable looking directly at Ines' body on account of their sexual relationship, he too is unsure of what to make of her nudity: his eyes do not linger on her body for too long, revealing an inquisitive rather than voyeuristic gaze at this nudity that is neither covert nor private, but openly displayed and accessible only on equal terms (Cormican, "Toward a Theory" 36).

Believing he has been set up, Tim ultimately refuses to attend and leaves, leaving Ines alone in her apartment. A cut subsequently captures Ines lying face down on her bed and staring vacantly into the distance, refusing to answer either the phone or the doorbell, and covering her head with the very dress she cast off earlier. By stretching the shot to almost an entire minute, the film once again invites the viewer to sit with Ines' conflicted emotions, zeroing in on her disorientation at having transgressed the boundaries of social and professional decorum and resisting any immediate resolution or escape from this state of defeat (02:14:46-02:15:37).

When Ines finally answers the door, she does so in a light dressing gown, suggesting an abandonment of her ambitious plan to host a naked party. In yet another reversal, however, she opens the door to her first naked guest: her Romanian assistant Anca, who has rationalized the move as a "challenge"—as a female Romanian employee, Anca occupies the lowest position in the corporate hierarchy and would thus be expected to be the first to rise to the challenge (02:16:00). After showing Anca in, Ines takes off the dressing gown and stands awkwardly around the living room with her assistant, who quickly breaks the silence by offering Ines her birthday present. Notably, Anca's is the only present Ines opens upon receiving it, and she is immediately moved to see it is a pocket calculator—a reference to an inside joke between the two, with Anca playfully admitting she thought of it because Ines constantly asks to borrow hers. Ines' emotional reaction to this thoughtful gift is yet another reminder of the absence of any real intimacy in the spaces she inhabits; indeed, the film drives this point home by subsequently having Anca ask Ines how she likes the apartment, a space Anca spent countless hours searching for and setting up unbeknownst to her boss. When Anca hesitantly explains this, Ines is once again overcome with emotion, registering the kindness of an employee whose labour has been invisible to her, much like her own labour is invisible to her superiors. The apartment itself

makes for an ironic backdrop to this realization: a space that is luxurious yet devoid of any personal touch, betraying a sense of neglect that is poignantly captured by Winfried earlier in the film when he takes a picture of a pair of withered flowers (00:45:36).

When the doorbell rings once more, Ines opens the door to what appears to be a tall furry monster, a mysterious figure dressed in a dark brown hairy costume with a mask that extends significantly over the head, adorned only with a few colourful pompoms. The creature commands the frame, standing in stark contrast to the naked guests in the apartment, and stays silent for the entirety of its appearance in the film's penultimate sequence. It is only at the end of the sequence that Winfried is revealed to inhabit the costume, having borrowed it from the Romanian host of the Easter gathering he and Ines attended—the head mask is even visible at the end of that scene, with the host explaining to Winfried that it is part of a Bulgarian costume (02:03:53-02:05:27). Not only does this get-up completely obliterate Winfried's identity, achieving Ade's goal that he should "disappear" into the costume, but it also adds a layer of symbolism to the scene that complements Ines' transgression against the norms of the corporate workplace: it is a Kuker costume, a Bulgarian folklore figure linked to pagan fertility rites, whose appearance is meant to drive out evil spirits (Ratner 50). Symbolizing the revival of nature, prosperity, and a bountiful harvest—underscored by the Kuker handing Ines a small bunch of flowers with a chunk of soil clinging to them—the arrival of this mythopoetic figure further disrupts Ines' entrapment in the corporate world, which the film visually communicates by having the Kuker's height shatter the frame and, by extension, the rigid confines of Ines' world (Gemünden ch. 5).

While both the party guests and film viewers are trying to decipher the identity behind the hairy costume, the doorbell rings again; as Ines goes to answer, she lets out a surprised laugh

and opens the door to reveal a naked Gerald, who admits he went for a beer first to muster up the courage to appear nude. With his shoulders slumped, head down and gaze pointed at the floor, Gerald's insecurity is palpable; deprived of his usual status-lending suits, his body is on full display and only partly obscured by the paper bag containing his clothes, with which he awkwardly covers his genitals (see fig. 18).



Fig. 18. Gerald comes back to Ines' birthday party naked (02:19:41).

Too preoccupied by his own nudity and by the equally naked Anca who greets him upon entry to notice the Kuker, Gerald then sets down the bag and extends his arms to wish Ines a happy birthday (02:20:15-02:20:19). This moment, which was not in the script but rather improvised by the actor, subtly conveys the notion that Gerald's "true" present is his nudity—a moment of triumph that serves as Ines' reward for her bold act ("BAFTA"). When he gets

comically scared by the Kuker standing behind him, Anca explains to the startled boss that the creature originates from Bulgarian folklore and is meant to ward off evil spirits; assuming that the figure is a paid performer, Gerald quickly declares that this is "good for the team," repurposing the Kuker's symbolism as an exercise in team building while simultaneously flaunting his corporate identity (02:21:05).

Gerald's acceptance of the naked party and subsequently of the Kuker as elements of a team-building exercise function as confirmation to both Ines and the viewer that, in the rigid corporate world Ines has to navigate, even a transgression as flagrant as appearing naked before your colleagues can be accepted if it is recontextualized as servicing the corporate ethos—in Maren Ade's words, "[wenn] man eine Nacktparty unter Kollegen als 'challenge' für den 'team spirit' verkauft, dann ist sogar diese riesige Grenzüberschreitung wieder systemkonform verpackt" (Jüttner). At the same time, Ines' disruptive act is rooted in emotional despair at having to inhabit a role that sees her continuously demeaned, undervalued, and at the service of male bosses and colleagues who have previously spun and participated in narratives that implied they sought to "seduce Ines into femininity" (Cormican, "Toward a Theory" 36). Despite her earlier repudiation of feminism, Ines' impromptu decision to appear naked before her colleagues and demand their own nudity in return can thus be read as a feminist act, a subversive rejection of corporate power dynamics and the gendered expectations imposed on her body. By stripping people of their usual status markers and down to their bare physical selves, Ines levels the playing field, forcing everyone to confront the emotional precarity that comes with being exposed and sized up, thereby revealing the vulnerability hidden beneath corporate posturing. The naked party is thus the culmination of Ines' resistance to the male and corporate gazes, a "sideways act of feminist empowerment" by a character who explicitly disavows feminism but

whose embodied defiance, highlighted by the film's long takes and realist aesthetics, calls attention to and ultimately challenges the unequal and oppressive expectations placed on women's bodies (Zeitchik).

The naked party scene comes to an end when the Kuker decides to depart Ines' apartment after scaring Gerald; the figure's slow, deliberate movements and brief pause to look at Ines on the way out plant a spark of recognition in Ines' eyes, who puts on her dressing gown and follows the mysterious stranger out of the apartment with the pretense that she has to arrange the performer's payment. A cut transitions to the streets of Bucharest, and the camera tracks a barefoot Ines as she follows the Kuker around, employing the only travelling shot in the film. When the Kuker sits down on a park bench, a medium shot from behind Ines' shoulder shows her closely watching as a little girl playfully approaches the creature, hinting at fond childhood memories of father-daughter moments shared between Winfried and Ines. When the Kuker gets up and starts to walk away again, Ines wrestles with the thought of returning to her apartment by briefly looking over her shoulder but ultimately decides to run after the creature, shouting "Papa!" before she catches up to him and wraps her arms tightly around the hairy figure (02:23:47). Winfried/Kuker returns the embrace, lowers his head, and Ines all but disappears into his "bear hug" in a striking shot also used as the film's poster (see fig. 19).



Fig. 19. Ines and Winfried embrace at a Bucharest park (02:23:53).

The film once again stops the clock for this moment, extending the hug to over twenty seconds, while the absence of non-diegetic sound grounds the powerful moment between father and daughter, whose communication during this scene is entirely non-verbal (02:23:50-02:24:15). While Winfried's tender body language conveys the unconditional love of a parent for their child, Ines' intensity—illustrated in her burying her head deeper into the Kuker's neck and squeezing him tighter with her hand—communicates her need for intimacy in a social and professional context completely devoid of it. During the embrace, a few strands of Ines' hair escape her tight bun and hang loosely from her head, a visual echo of her gradual release from the rigid composure she has maintained throughout the film. It is a rare instance of complete physical and emotional connection between Ade's two main figures, a culmination of their respective efforts to connect with the other and a recognition of the love they share despite their

unmistakable differences. Unlike their "business hug" from the start of the film, Winfried is the one to pull away first from the embrace, leaving Ines momentarily hanging from the creature's neck before she lets go, and the two then engage in a playful chase they are likely to have repeated countless times throughout Ines' childhood.

While *Toni Erdmann* builds to an emotional crescendo with the hug scene, which comes in almost two and a half hours into the film, the film does not end there; to do so, Ade has argued, would be "too simple" and "too much of a message," suggesting a superficial notion of closure ("BAFTA"). Instead, the viewer follows Winfried as he tries to pull off the Kuker's head mask, before a hard cut transitions to a final sequence that takes place in Germany, thus cyclically framing the narrative, which begins and ends in Ines' hometown (02:27:29). The sequence starts with Ines exiting a car, dressed in her usual dark suit and high heels, the only difference from her typical get-up being a dark blue shirt instead of a brightly coloured one, suggesting a somber occasion; this is soon confirmed to be the funeral of Annegret, Winfried's mother. After Ines greets her father at the funeral home, they walk up to the open coffin together to say their last goodbyes, and the camera frames them in a medium close-up shot standing next to each other, looking down at Annegret (see fig. 20). Despite the literal and figurative gap between them, this is the first time in the film where father and daughter reflect each other visually, owing to their near-identical attire and mirroring body language, suggesting a "slight thawing" of their relationship—the result of both shared grief and the transformative encounters they experienced together in Bucharest (Harries 241).



Fig. 20. Ines and Winfried stand over Annegret's coffin (02:29:16).

At Annegret's home, the final setting of *Toni Erdmann,* Ines reveals that she is leaving her consulting company and has already accepted a new job with McKinsey in Singapore, where she will be stationed for the next two years. Crucially, Ade does not have her protagonist quit her job entirely or change careers as a result of the film's events, and the director has made a point of saying that it was important for her that Ines continue her job in the end—after all, Ines' skill, ambition, and enjoyment of her work were never put into question in the course of the narrative (Peranson). Rather, in keeping with Ines' character development throughout the second half of the film, the job change suggests that she finally grew tired of her boss's empty promises of a promotion and decided to engineer the move to Asia herself, even moving on to the world's largest consulting company—an attestation to her growing agency and dismissal of an environment that was continuously marginalizing and undervaluing her.

When Winfried gets called inside, Ines follows him down to the basement, with the camera staying mostly on Ines as she walks behind her father and watches him go through Annegret's belongings. Among them, he finds a variety of intricate hats and a steel helmet, presumably from the Wehrmacht—a material reminder of the complicity of Annegret's generation in Germany's authoritarian past, further hinted at by Winfried when he comments that Annegret enjoyed Harry Belafonte's music despite considering it "Negermusik" (02:32:37). A few moments later, Winfried opens the basement door and walks out into the backyard, followed by Ines. In what will be the film's final few lines of dialogue—or, rather, monologue—Winfried addresses the question of happiness and what makes life worth living, which had caused a rift between him and his daughter during the spa scene earlier in the film:

> WINFRIED. Weißt du … Wegen deiner Frage da in Bukarest, nach dem Leben. Was ich lebenswert finde. Das Problem ist, dass es halt oft nur ums Abhacken geht. Da muss man das noch machen und dies und dann während dem geht das Leben einfach vorbei. Wie soll man denn Momente festhalten? Und jetzt sitze ich manchmal da und erinnere mich, wie du Fahrradfahren gelernt hast, wie ich dich mal an der Bushalte eingesammelt habe… Aber das versteht man halt erst hinterher. In dem Moment selber geht das gar nicht. (02:33:36-02:34:52)

Offering his daughter a metaphorical olive branch, Winfried confesses to Ines that he himself does not truly know what happiness is either, thereby acknowledging that he had no right to demand she justify her own happiness or humanity in Bucharest. At the same time, however, his emphasis on the inherent paradox in trying to grasp life's meaningful moments as they happen without being consumed by routine or obligations communicates an unspoken plea for Ines to slow down and engage with life before it slips away—that is, to stop the clock, as the film has

done for its most meaningful moments. The fact that Winfried cites watching Ines learn how to ride a bike and picking her up from the bus stop as examples of such moments underscores his understanding of human connection as the crux of life's meaning, which is, for him, found not in grand achievements or material success but in small, everyday acts of love, care, and presence.

While Ines does not speak during this final interaction, the scene's cinematography skillfully creates a higher degree of emotional connection with her character by positioning the camera capturing her reactions closer to Winfried's body compared to the camera pointed at Winfried, leading to a tighter frame of Ines compared to her father. Additionally, Ines is facing the natural light of the overcast sky, further illuminating her facial expressions, which get progressively softer at registering her father's vulnerability. After Winfried gives his first example of watching Ines learn how to ride a bike, a cut introduces a fifteen-second shot of Ines, whose earlier questioning expression is gradually replaced by a shy smile (02:34:29-02:34:45). When the film cuts back to Ines at the end of Winfried's monologue, the smile has now been replaced by a solemn yet sympathetic expression; she then glances down at his shirt pocket, reaches in to grab his fake teeth, and puts them on. The prankster dad lets out a warm, amused laugh at this unexpected move by his otherwise reserved daughter, who proceeds to pull a hat out of Annegret's nearby collection, a brown headpiece resembling a thick, braided crown (see fig. 21).



Fig. 21. Ines wears Annegret's hat and Winfried's fake teeth (02:35:34).

Once Ines puts the hat on, the camera cuts to Winfried no more; framed in a medium shot and with her pale skin illuminated against the dark suit and black tiles on the wall behind her, Ines is the sole focus of the film's final minute. Annegret's intricate hat and Winfried's crooked dentures make for a comically grotesque image that contrasts Ines' sleek corporate style, mirroring the visual transgressions of her father's own "Toni Erdmann" with his messy wigs and ill-fitted suits. Ines' "Toni," however, takes on additional meaning, as it is also laden with familial symbolism: by incorporating items belonging to both her father and her grandmother, Ines creates a fusion of the two preceding generations, thereby recognizing how Winfried's generation was defined in opposition to Annegret's, with these tensions ultimately reflected in her own generation (Gemünden ch. 6). In her patchwork get-up, Ines casts a playful gaze at her father and then smiles broadly; it is a gesture of reconciliation, an unmistakable if brief

acknowledgment of shared values between the two, which serves as an admission that she has embraced her father's legacy even if she remains committed to her career path. At the same time, Ines purposefully engages in the shared present with her father through this gesture, effectively creating a new meaningful moment between the two just like the ones Winfried mentioned earlier. Recognizing the moment's weight and validating Ines' performance with a softly spoken "genau," Winfried begs her to wait and heads into the house to fetch his camera (02:35:31). Left alone in Annegret's backyard, Ines is stuck in a pose of waiting; she takes a few steps around and looks back at the house in the hopes of seeing Winfried return with his camera but, in the final words of Ade's script: "Es dauert zu lange. Er kommt nicht mehr" (123). The moment Winfried hoped to capture is already gone, leaving Ines wearing an old-fashioned hat and a set of fake teeth but now stripped of the context which made them meaningful. Aware of this loss, Ines takes off the teeth and hat, and the film transports the viewer from a medium full shot reinforcing Ines' solitude among the anarchic nature in Annegret's backyard to a medium close-up foregrounding her introspective expression in what will be the film's final, almost thirty-second shot (see fig. 22).



Fig. 22. Ines is left alone in Annegret's backyard (02:36:47).

A silent yet evocative portrait of the protagonist after two and a half hours of emotional restraint and gradual transformation, the film's final shot invites the audience to meditate on Ines' inner state, letting the camera roll for twenty-five seconds before cutting to black (02:36:34-02:36:59). As with the film's other scene-concluding long takes, silence dominates the lingering camera gaze, with a barely noticeable L-cut carrying over the ambient diegetic sound of the backyard to the credits for a few seconds before blending it with The Cure's "Plainsong." The song's initial notes of soft wind chimes are suddenly replaced by a shower of loud synths and guitars, finally offering a powerful emotional release from Ade's painstakingly slow realism. Ines is centred on the frame for the final shot, with her sober gaze and downturned lips betraying a strong sense of melancholy. Standing alone in Annegret's backyard, she appears momentarily unmoored, as if caught between past and future; after Annegret's passing, Winfried's generation

will be next, and then she will be truly left alone. Her father's contention that life's meaningful moments are those of everyday human connection, then, becomes all the more poignant for Ines in the film's final seconds. Even though the viewer knows she will soon be resuming her hectic life, her earlier donning of Annegret's hat and Winfried's teeth suggests that the disruptive performances she initially rejected and later shared with her father throughout the film will have a lasting effect.

Toni Erdmann's ending is as powerful as it is open-ended, with much of its emotional resonance stemming from its ambivalence. There is "keine richtige Erlösung," in Maren Ade's words, nor is there a definite answer to what lies ahead for Ines' character, rendering speculation about the narrative's continuation irrelevant (Schulz-Ojala). Instead, like the majority of directors associated with the Berlin School, as Abel and Fisher note, Ade presents the audience with an unresolved tension and compels viewers to grapple with the questions it raises about the nature of humanity, morality, and the transience of life, inviting a reflection on Ines' journey without offering clear resolutions or moral judgments (272). By the end of the film, however, one thing is clear: what began as Winfried's story is now almost entirely Ines', with Ade repositioning her narrative to paint a complex portrait of a woman who, confronted with the limits of her own conformity, gradually challenges the gendered expectations of corporate culture and ultimately emerges with a newfound, if subtle, sense of agency.

3.6 "Metertief im Gender-Schlamm"

With its unsettlingly awkward portrayal of oppositional family dynamics providing a springboard for a nuanced inquiry into gender, corporate culture, and the dehumanizing effects of global market imperatives, *Toni Erdmann* resonated powerfully with audiences and critics, the film's engagement with gender emerging as a major point of discussion and sparking extensive

analysis of Ines' experience in a male-dominated corporate culture. Ade's critical reflection on the challenges Ines faces at work, along with her portrayal of Ines as a character who ultimately pushes back against these norms, prompted critics and audiences to interpret the film as a feminist statement—*Variety's* Guy Lodge, for instance, called the film a "tacitly blistering feminist evocation of the everyday setbacks faced by women in the workplace." Ade herself, however, expressly rejected the feminist label during *Toni Erdmann*'s post-Cannes press circuit; when asked by *CinemaScope* whether she sees her film as feminist, her response was telling: "It's okay for me when people say that, but it wasn't my intention. Maybe the film can be read that way because I'm a woman, but it's not that I said, 'Well, I want to start a revolution...'" (Peranson). Beyond citing an essentialist view that only assigns women with a feminist viewpoint on account of their gender, Ade equates feminism to a call to arms, evoking a rhetoric that sees feminism as an extreme position which, as discussed in chapter one, is informed by a German cultural context whose understanding of feminism is intricately linked with the West German feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Adding to her renunciation of feminism, Ade also stated in the film's press kit that "[the] whole gender issue actually kind of gets on my nerves, especially when it's given so much weight," adopting a line of argumentation that sees discussions of gender as lessening the film's gravity—a stance that mirrors the reluctance of female directors to align themselves or their films with feminism or women's cinema for fear of being pigeonholed, as discussed in the previous chapter (*Toni Erdmann Press Kit*).

It should be recognized, however, that Ade's disinclination to engage with questions of gender and feminism during *Toni Erdmann*'s press run was partly informed by the discursive climate of the 2016 Cannes festival, which saw the festival's lack of gender parity come under fire: of the twenty-one films selected for the main competition, only three were directed by

women.[20] As a response, the campaign 5050x2020 was launched by the Swedish Film Institute, calling on national film commissions and film institutes to commit to ensuring that half of all film funding be allocated to female filmmakers by 2020. Much of the resulting discourse was brought to the female filmmakers present at Cannes 2016, including Ade, who during the festival expressed that she felt as if "ich stünde in Cannes metertief im Gender-Schlamm und sei von tausend Fettnäpfchen umgeben," framing gender discourse as a battleground riddled with obstacles and strategic pitfalls (Oßwald). Despite this striking dismissal, however, the director went on to stress the importance of female film authorship, aligning herself with the call for raising the numbers of women directors, and citing British filmmaker Andrea Arnold as a director whose films should be studied "um zu wissen: Das kann man schaffen" (ibid.). After the festival, Ade leveraged the visibility afforded by Cannes to highlight the challenges faced by women filmmakers and to shed light on the strategies she has employed to navigate them, primarily through her production company Komplizen Film, as well as to endorse the Pro Quote Film initiative presented in the previous chapter (Baer and Fener, "Introduction" 2).

At the same time, despite her distancing from gender discourse and rejection of *Toni Erdmann* as a feminist film, Ade has recognized gender as a determining factor in how Ines is perceived and treated. In the *CinemaScope* interview cited above, Ade goes on to argue that, if Ines were a man, the expectations and pressures she faces would be markedly different—Winfried, for instance, "would never have gone to his son and asked, 'Are you happy?'" (Peranson). By asserting that women are more likely to be burdened with moral and emotional imperatives, the director highlights the gendered asymmetries in societal expectations, in turn informed by broader cultural norms that associate femininity with affective labour and position

[20] The percentage of female filmmakers at the Cannes main competition has remained under 20% in the years since with the exceptions of 2023 and 2025, with around 30% of the nominated films directed by women in those years.

women as responsible for both their own well-being that that of those around them—much like Ines being expected to run private errands for the boss or boost her team's morale. Elsewhere, Ade contends that she never intended to make a film critical of sexism in the business world but that she "merely wanted to show things the way that they are, and sexism is part of that reality" (*Toni Erdmann Press Kit*). While her rejection of an overt agenda mirrors a larger tendency among Berlin School directors to eschew the political, as explored in the previous chapter, her de-facto statement on the ubiquity of sexism in corporate consulting subtly exposes its systemic nature, framing it as an embedded and pervasive structural issue rather than a series of isolated incidents.

Still, when it comes to characterizing her female protagonist, Ade adopts a firmly individualistic rhetoric evocative of the new German feminist volumes presented in chapter one, according to which systemic problems are reframed as personal responsibility. Ade maintains that she always saw Ines as a "free and self-determining" (Ratner 48) character who has created the roles of employee, daughter, friend, and lover herself, along with the expectations that come with them, noting that what interested her most was seeing Ines gradually break away from these roles (Jüttner). Arguing that Ines is "not a suppressed woman" who could easily reject taking her boss's wife shopping, for instance, Ade seems to place Ines along a simplistic binary scheme of victimization versus self-determination, even when her film subtly exposes Ines' subjugation and dehumanization as prerequisites for getting a seat at the table and for advancing as a woman in the corporate world (Romney). Interestingly, despite her firm dismissal of *Toni Erdmann* as a feminist film, Ade does frame Ines' gradual pushback against the sexist norms of her professional milieu as a feminist move, admitting to Megan Ratner that Ines "kind of becomes more feminist than she thought. I mean that she actually is a feminist, but would not use the word" (Ratner 48).

Ironically, this statement directly reflects Ade's own rejection of the feminist label as expressed in her 2014 essay "Feministin sein war uncool" cited in the previous chapter, where she explicitly states that she would still not call herself a feminist despite thinking "very much along these lines" (Ade, "Feministin" 423).

Despite Ade's disavowal of an explicitly feminist positioning for both herself as a filmmaker and for Ines as a character, the analysis of her film has demonstrated that *Toni Erdmann* offers a more nuanced exploration of gendered identity and feminist interventions than its director's positioning alone can convey. Through the film's formal and narrative language, Ines is constructed as a multidimensional, intricately woven character who delicately balances between unforgiving harshness and deep vulnerability. Initially framed as a cold, ruthless professional who foregrounds her work identity through both her outward appearance and her interactions with others, she is gradually revealed as someone whose life is governed by the need to sustain a relentless performance—above all, performing masculinity at work to avoid associations with perceived "feminine" traits such as weakness or people-orientation, and instead project the traditionally "masculine" traits of control and assertiveness.

Yet even as she strives to perfect this performance—for instance by participating in the sexist devaluation of her younger assistant and thus perpetuating the very norms that inhibit her own advancement—the film makes clear that she will never be regarded as an equal, echoing the experience of the real business consultant shadowed by Ade on whom Ines is based (Hermsmeier). Gender is clearly a liability in this milieu: Ines is continuously demeaned, marginalized, and dehumanized by her male bosses and colleagues, whose paternalistic solidarity with her father despite his flagrant breaches of social decorum only serves to underscore her own precarity. By foregrounding the ubiquity of casual corporate sexism, the film exposes workplace

sexism as a structural issue that obstructs women's advancement regardless of competence or ambition, and one that women themselves can reproduce through internalized hierarchies, as Ines does in her treatment of her assistant.

The emotional toll of these dynamics is most vividly communicated through Ade's use of long takes, which capture Ines in moments of stillness and exhaustion. By letting the camera linger as if intruding on private moments, Ade amplifies the loneliness and fatigue that pervade Ines' life. Whether waiting for an elevator with her father or walking down an anonymous hotel corridor, the extended duration of otherwise transitional shots—coupled with the subtle shakiness of the handheld camera and the use of exclusively diegetic sound, often approaching silence—produces a sense of discomfort that highlights the emptiness both within and around Ines and paints her as a profoundly isolated figure, deprived of genuine emotional connection.

When Ines begins to resist the male and corporate gazes she has long internalized, despite her explicit rejection of feminism, a mode of embodied defiance emerges. In a hollow sexual encounter with a coworker, she refuses intercourse and, by reversing the sexual gaze onto her partner, reclaims the "bite" he sought to take from her through sex, thereby regaining her sexual agency in a deeply feminist act of resistance. Later, when faced with the despair of constant performance and the constraining expectations imposed on her body, she turns conformity into subversion: by forcing her colleagues to strip at her "naked party," she destabilizes corporate hierarchies and gendered power dynamics, performing an act of feminist empowerment that exposes and challenges the oppressive standards imposed on women's bodies.

Although Ines' acts of resistance do not culminate in a triumphant redemption, *Toni Erdmann* invites the audience to sit with her emotions as she navigates a fragile yet emerging sense of agency. Notably, Ade achieves this complex constellation without once subjecting Ines

to questions of marriage or offspring, rejecting the gendered expectations that continue to frame professional women in terms of domesticity and reproduction. Ines remains committed to her career, through which she derives self-fulfillment, and the film underlines this by ending with her move to a new company—a sign of growing agency and a rejection of the environment that had persistently marginalized her. The career woman introduced at the film's outset remains intact at its close, now strengthened by her resistance to corporate culture's gendered demands. This is less a radical transformation than a subtle shift in attitude, a gradual assertion of autonomy that bolsters her enduring commitment to her career path. Ultimately, despite Ade's and Ines' explicit disavowals of feminism, *Toni Erdmann* performs a decidedly feminist intervention through its formal and narrative strategies, exposing and challenging the implicit power structures and gendered expectations that shape women's personal and professional lives.

Chapter 4. Framing Self-Determination: Annika Pinske's *Alle reden übers Wetter*

Alle reden übers Wetter (Talking about the Weather) is a 2022 film by Annika Pinske, serving as both her feature film debut and the final thesis for her studies at the German Film and Television Academy Berlin (DFFB). It tells the story of Clara (Anne Schäfer), a doctoral candidate in Philosophy in her late thirties who lives in Berlin and visits her hometown in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern for her mother's (Anne-Kathrin Gummich) sixtieth birthday. The film is written and directed by Pinske, who also served as co-producer through her own company, pennybooth production. Along with pennybooth and the DFFB, *Alle reden übers Wetter* was co-produced by New Matter Films, a company founded in 2020 by Luise Hauschild and Mariam Shatberashvili, whom Pinske met through her studies at the DFFB (Pinske, "Filmtipp"). The film is also co-produced by Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg, the states' public broadcaster, as part of the initiative "Leuchtstoff," which aims at supporting feature and documentary films from the region. Realized on a budget of under €200,000, the film was primarily financed by Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, the states' film funding body, which allocated €100,000 for production and an additional €20,000 for distribution, with the remaining funds coming from the Federal Ministry for Culture and Media, and additional funding from the Federal Film Board (FFA) and Vorpommern Fond, a funding body for the region Vorpommern (Bartels; "Medienboard Förderzusagen"). Deliberately rejecting a reliance on third-party production companies to fund the project, Pinske has credited the film's minimal funding and lack of external pressure with granting her the freedom to define her own working methods, framing this creative self-determination as a crucial foundation for her future work (*Alle reden übers Wetter Presseheft*).

Alle reden übers Wetter premiered in February 2022 at the 72nd Berlinale, where it was selected for the Panorama section, which spotlights independent international cinema, and subsequently nominated for the festival's Best First Feature Award (Bester Erstlingsfilm). It was released in German cinemas in September of the same year to favourable reviews, with critics lauding Pinske's direction and calling it a film "über die wichtigsten deutschen Diskurse der Gegenwart" (Wellinski). Alongside festival prize nominations and a German shortlist selection for the 2023 Academy Award for Best International Feature Film, *Alle Reden übers Wetter* received three nominations at the German Film Critics Association Awards (Preis der Deutschen Filmkritik) for Best Feature Film Debut, Best Actress for Anne Schäfer, who portrays protagonist Clara, and Best Screenplay, with Pinske taking home the award for the latter.

Pinske dedicated two years to developing the script for her feature film debut, aiming to explore the complexities of mother-daughter relationships, motivated largely by what she sees as a scarcity of nuanced portrayals of mother-daughter bonds in cultural narratives (Pinske, Interview by Tara Karajica; Pinske, "Zwischen zwei Welten"). She has likewise pointed to the prevalence of clichéd cinematic depictions of East Germany as a key reason for setting her story in the East, a decision also rooted in her own background (Pinske, "Ich bin"). Born in Prenzlau (Brandenburg) and raised in Frankfurt an der Oder, Pinske occupies a unique position among German female filmmakers as an auteur from the former East—a fact she is acutely aware of, noting in the film's pressbook that there are "viel zu wenig Filmemacherinnen, die über ostdeutsche Biografien erzählen" (*Alle reden übers Wetter Presseheft*). As part of her research for the film, Pinske shadowed female professors and lecturers in Weimar and Esslingen, and conducted interviews with female doctoral candidates in Philosophy, mirroring her protagonist's profession. She then refined the script with the help of co-author Johannes Flachmeyer and

further input from *Toni Erdmann* director Maren Ade, who holds the credit for "Dramaturgische Beratung" in the film, as well as from screenwriter and DFFB faculty member Petra Lüschow (ibid.). Principal photography took place in May and June 2019 in Berlin and Krackow, a small municipality in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern's southeast, with Pinske subsequently editing the film with editor Laura Lauzemis for one year (Pinske, "Filmtipp").

Extending far beyond script work on one another's films, Annika Pinske's creative collaboration with Maren Ade underscores the significance of building and fostering gendered alliances in the film industry. During her studies in Philosophy—a biographical note she shares with *Alle reden übers Wetter* protagonist Clara—Pinske completed an internship at Komplizen Film, the production company co-founded by Maren Ade. The internship would later lead Pinske to study at the DFFB, where she completed a series of short films leading up to her feature film debut; her first short, *Spielt keine Rolle* (2015), was nominated for the German Short Film Award (Deutscher Kurzfilmpreis), an award she would go on to win one year later with her second short, *HOMEWORK* (2016). Pinske credits her experience at Komplizen Film with inspiring her to apply to the DFFB at age 29, noting that Maren Ade and Komplizen co-founder Janine Jackowski have had an indispensable influence in shaping her approach to filmmaking (*Alle reden übers Wetter Presseheft*). Crucially, when Pinske landed at Komplizen Film, the company consisted only of Maren Ade and Janine Jackowski—a fact Pinske later recognized as a pivotal experience, as it exposed her to female role models in a male-dominated industry:

> Komplizen Film war mein erster Kontakt in die Filmwelt überhaupt, als ich dort vor 15 Jahren ein Praktikum gemacht habe. Die Firma bestand damals eigentlich nur aus Maren [Ade] und Janine Jackowski und mir ist erst später klar geworden, was für ein absoluter Glücksfall das für mich war, bei zwei Frauen zu landen, die ganz autark und

> selbstverständlich die Filme machten, die sie machen wollten. Ich hatte vorher nicht einmal eine Vorstellung davon, dass ich Regisseurin werden könnte. Ich glaube, ich hatte damals ein ziemliches Klischee im Kopf, wie ein Regisseur sein muss, jedenfalls hielt ich mich aus irgendeinem Grund nicht für interessant oder verrückt genug. Mir fehlten ganz einfach weibliche Vorbilder. … Ich glaube, dass es sehr wichtig ist, sich als Frau in dieser Branche an anderen Frauen zu orientieren und sich ehrlich und auch kritisch aufeinander zu beziehen. (*Alle reden übers Wetter Presseheft*)

Bringing to mind the "if she can see it, she can be it" mantra, Pinske's assertion reinforces the importance of female representation in a male-dominated film industry, particularly in above-the-line positions such as producing and directing, which allow women to not only shape the narratives they tell but also to inspire future generations of filmmakers by demonstrating what is possible for women in these roles. Pinske's admission of her initial understanding of what—or rather, who—constitutes a director, a noun she cleverly employs in the masculine "Regisseur" form to drive the point home, is consistent with what Baer and Fenner call "masculinist accounts of the auteur as autonomous genius"—in other words, a gendered notion of the director as a male figure whose authority and vision are central to a film's identity (Baer and Fenner, "Introduction" 8). In its place, Pinske emphasizes the importance of creating and sustaining creative collaborations with female professionals in the film industry, establishing networks, and engaging in reciprocal learning and knowledge-sharing. *Alle reden übers Wetter* is a testament to such practices, as Pinske—who also worked on *Toni Erdmann* as assistant director to Maren Ade as well as script consultant—employs a variety of production and direction techniques influenced by her collaboration with Ade; these range from being the only one on set who may end a take to playing scenes through on location during pre-production along with her camera operator, which

Pinske notes she learned from working with Ade (*Alle reden übers Wetter Presseheft*). Accordingly, *Alle reden übers Wetter* also shares a number of formal characteristics with Ade's films; largely unstylized, utilizing natural settings, an almost exclusively diegetic sound, and a character-driven narrative, Pinske's debut aligns closely with the realist aesthetics associated with the Berlin School, leading critics to already hail the first-time director as "an example of the next generation of German filmmakers, influenced and encouraged by the achievements of their predecessors" (Barraclough).

Alle reden übers Wetter further serves as a compelling case study for women's film authorship as it not only features a notably high percentage of women in above-the-line roles but has also been publicly positioned as championing women's representation in film. An April 2019 post on the film's Instagram page features four slides with statistics on women's underrepresentation in German cinema both on screen and behind the camera, taken primarily from the 2015 and 2017 reports presented in chapter one (Prommer and Loist; Prommer and Linke). Next to the statistics, the text on the post reads "Wir haben übrigens einen Head of Department Frauenanteil von 75% und von unseren fünf größten Rollen sind vier weiblich" (@alle.reden.uebers.wetter). The film's credits corroborate this statement: the overwhelming majority of above-the-line and department head positions in *Alle reden übers Wetter* are occupied by women, with the total female share in cast and crew exceeding 50%. Additionally, the same post features a tag leading to the Instagram page of Pro Quote Film, the advocacy group seeking gender parity in the German film industry presented in chapter two, thus openly aligning the film with advocacy for a gender quota in the industry and highlighting its creators' commitment to increasing visibility and opportunities for women in key creative and decision-making roles.

Annika Pinske herself has been equally vocal about the ongoing challenges in achieving gender equity in the German film industry and ensuring equal opportunities for women, while also emphasizing the systemic precarity faced by mothers, a reality she personally navigates as a mother of two:

> It wouldn't even be enough to say that now we're giving half the money to women and we are far from that. The whole industry has to become more family-friendly if we really want to see more female stories. Many of the women who studied at my Film School disappeared as soon as they got pregnant and that tells us a lot about equality in our society. There is much to catch up on, so many female stories have already been lost. Irretrievably so. Every time I think about it, I get so sad and angry. But something is in progress and it is now our responsibility to keep it going. (Pinske, Interview by Tara Karajica)

Linking the structural barriers that continue to hinder gender equity in the film industry with a loss of women's stories, Pinske has often cited a sense of responsibility towards female storytelling as a driving force behind *Alle reden übers Wetter* during the film's press circuit, thus openly centring the role of gender in her narrative (*Alle reden übers Wetter Presseheft*; Pinske, "Filmtipp"; Pinske, Interview by Tara Karajica). This sense of obligation also extends to representing narratives of the former East for the director, who has also highlighted in interviews as well as in the film's pressbook the underrepresentation of stories about the East—and especially female-led ones—that go beyond "die Stasi und diese große Geschichte der DDR" and instead focus on the "banal" lives of East Germans ("Annika Pinskes Regiedebüt").

These dual concerns are informed, at least in part, by Pinske's own background. A self-professed "Arbeiterkind aus dem DDR Plattenbau" who achieved a "Bildungsaufstieg," the

director shares key biographical parallels with her protagonist; however, Pinske frequently stresses the film is not autobiographical (Pinske, “Filmtipp”; Pinske, “Ich bin”). Accordingly, the writer and director’s biography will serve as a reference point only to the extent that she has acknowledged its influence in her pursuit of creating a “realistic” film (Pinske, Interview by Tara Karajica). While Pinske’s own reflections on gender and feminism with regard to her film will similarly inform the reading, the analysis centres the film itself as the primary text, focusing on the portrayal of its female protagonist to explore how the film engages with gender dynamics in contemporary German society and cinema. With no body of academic scholarship on *Alle reden übers Wetter* currently available, the interpretation draws instead on critical reviews, interviews with the director, paratextual material released by the production and distribution companies, as well as on broader discursive constructions of womanhood and East German identity, as outlined in chapter one. Drawing on this approach, this chapter argues that the film constructs a nuanced and multilayered engagement with gender, challenging normative scripts of maternal care and positioning its protagonist as a woman navigating intersecting value systems shaped by class, region, and generation. Elevating self-determination as both personal ethic and feminist imperative, the film offers a pointed structural critique of women’s marginalization, crafting a gendered portrait of feminist resistance—one sustained through quiet acts of resistance and care, and passed between women across generational lines.

4.1 “Du Ossi”

While Clara is the first figure visually introduced in *Alle reden übers Wetter,* the film initially presents her from a removed vantage point: reflected in a hotel bathroom mirror, visible only through a narrow doorway, and filmed from several metres away. A woman in her late thirties, Clara is dressed in a loose-fitting, sleeveless blue top and black jeans with her shoulder-

length hair down; after she finishes brushing her teeth, she methodically collects the hotel's complimentary toiletries, the sound of glass bottles punctuating the silence dominating the scene. As she exits the bathroom into the hotel room, placing the bottles into her bag, the first line of dialogue cuts through the silence: "Du Ossi" (00:01:23). The phrase is delivered in a matter-of-fact, subtly accusatory tone by an off-screen male voice, whose name is later revealed to be Max; keeping his gaze firmly on Clara, Max continues: "Kann ich bitte Ihren Ausweis sehen? Ist Diebstahl. Ach so, Shampoos hattet ihr ja im Osten nicht, wahr?" (00:01:28-00:01:35). What could have been an innocuous action is reframed as cultural provocation: Clara's East German background—the first thing the viewer learns about her, even before her name—becomes a target for mockery, implying that her upbringing in the GDR's "Mangelwirtschaft" has imbued her with a scarcity mindset. Although his subsequent mimicking of a police officer frames the comment as a joke rather than a rebuke despite its provocative character, the characterization effectively others Clara, casting her as culturally distinct and implicitly inferior. Max's ensuing remark about the lack of such products in the East only serves to underscore his othering of her, employing the second person plural "ihr" form to position her within a group seemingly defined by their experiences under a socialist economy. This demarcation reflects a broader tendency in German reunification discourse, with the newfound access to goods for East Germans after the opening of the border frequently highlighted by both sides, albeit from differing perspectives: while Easterners emphasized the abundance and variety of products previously unavailable to them, Westerners often framed the narrative around East Germans' eagerness to shop and the resulting shortages in West German supermarkets, illustrating the contrasting perceptions of reunification between the two groups (Palliwoda et al. 106-07).

A distinctly German discursive construct, the "Ossi" is more than a geographic label—it carries deep-seated sociopolitical connotations, reinforcing stereotypes and asymmetrical power dynamics, which makes its employment in the film's very first line of dialogue all the more striking. Part of a broader pattern of differentiation between East and West Germans through language and identity markers, "Ossi" is used considerably more often as a designation for citizens of the former East than its counterpart "Wessi" is used for the former West, reflecting the "Ossi's" status as a marked "other" against the norm that is represented by the West (Heft 40-41; Palliwoda et al. 99). This classification, with the "Ossi" perceived as a deviation from the West German norm and often carrying negative connotations, reflects the asymmetrical nature of reunification: while the former GDR states underwent a complete structural transformation and adopted the West German system at all levels, West Germans experienced little to no systemic change.[21] Similar to twenty-first-century discursive dynamics of identity talk about "die Ausländer" compared to "die Deutschen," as Rebecca Pates points out, such hierarchical modes of social classification only serve to reinforce the naturalization and ethnicization of social differences, confirming the prevalence of the proverbial "Mauer in den Köpfen" (Pates 8-14). A metaphorical barrier manifesting in prejudices, economic disparities, identity issues, and differing political attitudes despite more than three decades since the physical fall of the Berlin Wall, the "wall in people's minds" still runs deep in the German collective mind, as the opening scene of *Alle reden übers Wetter* establishes—even in the minds of those who only spent their childhood in a divided Germany. While Max's subsequent teasing of Clara about the shampoos further elucidates the hierarchical classification and asymmetrical power dynamics between East

[21] The collective traits assigned to East Germans often include laziness, a "subservient spirit" that makes them more inclined toward violent extremism, and a longing for a different system, all attributed to the hypothesis that they hail from a "completely different country" than West Germans and did not seek out or expect the migration experience (Pates 11).

and West Germans, the salience of the initial “du Ossi” is enough to evoke “ein ganzes Feld von Vorurteilen und Ahnungslosigkeit und verzerrter Wahrnehmung” (Seitz).

Notably, Max’s labelling of Clara an “Ossi” for collecting the complimentary toiletries, which reproduces the stereotype of East Germans as thrifty or opportunistic due to their upbringing in a supposedly inferior economic system, is not met with overt surprise or indignation. Instead, Clara’s cool but visibly annoyed demeanour suggests she has routinely found herself subjected to such microaggressions about her background. Although she initially remains still and refrains from directly responding to Max’s casual yet loaded comments, her exaggerated actions thereafter—suggestively bending over the minibar, selecting a mini bottle of champagne, and taking a slow, deliberate sip with her gaze fixed on Max—functions as a deliberate act of defiance. By ostentatiously helping herself to what is likely the most expensive item in the minibar and making a show of consuming it, she pushes the stereotype to the extreme, seemingly embracing it yet simultaneously undermining its power. This act of ironic subversion is further emphasized through the scene’s visual composition, framing Clara in a medium close-up shot as she locks eyes with Max and smirks, which visually reinforces her response as an assertion of selfhood and a reclamation of agency over the label imposed on her, inflected with a hint of seduction (see fig. 23). Her gesture of putting the complimentary slippers in her bag at the end of the scene, which she makes sure Max sees her do, further underscores this dynamic, establishing her from the outset as a woman who, despite accustomed to being othered, actively resists external definition.



Fig. 23. Clara smirks at Max while opening a mini bottle of champagne (00:02:04).

When Clara leaves the room, a brief scene of her in the hotel hallway acts as a bridge between the opening scene and a sequence introducing the film's title card and main acting credits, set to the only instance of non-diegetic sound use in *Alle reden übers Wetter*. After briefly considering going back into the room, which hints at her emotional attachment to Max despite appearances, Clara starts walking down the hotel corridor when the first notes of the 1984 song "Niemand wird so wieder werden" by the Puhdys emerge, its resonant synth intro commanding the viewers' attention as the screen cuts to black and the title cards appear (00:03:12). The song continues into the first verse before a cut introduces a scene of Clara driving through the city streets at night; the soundscape then starts to transform, slowly blending in diegetic sounds of traffic while the song's volume and clarity decrease, subtly transforming it into diegetic sound coming from Clara's car radio. While this seamless transition blurs the boundaries between the film's external soundtrack and its internal story world, it is the song's

lyrics that dominate the sequence, echoing clearly against the ambient noise and focusing viewers' attention on the text:

> Niemand wird so wieder werden,
>
> so wie er mal war zuvor.
>
> Niemand kommt zweimal auf Erden
>
> durch ein und dasselbe Tor.
>
> Niemand kann zurück sich regen,
>
> weil er immer reifer wird.
>
> Niemand kann sich frei bewegen,
>
> hat er sich einmal verirrt. (00:03:29-00:04:10)

Centring on themes of irreversible change, the passage of time, and the impossibility of returning to an earlier state, the song's lyrics reinforce the idea that, once a person has undergone transformation, they cannot return to who they once were. As Clara drives silently through the night, the lyrics resonate distinctly within the scene, suggesting an internal confrontation with the themes articulated in the song and framing her as someone caught between past and present while navigating an identity shaped by external perception. That the song is by the Puhdys makes it all more poignant: an East German band, the Puhdys enjoyed widespread success both in their native GDR and in the FRG, becoming one of the few musical acts allowed to travel to the West to play concerts. Their ability to transcend the East-West divide while still being strongly associated with the cultural identity of the GDR mirrors Clara's own complex position who, as the film's first few minutes establish, is confronted with the implications of her East German background while existing in a predominantly West German framework. As a result, the song's lyrics take on additional weight, evoking the experience of East Germans who could not return to

their former selves after reunification, as the dissolution of their state rendered their familiar system and way of life irretrievably lost. Through its poignant choice of soundtrack, this scene sets the stage for the film's broader exploration of identity, agency, and the ways in which the historical transformation that was German reunification continues to shape individual biographies decades after.

4.2 "Selbstbestimmt"

Building on the themes introduced in the opening, the film's first thirty minutes expand on Clara's position between conflicting social milieus and roles, focusing on her life in Berlin as a doctoral candidate in Philosophy—an academic environment she navigates, yet one in which she must continually negotiate her belonging. These scenes also contextualize her relationship with Max, who is revealed to be a student in the graduate seminar Clara leads, a detail that renders their affair not only clandestine but professionally compromising. When Max shows up unannounced at Clara's shared apartment to ask for more from their relationship, she reproaches him for overstepping her boundaries and offers no definitive response; her cool tone and emotionally detached manner suggest an effort to compartmentalize the affair, distancing it from both her professional and emotional life (00:04:13-00:06:23). This negotiation is complicated in a later seminar scene, where Clara's roles as lecturer and lover converge. Still reeling from her earlier rejection, Max inserts a pointed remark into a classroom discussion on gender roles, claiming he would be comfortable with a partner who holds more authority than he does in a thinly veiled reference to Clara. His suggestive phrasing and lingering gaze place Clara in an impossible position: any acknowledgement risks exposing the relationship and undermining her authority, yet ignoring it allows the personal subtext to destabilize the classroom dynamic. In this moment, Max undermines the very authority he claims he is willing to accept, forcing Clara into

a silent performance of professionalism; indeed, Clara awkwardly sidesteps the comment, guiding the classroom discussion in a different direction (00:10:53-00:11:24). The scene exemplifies Clara's broader predicament: caught between roles that are not only distinct but appear mutually incompatible, she is compelled to manage her subjectivity in fragments, unable to inhabit any one position without compromising another.

The seminar discussion continues this negotiation between Clara's conflicting roles, unfolding as a subtext-rich exchange that reveals a gendered divide over authority and illustrates how even gestures toward parity can end up reinforcing the normalization of male dominance and female dependence. The discussion revolves around American artist Roy Lichtenstein's 1963 painting *Drowning Girl*; one of Lichtenstein's most recognizable works, *Drowning Girl* depicts a teary-eyed female figure in a strong close-up surrounded by a turbulent sea, with a thought bubble reading "I DON'T CARE! I'D RATHER SINK – THAN CALL BRAD FOR HELP!" Although with minor adjustments, both the text itself and the artwork are sampled from the cover of a 1962 issue of *Secret Hearts*, a romance comic book published by DC Comics between 1949 and 1971, illustrated by American comic book artist Tony Abruzzo, and primarily marketed to and read by women (Collins 71-73). As the ensuing discussion reveals, the seminar Clara leads centres on English philosopher John Stuart Mill's theory of utilitarianism, in turn based on his seminal 1861 essay *Utilitarianism.* In this work, Mill argues that morality is fundamentally concerned with the promotion of happiness, which he equates with utility, and that individuals should strive to maximize overall utility, thereby generating the greatest happiness for the highest number of people. After a student remarks that utilitarianism also entails the absence of suffering, Clara redirects the discussion to *Drowning Girl,* which prompts to the following exchange:

SEBASTIAN. … dass Nützlichkeit im Sinne von Lust auch Abwesenheit von Schmerz bedeutet und dass es da auch um eine gesamtgesellschaftliche Glücksbilanz geht.

CLARA. Aber was heißt das? Kann man den Lustgewinn einer Mehrheit auf Kosten einer Minderheit durchsetzen?

MARTIN. Sie ist ja keine Minderheit, sondern eine Frau.

CLARA. Herr Köhn, argumentieren sie mal mit Mill.

MARTIN. Es befriedigt ihren Stolz, Brad nicht um Hilfe zu bitten, doch den größeren Nutzen für sie hätte es natürlich, ganz klar einfach am Leben zu bleiben. Im Sinne des Utilitarismus würde Mill also argumentieren, dass die Rettung der Frau mehr Nutzen bringt.

YUNA. Das glaubst auch nur du.

MARTIN. Bitte?

YUNA. Die Frage ist doch, ob sie überhaupt gerettet werden will. Und wenn ja, ob sie einen Mann dafür braucht. (00:09:27-00:10:13)

The exchange directly confronts and simultaneously critiques gendered power dynamics: while Clara challenges the ethical implications of prioritizing majoritarian happiness by highlighting gendered power imbalances, Martin outright dismisses gender as a structural axis of oppression by reducing systemic inequality to a numbers game. That this dismissal takes place in a classroom of seven male students and only one female student not only heightens the irony in Martin's erasure of non-male perspectives but also reflects broader structural disparities in the field: though women comprise nearly half of undergraduate Philosophy students in Germany, their presence sharply declines at postgraduate and professorial levels—a tendency observed across all fields at German universities ("Frauenanteile nach akademischer Laufbahn";

Klonschinski et al.). Clara's role thus becomes doubly fraught: as both authority figure and outsider, she is subtly undermined even in spaces where she ostensibly holds power.

Martin's confidence is visually affirmed when he turns toward the row of male students to his left, raising his eyebrows as if appealing to a presumed consensus (see fig. 24). Yet crucially, the camera does not centre him. Instead, it foregrounds Yuna, the seminar's only female participant, positioned closer to the camera and framed centrally in the shot. Seated with one knee pulled up on the chair, her relaxed posture suggests a mix of ease in her environment and either disengagement or quiet resistance to the ongoing discussion. This impression is reinforced when, in response to Martin's provocative claim, Yuna looks up at Clara with an expression of disappointment and disdain, thereby seeking alignment with the only other woman in the room, before turning her gaze away and shaking her head (00:09:47-00:09:49). In foregrounding Yuna's silent reaction rather than Martin's verbal contribution, the visual composition critiques Martin's act of "mansplaining," as *Der Freitag*'s Arabella Wintermayr notes, by juxtaposing his assertion with the embodied response of the group he dismisses—who, significantly, remain both symbolically and numerically marginalized in this academic setting.



Fig. 24. Martin (right) argues that women are not a minority during Clara's seminar (00:09:49).

When Clara redirects Martin back to the seminar's theoretical framework, Martin's response reduces *Drowning Girl* to a theoretical cost-benefit analysis, effectively stripping the woman of agency by privileging her physical preservation over her refusal to seek help, even when her survival depends on the unwanted intervention of a male figure. Not only does this reading reproduce a patriarchal logic, visually underscored by Martin repeatedly glancing toward the other male students for affirmation, it also misrepresents Mill's philosophy (00:09:56-00:10:05). In his 1869 essay *The Subjection of Women,* which championed equality between the sexes*,* Mill challenged the very gender hierarchies that Martin implicitly reinforces, rejecting the notion that women require male protection due to their supposed biological inferiority. Given Pinske's own background in philosophy, the juxtaposition of Mill's theory with a classroom dynamic shaped by gendered power asymmetries appears deliberate: the scene transforms Clara's seminar into a critical lens through which entrenched hierarchies are laid bare, exposing

the ideological and professional constraints placed on her authority even within an intellectual space ostensibly under her control. Clara's restrained reaction—not confronting but instead prompting formal reasoning—reflects the constrained space she occupies, having to balance professional authority with the careful navigation of latent bias.

Once again, during Martin's explanation, the visual composition centres not him but Yuna, whose curt tone and visible irritation as she rebukes him signal growing frustration with her peer's suggestion that the woman's survival should be prioritized over her agency. The critique she subsequently articulates reorients the conversation from abstract utilitarian theory to a concrete question of autonomy, unmasking the gendered assumptions underlying Martin's utilitarian logic. Her rebuttal thus functions as a feminist disruption: in rejecting the paternalistic logic that casts men as default saviours and women as their dependents, she challenges both the content and the structure of the discussion. Her interjection also marks a moment of female solidarity within the scene, as the camera cuts from her to the row of unresponsive male students before settling on Clara, who allows herself a restrained, approving smile (00:10:09–00:10:13). This subtle gesture conveys mutual recognition—not just between the only two female figures in this setting, but between two women up against a male majority who is either dismissive of or largely indifferent to their marginalization.

While Clara subsequently affirms Yuna's critique, the moment is promptly interrupted by Max:

> CLARA. Was Frau Lee gut auf den Punkt gebracht hat, ist das Klischee. Damit spielt Lichtenstein ja durchaus, das Klischee von der emotionalen, leidenden, schwachen Frau, die von einem starken Mann gerettet werden muss.

MAX. Ja okay, aber ist das jetzt heutzutage wirklich nur eine Frage der Geschlechter? Gibt doch auch starke Frauen, die sich Männer suchen, die …

CLARA. Die was?

MAX. Ja… oder es gibt so Männer wie Joachim Sauer zum Beispiel.

MARTIN. Wer ist denn bitte Joachim Sauer?

MAX. Ja eben, den kennt halt keiner.

SEBASTIAN. Ehemann von Angela Merkel.

MAX. Dabei ist der vielleicht doch einer der stärksten Männer überhaupt, weil der es aushält, in diesem Machtgefüge zu leben. Ich wär' bereit, mich retten zu lassen. Oder so, Joachim-Sauer-mäßig, mich auf so 'nen Dauerzustand einzulassen. (00:10:14-00:11:08)

While the reproduction of gendered tropes in *Drowning Girl* should be less attributed to Lichtenstein's originality and more to the gendered conventions of the source material—American romance comic books of the 1950s and 1960s created by male artists and writers for a predominantly young female readership—Clara's identification of the binary of female vulnerability and male heroism, which she frames as a cliché critically engaged by Lichtenstein, serves as an invitation for the class to interrogate essentialist gender presumptions. Max's interjection, however, reframes the discussion through a postfeminist lens, suggesting that traditional gender binaries no longer fully apply, thus mirroring the discursive tendency observed in chapters one and two whereby feminism is framed as outdated or unnecessary. By invoking "strong" women who choose "dependent" men, Max implies that agency and submission are now flexible roles, no longer tethered to gender. The example of Joachim Sauer, Angela Merkel's largely invisible spouse, is invoked to challenge conventional masculinity by positioning male

self-effacement as a new form of strength. Yet the anecdote ultimately reasserts the very binaries it claims to question: by holding up Sauer as a model of male strength, Max implies that, for a man to occupy a secondary position to a powerful woman, extraordinary inner strength is necessary—a strength cast as self-effacing, sacrificial, and even heroic. This logic not only naturalizes male dominance but also codes its disruption as unusual and burdensome, as something to be "endured," ultimately reasserting male agency even in contexts of supposed subordination. That Sauer is a Professor Emeritus of Quantum Chemistry further undercuts Max's portrayal of him as subordinate: far from occupying a passive or dependent role, he is himself a figure of institutional authority. Max's remark that he, too, would be willing to take on such a role further exemplifies this contradiction: the act of accepting secondary status is reimagined not as a loss of privilege but as a voluntary gesture of strength—that is, despite male discomfort with perceived subordination. Rather than dismantling the binary, Max's anecdote then reaffirms its underlying assumptions, revealing how even gestures toward gender parity can mask the continued normalization of male authority and female dependence.

Overall, the seminar scene articulates the film's thematic concern with autonomy, authority, and gendered power hierarchies. Through both dialogue and composition, it stages a gendered divide not only in interpretation but in access to narrative and pedagogical authority. While Clara formally leads the discussion, her authority is subtly destabilized by her male students, whose comments redirect or diminish the feminist critique she gestures toward. In contrast, Yuna's resistance, both verbal and visual, builds a line of solidarity with Clara, foregrounding autonomy and the right to self-definition in the face of essentialist framings. Together, Clara and Yuna emerge not simply as women in a male-dominated space, but as figures who navigate and contest its hierarchies in distinct ways: Clara through strategic restraint, and

Yuna through open dissent. The gendered alignment between them, made visible through framing and reaction shots, contrasts with the indifference or obliviousness of their male peers. It is this alignment that imbues the scene with critical power, casting the seminar as a microcosm of the broader tensions around gender, power, and authority that will persist throughout *Alle reden übers Wetter.*

This interrogation of gendered hierarchies and the constraints placed on female authority carries into the following scene, which offers a pointed contrast: where the seminar raised complex questions of gendered authority, power, and structural hierarchies, the scene that directly follows it foregrounds the persistence of conventional gender norms—ironically, within the same university setting. The scene centres on a retirement party for a male professor, who, after lightly reprimanding his younger female assistant for getting balloons which read "Emeritus" despite his lacking the official title, closes his speech with a toast to his wife: "Sie kennen ja alle die Lebensweisheit: Ein Mann ist nur so erfolgreich wie die Frau, die hinter ihm steht. Deshalb hab ich mir vorgenommen, ein Ruheständler zu sein, der seine Frau auf Händen tragen und ihr jeden Wunsch von den Lippen ablesen wird" (00:11:35-00:11:50). The professor's toast is steeped in convention, cloaked in the language of praise while ultimately reinforcing normative gender roles. Invoking a supposedly universal maxim, he frames female support not as a partnership but as subordination, presenting it as both natural and virtuous, with the woman explicitly relegated to a position "behind" the man. This backhanded compliment casts a woman's self-sacrifice as a necessary condition for male achievement, often at the expense of her own aspirations. His proposed "reversal" in retirement—fulfilling his wife's every wish—is presented as compensation for what is implied to have been a lifetime of unequal labour, as if emotional and domestic care are only owed *after* a career is complete. The applause that follows,

including a colleague's "sehr schön," mirrors Max's earlier invocation of Joachim Sauer: in both instances, male willingness to "serve" their female partners is praised as exceptional and even heroic, ultimately reinforcing the normalization of male dominance (00:11:50).

That the film critiques this dynamic is evident through the figure of the professor's wife, who is standing beside him and appears blindsided by his declaration, her uneasy expression suggesting that this performance of gratitude was neither collaborative nor sincere. This critical perspective is reinforced by a cut to Clara, captured in a medium shot as she listens to the toast: at the mention of the "Lebensweisheit," Clara lets her mouth hang momentarily, raises her eyebrows, and glances downward, her expression registering restrained disapproval and a fleeting impulse to speak (00:11:39-00:11:45). Given that she has just led a seminar interrogating precisely these gendered tropes, the juxtaposition of the two scenes sharpens the critique, pointing to the embeddedness of such conventional scripts in German university culture—one that remains male-dominated, with enduring power structures that informally sideline women, and where the most frequently reported form of bias is gender-based discrimination (Beaufaÿs; Fousse et al.; Führer et al.). At the same time, the film's emphasis on Clara's reactions positions her within a younger generation that not only distances itself from these norms but actively fosters critical engagement with them, suggesting a gendered and generational shift.

The critique of the professor's celebratory framing of female self-sacrifice is not limited to Clara, however. The scene also introduces Clara's advisor Margot, who is among the guests at the retirement party; a cut to Margot after Gerd's toast and the onset of applause shows her refraining from clapping and instead gesturing for Clara to follow her out of the room, even as Gerd continues to speak in the background (00:11:53). Moments later, in the film's first of many scenes featuring multiple women interacting without a male presence, Gerd's young assistant

Sandra runs into the pair in the hallway and asks what they are doing outside, to which Margot sarcastically replies: “Gerd droht seiner Frau da drin auf offener Bühne mit Fürsorge” (00:12:03). Unlike Clara’s quiet disapproval, Margot does not hesitate to mock the professor’s performative gesture to his own assistant. Her characterization of Gerd’s declaration as a “threat” sharpens the film’s earlier critique, painting Margot as a cynical and unsentimental observer of gendered performance—a positioning further coded in the character’s costume design, with her sharply tailored blazer and slicked-back bob visually communicating her hardened professionalism and refusal to conform to gendered expectations (see fig. 25).



Fig. 25. Margot (left) chats with Clara and Gerd’s assistant Sandra (00:12:06).

When Sandra fails to grasp the irony in Margot’s remark, Margot exchanges an amused yet subtly disdainful look with Clara while the latter suppresses a smile, aligning the two women in their shared skepticism against both Gerd’s declaration and Sandra’s uncritical reception of it

(00:12:06-00:12:11). This divide deepens moments later when Sandra asks Margot about an administrative issue and Margot responds with thinly veiled contempt, subsequently remarking to Clara after Sandra leaves: “Wenn Gerd nicht in Rente gehen würde, dann wär’ die in zwanzig Jahren noch seine Assistentin, so beflissen wie die ist” (00:13:05). Reframing Sandra’s eagerness from professional virtue to a form of complicity in her own subordination, Margot’s sharp comment suggests that deference to male authority is not a path to advancement but an internalization of the very dynamics that keep women in auxiliary roles. Indeed, Sandra—who, as Clara points out in response, holds a doctoral degree—is revealed in this exchange to be a faculty member in charge of compulsory modules, teaching both graduate and undergraduate courses. Yet in this sequence she is reduced to the role of an assistant: decorating for the party, fetching the cake, and chastized for bringing the wrong balloons—tasks more befitting an intern than a scholar, and reflective of how she is treated as a subordinate instead of a colleague. Sandra’s portrayal in this sequence thus appears to validate Margot’s judgment, who, by contrast, embodies a refusal of that posture, with her sharp wit, confrontational style, and visible impatience with institutional pleasantries establishing her as a woman who has long since abandoned the performance of feminine accommodation.

Yet the film refuses to let Sandra be defined by external perception and relegated to subordinate status without resistance. When Clara joins a table occupied by Sandra and two male colleagues at Gerd’s subsequent retirement reception, one of the male colleagues, Falk, is recounting how a recently retired colleague of Gerd’s now feels invisible at conferences; with exaggerated surprise, Falk emphasizes the distress of such an experience and, turning to Sandra, asks whether she can imagine what that must feel like. Without missing a beat, Sandra replies “Ja, anscheinend besser als du,” keeping her gaze firmly on Falk, who is now looking around the

table in a mix of embarrassment and disbelief (00:18:03-00:18:08). Acting as both a rebuke and a revelation, Sandra's response exposes Falk's gendered obliviousness: while he treats invisibility as a post-career anomaly, for her it is a persistent condition, evidenced in her earlier treatment at the retirement party. Sandra's critique aligns with documented structural disparities in German academia, where male-dominated power structures continue to shape access and visibility, reinforced by the sharp decline in the proportion of women with each step up the academic ladder and a corresponding widening of the gender pay gap—patterns reflecting exclusionary dynamics that compound women's marginalization over the course of their careers ("Frauenanteile nach akademischer Laufbahn"; Fousse et al.; "Nach wie vor"). Importantly, though Sandra has so far been framed largely through her deference and subordinate role, this moment reveals her sharp awareness of that marginalization and her willingness to push back, even if subtly, against the dynamics that keep her in place. With a single line and a fleeting exchange of glances, the film deepens the portrayal of a figure otherwise relegated to the margins, granting Sandra a flash of agency and subjectivity rarely afforded to female characters in relatively small, supporting roles—a gesture later echoed in the treatment of two other marginal female figures, exemplifying the film's broader commitment to portraying women with emotional complexity and narrative depth.

Where Margot embodies a rejection of gendered accommodation and Sandra a form of compliance tinged with quiet resistance, Clara is constructed as caught between these poles, her negotiation of gender further complicated by her East German background. Her marginal status in the university circles of Berlin as a young female academic from the former East is foregrounded both visually and narratively, initially through a twenty-second wide shot of her sitting by the trunk of her car to change out of sneakers and into high heels to attend the

retirement reception (00:13:37-00:13:56). Her aging Opel Corsa, parked before the professor's stately villa in a visibly affluent neighborhood, becomes a visual metaphor for her outsider status in the academic elite, and sets the tone for a recurring visual strategy in *Alle reden übers Wetter*: characters' internal tensions are communicated through quiet, lingering wide shots that place them in stark contrast to their often alienating surroundings (see fig. 26).



Fig. 26. Clara rests against her car to change to high heels before attending a retirement reception (00:13:41).

The tension Clara faces in navigating elite academic spaces is most clearly dramatized in her meeting with Max's father, a fellow scholar of Gerd's generation and representative of the world she is attempting to enter. The encounter immediately reveals a striking contrast: Clara's last name is Liepmann, while Max's father is introduced as Alexander von Brandis. Commonly associated with noble lineage, the particle "von" implicitly marks a social and historical distance

between Clara, who grew up in the former GDR and is likely of working-class origin, and the academic elite of reunified Berlin. The interaction is further shaped by a moment of awkwardness that underscores Clara's outsider status: she greets Alexander with the informal "du," a usage Max later explains is typical at their university, only for Alexander to correct her with a pointed preference for the formal "Sie." When the professor leans in to clarify, Clara misinterprets the gesture and kisses him on the cheek in a moment of well-crafted discomfort that recalls Maren Ade's employment of awkwardness to expose underlying social tensions; caught between institutional affiliation and cultural misalignment, this double faux pas intensifies Clara's precarious position, marking her as someone navigating but not yet fully belonging to this exclusive academic world. When Max's father subsequently asks Clara about her dissertation topic, she treats it as a chance to reassert her intellectual legitimacy: "Zu Hegels Theorie der Freiheit. Also genauer gesagt zum Begriff der Intersubjektivität in Hegels Konzeption von Familie und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft" (00:16:57-00:17:06). Clara's choice of topic is significant in itself: Hegel's theory of intersubjectivity, especially in the context of family and civil society, engages directly with the formation of individual identity through social structures—precisely the terrain Clara navigates as she tries to reconcile her personal background with the demands of an elite academic culture. Her command of this abstract philosophical language becomes, as *Die Zeit*'s Sebastian Seidler notes, both a marker of distinction and a strategic distancing from her East German roots, which she conceals behind a form of "functional professionalism" (Seidler).

Notably, however, rather than engaging with Clara's dissertation topic, Max's father immediately redirects the conversation to Clara's family: "Und die Eltern, sind die auch aus dem Metier?" (00:17:10-00:17:12). Treating academic status as a form of inherited capital,

Alexander's question implies that intellectual legitimacy is not only achieved but passed down through familial lineage, further exposing the structural barriers Clara faces as someone without such inherited cultural capital. Clara's quick and emphatic "Nein" is followed by a brief silence, during which her discomfort is captured in a medium close-up as her gaze moves uneasily between Alexander and Max, before eventually continuing: "Mein Vater war Diplomat. Und meine Mutter, ganz klassisch… Hausfrau" (00:17:13-00:17:25). The speed and certainty of this statement suggest a lie improvised on the spot—an impression subtly reinforced by Max's puzzled reaction in the following shot (00:17:26). Leaning into the fabrication, Clara then adds: "Meine Mutter malt eigentlich nur noch, mein Vater hat ihr ein Atelier geschenkt. In der Uckermark" (00:17:30-00:17:36). Her raised eyebrows as she delivers the final phrase communicate the incongruity or even absurdity of this fabricated detail, hinting at the implausibility of a diplomat father situating his wife's artistic retreat in a region often associated with rural marginality and former East German provinciality. While Clara's framing of her father as a diplomat legitimizes her class position, the framing of her mother as "ganz klassisch… Hausfrau" strategically evokes the Western model of the male breadwinner and female homemaker explored in chapter one, an arrangement uncommon in East German households but legible and respectable to the Western audience it is targeted at—much like the retiring Gerd's wife, who is implied to have primarily performed domestic labour her whole life. In evoking this model, Clara enacts a performative gesture of belonging, disavowing her own likely working-class upbringing in favour of a narrative more palatable to West German academic expectations; this is confirmed when Max's father accepts the account with a polite "Toll," thereby tacitly validating the performance (00:17:26). Women's domesticity thus becomes a tool in Clara's performance of belonging, a gendered signifier of respectability whose acceptance confirms the

persistence of the male breadwinner model, thereby sanctioning women's role as that of the domestic labourer next to—or, in Gerd's case, behind—a male material provider.

While Clara performs belonging by adopting conventional gender scripts, the film sharply contrasts this strategy with the cost of violating those scripts through the figure of Margot. When Margot takes a tray from a waiter to help herself to hors d'oeuvres at the reception, she is spotted by Max's father, who quips: "Na, Margot, gierig wie immer?" (00:18:37–00:18:40). Reframing Margot's self-assuredness and appetite as innate greed, Alexander invokes a long-standing discursive pattern in which women's assertiveness is cast as strident, excessive, or even threatening, while its male counterpart goes unquestioned (Druxes 244; Lang and Rybnikova 369). Adding to the double bind women face in professional contexts, his comment further implies that Margot's appetite, both literal and metaphorical, ought to be moderated, subtly policing the boundaries of female ambition and framing it as something that must remain contained. Importantly, this quip comes right after a short exchange between Margot and Clara, in which Margot notices that Clara is without a drink; when Clara responds that no one has offered her one yet, Margot pulls her aside and pointedly remarks: "Wenn ich immer gewartet hätte, bis mir jemand was anbietet, wäre ich jetzt noch in Gockhausen" (00:18:15–00:18:19). Sharp and deliberately assertive, Margot's comment voices a broader critique that runs through the film: that those marginalized, whether by class or gender, cannot rely on institutional generosity and must claim access for themselves. Juxtaposed with Alexander's later accusation, the moment exposes how self-assertion is quickly reframed as inappropriate or transgressive when enacted by those expected to remain deferential, deepening the film's critique of gendered power hierarchies.

Margot continues to function as both a source of resistance to gendered and hierarchical power structures and a target for the disciplining of such resistance—a dynamic that comes to the fore in a dinner table discussion at Gerd's reception as the evening winds down. The audience is thrown into the conversation in medias res, with Alexander accusing Margot of becoming suspicious of moral consensus and Margot challenging his assumption that such consensus even exists, once again exposing Alexander's inability to recognize the limits of his own privileged perspective. Despite Alexander being the one to deliver the first line of dialogue, the scene opens with a shot focused on Margot, who is seated prominently in the centre of one side of the table, flanked by Clara to the left and Sandra to the right; the opposite side is soon revealed to be occupied by Gerd, Alexander, and Max in an arrangement that visually encodes gender hierarchy and alignment. When Alexander levels his accusation at Margot, both Clara and Sandra turn their heads to her with slightly raised eyebrows, mirroring Margot's stunned expression and signaling to the viewer that Alexander has transgressed a boundary Margot is poised to defend (fig. 27). Indeed, when Margot does ironically counter that she was not aware that Alexander is speaking "für uns alle," she briefly extends her arms to either side, effectively including Clara and Sandra in the imagined collective, in a gesture that opposes Alexander's assumption of universal agreement by momentarily asserting a shared female perspective (00:19:18). Mise-en-scène is thus manipulated to reinforce the scene's gendered subtext: while the men dominate one side of the table and speak from positions of inherited authority, the women form a loosely allied front shaped by experiences of marginalization.



Fig. 27. Clara and Sandra turn to face Margot at Gerd's retirement reception (00:19:13).

Clara's precarious standing comes into sharper focus when the conversation is revealed to centre on the former GDR, cued by Gerd's wife Barbara's reference to "die neuen Bundesländer" (00:19:24). Reflecting official reunification discourse that relegates East Germany to part of the pre-existing structures of the Federal Republic, the term positions the West as the norm and the East as its deviation—a discursive move that, as observed in the discussion of the term "Ossi" earlier, continues to shape perceptions decades after reunification (Hogwood 46). As the group's conversation unfolds, revealing entrenched stereotypes about the East/West divide, Clara is visually anchored as the emotional focal point: consistently framed in medium close-ups and tracked by a handheld camera, her shifting expressions signal discomfort and mounting frustration. Yet she remains largely silent; even when Margot gestures toward her as a legitimate source of knowledge, Clara is pre-empted by Max, whose attempt to defend her inadvertently reinforces her marginalization. It is only when Alexander makes a sweeping claim that the East

“tut sich da schon schwer mit der Demokratie” that Clara finally interjects to reframe the alleged democratic deficit as a legacy of historical oppression, noting that “fünfzig Jahre Diktatur, das geht nicht spurlos an Menschen vorüber” (00:19:42–00:19:46). Though brief, this firm but measured statement asserts interpretive authority over her own experience and subtly redirects the conversation away from pathologizing East Germans and toward a structural reading of post-reunification struggles.

Crucially, the scene’s visual and dialogic structure draws a clear parallel between condescending attitudes toward East Germans and the patronizing logic underpinning gendered hierarchies. Though she is the only person at the table with direct experience of the GDR, Clara is consistently denied discursive agency, recalling the earlier seminar scene, where the only female student was likewise visually centered but denied interpretive authority until she claimed it herself. Combined with the narrative choice to have former West Germans position themselves as the primary narrators of East German experience, the film deliberately invokes a “Besserwessi” logic—a West German posture of superiority that performs empathy while asserting both cultural hegemony and epistemic control (Schneider 137–39). Through this parallel, the scene stages the intersection of gender and regional identity; importantly, however, the film does not merely layer forms of exclusion but reveals how each reinforces the other, shaping Clara’s role in the group as one of embodied presence but muted authority. In this context, her eventual assertion becomes doubly significant, emerging not only as a personal response to Alexander’s erasure but as a form of resistance to the structural forces that simultaneously diminish her voice as a woman and an East German.

Clara’s assertion about the lingering effects of authoritarianism is seemingly affirmed by Gerd, yet his agreement quickly reveals itself as echoing familiar “Besserwessi” logic: by

referencing the post-reunification evaluations of East German universities—which were conducted by overwhelmingly West German evaluators and resulted in a "cleansing" of staff and a devaluation of the East German academic ecosystem—Gerd reframes structural exclusion as justification for the marginalization of East German academics, thereby neutralizing Clara's critique and reaffirming West German dominance (Pritchard 167-72). In a striking reversal, however, it is Gerd's wife Barbara who challenges this logic, questioning the legitimacy of the dismissals and reframing the process as an "Übernahme," thereby exposing the asymmetrical power structures underpinning narratives of integration (00:19:50). Gerd's drawn-out "Babsi" in response functions as a gendered act of dismissal, reducing her intervention to emotional naïveté in a gesture meant to return her to the domain of domesticity and silence her critique (00:19:56). Yet Barbara persists, directly implicating Gerd in the system from which he benefited by calling attention to the ease and speed of his post-reunification success. That this incisive political challenge emerges from Barbara—a character so far confined to silent domestic labour—deepens her portrayal and reinforces the film's commitment to complicating marginal female figures. Her unexpected assertion parallels Clara's earlier intervention and Margot's ongoing resistance, offering a different yet equally potent form of critique from a woman whose silence and deference are presumed. Through figures such as Barbara and Sandra, the film refuses to essentialize female roles, instead tracing how women positioned at the margins directly confront and expose the structural hierarchies that shape their lives. As a result, Barbara's intervention not only subtly unsettles the celebratory veneer of the retirement gathering but also strengthens the film's intersectional critique of gendered and regional power.

One final moment of tension in the scene culminates in a single word that crystallizes the film's broader commentary on gender, identity, and authority—a word that could almost serve as

an alternate title for the film. After Max once again places Clara on the spot, much like he did during the seminar, by sarcastically asking how her supposed diplomat father dealt with the collapse of the GDR, Clara flatly responds that her father shot himself, thus bringing the conversation to an abrupt halt. Refusing to allow the group to gloss over the moment, Margot breaks the silence and confronts the unspoken taboo, questioning the idea that life must be preserved at all costs. When Alexander invokes humans' inherently social nature and the conventions that, in his view, underpin the duty to keep living, Margot counters by asserting individual authority over one's death as over one's life:

> MARGOT. Ihr macht was ihr wollt, aber ich möchte darüber entscheiden und so sterben, wie ich gelebt habe.
>
> ALEXANDER. Alleine?
>
> MARGOT. Selbstbestimmt. (00:21:07-00:21:17)

Invoking a normative framework in which women's success is still measured by marriage and motherhood, Alexander's tactless interjection suggests that Margot's implied lack of a conventional partnership or family structure is a deficiency, his caustic tone framing this departure from societal norms as something to be criticized. Margot's succinct response—"selbstbestimmt"—flips the narrative: rather than defending herself within patriarchal terms, she rejects the narrow assumptions behind Alexander's remark and asserts self-determination as the guiding principle in her life. The significance of this moment is underscored both by its function in concluding the scene and through visual framing: following Margot's reply, the camera lingers on a medium shot of her and Clara for three seconds, capturing Clara's quiet admiration and Margot's composed, self-assured expression, inviting the audience to dwell on this moment of feminist resistance and solidarity (00:21:17-00:21:20). Importantly, Margot's assertion resonates

beyond gender: in the broader context of the film's East/West dynamic, the claim to self-determination evokes a long-standing political demand among East Germans to assert their own identities in the face of post-unification erasure and marginalization—a demand grounded in a collective self-understanding as agents of their own (and German) history, having enacted their own "Selbstbefreiung" from authoritarian rule (Wagner 164-65). Where West German narratives often claim interpretive authority over the former GDR, as this scene pointedly dramatizes, Margot's retort insists on the right to self-definition—personally, politically, and at their intersection. As a result, "selbstbestimmt" emerges as a radical claim to agency against structures that categorize, constrain, or silence, effectively distilling one of the film's central themes: the struggle for autonomy in the face of systemic power.

At the same time, the film resists framing women's self-determination as a panacea, instead subtly acknowledging the emotional toll such autonomy can exact. After Clara brings Margot home from Gerd's reception, she finds her advisor smoking silently by the living room window. Clara pauses, hesitating for a few seconds with an uncertain, almost puzzled expression; picking up on her discomfort, Margot jokes that she is not about to jump in a cynical reference to the earlier conversation around suicide, adding: "Ich hab keine Kinder, die mich ablehnen können, wenn ich alt und ungenießbar werde. Ich hab noch nicht mal Katzen" (00:24:23). Delivered with a self-deprecating laugh, this bittersweet admission reveals the emotional cost of Margot's autonomy, suggesting that Alexander's earlier dig touched a nerve and hinting at the sacrifices her professional success entailed—particularly for a woman without the privilege of outsourcing domestic or emotional labour. Although Clara chooses not to respond and leaves the apartment, the camera lingers on Margot for ten seconds, framing her in a wide shot smoking silently by the window (see fig. 28).



Fig. 28. Margot smokes by her living room window late at night (00:24:51).

Mise-en-scène, cinematography, and sound expertly converge in this shot, which "in mere seconds all but defines the character" (van den Klashorst). Framed by the rigid vertical and horizontal lines of the apartment's architecture, which visually echo her hardened exterior and the constraints she has navigated, Margot's still figure embodies both resilience and profound loneliness. The subtle shakiness of the handheld camera communicates her vulnerability, while the distant sound of thunder intensifies the emotional weight of the scene, amplifying her precarity and isolation. Partially visible on the hallway wall to the right is Roy Lichtenstein's *Drowning Girl*, recalling the earlier seminar discussion on agency and self-determination, and subtly reaffirming the latter as Margot's defining principle. Similar to the earlier shot of Clara sitting by the trunk of her car outside Gerd's villa—though here with greater emotional intensity—this shot continues the film's visual strategy of sparsely employing quiet, wide shots

at pivotal narrative moments to wordlessly capture characters' inner tensions. This framing of Margot thus visually articulates the emotional cost of a professionally successful woman's self-determination, foregrounding how female autonomy, particularly when achieved outside the normative roles of wife and mother, is often accompanied by social isolation, thereby quietly exposing the gendered trade-offs embedded in pathways to professional advancement.

This complexity resurfaces the following morning in a brief yet telling scene set at the university. When guest lecturer Hanna (played by *Toni Erdmann* protagonist Sandra Hüller), accompanied by Clara, encounters Margot in the hallway, she immediately recognizes her as a former professor. Margot, however, admits she does not remember Hanna and prepares to leave, only to be met with a sharp outburst: Hanna denounces her as a "furchtbare Dozentin" and a "böser Mensch," explaining that Margot was very hurtful both to her and to others during her studies (00:28:36–00:29:03). Margot coldly dismisses the critique, refusing to apologize and telling Hanna to stop playing the victim. The implication is clear: Margot once treated Hanna with the same hardness she now displays, a callousness she neither apologizes for nor reflects upon. By juxtaposing this brusque rejection with the prior scene of Margot's vulnerability at home, the film complicates her characterization: she is at once exposed and impenetrable, vulnerable in private yet unyielding in public. The complexity deepens in the next scene, when Margot seeks out Clara in the hallway, attempting to engage her even as Clara withdraws, suggesting a flicker of insecurity about how her current student now perceives her (00:30:51–00:33:53). Together, these moments exemplify the film's narrative economy and attentiveness to the construction of female subjectivity, crafting figures whose contradictions resist simplification by foregrounding the complexities that underlie women's lived experiences.

4.3 “Irgendwelche Wünsche?”

In tracing its protagonist’s efforts to negotiate belonging both in Berlin’s academic world despite her East German background and in her East German hometown despite her chosen life in the West, *Alle reden übers Wetter* explores these tensions primarily through the lens of a mother-daughter dynamic: Clara’s relationship with her mother, Inge. Yet this is not the only such bond in the film. Around the thirty-two-minute mark, Clara is shown lying fully clothed on her bed, her stillness conveying emotional exhaustion; she then proceeds to pick up her phone and record a voice message, beginning with the words “Hey Emma, ich bin’s, Mama” (00:31:49). While attentive viewers may have picked up on brief references to Emma earlier—such as during Max’s unannounced visit to Clara’s apartment or when the pianist at Gerd’s reception casually inquired about her—Clara’s daughter’s existence has been merely “beiläufig eingestreut” in *Alle reden übers Wetter,* in keeping with the film’s broader strategy of conveying meaning through implication rather than explicit exposition (Meyns). Along with the understated way in which Clara contacts her daughter, this narrative delay suggests that Clara’s identity as a mother is not foregrounded in her day-to-day life and that her relationship with Emma, while clearly present, may be somewhat casual or distanced. Reinforced by the implication that Emma does not live with her mother, this revelation adds a striking new layer to Clara’s character, inviting the viewer to engage with assumptions about motherhood, presence, and emotional proximity.

The implications of Clara’s non-normative relationship with her daughter are explored in greater depth when she picks up Emma for a weekend trip in the East, a scene which immediately foregrounds visual and structural contrasts between Clara’s life and that of Emma’s custodial home. The scene opens with a wide shot of Emma in front of a gated, well-kept family

home surrounded by grass and trees in a composition that evokes affluence and stability, just as Clara's aging Opel Corsa pulls into the frame (00:32:07-00:32:12). The contrast is striking and deliberate, positioning Clara outside the bourgeois family ideal represented by the pristine suburban house, and underscoring the material differences between her and Emma's father. The initial embrace between mother and daughter gives way to a telling exchange that confirms Clara's non-custodial status, reverting normative expectations around motherhood and domestic care. Importantly, the film presents this inversion of the conventional custody model matter-of-factly, without dramatization or critique, presenting Clara as a mother who may be physically and emotionally distanced yest still actively engaged, thereby normalizing a model of motherhood that supports professional ambition and is not defined by full-time cohabitation. At the same time, the emotional fragility of this arrangement is made visible: when Clara attempts to high-five Emma for a good grade in literature, Emma rebuffs her, saying "Ich mag das nicht, wenn du so tust, als hätten wir uns gestern erst gesehen" (00:33:02-00:33:05). The comment registers not just disappointment but emotional dissonance, as Clara's attempt at casual intimacy only highlights the distance between them. Clara's maternal role thus emerges as one shaped less by steady presence than by moments of reconnection, underscoring a version of motherhood negotiated under the competing demands of autonomy and care. By complicating this alternative model, the film resists easy celebration: while it legitimizes maternal roles outside traditional structures, it also reveals the vulnerability and ambivalence that can accompany them.

The film further emphasizes Clara's position outside the normative family model with the arrival of Pia, Emma's young stepmother, who appears in form-fitting athletic wear, holding snacks and accompanied by a toddler and a cheerful dog—the very image of conventional domesticity. Pia's resemblance to Clara is notable, both being thin, fair-skinned brunettes; at the

same time, her youth, relaxed demeanour, and physical proximity to Emma's home mark her as the symbolic successor in the traditional family structure. When Pia's toddler Nils rejects Clara's high-five, the moment mirrors Emma's earlier rejection, reinforcing Clara's displacement from the nuclear unit. A brief exchange between the two women reveals that Pia has returned to work part-time, aligning her with the dominant gendered labour patterns discussed in chapter one, whereby women largely return to work part time, if at all, following family leave (*Lohngerechtigkeit*). This adherence to the normative domestic script is underlined by the arrival of Roland, Emma's father, whose exaggerated entrance on a brand-new lawnmower provides an unmistakable caricature of suburban provider masculinity. The contrast between this model and Clara's is staged most strikingly in the scene's final image: a ten-second wide shot that mirrors Clara's gaze and holds the viewer's attention as the gate closes behind the family—Roland on the mower, Pia, Nils, and their dog running toward the house, a gleaming SUV parked beside it (see fig. 29; 00:34:56-00:35:07).



Fig. 29. The gate to Roland's house closes with his family visible in the background (00:35:07).

It is a quietly loaded image: Clara is positioned not just physically outside the family unit but symbolically beyond the boundaries of normative domestic life, the closing gate in the foreground forming a literal boundary between her and this model. The composition thus turns the family tableau into a performance of gendered stability, inviting the viewer to contemplate what Clara may be sacrificing—or refusing—in her pursuit of a self-determined life. The contrast between the closed, curated family unit and Clara's embodied autonomy subtly reframes the nuclear family not as inevitable but as one of many possible configurations, reaffirming the film's portrayal of Clara's maternal role as neither failed nor deviant, but consciously and self-reflexively other.

Parallel to its portrayal of an alternative maternal model, the film foregrounds Clara's relationship with her own mother, Inge—a bond that forms the emotional core of the narrative and is rendered through the recurring motif of talking about the weather, echoing the film's title. This metaphor for emotional distance is established early on: while preparing for her seminar, Clara receives a phone call from Inge, who ignores her daughter's repeated attempts to end the conversation and instead rambles about the weather (00:07:24-00:09:18). Inge's chatty tone contrasts with Clara's visible irritation, exposing a fundamental disconnect in how each woman approaches communication and intimacy. The motif intensifies once Clara travels East for the weekend, where Inge's fixation on the weather emerges as symptomatic of a broader local culture shaped by small-town routine and surface-level pleasantries. Several minor characters greet Clara with near-identical weather talk, producing a comic repetition that renders the film's title almost literal. These conversations function less as genuine exchanges than as rituals of familiarity in a community where little changes—a stagnation symbolized by the town's

interiors: the local pub is cluttered with grandfather clocks, porcelain figurines, and framed landscapes, yet conspicuously lacks Wi-Fi. In this way, the motif of weather talk comes to index both emotional reserve and spatial provinciality, framing Inge's world as one suspended in time—a static environment that clashes with Clara's more mobile, reflexive, and professionally driven life.

This difference in meaning-making between the two social worlds Clara inhabits comes sharply into focus in her first private scene with her mother. The scene unfolds in Inge's modest kitchen, a quietly intimate space shaped by the rhythms of domestic routine: Inge bakes while Clara, seated at the kitchen table and bent over a crossword puzzle, occupies a place and posture that evoke childhood familiarity (00:39:15). Here, Inge's character begins to take shape: a practical, no-nonsense woman who has likely spent her entire life in her hometown and finds reassurance in the familiar rhythms of daily life —in other words, a "Kreuzworträtselkönigin, oberflächlich einfach gestrickt, pragmatisch bis in die Knochen" (Balkenborg). This pragmatism emerges when Inge casually asks Clara how things are going at the university; Clara's brief pause, followed by a flatly delivered "Gut," reveals a moment of disappointment, her expression suggesting that she recognizes this as a routine inquiry devoid of genuine interest—a performative gesture rather than a prompt for meaningful dialogue (00:40:52). After Clara mentions a possible publication, Inge acknowledges it with minimal interest before asking about Clara's dissertation timeline, and the ensuing exchange exposes the affective impasse between them:

INGE. Und deine Doktorarbeit?

CLARA. Na, wenn's gut läuft, Ende nächsten Jahres.

INGE. Wat? Dauert aber lang, oder?

CLARA. Interessiert dich eigentlich auch was ich schreibe oder nur wie lange?

CLARA (CONT'D). Kannst ja mal lesen, ich hab's dabei.

INGE. Clara, dat… dat is mir alles so… so verkorkst und jestelzt, weeste—

CLARA. Ich kann's dir doch erklären.

INGE. Du, aber nicht mehr heute Abend. (00:41:14-00:41:58)

The exchange is telling as much for what is said as for what is withheld. In response to Clara's loaded question whether she is at all interested in the content of her work, Inge avoids answering altogether; the uncomfortable silence that ensues is emphasized by a slow pan from Clara to Inge, whose averted gaze and pursed lips underscore her discomfort and unwillingness to engage, both emotionally and intellectually (00:41:33–00:41:43). The pan reflects the scene's broader visual strategy, with the camera alternating between the two women but never framing them together, visually reinforcing their disconnect. This emotional and communicative gap becomes explicit when Inge characterizes Clara's work as "verkorkst" and "jestelzt"—terms that reduce Clara's academic language to something unintelligible, convoluted, and even affectively off-putting to Inge's frame of reference. Importantly, her critique extends beyond the writing itself to the entire linguistic and cultural world Clara now inhabits, reflecting fundamentally different relationships to language and meaning: for Inge, language is a tool for the practical and immediate, whereas for Clara, it is a means of interpretation, critical reflection, and emotional expression.

The film explores this emotional disconnect and divergence in meaning-making with subtlety, gesturing toward the sociopolitical histories that have shaped each woman's understanding of personal fulfillment. A grocery store exchange the day after Clara and Emma's arrival serves as a pointed example: as the three generations of women walk the aisles together,

Inge remains focused on practical concerns—grocery brochures, prices, and efficient movement through tasks—while Clara attempts to prompt a moment of reflection with a seemingly innocuous question, asking her mother what she hopes to do in the next ten years. Inge's immediate response, "Oh, wat du mal alles wissen willst," dismisses the inquiry as overreaching, treating her daughter's search for meaning or emotional reflection as a kind of intellectual imposition (00:43:33). Undeterred, Clara reframes the question in more practical terms, asking her mother to name three things she would like to do before turning seventy; when Inge deflects again by shifting attention to the task at hand, Clara persists:

CLARA. Denkst du da nie drüber nach?

INGE. Hm?

CLARA. Wünsche? Irgendwelche Wünsche?

INGE. Wünsche… (00:44:05-00:44:12)

Inge's repetition of "Wünsche," delivered in a near-sarcastic tone as she reaches for a carton of cream, betrays both discomfort and disinterest. She neither meets Clara's gaze nor pauses in her movements, grounding her response in the physical act of shopping—a visual and symbolic gesture to the fact that, for Inge, "wishes" remain grounded in the practicalities of everyday life. The physical staging of the scene underscores the emotional divide between mother and daughter: where Clara reaches out, literally and figuratively, Inge folds back into her habitual pragmatism, shutting down the possibility of further intimacy (see fig. 30).



Fig. 30. Clara urges Inge to express wishes for the future during a grocery store run (00:44:36).

When Clara presses further, Inge finally offers: “Dass ich noch mal Arbeit finden will, bevor ick in Rente jehe? So wat?” (00:44:28). While Inge’s questioning tone and tentative phrasing suggest she is merely searching for an answer that will satisfy her daughter, the “wish” she instinctively reaches for carries considerable weight. Inge’s age implies that she, like many East German women, came of age in a system where self-actualization was tied to full participation in the workforce, as outlined in chapter one, with the GDR emphasizing women’s employment as a matter of both ideology and necessity. After the fall of the regime and re-unification, however, East German women were suddenly absorbed into a West German system that emphasized women’s domestic roles, while the widespread devaluation of their professional and academic credentials meant that many lost their jobs. As a result, many East German women were forced to fundamentally reorient their lives, cut off from the values and structures that had once anchored their identity— what Clara’s advisor Margot had referred to at the retirement

reception as a “Bruch in der Biographie” for former GDR citizens (00:20:15). Inge is emblematic of this generation: her qualifications likely devalued, her career curtailed, and her sense of purpose destabilized, she embodies the disillusionment of a generation whose ambitions were not only thwarted but delegitimized. This moment, then, extends beyond personal ambivalence, with the film gesturing toward the systemic erasure of a generation’s sense of identity. Inge’s evasiveness is not simply reluctance to engage with her daughter’s questions, therefore, but a defense shaped by structural loss. Her hesitation speaks to a form of resignation Clara cannot fully access—not out of lack of empathy, but because her own pursuit of “wishes” unfolds within a world where female self-determination is socially and institutionally supported.

Brief but loaded, the grocery store exchange echoes the emotional stalemate from the kitchen scene: Clara seeks connection through reflection, hoping for a sign of personal ambition or shared values, likely as a way to validate her own path, whereas Inge, shaped by a sociopolitical context that once encouraged professional achievement and later stripped it away, remains anchored in the immediacy of daily life. For her, abstract aspirations have become suspect, representing reminders of a system that no longer values what she was once taught to strive for. Like her earlier disengagement from Clara’s dissertation, her dismissal of “wishes” reveals not only emotional reticence but a historically conditioned skepticism toward aspiration and personal empowerment. Where Clara belongs to a generation that sees self-realization as a right, Inge represents a model of womanhood forged in collective ideals and undone by systemic abandonment. By grounding each woman’s response in the framework that has informed her relationship to fulfillment and ambition, the film constructs a nuanced contrast between two competing ideologies of selfhood—one shaped by post-reunification liberal individualism, the other by the rise and fall of a socialist ethos. The gulf between Clara and Inge is thus not merely

generational but informed by intersecting ideological legacies, reflecting how two different state systems with radically divergent views on gender and aspiration continue to shape the contours of women's lives and their understanding of what fulfillment can or should mean.

4.4 "Ich bin hier die Frauenbeauftragte"

While Clara's fraught relationship with her mother maps a generational and ideological divide in meaning-making, her interactions with the broader small-town community in her East German hometown reveal an even sharper divergence in worldview and behavioural norms. Yet she is not portrayed as entirely outside this world: Clara still moves fluently within the linguistic and cultural register of East German provincial life, reinforcing her position as caught between two distinct and at times conflicting spheres. Her command of the local dialect becomes immediately apparent upon arrival: while unloading her car, she greets a neighbor with a casual "Na, Klaus, alles jut?" switching seamlessly into East German vernacular after previously speaking exclusively in High German (00:36:30-00:36:33). This linguistic shift signals not only her continued familiarity with the codes of her upbringing but also her capacity to traverse the symbolic border between the metropolitan West and rural East. That ability is reinforced moments later when she offers her mother "einen dieser geschmacklosen Orchideentöpfe …, die auf dem (ostdeutschen) Land weit verbreitet sind," as Frank Schirrmeister notes in a review for *Neues Deutschland*. More than a prop, the orchid reflects Clara's sensitivity to regional customs and social rituals, while at the same time exemplifying the film's broader ethnographic precision, offering viewers a portrait of East German life rendered through the lens of a director who knows it intimately.

This ethnographic attentiveness is no coincidence, as it largely reflects the director's own East German background and lived familiarity with the spaces and communities she depicts. The

rural scenes in *Alle reden übers Wetter* were shot in Krackow, a small municipality in southeastern Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, which is also the home of Annika Pinske's own grandparents (Pinske, "Annika Pinskes Film"). While the choice of location was partly pragmatic, driven by the film's tight budget and the director's logistical ease in the area, the setting also carries personal weight. Like Clara, Pinske comes from a working-class background and was raised by a single mother who worked at the GDR's largest microelectronics manufacturer, the Halbleiterwerk in Frankfurt an der Oder (Bartels). This biographical proximity shapes the film's grounded portrayal of the rural East, a place Pinske describes as evoking for her "so etwas wie Heimat"—a term that later surfaces in the film explicitly, reflecting its broader concern with belonging and ambivalence (ibid.). At the same time, this authenticity resonates beyond authorial intent: when the film screened at the Neiße Filmfestival, held in the tri-border region of Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic, audiences recognized their own experiences in the film's details, noting, for example, that their grandmother owned the same toaster featured in Inge's kitchen (Pinske, "Annika Pinskes Film"). As Pinske later reflected, while she had anticipated potential misreadings of the film in a region with strong AfD support, the dominant response was not one of nostalgia or stereotyping but of "Wertschätzung"—a sense of being seen and of recognizing the reality of life in the modern-day East (ibid.). In this way, *Alle reden übers Wetter* offers a rare intervention in contemporary German cinema: where portrayals of the East are often filtered through West German lenses, Pinske's film reclaims East Germany as a lived and evolving space, shaped not only by political rupture but by the textures of ordinary life.

That the film insists on recognition without romanticization emerges through the subtle ways it critiques the socially regressive attitudes embedded in Clara's hometown. While Clara is standing at the bar in the local pub, an off-screen male voice loudly remarks "ist 'ne Liepmann,"

adding that he recognized Clara by her “Fahrjestell”—a crude reference to her figure (00:46:30–46:34). The voice turns out to belong to Klaus, Inge’s neighbour, who had greeted Clara earlier and is now seated behind her. One of the men at his table mildly rebukes him, prompting Klaus to raise his hands in mock apology, while he and Clara’s uncle Peter continue to look in her direction. Framed in the foreground with a subdued expression, Clara remains silent, her non-reaction betraying resignation instead of surprise, as if such comments are expected in this environment and thus not worth confronting (see fig. 31).



Fig. 31. Clara overhears a crude remark about her body at the local pub (00:46:36).

The moment succinctly illustrates the casual normalization of sexist behaviour in the regional and generational context Clara finds herself re-entering. And yet, the film resists rendering the town’s inhabitants in one-dimensional terms. Moments later, as Clara speaks to Marcel, the pub owner's son, Klaus calls out again, this time with the warning “Hände weg von

der Professorin!" (00:46:57). While still intrusive, his interjection now frames Clara not in terms of her body but her profession in a half-joking, half-proud recognition of her academic status. The tonal shift in Klaus's remarks encapsulates the contradictory nature of the town's social codes: on the one hand, Clara is still subjected to the reductive gaze of male familiarity; on the other, her success is acknowledged and even celebrated, framing her upward mobility and escape from the confines of small-town life as aspirational. In capturing the tension between condescension and pride, the film constructs a textured portrait of East German provincial life; rather than indicting or idealizing the community, it foregrounds its contradictions, blending recognition with critique in a nuanced engagement with the ambivalence of small-town belonging.

The film's exploration of entrenched social norms in Clara's hometown intensifies during the sequence depicting Inge's birthday celebration, an event that serves as a sharp counterpoint to the posh retirement party in Berlin: champagne from gold-rimmed glasses is replaced by beer in plastic cups, Schumann on the piano gives way to light-hearted Schlager music, and the understated park setting contrasts starkly with Gerd's elegant villa, visually and sonically reinforcing the film's attention to classed and regional distinctions. When a young boy begins to cry near the makeshift dance floor, where Clara is dancing with Inge while Clara's aunt Renate is partnered with her husband Peter, Renate loudly chides the child:

RENATE. Kannst och wieder aufhören, Jungs sind doch keene Heulsusen.

CLARA. Mädchen auch nicht.

PETER. Oh, Gottchen.

CLARA. Ja, ich bin hier die Frauenbeauftragte.

PETER. Allet klar. Dann wissen wir ja, in welche Richtung wir schießen müssen.

INGE. Du noch wieder! (00:50:07-00:50:20)

Upholding an essentialist and disciplinary view of masculinity, Renate's comment equates emotional expression with weakness and implicitly reinforces the notion that strength is inherently gendered male. That this view is voiced by a woman is crucial: Renate's policing of masculinity illustrates how patriarchal norms are not only imposed by those they serve but often internalized by those they subordinate and sustained through everyday gestures. When Clara's quick retort disrupts this binary by extending her defence to girls as well, insisting that emotional restraint should not be a gendered expectation, her intervention is immediately trivialized by Peter's sarcastic response, which frames her objection as exaggerated, recasting her attempt to engage seriously with gender norms as hypersensitivity or dogmatism—a critique often directed at feminists, as explored in chapter one. Clara's subsequent self-identification as the "women's representative" directly critiques this dismissiveness, positioning herself as a defender of gender equity in a context that normalizes casual sexism and essentialist thinking. Peter's response, framed in the language of gendered conflict, escalates the moment from dismissal to open hostility by implying a gender war between a male "we" and those who challenge patriarchal norms. That both Renate and Inge laugh at the remark effectively illustrates that such attitudes are not only tolerated but actively upheld by the very women who have internalized them. Notably, the exchange stands in pointed contrast to Clara's university seminar earlier in the film, where gender discourse was approached with critical nuance while feminist critique received institutional support. Here, Clara's feminist position is not only unpopular but actively mocked, exposing the deeply entrenched essentialist norms that govern small-town gender politics while highlighting the limits of Clara's ability to intervene.

Reinforcing this sense of ideological rupture in stark and embodied terms, the sequence culminates in a moment of physical violence that confronts the viewer with the visceral implications of the gender norms Clara seeks to challenge. As Die Toten Hosen's 2012 hit "Tage wie diese" begins to play and the attendees continue dancing, the camera tracks a young boy running wildly across the dance floor and slapping women on the buttocks in a disturbing mimicry of sexist adult behaviour. The act is initially ignored by the adults, treated as part of the chaotic festivity; his mother Nicole is watching from the sidelines with growing irritation, her visibly young age and early-2000s fashion of skinny jeans and peep-toe heels suggesting both generational immobility and the early entry into motherhood common in rural communities. When the boy slaps Inge as well, Nicole hastily intervenes, dragging him off to the side and threatening to take him home. The boy begins to scream for her to stop touching him, escalating the tension, until Nicole yells "Es reicht!" and a loud slapping noise is heard (00:51:23). Though the camera does not show the act itself, remaining fixed on Clara and Emma in a medium shot as they watch the events unfold, the sound is unmistakable and jarring. In the immediate aftermath, a five-second wide shot captures the dance floor: adults continue dancing, seemingly undisturbed, including a smiling Peter dancing with Clara's grandmother, while the boy runs off in the background holding his cheek to seek comfort from his father (00:51:25-00:51:30). The collective indifference is striking: only two older boys, who were previously shown playing with the young boy, are shown standing still, their body language communicating shock and confusion. Unlike the adults, they have not yet absorbed the community's silent codes of behaviour—the same codes Inge invoked earlier when she warned Clara to not make a "fuss" over a missing side dish, dismissing the impulse to assert oneself as socially inappropriate (00:47:55). Here, that same logic of prioritizing appearances over accountability is extended to a

more disturbing register, as physical violence against a child is absorbed into the background of social normalcy.

Yet the scene is filtered through Clara's perspective. While the slap and its aftermath unfold off-screen, the film immediately cuts to a close-up of Clara's face—the only such shot in the sequence—capturing her reaction with devastating intimacy (see fig. 32). Her eyes water slightly, her expression is painfully somber, and she briefly looks away, as if needing to disengage from what she has just witnessed. The shot not only centres Clara's emotional response but also positions her as the ethical lens through which the viewer is invited to register the dissonance between the community's passive acceptance of violence and Clara's quiet, empathetic objection. Utilizing camera perspective and narrative restraint to highlight the emotional cost of social conformity, this intimate shot underscores Clara's growing distance from a world that silences discomfort in favor of decorum. Notably, the disciplinary violence inflicted by Nicole stands in sharp contrast to the maternal model Clara embodies—one defined by emotional care, attentiveness, and a deliberate resistance to normative scripts of motherhood rooted in control or punishment. In this moment, Clara is not only cast as a moral witness, but as the embodiment of an alternative, more reflective maternal ethos.



Fig. 32. Clara observes the aftermath of Nicole slapping her young son (00:51:31).

For the rest of the attendees, however, the incident barely registers as more than a fleeting disruption to Inge's birthday celebration. When the camera cuts back to the dance floor, a few curious glances are exchanged among Peter, Renate, and Inge, but no one breaks from the rhythm of the party. As "Tage wie diese" transitions from its subdued opening verses into the more anthemic refrain, Inge turns to Renate and encourages her to keep dancing, signaling a collective return to celebration. Evoking the desire to immortalize euphoric moments, the song's lyrics contrast sharply with the emotionally charged event that just occurred, heightening the dissonance between the party's outward joy and its undercurrent of suppression and denial. As the chorus builds and guests join in with increasing exuberance, the camera does not indulge in the collective euphoria; instead, it abruptly cuts to a wide shot of Clara walking alone at the edge of the park, visually reinforcing her alienation through another carefully composed wide shot (see fig. 33).



Fig. 33. Clara takes a walk by herself at dusk during her mother's birthday celebration (00:52:14).

The handheld camera lingers on this image for over thirty seconds, an unusually extended shot for the film, while the muffled sounds of the celebration in the background reinforce Clara's physical and emotional detachment (00:51:54-00:52:22). Gradually receding into the landscape, her diminishing presence within the frame functions as a visual metaphor for her isolation and sense of powerlessness, as though she is being quietly absorbed by an environment that offers no place for her. This quiet, solitary moment powerfully reflects Clara's alienation within a community that prefers conformity to confrontation, turning a blind eye to uncomfortable situations, even including the normalization of corporal punishment as a disciplinary tool. The emotionally resonant shot thus crystallizes the central tension in Clara's character: caught between two worlds, she fully belongs to neither. Her hometown feels estranging despite its

familiarity, while her academic life in Berlin requires the constant performance of fitting in, exacerbated by her lack of inherited cultural capital. Through the subtle interplay of framing, duration, and off-screen sound, the film quietly frames Clara's solitude not merely as a retreat but as a poignant articulation of a life lived between competing value systems, in which identity and belonging are not assumed but have to be continually negotiated.

The film intensifies Clara's alienation in a final exchange that fuses entrenched sexism with simmering anti-West sentiment, rendering her doubly displaced—both as a woman and as an East German perceived to have "betrayed" her roots for life in the West (Seitz). After her solitary walk, a cut transitions to a medium shot of Clara sitting alone on a park bench, visually separated from her uncles Udo and Peter and cousin Maik, who sit opposite her, highlighting her isolation not only in gendered terms but as someone estranged from her place of origin. The men's conversation mirrors the earlier East/West exchange at Gerd's retirement party, though now it is steeped in the language of rural grievance. The "Besserwessi" logic echoed in Berlin finds its counterpoint here in the posture of the "Meckerossi" or "Jammerossi"—terms used in the West to frame East Germans as chronically dissatisfied yet passive, undermining genuine political critique by recasting it as mere complaint (Wagner 156–57, 198). The film navigates this dichotomy with nuance, layering valid structural frustrations—such as bureaucratic barriers to local projects—with sweeping generalizations and veiled hostility, reflecting a broader mood of disillusionment and latent extremism, hinted at earlier through a fleeting shot of teens in nationalist apparel listening to what the director describes as "Nazimusik" (00:49:02-00:49:10; Pinske, "Annika Pinske"). When Peter darkly concludes that no one should be surprised "wenn die Hütte ja mal brennt," Clara's fixed gaze registers unease, as the comment shifts from observation to justification, presenting violence not as a threat but as an inevitable result of

systemic neglect (00:53:23–00:53:29). Recognizing Clara's discomfort, Peter meets her gaze, mocking his niece's reaction with a sarcastically delivered "Da kiekt se" before directly challenging her, asking whether she agrees with him; all the while, the camera stays on a medium shot of the men, who by the end of Peter's question have all turned their heads to look at Clara (see fig. 34).



Fig. 34. Udo, Peter, and Maik look at Clara after a provocative comment (00:53:36).

Ranging from distrust to open mockery, the men's expressions serve to isolate and scrutinize Clara, treating her visible unease not as cause for reflection but as confirmation that she no longer belongs—with the partial exception of Maik, whose discomfort hints at a generational rift similar to Max's role in the earlier dinner scene, neither affirming the older men's views nor, however, openly challenging them. The result is an almost suffocating moment in which Clara is visibly othered, implicitly expected to either defend herself or remain silent. When she calmly asks Peter to elaborate, he dismisses the opportunity; registering the weight of

his implications and refusing to let them pass unchallenged, Clara quietly pushes back, telling her uncle “Das war doch ’ne gezielte Provokation” (00:53:50). Her comment is immediately met with derisive laughter, with Peter calling her a “Schlaufuchs” and repeating her phrase in a mocking tone (00:53:54-00:53:58). A pointed departure from Klaus’ earlier “Professorin,” Peter’s remark caricatures Clara’s intellect as pretentious, while the ensuing laughter underscores her exclusion, confirming her perception as disconnected from local realities and estranged from the community’s social and linguistic norms—the very image, in their eyes, of an “eingebildete Verräterin” (Taszman). Indeed, it is her very language that underscores the divide, a formal and analytic register that stands in sharp contrast to the men’s colloquial speech, regional inflections, and slurred delivery, signaling that she no longer speaks, both literally and culturally, the same language. Through this carefully orchestrated exchange, the film lays bare the convergence of regionalism, masculinity, and anti-intellectualism, positioning Clara as a threat to the town’s gendered and ideological status quo.

The film brings this escalating gendered tension to a pointed close with a final act of casual sexism, which succinctly exposes the normalization of gendered microaggressions in this small-town milieu. After Maik attempts to defuse the tension by pouring a final round of vodka, Udo raises his glass and delivers a crude toast: “Wat ist die Steigerung von Rinderwahnsinn? Frauenpower. Prost” (00:54:23). Though directed at Peter and Maik, Udo speaks loudly enough for Clara to hear in a calculated move that renders her a silent target. While neither Peter nor Maik respond directly to the remark, their failure to object effectively affirms the acceptability of such overt misogyny within the group. Reducing women’s empowerment to pathology, Udo’s “joke” equates female agency with madness and dehumanization in a discursive move that delegitimizes feminist assertion by framing it as hysterical excess. Clara does not respond;

instead, she absorbs the moment in silence, her lowered gaze and tense posture signaling disappointment, unease, and restraint. When Inge interjects with a half-hearted plea to not spoil the mood, Udo deflects responsibility by replying "Kannst ja mal deiner Tochter sagen," turning to Clara with a smirk, thereby provocatively framing her as the killjoy figure often associated with feminist critique (00:54:42–00:54:46). Though she has barely spoken, the implication is clear: Clara's mere presence—and with it, the intellectual, feminist, and culturally mobile world she is perceived to inhabit—is disruptive. Udo's comment thus echoes the tendency observed in chapter one to trivialize structural sexism through humour, with the language of "Herrenwitze" operating as a rhetorical strategy to silence dissent and reinscribe patriarchal norms. In this final exchange of Inge's birthday celebrations, the film amplifies the gendered dynamics of exclusion that shape Clara's return home, where speaking out, whether in response to violence, discrimination, or casual misogyny, is not only unwelcome but framed as a breach of social rules.

The emotional tension built up during the day culminates in a confrontation between Clara and Inge in Inge's kitchen after the birthday festivities, voicing the emotional impasse that has been simmering beneath their interactions. As Inge enthusiastically praises the edible arrangements for their appearance and abundance, the handheld camera, increasingly unsteady, mirrors the emotional volatility of the moment, slowly panning from a medium shot of Inge bent over the kitchen table to a close-up of Clara at the sink, her head down as she listens silently until she finally explodes:

> CLARA. Ist mir scheißegal. Könnt' mir nix egaler sein. Das Wetter, das Essen … ob wa gut durchgekommen sind. Warum sagst du nix zu Nicole? Wieso tun hier alle so, als wär's das Normalste von der Welt, dass man ein Kind haut? Versteh's nicht.

> Wie kann man nach all dem über's schön angerichtete Essen sprechen? (00:56:10-00:56:49)

Clara's outburst is more than a reaction to the slap witnessed earlier—it is a visceral indictment of the entire culture of silence and surface-level pleasantries that permeates this rural community, in which addressing uncomfortable truths is treated as a faux pas. Even in the privacy of her own home, however, Inge remains silent; refusing to engage, her silence actively reinscribes the very norms Clara is protesting, reinforcing both the emotional gulf between them and the unspoken social code that prioritizes appearances over confrontation. When Clara explicitly demands a response, Inge once again withholds it, prompting Clara's pained accusation: "Oh, es regt mich so auf, dass hier einfach nur geredet und gelabert wird und einfach nie kommuniziert!" (00:57:20-00:57:27). This moment crystallizes the central conflict of their relationship: not simply generational or ideological distance, but a breakdown in communication itself—a loss of a shared language, as reviews of the film frequently highlight, and, with it, a collapse of a shared emotional register (Seitz; Wellinski; Wintermayr). The cultural and intellectual language Clara has acquired through education and social mobility now sets her apart, isolating her from the working-class milieu she emerged from while simultaneously rendering her unreadable to it.

This sentiment is repeated moments later; after Inge once again sidesteps Clara's attempts at emotional intimacy, Clara makes a final appeal to her mother in a moment of raw vulnerability: "Ich will mich nicht mehr mit dir nur übers Wetter unterhalten" (00:58:15). Returning to the film's central metaphor, Clara's line casts weather talk as symbolic of a wider cultural disposition, framing it as a means of sustaining emotional distance under the guise of social harmony. Her plea is not just for deeper conversation, but for a new language of mutual recognition—one that bridges the emotional and ideological divide between her and her mother.

That Inge leaves the room angrily in response underscores the tragic gravity of the scene: Inge forecloses the possibility of achieving a shared register, signalling an unwillingness—or inability—to meet her daughter on the emotional terrain she longs for, leaving their relationship suspended in asymmetry and unresolved longing. Yet the scene does not end there. In a quietly devastating epilogue, Emma enters the kitchen moments later and gently asks Clara if everything is okay, to which Clara responds with a distracted "mhm" and then remains silent when Emma persists (00:58:50-00:59:09). The mirroring is poignant: Clara is now the one unable to engage, reflecting the very communication gap she just decried. With remarkable narrative economy, the film gestures toward an intergenerational cycle of silence, tracing how three women shaped by vastly different sociopolitical contexts both inherit and perpetuate emotional patterns of disengagement.

Where Clara's search for mutual understanding with her mother falls short, she unexpectedly finds it in an old flame: Marcel, the pub owner's son. After Marcel lets her in the pub while he closing up for the night, a cut to a wide shot frames Clara alone at the bar, slouched on a stool and surrounded by the pub's dated décor (see fig. 35). Her small figure barely registers within the cluttered composition, visually reinforcing her dislocation in another resonant wide shots that places the film's protagonist in spaces she cannot fully inhabit.



Fig. 35. Clara at the local pub after her mother's birthday celebration (01:00:31).

In marked contrast to Clara's strained interactions with her mother and extended family, her conversation with Marcel unfolds with notable emotional directness. Free from surface-level pleasantries—strikingly, not a single mention of the weather—their exchange moves quickly to the core of unresolved questions around ambition, family, and belonging. After Clara explains that she met Emma's father during a solo trip to South America, Marcel asks whether it feels strange that her daughter now lives with him. Crucially, his question does not carry judgment; rather than chastizing Clara for diverging from conventional maternal norms, Marcel invites her to reflect on her experience. His openness allows for a rare moment of recognition, in which Clara's non-normative maternal arrangement is not criticized but validated as legitimate. Her response is equally revealing: "Ja, schon. Aber die hat da ihre Freunde, Schule, Haus am See… Warum soll ich sie da rausreißen, [bloß] weil die Eltern Probleme haben?" (01:03:01–01:03:14). Centring Emma's well-being, Clara's reply resists narratives of maternal self-sacrifice and

instead frames motherhood as responsive, pragmatic, and child-oriented. In doing so, the film reaffirms its quietly radical model of maternal care, one decoupled from cohabitation and traditional gender expectations, and instead rooted in emotional maturity and relational attentiveness.

A few moments later, after Marcel asks Clara whether she enjoys her work at the university, her response finally gives voice to the passion and meaning she derives from her intellectual pursuits, opening a space for mutual reflection on purpose, belonging, and personal fulfilment:

> CLARA. Weißte, wenn… wenn ich schaffe, so'n Gedanken zu packen… wenn… wenn ich schaffe den aufzuschreiben und dann… dann liest das irgendwer und dann… dann versteht der das genau wie ich… weißte, es ist wie so'n… ist vielleicht so'ne Art Heimatgefühl. Macht das irgendwie Sinn? (01:06:09-01:06:42).

Clara's halting delivery, shaped as much by hesitation as by her inebriated state, captures her emotional vulnerability and the challenge of putting intellectual fulfilment into words. What she finally articulates—the moment of being understood by another through writing—emerges as a profound form of connection, a kind of *Heimatgefühl* rooted for her not in place, but in intellectual recognition. The poignancy of the moment is heightened by the cinematography: as Clara speaks, the camera slowly pans toward Marcel, culminating in a medium two-shot that frames them together, visually mirroring their moment of emotional closeness (01:06:24-01:06:33). When Clara tentatively asks whether what she just described makes sense, Marcel's quiet nod affirms her experience; the pub's warm, subdued lighting intensifies the intimacy of the moment, gently illuminating Clara's vulnerable expression and casting Marcel's face in profile, his contemplative gaze suggesting genuine attentiveness and emotional engagement (see fig. 36).



Fig. 36. Clara connects with Marcel over feelings of belonging (01:06:43).

In turn, Marcel responds with an unexpectedly honest reflection on his own life:

> MARCEL: Ich wollte mal ’n Haus bauen und Familie gründen, Baum pflanzen, Laden vom Vater übernehmen. Jetzt bin ich 39 und, ja, hab alles, hab das alles geschafft und weiß gar nicht, was noch kommen soll. Immer weitermachen… weitermachen… dabei ist ja auch irgendwie die Heimat. Ich könnt’ das gar net so wie du. Alles neu und alles hinter mir lassen…” (01:06:53-01:07:47).

Grounded in the traditional aspirations of rootedness—house, family, inherited work—Marcel’s answer reveals that this conventional trajectory has not yielded certainty or satisfaction. Though fulfilled on paper, he now finds himself adrift in repetition, unsure of what comes next. His remark that the *Heimatgefühl* for him lies in that ongoing rhythm gestures toward a less romantic, more habitual form of belonging, one not defined by passion but by familiar repetition.

Yet this oddly resonates with Clara's own formulation, though in an inverted register, as both seek meaning but from opposing directions: Clara through movement and reinvention, Marcel through continuity and stability. Clara's final line, a toast "auf die Heimat," carries equal parts irony, given how differently the concept resonates for each of them, and a sense of understanding (01:07:43-01:07:47). In this moment, *Heimat* emerges in the film as a shared, if unstable, concept, neither tied to geography nor wholly definable, but rooted instead in longing and in the fragile recognition of another person's equally unsettled relationship to the question of where and how to belong. *Heimat* thus becomes the kind of common ground Clara has been seeking in her fraught relationship with her mother: a moment of recognition in which one's search for meaning is acknowledged and validated.

After the exchange, Marcel quietly takes Clara's hand and leads her to the floor, inviting her to dance with him to Edo Zanki's 2011 cover of Gregor Meyle's song "Finde dein Glück," a ballad about the importance of patience and endurance in the search for happiness. As the music fills the otherwise empty pub, the two begin to dance, tentatively at first, negotiating the limits of familiarity and intimacy. When Clara eventually rests her head on Marcel's shoulder, the gesture could initially be read as a retreat to male support, but it more accurately signals a moment of earned release: a brief, secure surrender from the isolating burden of constant resistance and self-reliance. The song's lyrics, which resonate clearly in the scene, reinforce this reading: centring on perseverance, longing, and the ongoing search for meaning, they invite the audience to reflect on a vision of happiness not as achievement but as the resilience to continue seeking fulfillment in the face of adversity. Lasting nearly two minutes, the dance slows the film's rhythm considerably, elongating this moment of tenderness and mutual recognition (01:08:50-01:10:30). What unfolds is not a romantic rekindling, but a melancholic acknowledgment of two people

who once shared a path and now stand at different points in their respective journeys, each actively crafting their own versions of *Heimat* and *Glück*, though grounded in divergent ideas of fulfillment. With its emotional resonance, deliberate pacing, and layered symbolism, the dance between the two former lovers quietly but powerfully ends the ten-minute pub sequence—a kind of self-contained narrative arc within *Alle reden übers Wetter* which, as the director has noted, could stand as a short film in itself—offering a fleeting yet intimate moment of mutual understanding that gently validates Clara's self-determined path (Pinske, Interview by Borjana Gaković).

4.5 "Du hast das Zeug dazu"

The film's final twenty minutes function as a kind of epilogue to Clara's emotionally charged weekend. Though the film offers no neat resolution—neither to her strained relationship with her mother nor to her ongoing negotiation of belonging in the conflicting milieus she inhabits—it provides moments of quiet affirmation that suggest, if not closure, then forward movement. This acknowledgment first comes from another marginal yet sharply drawn female figure: Clara's grandmother, Charlotte. In a scene set the morning after Inge's birthday, just before Clara and Emma leave for Berlin, the family gathers at Charlotte and Hans' house in a tableau of rural domesticity. Hans rambles, predictably, about the weather, while Charlotte hands Emma cartons of eggs and gives instructions on how to hang laundry and trim beans—gestures that subtly root the scene in intergenerational continuity. Then, unprompted, Charlotte expresses a desire to travel; when Hans dismisses her, she insists, and turns to Clara with quiet conviction: "Du machst das ganz richtig. Lass doch die alle noch reden. Die sind doch nur neidisch, weil sie selber nüscht im Kopp haben. Bei uns war dit anders" (01:14:22–01:14:36). Resonating beyond familial pride, Charlotte's remark offers the generational endorsement Clara has been unable to

obtain from her mother: an affirmation of her intellectual and personal autonomy. Crucially, Charlotte identifies structural limitation, not individual failure, as the force that narrowed her own path, articulating a critique of how the sociopolitical forces of each generation's historical moment directly shape and constrain women's agency. Where Hans' retreat into routine recalls Marcel's habitual *Heimatgefühl*, Charlotte's continued assertion of possibility aligns her with Clara's forward momentum. The film thus stages a gendered contrast between inertia and aspiration—a dynamic Pinske portrayed with intention, emphasizing in interviews that the women in her debut "wollen noch was …!" (Pinske, "Zwischen Zwei Welten"). Sharpened by the acknowledgment of systemic constraint, this desire emerges as a quiet feminist undercurrent in the film, embodied by women who assert meaning and self-determination within—and against—the boundaries of their own sociopolitical context.

A few moments later, a shared moment of silent observation creates a poignant image of intergenerational alignment. After Hans draws attention to a flock of starlings soaring overhead, the family turns their gaze skyward. The film lingers deliberately on the moment: a thirteen-second shot captures the intricate, shifting murmuration, followed by a seventeen-second countershot of Clara, Emma, and Inge seated side by side, silently watching the sky in a composition that became the film's poster (see fig. 37; 01:14:45–01:15:15). The extended duration of both shots slows the film's rhythm, inviting contemplation. In their collective gaze, the three generations of women are momentarily aligned, visually linked despite their emotional and ideological distance. Whether the starlings are migrating or simply moving in unison remains ambiguous; either way, in this moment, they become a symbol of motion and transformation, aligning with the film's engagement with transition, movement, and the ongoing

search for belonging—a search shared by each woman in the frame, shaped by the distinct contours of her generation.



Fig. 37. Alle reden übers Wetter film poster; Grandfilm, https://grandfilm.de/alle-reden-uebers-wetter/.

Amid the scene's stillness, Clara turns to observe Inge, who remains absorbed in watching the birds overhead. Clara's gaze lingers on her mother with a contemplative expression, as if attempting to preserve the moment and simultaneously guess at her mother's thoughts (01:15:04). Sensing her daughter's eyes on her, Inge turns to meet Clara's gaze, a faint smile forming on the mother's lips in an understated but powerful gesture that marks a rare moment of mutual recognition between the two (see fig. 38; 01:15:09–01:15:12). This quiet exchange captures a fleeting alignment between mother and daughter: a moment of sincere, wordless communication between two women whose conflicting modes of expression produce tension, yet whose bond is underpinned by unspoken admiration and enduring love. That this silent connection unfolds as Hans absentmindedly murmurs about the weather only heightens its poignancy, underscoring the contrast between habitual small talk and the emotional substance conveyed without words. While this is not the explicit affirmation Clara

has sought from her mother throughout her stay, their mutual gaze functions as a tacit acknowledgment of a bond that persists beyond ideological difference or communicative failure. In this moment, the film reframes maternal recognition not as resolution, but as relational endurance—a quiet but resonant expression of love that offers a fragile, partial closure for the tensions that have defined the weekend.



Fig. 38. Inge meets Clara's gaze the morning after her birthday celebration (01:15:10).

This intergenerational affirmation of love finds quiet reinforcement moments later in a carefully composed shot that captures two parallel gestures mirroring one another across generations. As Clara walks to her car, Charlotte discreetly slips a bill into Clara's hand; when Clara protests that she is an adult and does not need it, Charlotte insists until Clara accepts it in a familiar gesture of maternal care. As Clara thanks her grandmother with a hug, Inge and Emma enter the frame; in a striking visual echo, Inge hands Emma a bill in the same manner, with

Emma first protesting and then ultimately accepting the gesture (01:15:25-01:15:40). Framing both pairs of grandmothers with their granddaughters within a single composition—Inge and Emma in the foreground, Charlotte and Clara in the background—the film crafts a moment of intergenerational continuity: women passing on support and affection in the form of quiet, habitual gestures (see fig. 39). What emerges is a distinctly gendered lineage of emotional labour and practical love, reaffirming the message that, even where worldviews and values diverge, familial bonds among women are sustained through everyday acts of care and tenderness.



Fig. 39. Inge kisses Emma goodbye as Clara and Charlotte share a hug in the background (01:15:39).

This affirmation of intergenerational support between women carries into the film's final sequence, which is set in Berlin, thereby cyclically framing the narrative. Following a dinner between Clara, Emma, and Clara's roommates at her shared apartment, a cut introduces a

medium shot of Clara standing in a university seminar room, practicing her upcoming lecture. Her assured tone and poised delivery, complete with rehearsed responses to imaginary questions, contrast sharply with the unease she exhibited during her visit home. Here, the university space reemerges as a site of clarity and control, a place where Clara can assert her intellectual confidence and reclaim her sense of purpose. After she responds to an imaginary question from Professor von Brandis, whom she names explicitly, a quiet chuckle is heard off-screen, soon revealed to come from Margot, who enters the room with a warm smile and a stack of papers. After briefly scanning the empty seats, Margot turns to Clara and delivers a candid assessment of the structural gender bias embedded in academia:

> MARGOT. Leute wie der Brandis werden dich immer in Frage stellen, egal wie gut du bist. Du wirst immer härter kritisiert werden, dich öfter rechtfertigen müssen und doppelt so viel arbeiten. Du hast das Zeug dazu, weil du dich nicht mit den Krümeln zufriedengibst, die man dir hinwirft, so wie Sandra, unsere ewige Assistentin.
>
> CLARA. Ich will mich nicht mehr über alles erheben müssen.
>
> MARGOT. Das musst du dir schon selbst verzeihen, dass du mehr vom Leben willst. (01:20:37-01:21:13)

In a moment of intergenerational mentorship, Margot articulates the entrenched asymmetries faced by women in academia—a reality Margot herself has had to navigate and continues to be shaped by, as the film's early scenes demonstrate. Her critique reflects the documented persistence of gender bias in German academia, where informal networks and male-dominated cliques function as exclusionary mechanisms, often marginalizing women regardless of qualification or rank (Fousse et al. 4). While male academics tend to access institutional

influence through these informal channels from the beginning of their careers, women must exert greater effort to shape their working conditions and secure recognition (ibid.). Crucially, Margot's emphasis on the remark "egal wie gut du bist" gets to the heart of the injustice: that women's competence is scrutinized not on the basis of skill or performance but because of their gender. Rejecting the myth of individual performance, Margot's critique is deeply structural, identifying sustained resilience and refusal to conform as the only viable responses to systemic injustice—qualities she recognizes and affirms in Clara, while juxtaposing her with Sandra, who serves as a cautionary figure, embodying the long-term costs of resigning oneself to marginalization. In articulating a structural critique of gender bias, the film elevates Clara's ethic of resistance from necessary consequence of her intellectual ambition to an emphatically feminist act, validated by and modeled on the experience of a woman for whom such resistance has long been a lived necessity. Indeed, the fact that Clara has a "Doktormutter" at all is significant in itself, given the persistent underrepresentation of women in the upper echelons of academia, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Margot's own path would have been shaped by "viel größere Widerstände," as the director notes, likely compounded by the limited presence of female professors—let alone advisors—who could both model success under structural constraint and offer concrete guidance, as Margot now does for Clara (Pinske, "Zwischen zwei Welten").

Clara reacts to Margot's affirmation not with defiance but with visible fatigue, evident in her slumped posture and downcast expression, voicing a desire to exist on equal footing without the constant labour of transcending structural constraint. While this response can be read as a retreat from the feminist resistance she needs to perform both personally and professionally, it ultimately registers more as a testament to the emotional cost of such a posture. Clara's response reveals the compounding toll of having to perform resilience across intersecting terrains of

exclusion: on the one hand, a professional terrain that remains hostile to ambitious women, especially those without inherited cultural capital and marked as coming from marginal socioeconomic backgrounds, and, on the other, a personal terrain that continues to undermine her both as a woman and as a "conceited traitor"—a figure perceived to have abandoned her origins through education and westward mobility. Margot's reply to this articulation of exhaustion is both empathetic and sobering: Clara needs to forgive herself for wanting more out of life. In this quiet imperative lies a recognition of the cost of ambition for women: guilt, alienation, and the internalization of societal reproach. Importantly, however, Margot reframes Clara's weariness not as weakness, but as a consequence of wanting more than what the world is willing to easily give. The camera remains fixed on Clara during Margot's final line, capturing the shift in Clara's expression—a flicker of recognition mixed with pain—as she processes the weight of her advisor's words. In this subtle cinematographic gesture, the film heightens the scene's emotional gravity, offering no real resolution but rather a moment of clarity that invites the viewers to contemplate the emotional toll of women's ambition in the face of structural marginalization.

A moment of validation concludes this emotionally charged exchange, offering a much-needed recognition of Clara's efforts. Following her invitation to Clara to forgive herself for wanting more out of life, the camera tracks Margot as she walks towards her student, hands her the stack of papers in her hand, and declares: "Das hier ist jedenfalls sehr gut" (01:21:24). An acknowledgment of the quality of Clara's manuscript, the gesture functions both as a validation of Clara's scholarly efforts and as a symbolic passing of the torch. Captured in a medium shot that frames advisor and student together, the exchange constitutes a moment of recognition and continuity between generations of women navigating the same structural constraints (see fig. 40). This recognition carries particular weight, as it offers Clara the affirmation she has longed for

throughout her return home—an affirmation that her mother, in particular, has withheld. That it now comes from her "Doktormutter" not only underscores the significance of gendered networks of support, but also reconfigures maternal dynamics within a professional, academic context. The term itself, blending institutional mentorship with maternal connotations, gestures toward the film's broader commentary on mother-daughter relationships: here, recognition and encouragement emerge not from biological ties but from a chosen, intellectual kinship shaped by solidarity and shared navigation of structural inequities.



Fig. 40. Margot congratulates Clara on her manuscript (01:21:28).

The film's closing scene functions as a moment of catharsis for Clara, a much-needed emotional release that gestures towards a gendered portrait of resilience shaped by quiet acts of resistance. The scene is set in an auditorium where a student concert is about to begin, with Clara taking a seat just as a band of black-clad students, including Emma on the tuba, launches into the

unmistakable opening of Rage Against the Machine's 1992 protest anthem "Killing in the Name." While some parents exchange puzzled or uneasy glances, Clara immediately responds with a wide grin, validating the performance with a blend of amusement and recognition (01:23:03–01:23:06). As the music intensifies, the camera alternates between a close-up of Clara and a medium shot of Emma, whose focused expression and assured performance counterbalance her mother's rising emotional vulnerability (01:23:29–01:23:50). Following the instrumental opening, the students launch into the song's famously aggressive refrain, repeating it in unison. The lyrics, which express a defiant call for autonomy in the face of pressure to submit, resonate distinctly within the scene, foregrounding the call to reject conformity and embrace self-determination. The song choice and its performance by a youth ensemble lend the lyrics particular poignancy, aligning the adolescent pursuit of autonomy and self-definition with the film's broader engagement with questions of identity, authority, and the intergenerational transmission of resistance.

As Emma meets Clara's gaze from the stage, the camera cuts to a close-up of Clara's face, leading into a sustained final shot that lasts thirty seconds (01:23:51-01:24:22). Wordlessly, Clara cycles through a spectrum of emotions: pride, contemplation, sorrow, and finally a quiet, tearful smile. The moment Emma looks at her again, Clara's smile deepens, and the film freezes the frame, letting it linger on screen for five seconds (01:24:17-01:24:22). The music halts with the freeze, allowing the power of Clara's expression to resonate in silence before a final cut to black (see fig. 41).



Fig. 41. A freeze frame of Clara smiling as she watches Emma play (01:24:18).

The emotional weight of this closing moment is manifold. Clara's pride in Emma is not only maternal but ideological: Emma's choice to play the tuba—a weighty, unconventional instrument Clara had earlier teased her about—becomes a metaphor for carving out a self-directed path, with Emma's performance embodying the idea of "going your own way," as the song's lyrics boldly proclaim, mirroring her mother's efforts to define life on her own terms. The moment thus emerges as an intergenerational gesture of recognition and affirmation: Clara sees her own struggle reflected in her daughter, and for a brief moment, that reflection is one of hope. Even as the film never underplays the cost of Clara's choices—the isolation, emotional exhaustion, and constant negotiation of her place between worlds—it closes on a note of hard-earned clarity. The freeze frame preserves not a static triumph, but a moment of quiet recognition: that the pursuit of self-determination, particularly for women, is worth it. While the moment could be read as tying Clara's fulfillment to motherhood, Emma's presence here

functions not as a resolution to Clara's struggles but as a reflection of her values: autonomy, resilience, and refusal to conform—values powerfully echoed in the song lyrics that sonically dominate the scene. In this closing gesture, the film offers a gendered portrait of resilience that neither idealizes nor stigmatizes ambition, but affirms it as a vital, ongoing process—one handed down, one act of defiance at a time.

4.6 "Dieser Film gehört den Frauen"

Alle reden übers Wetter offers a nuanced and multifaceted engagement with gender, positioning its female protagonist within a network of women who, whether central or peripheral to the narrative, are consistently rendered with psychological depth and agency. At the film's centre is Clara, a protagonist shaped by contradiction: intellectually driven yet emotionally volatile, assertive yet vulnerable, committed to self-determination yet greatly affected by others' perceptions of her, her internal tensions anchor the film's exploration of what it means to be a woman navigating intersecting cultural, classed, and generational value systems. Caught between two competing cultural and ideological frameworks and constantly negotiating her belonging in both, she is, as reviewers point out, a character "whose complexity and contradictory nature is rare in a female protagonist" (van de Klashorst). This is no accident; Pinske deliberately crafted Clara as a "zeitgemäße und komplexe Frauenfigur, die auch widersprüchlich ist und unvollkommen sein darf, die nicht immer lächeln muss, um sympathisch zu sein" (*Alle reden übers Wetter Presseheft*). In doing so, she directly challenges the essentialist traits historically projected onto female protagonists—likeable, agreeable, and emotionally self-effacing—while simultaneously highlighting the structural costs of these expectations, particularly through the figure of Sandra, the "eternal assistant" whose professional stagnation becomes a cautionary counterpoint. The director has framed this commitment as part of a broader responsibility to

reshape how women are portrayed on screen, stating in an interview: “Wenn man heute davon spricht, dass wir starke Frauenfiguren brauchen, dann müssen das keine unangreifbaren, positiven Frauen sein, die sich durch den Film lächeln. Sie brauchen eine Fallhöhe, sie müssen ambivalent sein und auch ihre bösen Seiten und ihre Ecken und Kanten haben” (Pinske, “Zwischen zwei Welten”). Such multidimensionality is not only a rejection of flat archetypes but also a strategic invitation to identification: Clara’s contradictions make her more human, more recognizable—a character who “is not exactly likable, but invites empathy” (van de Klashorst). In constructing her, then, Pinske offers a quietly radical model of womanhood, disrupting conventional expectations and expanding the representational space available to women in contemporary German cinema.

This representational complexity also informs the film’s treatment of motherhood, subverting culturally entrenched assumptions about maternal identity and presenting alternatives to dominant modes of motherhood and care. Clara’s daughter Emma does not live with her full-time, thereby reversing the conventional custody arrangement that typically places children with their mothers and, as a result, displacing onto the maternal figure a kind of emotional detachment more commonly associated with fatherhood. This redefinition of motherhood is extended through two additional relational frameworks: first, in the complex and fraught bond between Clara and her own mother Inge, which draws on the narrative tradition of framing motherhood through generational conflict but is equally shaped by the divergent sociopolitical conditions that have defined each woman’s access to self-realization; and second, in Clara’s relationship with her academic advisor Margot, whose role as “Doktormutter” expands the maternal beyond biological kinship and into a model of feminist mentorship and intellectual lineage (Hill 75).

Yet it is in Clara herself that the film's intervention is most radical. Rather than idealizing or discrediting her maternal arrangement, the film treats it with quiet neutrality, thereby destigmatizing a maternal model grounded not in proximity or emotional availability but in negotiated care, ambition, and complexity. Clara and Emma's bond resists the dominant script of maternal intimacy, instead offering a portrait of motherhood shaped by career demands, spatial separation, and emotional ambivalence. This rejection of the idealized maternal norm also represents a broader critique of what chapter one outlined as the sacrosanct model of motherhood largely dominating the German cultural imaginary—one that privileges the biological mother as primary caregiver, grounded in a supposedly innate maternal instinct and stabilized through heteronormative marriage and domestic cohabitation. The film gestures to this model explicitly through Emma's father's new family and, more subtly, through Marcel's, both of which conform to traditional expectations of domestic stability and maternal presence, rendering Clara's divergence all the more striking. In Clara, Pinske offers a protagonist decisively outside this normative framework: a single mother pursuing an academic career, whose maternal identity is neither unambiguous nor all-defining, thereby challenging conventional narratives of female fulfillment by refusing to equate motherhood with self-sacrifice, domesticity, or the assumption that a woman's primary value lies in her caregiving role.

Importantly, Clara's story is anchored in the principle of self-determination—the authority to shape one's life and identity on one's own terms. Narratively, this thematic strand is most explicitly articulated through her academic work: both her dissertation and the seminar she leads centre on questions of power, agency, and structural inequality. In the seminar scene, this inquiry is further gendered, as the discussion turns toward the persistence of patriarchal hierarchies and mirrors the discursive patterns explored in chapter one, with male participants

either dismissing gender as a relevant analytic category or invoking a postfeminist rhetoric that assumes the dissolution of structural inequalities, ultimately reinscribing essentialist binaries by normalizing male authority and female subordination. Against this backdrop, Pinske turns her lens to the lived experiences of women and highlights their everyday forms of resistance: Yuna's intervention in the seminar provides a feminist counterpoint that foregrounds women's agency, Margot's explicit claim to living "selbstbestimmt" directly rebuts Alexander's sexist insinuation about her lack of a conventional family and reframes her life choices as intentional rather than deficient, while Clara's self-identification as the "Frauenbeauftragte" pushes back against essentialist gender presumptions, exemplifying how agency can be asserted through small, defiant gestures. Across the film, such moments accumulate into a broader assertion: that women's resistance often takes the form of quiet, persistent refusal to conform to societal expectations.

Formally, Pinske reinforces this theme of self-determination, along with its emotional toll, through careful framing and visual composition. Clara is frequently framed in wide shots that place her in open or alienating spaces, turning the physical environment into a metaphor for the solitude and dislocation that can accompany autonomy; one of the film's most resonant examples of this technique is the long, silent shot of Clara walking barefoot beyond the edge of her hometown park's parking lot, distanced both spatially and emotionally from the communal festivities. A similar visual strategy is employed with Margot, framed in a wide shot smoking alone in her apartment, a solitary figure shaped by decades of professional defiance. These carefully held shots, for which Pinske deliberately lets the camera roll a few extra seconds, invite the viewer to absorb their emotional weight, with their stillness and temporal extension quietly disrupting the film's dominant rhythm of tightly scripted, two- to three-minute scenes

characterized by narrative economy. Though few in number, these shots are structurally and emotionally significant, articulating a distinct visual strategy that draws from Pinske's work with Maren Ade and aligns her with the aesthetic ethos of the Berlin School. By carefully employing such shots at emotionally charged moments in the narrative, the director reinforces the message that women's pursuit of self-determination is not only vital but marked by isolation, sacrifice, and a persistent need for inner resolve.

This narrative centering of women unfolds not only through Clara's story but through the film's broader commitment to representing female experience in all its generational and social complexity. One of the film's most radical interventions lies in its sheer abundance of female characters and the narrative space devoted to their interactions. Whereas, as demonstrated in chapter two, the German film industry continues to marginalize women on screen—offering them less speaking time, limiting their roles to younger age brackets, and often framing them in relation to men or under male authority—this film defies this norm at every level. Pinske's debut not only presents a wide range of female characters across generations, but situates them in meaningful contexts: as professionals, mothers, daughters, mentors, and women navigating competing social expectations. Contrary to the industry pattern of women being "sichtbar, aber nicht vielfältig" and often reduced to one-dimensional roles, the writer and director gives even minor characters surprising emotional depth and narrative agency, often in the space of just a few lines (Prommer et al. 25). By contrast, the film's male characters, while not caricatured, remain secondary; their complexity is acknowledged, but they are largely relegated to the margins of Clara's story. This too was a deliberate decision: when asked about the role of men in Clara's life, Pinske emphasized that, while she tried to avoid constructing the male characters merely as antagonists, it was ultimately important to establish the centrality of women in her film: "[die

männlichen Figuren] sind vielschichtig und nachvollziehbar in ihrem Verhalten, aber sie sind Nebenrollen, denn dieser Film gehört den Frauen" (*Alle reden übers Wetter Presseheft*). This statement is emblematic of the film's broader politics: a conscious centring of women's perspectives, lives, and complexities, marking a representational shift that effectively reclaims narrative space for women in German cinema.

This rebalancing of narrative authority in *Alle reden übers Wetter* is mirrored not only in front of the camera, but also behind it, reflecting a structural decision rooted in Pinske's explicit commitment to female authorship. This commitment can be traced to the director's self-identification as a feminist—a notable stance in an industry where, as chapter two demonstrated, many female directors still hesitate to adopt the label, fearing marginalization or assumptions of ideological rigidity. In contrast, Pinske embraces it without hesitation; when asked in an interview whether she identifies as a feminist and, if so, how this informs her filmmaking, her response was particularly telling:

> Absolutely, yes! Most of the heads of department were women and I don't know the exact percentage of women in the team, but it was at least 50% – more likely above. I don't think that my protagonists always have to be female. Actually, I have a great desire to deal more with the subject of masculinity, but right now I still feel this responsibility, because there are still too few films by women about women and women still talk too much about men in films! (Pinske, Interview by Tara Karajica)

This statement links Pinske's feminist identification directly to the gender composition of her crew and to the thematic direction of her work, thus affirming both a political and an aesthetic commitment to amplifying women's voices. The film's credits corroborate her assessment, with the overwhelming majority of above-the-line and department head positions occupied by women,

while the total female share in cast and crew exceeds 50%. Importantly, this gender composition confirms the findings of the 2019 study on gender bias presented in chapter two that women are more likely to work with other women in film, especially when occupying above-the-line positions (Loist and Prommer 107). Equally significant is the sense of responsibility Pinske cites towards female authorship and storytelling, which for her goes beyond numerical equity to address the epistemic frameworks through which stories are told; in the film's press kit, she describes her writing process as "eine Suche, auch nach dem, was weibliches Erzählen sein kann" (*Alle reden übers Wetter Presseheft*). This search is not limited to constructing female characters who speak about more than men; rather, the film enacts a narrative mode rooted in female subjectivity, thereby reshaping structure, perspective, and thematic emphasis. This is evident, for example, in the film's prioritization of female-to-female interactions, or in the multigenerational gaze at the starlings, which reorients the emotional climax away from traditional narrative closure and toward a gendered mode of shared recognition and ambivalence.

In this way, it is not surprising that reviews frequently highlight Clara's experiences of gendered marginalization, linking it to the film's broader commentary on the enduring structural disparities between states of the former GDR and FRG in the post-unification era—disparities which the film weaves into its narrative through intersecting explorations of gender, class, and generational identity, thereby painting a portrait "über die wichtigsten deutschen Diskurse der Gegenwart" (Wellinski). While Pinske has stated that it was not her initial intention to frame the film as a commentary on gender equality, she went on to acknowledge its thematic resonance, stating that the film "ist definitiv ein Kommentar zum Stand der Gleichberechtigung geworden" (*Alle reden übers Wetter Presseheft*). Her position recalls Maren Ade's remarks on *Toni Erdmann*, with the director similarly describing her work not as consciously feminist but as a

"realistic" portrayal of gendered social realities—what Pinske in turn calls an "organic" emergence of such themes in her film (*Alle reden übers Wetter Presseheft*; *Toni Erdmann Press Kit*). Together, these reflections point to a revealing paradox: that even when not directly intended, any attempt to portray the lives of women with realism inevitably becomes a commentary on the persistent absence of real gender equality.

Ultimately, Annika Pinske's feature-length debut *Alle reden übers Wetter* emerges as a quietly radical work not because it stages overt acts of rebellion, but because it insists on portraying female experience in all its nuance, contradiction, and social embeddedness. The film challenges conventional notions of womanhood, motherhood, and ambition, refusing to glorify or stigmatize its female characters and instead anchoring them in structural realities that shape their possibilities for action. Through Clara's journey, the film maps the cost of pursuing self-determination across gendered, classed, and regional lines, offering a complex portrait of resilience that defies cinematic norms of female representation. At the same time, Pinske's commitment to female authorship—both in terms of crew composition and storytelling perspective—expands the representational possibilities within German cinema, shifting narrative authority toward women in both content and form. What emerges is a decidedly intersectional vision: a film attentive to the social textures of inequality, yet equally invested in small acts of resistance that assert the right to live, think, and mother differently. In a landscape where portrayals of women are still shaped by cultural prescriptions and industry bias, *Alle reden übers Wetter* marks a vital contribution, not only to the evolving representations of women in German film, but to the feminist project of expanding who can be seen, what can be said, and how these stories can be told.

Chapter 5. Narrating Inevitability: Sherry Hormann's *Nur eine Frau*

Nur eine Frau (*A Regular Woman*) is a 2019 feature film directed by Sherry Hormann dramatizing the life and 2005 murder of Hatun "Aynur" Sürücü, a young German woman of Kurdish-Turkish background who was fatally shot by her youngest brother at a bus station in Berlin for allegedly violating the family's honour. Written by screenwriter Florian Öller, the screenplay draws primarily on the 2012 book *Im Namen der Ehre? Ein deutsches Schicksal* by journalists Matthias Deiß and Jo Goll, a nonfiction account investigating Sürücü's murder and the broader sociocultural contexts surrounding it, as well as on court documents and interviews with key people in Sürücü's life. The film was produced by journalist Sandra Maischberger through her company Vincent Productions in co-production with Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg, alongside Norddeutscher Rundfunk, Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Hessischer Rundfunk, and Südwestrundfunk. Produced under the working title *Die Frau auf der Straße* (*The Woman on the Street)*, the film was realized on a budget of just under €600,000, with €250,000 coming from the German Federal Film Fund, €200,000 from Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, who also allocated an additional €25,000 for distribution, as well as €100,000 from nordmedia, the media funding body for the states of Lower Saxony and Bremen ("Förderentscheidungen Film"; "nordmedia Vergabeentscheidungen"; *Produktionsspiegel 2018*).

Principal photography for the film took place in Berlin in August and September 2018 at locations directly connected to Sürücü's life, including the Kottbusser Tor neighbourhood where her family lived, the apartment she shared with her son, and the bus station in Berlin-Tempelhof where the murder occurred. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject and the use of real-life locations, production was conducted discreetly, with assistance from Turkish security personnel (Köhler; Krämer). While Hormann notes that the Turkish-German community was initially

hesitant about the project—which, as the director argues, "sicherlich auch daran lag, dass sehr viele Frauen an diesen Dreharbeiten beteiligt waren – Produzentin, Regisseurin, Kamerafrau, Hauptdarstellerin"—trust grew as filming progressed, particularly as members of the team encountered individuals who had known Sürücü personally (*Nur eine Frau Presseheft* 10).

Nur eine Frau was first screened at the 2019 Berlinale as part of the "LOLA at Berlinale" series, which features films preselected by the German Film Academy's committees for potential nomination for the German Film Awards, and is aimed at industry professionals attending the European Film Market; the screening was also attended by Sürücü's real-life ex-partner[22] (*Hier Cannes Oscar Berlinale schauen*; DVD audio commentary). The film had its official world premiere at the 2019 Tribeca Film Festival and was released in German cinemas in May 2019, remaining in theatrical circulation for several weeks. It was then broadcast on ARD's flagship channel Das Erste in early 2020, with multiple subsequent airings each year by various public broadcasters. At the 2019 German Film Awards, cinematographer Judith Kaufmann received a nomination for Best Cinematography for her work on the film—notably, she was also nominated in the same category that year for her work on another film directed by a woman, Caroline Link's *Der Junge muss an die frische Luft* (2018). In early 2020, Sherry Hormann was awarded Best Director at the Bavarian Film Awards for *Nur eine Frau*, with the jury lauding her direction for crafting "eine Frau …, die kein Opfer ist, sondern sich für sich selbst einsetzt. Eine Frau, die das Leben liebt und in Deutschland zu Hause ist" ("Gerlach: Bayern adelt Filme").

A distinctly stylized film, *Nur eine Frau* employs a near-continuous voiceover narration throughout its 90-minute runtime and draws on conventions of the true-crime genre, including time stamps to signal shifts in chronology, real photo and video footage from Sürücü's life, and

[22] The name of Hatun Sürücü's ex-partner has not been made public.

still portraits to introduce characters, each labelled with their names in bold red lettering. Among its most prominent stylistic devices is the use of still photography, which is interwoven throughout the film by editor Bettina Böhler and, in some instances, presented in montage sequences that substitute for live-action scenes to depict specific events or periods in Sürücü's life. Credited to photographer Mathias Bothor, these images reflect Hormann's desire to interrupt the film's narrative flow without resorting to freeze frames (*Nur eine Frau Presseheft* 10). The stills are visibly edited in terms of colour and lighting, producing a marked visual contrast with both the live-action scenes and the documentary material intercut throughout the film. Together with the film's thematic focus, this stylization has led both critics and the film's creative team to describe *Nur eine Frau* as a form of epic theatre, drawing on conventions pioneered by Bertolt Brecht and associated with German modernism, particularly in producing a *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), which seeks to disrupt emotional immersion in order to provoke critical reflection—an effect the film deliberately cultivates through its voiceover narration, visual segmentation, and integration of documentary material (Krämer; Scheer).

This strategic deployment of distancing techniques not only aligns with the aesthetics of epic theatre but also brings the film strikingly close to documentary cinema. This proximity reflects the background of its producing company, Vincent Productions, which primarily produces documentaries alongside its flagship talk show *maischberger* (2003–present); additionally, the professional trajectory of screenwriter Florian Öller, who has written for long-running police procedurals such as *Tatort* (1970–present), informs the film's structural and tonal affinities with the crime genre. Both Hormann and Maischberger have explicitly referred to *Nur eine Frau* as a "dokumentarischer Spielfilm," underscoring the project's dual claim to narrative dramatization and factual grounding (*Nur eine Frau Presseheft* 10, 12). However, this hybridity

has prompted critical questions about the film's claims to authenticity, especially in relation to its central narrative device, the voiceover. Narrated by Almila Bağrıaçık, who plays Sürücü—the only character whose real name remains unchanged—the film adopts a posthumous first-person perspective in which Sürücü recounts the events leading up to her murder and their aftermath from beyond the grave. When questioned in interviews about the ethical implications of imagining what a murdered person might have thought or said, and whether the Sürücü depicted in the film should be considered a fictional character, both Hormann and Öller emphasize the film's fictional status, with Öller describing the narration as a "fiktionale Stimme," while Hormann asserts that *Nur eine Frau* "ist eben ein Spielfilm fürs Kino und keine TV-Dokumentation" (Karkowsky; Schwickert). At the same time, however, the voiceover is consistently framed by the filmmakers as the film's most significant intervention in existing narratives about the case: during the film's press run, both Hormann and Maischberger as well as Sürücü actor Almila Bağrıaçık have repeatedly argued that the film "gives Sürücü a voice" through the narration, and in doing so reimagines her from passive victim to an active agent who asserts authorship over her own story (Garcia; Köhler). In this way, the film links self-narration and self-reflexivity with female autonomy and self-determination; the implications of this complex interplay between fiction and documentation will be explored in the analysis presented in this chapter.

No stranger to narratives centred on women and gender, director Sherry Hormann, who was born in New York and holds dual German and U.S. citizenship, studied at the Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film München (HFF München) and has since built a substantial career in Germany across both cinema and television. Hormann made her feature film debut with *Leise Schatten* (1991), a drama about an unhappily married woman, which earned her the Bavarian

Film Award for Best New Director. She gained commercial recognition with her second feature, the romantic comedy *Frauen sind was Wunderbares* (1994), which centres on a love triangle between a woman and two men, followed by further comedies such as *Irren ist männlich* (1996) about a man who discovers his infertility, and *Männer wie wir* (2004), the story of a homosexual soccer player. As commercially oriented relationship comedies, these closely align with the cycle of films often referred to as New German Comedy, as discussed in chapter two, which rely on conventional gender constructions within narrative-driven frameworks (Copsey 32-33). Hormann has since shifted toward more charged subject matter with what became her most commercially successful film, *Wüstenblume* (2009), a German-Austrian-French co-production about female genital mutilation in Somalia, adapted from the autobiography of Somali-born model and human rights activist Waris Dirie. Notably, *Wüstenblume* is one of only two German films directed by a woman to attract over one million viewers between 2009 and 2013 (out of a total of thirty-five films to reach the threshold during this period), the other being Yasemin Şamdereli's 2011 hit *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland* (Aylett et al. 31; Loist and Prommer 101). Following *Wüstenblume*, Hormann continued her engagement with biographical narratives of gendered violence with *3096 Tage* (2013), a dramatization of the real-life abduction of Austrian Natascha Kampusch. In the years leading up to *Nur eine Frau*, Hormann directed a number of television episodes, primarily in the crime genre, including two episodes of *Tödliche Geheimnisse* (2016–present), a made-for-TV series on which she collaborated with *Nur eine Frau* screenwriter Florian Öller.

Nur eine Frau is neither the first piece of media to engage with the case of Hatun Sürücü nor the first feature film. Since her murder in 2005, the case has generated a wide range of responses, including journalistic investigations, multiple documentaries, television episodes

(including installments of *Tatort*), and feature films, reflecting the case's enduring relevance and its central position in German debates on gender, migration, and Islam (Gerhards). Among the most widely recognized of these representations is Feo Aladağ's feature film debut *Die Fremde*, a drama about a Turkish-German woman who escapes an abusive marriage in Istanbul and returns to Berlin with her young son, only to be ostracized by her family for pursuing an autonomous life. The cinematography for the film was done by Judith Kaufmann, who would later also serve as director of photography for *Nur eine Frau*; additionally, actor Almila Bağrıaçık, who portrays Hatun Sürücü in Hormann's film, had her first role in *Die Fremde* as the protagonist's younger sister. Loosely based on Sürücü's story, the film was a critical and commercial success, though not without controversy, as Aladağ's decision to portray the male members of the protagonist's family with a degree of psychological depth was met with both praise for offering a more layered portrayal and criticism for appearing to invite empathy toward the perpetrators (Buß). At the same time, the film's uniformly positive depiction of German characters was seen by some as reinforcing the familiar tropes of the enlightened, liberal German mainstream against an essentialized and opaque Turkish "parallel society"—a critique shared by Turkish-German documentary filmmaker Aysun Bademsoy, who knew Sürücü personally and dedicated her 2011 documentary *Ehre* to her (Böcking 214; Gramling 38; Naiboglu 112).

Die Fremde was frequently invoked during the press coverage for *Nur eine Frau*, with critics drawing comparisons between the two films and Hormann herself acknowledging the overlap, stating that her initial reaction when approached by producer Sandra Maischberger to direct the project was to point out that a film about the story already existed (Krämer). However, both Hormann and Maischberger emphasize that the developments in Germany's sociopolitical landscape since the release of *Die Fremde* justify a renewed engagement with the material,

pointing to the intensified public focus on "parallel societies" and gender equality in the context of increased immigration from Muslim-majority countries—especially following the arrival of over one million immigrants in 2015 and the Cologne attacks of 2015/2016—as well as the growing climate of hostility toward religious and cultural difference, marked by the rise of right-wing movements such as PEGIDA (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes) and the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) (Garcia; Krämer). Accordingly, while *Nur eine Frau* does not address new subject matter in terms of its central narrative, its production and reception must be understood within the context of these more recent sociopolitical developments. As a film emerging in the aftermath of the so-called "Migrationskrise" and amidst heightened anxieties around integration, gender norms, and cultural identity, *Nur eine Frau* invites renewed attention to how Sürücü's story is retold—and to what ends—within this shifting discursive environment.

The legacy of the Hatun Sürücü case remains highly visible in Germany, with the murder being commemorated annually through events, public discussions, and media presentations, which often frame her life as a story of successful integration tragically cut short by gendered and religious violence. Over the years, Sürücü's death has become a recurring point of reference in debates surrounding Islam, migration, and gender equality—so much so that, as Beverly Weber notes, "any cursory reference to her death instantly evokes the specter of 'failed integration'" (*Violence and Gender* 39). The ongoing discursive centrality of Sürücü's story calls for an examination of how this most recent cinematic iteration engages with its subject, particularly in relation to dominant representations of Muslim women, as outlined in chapter one. Additionally, *Nur eine Frau* warrants critical attention because it has been explicitly framed as a didactic tool: producer Sandra Maischberger has identified the film's intended audience as

"junge Zuschauer," a claim substantiated by an extensive thirty-page teaching guide available on the film's official website, which outlines its suggested use in subjects such as Religion, Ethics, and German, and includes discussion questions and exercises (*Nur eine Frau Presseheft* 14; Kohlmann and Selg). Beyond its pedagogical framing, Hormann's film has also become increasingly integrated into commemorative practices surrounding Sürücü's case: since its release, it has been regularly screened at events marking her murder, including on the twentieth anniversary in 2025 at programmes organized by groups such as the women's rights organization Terre des Femmes ("Mehr als nur eine Frau").

The analysis presented in this chapter foregrounds *Nur eine Frau*'s engagement with gender, offering a reading attentive to its intersections with religion and migration. The film's centring of gender is signalled not only in its title—which it notably shares with a 1958 DEFA film by Carl Ballhaus about the life of suffragist and author Luise Otto-Peters, itself based on Hedda Zinner's biographical novel of the same name—but also in how its creators frame their own position in relation to the subject matter. When asked about her motivation and legitimacy to tell this story as a German-American director with no direct ties to Sürücü's cultural or religious background, Hormann's response is telling: "Ja, kann ich. Weil es geht um 'ne Frau" (DVD bonus interview). Framing gender as a unifying and authorizing framework, the director's statement positions the film not merely as a commentary on cultural or religious difference, but as an articulation of a shared female experience grounded in gendered violence and female subjectivity. Accordingly, this chapter examines the extent to which the film constructs such a cross-cultural framework through its portrayal of Sürücü's life and murder, analyzing how it presents both her pursuit of emancipation and the forces that constrain it. With no existing body of academic scholarship on *Nur eine Frau* at the time of writing, the interpretation draws on the

film's journalistic source text, reviews, interviews with the filmmakers, and paratextual material released by the production and distribution companies. It also builds on broader representations of Islam and Muslim femininities in Germany discussed in chapter one—particularly as shaped by the headscarf debate of the early 2000s, the Cologne attacks, and, most centrally, the Sürücü case itself —to assess how *Nur eine Frau*, as a woman-centred story created by an overwhelmingly female team, seeks to intervene in dominant narratives and reframe Sürücü's legacy through a lens of autonomy, voice, and visibility. Drawing on this approach, the chapter argues that while the film positions itself as a feminist intervention that restores narrative agency to its protagonist, it ultimately reinforces familiar tropes of cultural otherness and gendered victimhood. By framing Sürücü's story as both exceptional and inevitable, the film constrains its representational politics, aligning with dominant cinematic portrayals of Muslim women as trapped between oppressive patriarchal tradition and Western emancipation.

5.1 "Das bin ich"

Nur eine Frau begins with a J-cut blending the diegetic sounds of urban traffic over the final production credits before a fade-in introduces a medium shot of a woman walking down a Berlin street holding a toddler; the sunlight catches the woman's long hair, tied back in a ponytail, drawing the viewer's attention to her as the visual focal point (00:00:36-00:00:51). As the camera tracks the woman from behind, a voiceover begins:

> AYNUR. Mein Name ist Hatun. Hatun Sürücü. Aber Hatun sagt keiner zu mir. Alle nennen mich Aynur. Einfach nur Aynur, wie das Leuchten des Mondes. Sie könnte ich sein. Oder sie. Oder auch sie. Oder sie. Aber nee. Das bin ich. Mein Bruder hat mich erschossen. Im Februar 2005. Ich war ein Ehrenmord. Der erste, der so richtig fett Presse hatte. Vielleicht erinnert ihr euch. Vielleicht war ich euch

> damals schon… egal. Vielleicht denkt ihr: "Na und? Alles schon so lange her. Kann die nicht einfach tot bleiben?" Stimmt, ich bin tot. Habe ich mir auch anders vorgestellt. Aber eine Sache ist gut daran: ihr sitzt vor mir und hört zu. Also willkommen. Willkommen in Deutschland. (00:00:54-00:02:05)

Aynur's opening monologue is accompanied by a visually layered sequence that shifts between live-action footage, video documentary material, and a montage of stills of Almila Bağrıaçık as Aynur.[23] After Aynur introduces herself, the camera pans from the woman holding the toddler to another woman on the street as the voiceover says "Sie könnte ich sein" (00:01:07). Each repetition of the phrase is accompanied by a new cut to a different woman, some wearing headscarves, others with uncovered hair. Visually underscoring the idea that the protagonist could be any one of the figures shown, the sequence is centred around young women crossing the street, a symbolic gesture suggesting movement, choice, and exposure, and alluding to life paths that remain open to others but were closed off to Aynur through her murder—a fact the viewer is starkly confronted with through an abrupt cut to video documentary footage of the crime scene, timed with the voiceover's assertion "Das bin ich" (see fig. 48). The shot zooms in on Sürücü's corpse, lying on the sidewalk covered by a white sheet, interrupting the fictional framing and confronting the viewer with the material reality of her death (00:01:26-00:01:28). A series of short documentary clips taken in the aftermath of Sürücü's murder accompany the remainder of the opening voiceover, from wide shots of police standing near the body, to a five-second clip zoomed in on the corpse beneath a white sheet, to footage of mourners placing flowers at the site beside a photo of Sürücü holding her young son. The sequence reinforces the

[23] To distinguish between the film's protagonist and the real-life figure, "Aynur" will be used throughout this chapter to refer to the character in *Nur eine Frau*, whereas "Hatun Sürücü" will refer to the individual on whose life the film is based.

film's grounding in historical reality, while the repeated zooms both centre Sürücü as the narrative's focal point and invoke a sense of loss as a result of violence.



Fig. 42. A distant view of Hatun Sürücü's corpse at the crime scene (00:01:28).

At the same time, the voiceover constructs Aynur as a self-aware narrator. Her death is immediately acknowledged and explicitly labeled an "honour killing," adopting a term that came to dominate discourse surrounding the case despite its contested nature for potentially implying a justifiable motive (Schwickert). Additionally, Aynur's death is treated as a narrative premise: she speaks from a posthumous, indeterminate present, one that implicitly aligns with the film's release context by referring to her death as "schon so lange her." The tone she adopts, often described by reviewers as "clinical," is notably restrained, lending the narration a texture of reportage (Krämer; Uhlich). Yet beneath this affective flatness lies a current of emotional

sincerity, particularly in the moments when she acknowledges her death or addresses the viewer, thereby confronting the audience with the ethical weight of listening to a voice that can no longer speak. The voiceover was recorded at three distinct stages in relation to production: prior to filming, during, and after; according to actor Almila Bağrıaçık, it was only after filming had wrapped that she found the "right" tone for the narration (Krämer). Hormann has confirmed that the final version used in the film is largely drawn from this last recording, suggesting that the voiceover's distinctive tone emerged not as a technical device but as the result of Bağrıaçık's full immersion in the character—a performance shaped by her experience of inhabiting Sürücü's role across the entire shoot (DVD bonus discussion).

From the outset, *Nur eine Frau* breaks the fourth wall, with Aynur directly addressing the viewer in the opening monologue in an act that functions as both an assertion of posthumous agency and a demand for recognition, challenging the viewer to engage with her as a subject who reclaims narrative authority over her own story. Framing the audience's act of listening as the one redeeming aspect of Aynur's situation, the film casts the retelling of her life as the only possible form of restitution, imbuing the film with a sense of representational justice. The monologue's closing line, "Willkommen in Deutschland," reinforces this framing: far from a neutral welcome, it anchors the narrative firmly within the German national context. By asserting Aynur's place—and her death—within Germany, the film implicitly rejects interpretations that would position such violence as outside the bounds of German social reality, instead insisting that this story occurs within, and implicating, German society itself.

The opening monologue is followed by a montage of still photographs showing Aynur in front of a graffitied wall, looking directly into the camera (00:02:05–00:02:11). Her initially serious expression gradually shifts to playful smiles, set against the non-diegetic backdrop of

Will Smith's 1997 hit "Gettin' Jiggy wit It." High in contrast and dominated by whites and reds, the stills serve as a stylized introduction to the film's protagonist, who appears without a headscarf, thus establishing her from the outset through the visual register of her later self-presentation—one that, reinforced by her playful expressions and the upbeat soundtrack, is implicitly coded as positive (see fig. 49).



Fig. 43. A stylized still of Aynur in front of a graffitied wall (00:02:07).

Following the film's title card, a cut transitions to a medium shot tracking Aynur, now wearing a headscarf, as she walks down the street. The caption "Mai 1998" appears in the lower left corner, marking the temporal setting and further grounding the narrative in historical specificity through a convention borrowed from the documentary and true-crime genre (00:02:12–00:02:19). The voiceover identifies the girl on screen as the younger Aynur, seven

years before her death, and refers to the Will Smith track as "her song"—a fictionalized detail added by screenwriter Florian Öller to lend the scene a light, personal tone (DVD bonus discussion). As Aynur approaches a bridal shop window, the camera captures her reflection layered over a mannequin dressed as a groom while she gazes at a bridal gown in a visual metaphor that foreshadows the imposition of marriage upon her. The voiceover continues: "In meinem Abgangszeugnis steht: 'Aynur verlässt das Gymnasium auf Wunsch der Eltern, um in die Türkei zu gehen.' Klingt doch besser als: 'Aynurs Eltern leben nach streng sunnitisch-kurdischer Tradition, deshalb wird sie verheiratet'" (00:02:53–00:03:06). Notably, the first line reproduces the exact language on Hatun Sürücü's actual school leaving certificate, a testament to the film's attention to factual detail and its framing of the story as a retelling of the real Sürücü's life (Deiß and Goll 52). The voiceover's attribution of Aynur's forced marriage to her parents' adherence to "strict Sunni Kurdish tradition" suggests an initial attempt to distinguish between religion and cultural practices, shifting the implication of blame away from Islam and toward regional or ethnic tradition.

Yet this distinction is quickly complicated. Less than a minute later, while introducing her family, Aynur states: "Meine Familie ist nicht wie andere muslimische Familien. Meine Familie ist streng religiös" (00:03:45–00:03:52). While this statement attempts to nuance religious practice by differentiating among forms of Islamic practice, it also frames religion as an explanatory framework for Aynur's oppression through its sequential placement: positioned during a scene set at a wedding venue in Istanbul, just prior to Aynur's wedding, it follows the voiceover's observation that her father has chosen one of her cousins as the groom—a practice associated more with Eastern Anatolian custom intended to preserve tight-knit village communities (Deiß and Goll 53). Linking the family's "strict religiosity" with the forced

marriage of a still-teenage Aynur to a close relative, the statement's positioning thus muddles the earlier distinction between religion and tradition, implicitly attributing the marriage, at least in part, to religious adherence rather than cultural custom.

The nearly seven-minute wedding sequence set in Istanbul functions less as a depiction of the ceremony itself than as an introduction to Aynur's immediate family (00:03:19–00:09:36). Each family member is introduced through one or two stylized stills, rendered in high contrast and accompanied by their names in the film's signature bold red lettering. The visual palette of the sequence is dominated by reds, whites, and greens, echoing the colours of the Kurdish flag: the wedding hall is adorned with deep red roses that contrast sharply with the white walls, tablecloths, and furnishings, while the brothers' introduction takes place in a Turkish barbershop with bright green walls, which also serve as the backdrop for their still portraits. Throughout this segment, Aynur continues to assert narrative agency: during the presentation of her brothers, she notes that she has chosen to omit her eldest brother from "her" story, effectively taking ownership of the narrative by determining whose presence is included or erased. While the remaining brothers are introduced with minimal narrative elaboration, the youngest, Nuri, is identified as her future killer, though the film offers no further explanation at this point. Among the four, the final brother introduced is the only one positively characterized by Aynur: "Bleibt Nummer vier: Aram, der Ausreißer. Studiert Jura, geht breakdancen statt beten… Für seine Brüder ist er deshalb ein Penner, kein echter Mann. Für mich wird er der einzige Freund unter meinen Brüdern bleiben" (00:05:12–00:05:30). Aram's depiction—who, unlike his brothers, has long hair and looks visibly uncomfortable at the barbershop—as an "outsider" who rejects conventional gender expectations establishes the family's understanding of masculinity, which is portrayed as rooted in rigid, patriarchal ideals that conflate masculinity with discipline and

religious conformity. The fact that his brothers view him as “not a real man” as a result highlights the restrictive and normative model of masculinity within the family, while Aynur’s identification of him as her only ally among them underscores the gendered and ideological divide that structures her familial relationships.

The family's stance on gender roles and female agency is further articulated in the scenes leading up to Aynur’s wedding. Following the introduction of her brothers and while Tarik, Sinan, and Nuri are shown dancing at the venue, Aynur’s voiceover observes: “Aber erst mal feiern sie alle, dass ich den Besitzer wechsle. Aus mir, der Tochter meines Vaters, wird die Frau des Mannes” (00:05:52–00:06:00). The line frames her marriage as a transfer of ownership, reinforcing a possessive logic in which Aynur is defined entirely through her relationship to male figures. Female subjectivity is denied; instead, womanhood is constructed as a function of patriarchal control. This critique is presented in a strikingly literal manner that aligns with the film’s pedagogical aim, resulting in a didactic tone that has been noted in critical responses to the film (Scheer). The juxtaposition between Aynur’s detached, cutting tone and the celebratory image of her brothers dancing reinforces the disturbing normalcy of this gendered transaction, a contrast intensified by the immediate cut to young twin girls at the venue silently observing the scene (00:06:00–00:06:02). Dressed in white and pale blue, which visually codes them as pure and innocent, their presence and sequential placing implicitly position them as future subjects of the same patriarchal order, suggesting the cyclical nature of women’s subordination and heightening the film’s critique of pervasive patriarchal control.

A subsequent wedding dress fitting scene underscores the internalization of patriarchal gender norms by female family members who, by reproducing them, reinforce their cyclical transmission. The scene opens with a pointed instance of fourth-wall breaking: as Aynur and her

mother Deniya converse in Turkish, the voiceover directly addresses the audience, noting that the viewers understand "weder unsere Kultur noch unsere Sprache," and announcing a language switch (00:06:08–00:06:18). The on-screen dialogue then continues in German, a shift that both acknowledges the limits of cultural translation and highlights the film's pedagogical address to a non-Turkish-speaking, majority German audience. As Deniya—whose deep red clothing and headscarf visually contrast with the white dress, continuing the segment's colour palette — adjusts Aynur's wedding dress, she instructs her daughter to "Mach uns ja keine Schande," a line which functions as a literal expression of the family's honour-based framework and serves as a moment of foreshadowing (00:06:19). Notably, Deniya's subsequent introduction via the voiceover conveys no information beyond her name, unlike the male members of the family, while her second still image shows her looking down and away from the camera in a gesture of modesty and deference (00:06:24–00:06:27). This sharply contrasts with the male relatives: the brothers face the camera directly, while the father, although gazing off-camera, maintains eye level with it, communicating presence and control (00:03:33). Aynur's three sisters are likewise presented with minimal narrative framing; though they meet the camera's gaze, they are identified only by name and thus constructed as marginal figures at this point in the narrative (00:06:38–00:06:57).

Resuming her instruction toward her daughter about how to behave in her new role as a wife, Deniya continues: "Werde nicht laut. Männer mögen keine Frauen, die laut werden. Hab immer ein nettes Wort für ihn übrig und koch ihm gutes Essen, ja? … Halte deinen Körper glatt, damit du ihm gefällst, wenn er dich begehrt. Und im Bett tust du, was Botan sagt" (00:06:32-00:06:54). Through this speech, Deniya articulates a set of gendered expectations centred on submission, silence, and physical and sexual availability; the initial injunction to not become

“loud” is particularly revealing, as it frames female presence and assertiveness as undesirable, effectively equating femininity with obedience. Presenting this view as a universal truth guiding gender relations, Deniya frames patriarchal norms as naturalized facts rather than imposed values. The mother’s additional instructions further inscribe Aynur’s value within a framework that prioritizes male comfort and desire, one in which female sexuality is erased or made passive, while women’s sexual compliance is framed as a duty, expressed in the language of command, thereby emphasizing the expectation of subservience. At the same time, the scene introduces a generational dynamic: these values are transmitted by the older generation to the younger as a form of control, underscored by the physical act of Deniya tightening her daughter’s wedding dress as she speaks in a gesture that literally and metaphorically restricts Aynur’s movement and breath, visually reinforcing the constrictive nature of these expectations.

Deniya’s instructions take a jarring turn when, after advising Aynur to obey her husband sexually, she removes a tissue-wrapped razor from her sleeve and fastens it to her daughter’s undergarments, instructing her to cut her finger “wenn er nicht kann” and smear the blood on the bedsheet (00:07:10–00:07:31). The gesture references a deeply entrenched patriarchal custom in which a woman’s virginity must be visually verified through blood-stained sheets following the wedding night—symbolic proof of sexual purity and, by extension, family honour. The implication is that, within the strict Kurdish code observed by the Sürücü family, the burden of upholding it falls squarely on the woman: should the husband be unable to perform sexually, it is the bride who must fabricate evidence, even through self-harm. In sharp contrast to the demand for visible proof of female purity, male sexual inadequacy is concealed and its burden silently displaced onto the woman. Deniya communicates this expectation in a matter-of-fact tone to a visibly stunned Aynur, who remains silent, though her increasingly tear-filled eyes betray inner

turmoil. Deniya is thus portrayed as a pragmatic enforcer of cultural norms, prioritizing adherence to custom and the family's social standing over her daughter's well-being. Notably, not only are Aynur's three younger sisters introduced during this exchange, but the camera also intermittently cuts to them, with Deniya herself glancing in their direction while delivering her instructions (00:06:38-00:07:36). Framing the moment not only as a rite of passage for Aynur but as a foreshadowing of what awaits her younger siblings, this visual alignment exposes how the regulation of female bodies is reproduced across generations, sustained in part by maternal figures who, having internalized these norms, continue to enact and transmit them.

After adjusting Aynur's wedding dress, Deniya takes her daughter's hands and delivers a final set of instructions: "Aynur, du wirst eine gute Frau sein, die Allah gefällt, die Botan gefällt, und uns Ehre machen, ja?" (00:07:35-00:07:43). Explicitly reinforcing the family's strict moral code, Deniya defines being a "good woman" through dual obedience to religious expectations and marital subservience. Her statement places familial honour directly upon Aynur's compliance, suggesting that a woman's moral conduct and sexual propriety are fundamental to preserving collective reputation. Delivered in a tone that blends reassurance with conviction, the line leaves Aynur visibly shaken; she remains silent, her gaze cast downward. When Deniya notices her daughter's tear-filled eyes, her own expression softens, and she takes Aynur's face in her hands, resting her forehead gently against hers (see fig. 50).



Fig. 44. Deniya rests her forehead against Aynur's on Aynur's wedding day (00:07:50).

The gesture suggests a moment of maternal empathy—a recognition of the emotional weight Aynur bears and, in turn, of the generational repetition of this burden. Framing mother and daughter in a medium close-up, the shot draws attention to the pair's closed eyes and solemn expressions, while the sunlight illuminating Aynur's white dress amplifies her symbolic construction as innocent and sacrificial. Yet this affective connection is short-lived; Deniya quickly steps back, presenting Aynur to her younger sisters with a smile. The transition marks a return to pragmatic performance: emotional recognition gives way to the maintenance of custom, foregrounding maternal figures as enforcers of patriarchal structures.

Following this intimate moment, a cut transitions back to the wedding venue, where Aynur's brothers are shown dancing to Turkish music, their father watching approvingly. The voiceover continues:

AYNUR. “Zur Schande werden” heißt, aus der Reihe zu tanzen, in einer Welt, in der nur Familie und ihre Ehre zählen. “Zur Schande werden” heißt, mit den Traditionen zu brechen. “Zur Schande werden” heißt, einen eigenen Willen zu haben, nicht den Regeln der Familie zu folgen und damit ihre Ehre zu verletzen. Diese Todsünde kann bei uns nur eins von beiden Geschlechtern begehen. Nur die Schwester, nur die Tochter, nur die Ehefrau. Denn die Frau ist das Ehrwürdigste, was ihr Mann, ihr Vater, ihre Familie besitzt. Und wenn du die Ehre der Männer befleckst, wenn du nicht funktionierst, musst du bestraft werden. (00:08:02-00:08:55)

Offering a direct and didactic exposition of the honour-based framework that structures the Sürücü family’s worldview, the voiceover explicitly links deviations from gendered expectations with punitive consequences, thereby foreshadowing Aynur’s murder—which the film’s opening has already identified as an “honour killing”—and framing it as the ultimate consequence of transgressing prescribed gender norms. In keeping with the film’s explanatory mode, the voiceover leaves little interpretive ambiguity, instead spelling out the gendered logic that underpins Aynur’s marginalization and eventual death. The conception of honour articulated here is consistent with the patriarchal norms and essentialist gender roles prevalent in rural Anatolia, where the Sürücü family originates: within this cultural framework, *namus* (honour) is paramount and rests primarily on the conduct of female family members (Deiß and Goll 45–46, 211–13). *Namus* cannot be accrued, only defended, specifically by controlling women’s sexuality and behaviour; virginity before marriage, obedience to male authority, and avoidance of public expressions of sexual autonomy are expected from women and girls, whose failure to conform is perceived as a violation of the family’s moral standing. By contrast, a man’s honour

rests on his capacity to prevent, conceal, or retaliate against such perceived transgressions (ibid. 212). While this behavioural code continues to influence gender relations in some Kurdish rural communities, its enforcement through violence—particularly murder—remains rare; more commonly, transgressions are concealed to avoid public shame. However, as Kurdish-German politician Giyasettin Sayan notes in Deiß and Goll's account of the Sürücü case, for immigrant families who left rural contexts decades ago, these traditional norms can become "eine Art Rettungsinsel"—a symbolic refuge amid unfamiliar sociocultural environments (ibid. 211). In such cases, cultural values may become more rigidly enforced than in their place of origin, reinforcing patterns of social control and gendered surveillance. Although the journalistic source material on which the film's screenplay is based makes this distinction between tradition and diaspora dynamics, the film does not; instead, the voiceover employs a generalizing "we," presenting the honour code as an undifferentiated truth. As a result, the stakes of gendered control are conveyed at the expense of cultural nuance, risking the conflation of diverse practices into a single frame.

The visual sequence accompanying the voiceover deepens its resonance, with the arrangement of individual shots mapping the honour code onto the family members. At the start of the monologue, a sequence of medium, full, and wide shots shows Aynur's brothers dancing at the wedding venue, their father watching with approval; when the voiceover asserts that only women can commit the "deadly sin" of shame, the camera cuts to a medium shot of Deniya seated alone at a table, her gaze lowered (00:08:31). The contrast between her restrained posture and the men's expressive freedom underscores her constrained role within the family: while the men publicly display joy, she is tasked with upholding decorum through her physical separation and subdued presence. A subsequent cut tracks Rohat escorting Aynur down a hallway,

presumably to her wedding, evoking a ritualized passage from one form of male guardianship to another just as the voiceover frames the female body as male property (00:08:37–00:08:47). The juxtaposition of red and white in Aynur's wedding attire heightens the sacrificial imagery—what *Frankfurter Allgemeine*'s Ursula Scheer terms "Unschuldweiß und Blutrot"—with a veil now obscuring Aynur's face and a red ribbon tied around her waist, the latter a Turkish wedding tradition symbolizing the bride's virginity. This symbolism is intensified by the next image: as the voiceover articulates the consequences of dishonouring male familial pride, the film cuts to a medium full shot of Aynur and her groom, Botan, seated before a wall of red roses (00:08:48). Both appear visibly uncomfortable, their solemn expressions underscoring the affective weight of the forced marriage. A slow zoom on Aynur's face culminates in a close-up, placing the viewer in direct confrontation with a protagonist whose fate—both cinematic and historical—has already been sealed by the very logic of honour and punishment the voiceover spells out in this moment (see fig. 51).



Fig. 45. Aynur in a close-up at her wedding (00:09:01).

While the shot remains on the close-up of Aynur's face, with her solemn expression reinforcing her visual positioning as a sacrificial figure through the contrast of white veil and deep red backdrop, the voiceover resumes: "Das Bundeskriminalamt hat sechs Beispiele für das Fehlverhalten einer Frau gesammelt, das mit einem Ehrenmord enden kann. Nummer eins: Die Frau lehnt einen von der Familie ausgewählten Ehemann ab und verweigert die Zwangsheirat. Nummer zwei: Die Frau hat ihre Jungfräulichkeit vor der Ehe verloren" (00:09:01-00:09:20). Each point is displayed in white text against a black screen, marked with "BKA/Nr. 1" and "BKA/Nr. 2"—another formal device reminiscent of the documentary or true-crime genre, which imbues the statements with institutional authority and lends them a veneer of factual legitimacy. It is important to clarify, however, that these examples are not directly issued by the Bundeskriminalamt (BKA) itself; rather, they are derived from a 2011 study commissioned by the BKA and conducted by the Max-Planck-Institut für ausländisches und internationales

Strafrecht, which analyzed all known cases associated with "honour killings" in Germany between 1996 and 2005, aiming to compile a systematic and empirical account of the phenomenon (Oberwittler and Kasselt). Although the reasons cited in the film are included the 2011 BKA-commissioned study, they are neither phrased in this form nor presented in the original report as a definitive list. Rather, the study identifies these motives as part of a broader and more nuanced analysis of multiple, often intersecting, factors behind such killings, with the authors primarily distinguishing between perceived misconduct by the victim in either a "legitimate" or "illegitimate" relationship (Oberwittler and Kasselt 98). Crucially, the study also underscores the conceptual difficulty of categorizing a murder as an "honour killing," noting the fluid boundaries between such cases and so-called "partner killings"—a phenomenon more commonly referred to in contemporary discourse as a femicide. Within this framework, the first two reasons cited in the film correspond to the study's categories of perceived misconduct, the first tied to a "legitimate" partnership and the second to an "illegitimate" one, with the data showing that the overwhelming majority of "honour killings" involve the latter (ibid. 120). While the film's list draws on these findings, its stylized presentation—reducing the explanations to simplified, decontextualized phrases paired with aesthetic conventions typical of investigative crime media—obscures the complexity of the source material, lending the impression of direct institutional endorsement by the BKA. As with the film's treatment of the journalistic account by Deiß and Goll, this reflects a broader tendency in *Nur eine Frau* to prioritize narrative clarity over analytical nuance, streamlining the source material into a coherent and emotionally accessible story, often at the expense of its original complexity and ambiguity.

5.2 “Er schlägt sie, weil er sie liebt”

The rigid gender norms embedded in the Sunni Kurdish tradition upheld by the Sürücü family become starkly visible upon Aynur’s return to Berlin, where she seeks refuge after fleeing her abusive marriage in Istanbul. Deniya’s cold reception of her heavily pregnant daughter sets the tone, followed by a tense kitchen scene in which Tarik and Sinan place blame on Aynur for the violence she claims to have endured from her husband (00:10:34-00:11:52). Importantly, the scene withholds the specifics of Aynur’s situation, thus communicating to the viewer that, within this system, the nature or severity of a woman’s suffering is ultimately irrelevant, as her experience will be rendered secondary to the imperative of preserving familial and cultural norms. Sinan’s immediate dismissal of Aynur’s account, which the scene opens with, illustrates the default privileging of male perspectives—a point Aynur herself highlights, thereby actively asserting her own perspective and rejecting the implicit erasure of her subjectivity that Sinan’s disbelief entails. However, Aynur’s insistence on the legitimacy of her voice is met by deflection: saying that she must have provoked the abuse, Tarik acknowledges her claim only to redirect culpability, echoing a patriarchal logic in which women are held responsible for the violence inflicted upon them. Deniya, meanwhile, straddles the role of mediator and custodian of tradition: while she does not challenge Aynur’s claim outright, she insists that separation is unacceptable “egal was passiert,” thereby positioning maternal loyalty not with the daughter’s suffering but with the preservation of a patriarchal order that subordinates her to male control (00:10:51-00:10:55). The mother’s invocation of the unborn child as her husband’s rightful possession, insisting that Aynur cannot leave him, “schon gar nicht mit seinem Kind im Bauch,” solidifies this stance, marking both the child and Aynur’s body as extensions of male authority,

and illustrating how women's internalization of patriarchal values can lead them to perpetuate norms that systematically curtail female autonomy (00:10:58).

This patriarchal logic is taken to an even more disturbing extreme in a subsequent conversation between Aynur's father and older brothers about her return, which sees Aram emerge as the lone dissenting voice against the family's entrenched patriarchal logic (00:11:53-00:12:13). Tellingly, the conversation centres not on the violence Aynur has endured—which is now explicitly revealed as physical abuse—but on her perceived failure to preserve familial norms. Tarik and Sinan consistently deny Aynur's agency, casting reconciliation as her duty, and framing her departure as the source of familial dishonour. All the while, their references to gossip among the extended family about Aynur's return underscore how strongly their concerns are tethered to communal perception and social respectability. Most revealing, however, is Sinan's justification of physical violence as a form of love, defending Aynur's husband by stating: "Er ist ihr Mann. Er schlägt sie, weil er sie liebt. Was soll er denn sonst machen, wenn sie nicht zuhört?" (00:12:04-00:12:09). Unambiguously framing physical abuse as a legitimate expression of love and male authority, this statement encapsulates a patriarchal worldview in which male violence is normalized and even romanticized as a response to female non-compliance, with women's bodies cast as sites of male ownership. While Aram's protest stands in contrast to this patriarchal script, voicing the only unambiguous rejection of the abuse, his position is isolated, illustrating the broader gender politics in the film's depiction of the Sürücü family: with the exception of Aram, the male family members are unambiguously portrayed as upholding a worldview that legitimizes control, subjugation, as well as emotional and physical violence against women in the name of honour and tradition.

Although Aynur's father eventually permits her to stay, the constraints placed on her are communicated both narratively and visually in the subsequent scenes depicting her return to the family home, accompanied by a voiceover:

> AYNUR. Er lässt mich bleiben. Dafür zahle ich den Preis, den unsere Tradition vorsieht. Scheitert eine Ehe, büßt die Frau. In Demut. lhr ist erlaubt zu beten. lhr ist erlaubt zu arbeiten. lhr ist erlaubt, ihrer Mutter im Haushalt zu helfen. Das Haus allein zu verlassen ist ihr verboten. Wieder zur Schule zu gehen ist ihr verboten. (00:12:57-00:14:06)

Delivered in the flat, clinical tone characteristic of the majority of the voiceover, Aynur lists what is permitted and forbidden to her in a sequence of short, declarative sentences, which underscore the rigidity of the constraints imposed on her. At the same time, the attribution of these restrictions to "tradition" reinforces the film's effort to distinguish cultural custom from religion in explaining Aynur's situation. This sense of restriction is further intensified by the accompanying visual sequence, which depicts Aynur scrubbing the bathroom floor and grocery shopping with her mother—notably, both while heavily pregnant. Most striking, however, is the beginning of the sequence: a thirty-second scene of Aynur in her room, silently putting on a headscarf (00:12:59–00:13:35). The close-up shots dominating the scene focus the viewer's attention on her mechanical movements and somber expression, conveying a sense of resignation and powerlessness. By positioning the act of veiling alongside the recitation of prohibitions, the film taps into dominant cinematic conventions that frame the headscarf as a sartorial marker of oppression (Selfe 219). At the same time, the black colour functions symbolically, connoting mourning, humility, and penance—a visual marker of her diminished status following the breakdown of her marriage. The scene culminates in a five-second medium close-up of Aynur

staring at herself in the mirror, her expression stern and inward-looking, visually embodying the submission and muted suffering articulated in the voiceover (see fig. 52).



Fig. 46. Aynur putting on a black headscarf after being allowed to stay in Berlin (00:13:32).

Yet the film quickly dispels any illusion that Aynur is safe, even within the presumed refuge of her family home. After the birth of her son, Can, whose presence heightens existing tensions with her siblings, Aynur is relegated to the storage room, a small, dimly lit space adjacent to the boys' bedroom. At first, this move appears to offer a brief reprieve from the chaos of the household: a close-up captures the infant peacefully asleep in Aynur's arms in the dark room, communicating a sense of tranquility and maternal tenderness (00:20:18). This calm is shattered in the next shot, which reveals a dark figure, soon identifiable as Sinan, silently sitting on the bed, his eyes fixed on Aynur; his obscured features render him almost faceless, evoking a sense of menace. A medium close-up from over his shoulder captures him placing his hand on

Aynur's breast next to the sleeping infant, juxtaposing Can's innocence against the horror of the impending abuse. Sinan proceeds to masturbate, his hand on his sister's breast, facing away from her in a stance suggesting shame or dissociation. The silence, punctuated only by Sinan's increasingly erratic breathing, heightens the scene's horror and discomfort, while the soft illumination on the sleeping Can underscores his symbolic role as an embodiment of innocence against the surrounding violation. The scene is presented without any stylized elements—no non-diegetic sound, no voiceover, no stills—and is filmed using a handheld camera, lending the scene a raw, unfiltered quality that conveys the gravity of the assault. While the scene is based on a real incident in which Alpaslan Sürücü (the Sinan figure) sexually assaulted his sister Hatun at the family home in Kreuzberg, the presence of the Can character during the assault is likely a fictional addition. In reality, German authorities ordered a DNA test on Hatun's son after learning of the assault (which showed that Alpaslan was not the father), indicating that the assault was understood to have happened before his birth rather than afterward (Deiß and Goll 101, 125-27). Can's presence in the scene can thus be understood as a deliberate dramatization; by placing her brother's act next to—and in direct contrast with—the sleeping infant, the film not only heightens the emotional impact of the assault but, crucially, emphasizes that no one is safe from the pervasive reach of patriarchal violence.

5.3 "Was wünscht du dir für dich?"

Aynur's emancipation from her family and her rejection of its gendered codes of honour constitute both the narrative and emotional core of the film, portrayed through a series of decisive actions that on the one hand afford her spatial and economic independence, and on the other reflect her redefinition of cultural and religious identity. This trajectory begins with her relocation to a mother-child facility following a heated confrontation with her parents, which was

sparked by her decision to seek help from the local youth welfare office. This development mirrors Hatun Sürücü's real experience: after seeking help from the Jugendamt Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg for support in summer 1999, she was placed at the Mutter-Kind-Haus "Jörg Sommerlath" in Berlin-Lichterfelde in October of the same year, a facility operated by the non-profit organization Evangelisches Jugend- und Fürsorgewerk (EJF) that provides comprehensive support for pregnant women and mothers in difficult circumstances (Deiß and Goll 52-55). As Aynur is shown boarding a bus with Can in her arms following the confrontation with her parents, the voiceover draws a pointed comparison:

> AYNUR. Meine Eltern kamen in den Siebzigern aus Ostanatolien nach Berlin. Hier fanden sie Arbeit und einen Platz für ihre Familie. Sie ließen die alte Welt hinter sich. So wie ich jetzt. Es gibt nur einen Unterschied: Ich bin nur eine Frau. Eine, die sich nicht vorschreiben lassen will, wie sie und ihr Kind zu leben haben. Weder von Männern noch von irgendeiner Tradition. Und damit habe ich den Tod verdient. (00:28:10-00:28:44)

By drawing a parallel between her departure from the family home with her parents' migration from Eastern Anatolia to Berlin in the 1970s, the narration frames both as acts of departure from the "old world," casting them as forward movements in pursuit of autonomy and a better future. However, the parallel is undercut by the stark declaration that Aynur is "nur eine Frau," echoing the film's title. The line carries layered ambiguity: "nur" can mean "only" or "just," while "eine" can suggest both the indefinite "a" and the singular "one." While the more colloquial "just a woman" underscores women's powerlessness against the systemic devaluation of their lives within patriarchal structures, variants such as "just one woman" or "only one woman" emphasize Aynur's singularity, tragically casting her life and death as both unique and emblematic.

Foregrounding her gender as the very condition that renders her pursuit of self-determination not only precarious but punishable, the line's resonance lies in this very ambiguity—one that is notably flattened in the film's English release title, *A Regular Woman*, which gestures toward ordinariness and obscures the gendered fatalism at the heart of the original. Hormann has noted in interviews that the film's English title was chosen by distributors, emphasizing her preference for the German original, which she describes as carrying a "wütend" tone (Hormann, "Bewegender Film"). This sense of anger is echoed in the voiceover: while the acknowledgment of systemic marginalization suggests powerlessness, the voiceover immediately pivots to a tone of defiance. Aynur asserts her refusal to be governed by men or tradition, marking her as both aware of and resistant to the structures that constrain her. In naming these forces explicitly, the film assigns direct culpability to patriarchy and tradition; at the same time, the final line reasserts the inevitability of her fate, advancing the argument that, in such a framework, a woman's agency is not only impermissible but fatal.

This assertion of fatal inevitability is immediately reinforced by the film's transition to the third motive for an "honour killing" identified by the BKA—or, more accurately, the third reason loosely derived from the 2011 BKA-commissioned study, namely a woman's decision to separate from her husband (00:28:47-00:28:56). While separation is categorized in the original study as perceived misconduct within a "legitimate" relationship, the authors emphasize that in none of the cases classified as "honour killings" in the narrower sense was separation alone the decisive trigger: the crimes only occurred after the woman was believed to have entered into a new intimate relationship, thus moving into the domain of "illegitimate" partnership and perceived sexual transgression (ibid. 120). The film's framing of separation as an isolated motive thus distills the more nuanced findings of the source material into a simplified causal

explanation—a tendency even more apparent in the presentation of the fourth supposed motive, namely a woman challenging the man's provider role by being employed (00:44:17-00:44:24). Out of the six motives cited throughout the film, this is the only one not identified by the authors of the 2011 study as a recurring factor in the cases they analyzed. While one case involved a perpetrator who reportedly felt undermined because his wife became the primary breadwinner after he lost his job, the resulting murder targeted the daughter, not the wife, and was attributed to the daughter's perceived premarital relationships following her decision to leave the family home (Oberwittler and Kasselt 116–17). The inclusion of this fourth motive as an ostensibly authoritative explanation must therefore be read as a conscious narrative intervention: by presenting it on equal footing with the others, the filmmakers underscore the symbolic weight of Aynur's employment as a violation of the traditional gender contract, effectively positioning female economic independence as a direct affront to patriarchal authority. Taken together, the film's six purported motives thus function less as faithful representations of empirical research and more as a narrative device to construct a linear, digestible trajectory that frames Aynur's murder as the cumulative result of easily identifiable transgressions.

Echoing the film's framing of employment as a direct challenge to patriarchal authority, the scenes depicting Aynur's pursuit of financial independence carry notable symbolic weight, even though they occupy relatively little screen time. Already during her stay at the mother-child facility, she begins working at a supermarket and expresses her wish to finish school. When Heike Beck, the youth welfare official, questions how she plans to manage all of it, Aynur replies without hesitation: "Ich krieg' das hin" (00:29:51). This brief assertion of competence serves as an early indicator of her resilience and determination, traits that are visually reaffirmed in a subsequent montage that intercuts live-action footage with stylized stills: Aynur is shown

navigating public spaces with Can in her arms or stroller, studying with him on her lap, and working at the supermarket—scenes that collectively enact her claim that she can "do it all," reinforcing her construction as capable, autonomous, and forward-moving in the face of systemic constraints (00:30:05–00:30:53). Upon completing her education, she expresses a desire to train as an electrician—a decision that catches Beck off guard, who calls it the "dirtiest" and "loudest" job she knows, echoing the persistence of gendered assumptions surrounding vocational roles observed in chapter one (00:43:54–00:43:56). Aynur, however, remains undeterred, which not only affirms her growing self-assurance but also underscores her continued resistance to normative expectations of femininity.

The film visually anchors Aynur's vocational training in her costuming, using her work uniform as a symbol of resistance to traditional gender roles. Immediately after dismissing Beck's gendered skepticism about her choice to train as an electrician, a wide shot shows Aynur crossing the street in a deep blue uniform, which visually stands out against her surroundings (see fig. 53). Worn throughout her training, the uniform functions as a visual marker of her departure from familial and cultural expectations, a contrast further coded in its blue hue, which diverges from the reds and greens that dominate the film's family scenes. Tellingly, the uniform is commonly referred to in Germany as a "Blaumann" (literally "blue man"), owing to its use by trades historically dominated by men—such as mechanics, electricians, and factory workers—and thereby coded as masculine. In wearing a "Blaumann," then, Aynur is reappropriating a symbol of male-coded labour, thus reinforcing her defiance of gendered boundaries.



Fig. 47. Aynur in a blue uniform on her way to her vocational training (00:44:03).

The symbolic threat her uniform poses becomes explicit when Tarik confronts Aynur on a bus while she is in uniform, ordering her to sit beside their father. When she refuses—thereby defying a core tenet of Kurdish tradition, namely deference to elders, which here intersects with the demand for female subordination to male authority—Tarik slaps her and unleashes verbal abuse (Deiß and Goll 43). Just before she exits, Tarik sneers: "Na, guck dich mal an, du siehst aus wie ein Mann. Wie ein Mann" (00:53:32–00:53:34). His insult implies that by wearing the "Blaumann," Aynur is performing masculinity—a deviation framed as both transgressive and shameful, and an affront not only to gender norms but also to the social order those norms are meant to preserve. The outburst underscores how strictly sartorial autonomy is policed within the patriarchal tradition upheld by the Sürücüs, whereby any departure from demure, compliant femininity is perceived as a threat and punished accordingly. At the same time, the scene marks a

key moment in the film's depiction of Aynur's defiance: it is not merely her actions but her refusal to perform deference—embodied here by her refusal to sit beside her father and her steady, unflinching gaze at her brother—that destabilizes the traditional power dynamic, sharpening her portrayal as one of embodied defiance, enacted face to face with the very men who seek to discipline her into submission.

If Aynur's uniformed defiance on the bus marks a visible challenge to patriarchal expectations, her decision to remove the headscarf represents an even more profound rupture—a symbolic break from the cultural and religious norms governing her body and identity. This act is captured in one of the film's most visually striking and widely discussed scenes, and follows a night out dancing with Senna, a friend Aynur meets during her time at the mother-child facility. Like Aynur, Senna is a young mother of Turkish background raising a child on her own, yet her portrayal diverges sharply: Senna wears her hair loose, speaks openly about dating and nightlife, and moves freely through public and social spaces without apparent constraint. As such, she operates as a counterpoint to Aynur, representing an alternative model of Turkish femininity, one not subject to intense familial scrutiny and free to navigate public and romantic spaces without fear. This aligns Senna with the trope of cultural hybridity observed in German public discourse, wherein the assimilated Turkish youth functions as a bridge between the irreconcilable opposition of Turkish/Islamic tradition and the liberal democratic values associated with German society (Ewing, "Between Cinema" 274).

After a night out dancing with Senna, an act the voiceover pointedly frames as "bringing new shame" to the family, the narration continues: "Und dabei bleibt es nicht. Ich verstehe nicht länger, was Allah gegen meine Haare hat" (00:32:36-00:32:41). This reflection signals more than a personal grievance, marking the beginning of a theological and cultural reckoning. By

questioning the religious rationale for veiling, Aynur reframes the issue on her own terms, asserting that understanding and, by extension, authority, must come from within. This inner shift is visually echoed in the scene that follows, initially showing a fluorescent-lit wall with a green tint, with the camera tilting downward to reveal a top-down view of Aynur, still veiled, bent over the sink in her room (00:32:39–00:32:46). A subsequent cut transitions to a blurred medium full shot of Aynur rising and beginning to unwrap her headscarf; as the camera slowly zooms in, the image gradually sharpens (00:32:47–00:32:54). The unwrapping of both the scarf and the undercap is captured primarily through this zoom shot, which allows a partial view of her reflection in the mirror, culminating in a medium close-up of Aynur through the mirror with her hair down (see fig. 54). This shot is intercut with the earlier overhead perspective, focusing the viewer's attention on the tactile process of unveiling, with the deliberate movement of her hands drawing visual focus to the physical and symbolic weight of the act. Notably, Aynur's unveiling scene is filmed in slow motion, with the high frame rate of 60 frames per second producing a distinctive flickering effect in the fluorescent lighting that dominates the viewing experience (DVD bonus discussion).



Fig. 48. Aynur looks at her reflection in the mirror after taking off her headscarf (00:33:38).

The convergence of these elements produces a highly stylized scene that frames Aynur's removal of her headscarf as a moment of personal liberation, rendered through the lens of emancipation. A non-diegetic club track, carried over from the previous sequence, and rising in volume as Aynur begins to unwrap her headscarf, sonically links Aynur's decision to unveil with club culture and, by extension, with her newfound freedom to occupy public spaces. Hormann has confirmed that the implication is that Aynur has just returned from her night out with Senna, a suggestion reinforced by the scene's sequential placement, the music's continuity, and Aynur's headscarf, which appears identical to the one worn while walking with Senna (DVD bonus discussion). The manipulation of camera placement and lighting in this scene further codes Aynur's unveiling as a symbolic act of autonomy: her face remains partially obscured until she removes her headscarf and lets her hair down, at which point her reflection in the mirror is

clearly illuminated by the overhead fixture. This moment of visibility has been read by reviewers as a "Moment der Befreiung"—an impression supported by the visual motif of blurring and sharpening: as Aynur lowers her scarf and looks at herself in the mirror, the temporary distortion gives way to a sharp image, emphasizing the act as one of clarity and self-recognition (Scheer). The use of slow motion throughout further elevates the moment, slowing time to underscore its significance and emotional resonance. Hormann has described the technique's function as "ennobling" ("veredelt") the moment, confirming her intent to present Aynur's act not simply as personal, but as symbolically charged—a cinematic reclamation of autonomy and self-definition (DVD bonus discussion).

With its heightened stylization and centrality to the film's narrative trajectory, the scene depicting Aynur's removal of her headscarf has drawn criticism for the way it frames the act. *The New York Times*' Teo Bugbee, for instance, points to both the voiceover's questioning what "Allah has against [her] hair" and the accompanying club music as elements that construct a moment tailored to satisfy Western conceptions of female emancipation. Indeed, the scene echoes an established pattern in German public discourse which tends to frame the headscarf as part of a monolithic cultural tradition that victimizes women; its removal, on the other hand, is interpreted as a gesture of alignment with Western values, rendered through the lens of women's emancipation from patriarchal control (Ferree 168; Selfe 22–23). This binary is likewise reflected in other cinematic portrayals of the headscarf in contemporary German films, where it functions predominantly as a visual marker of oppression, with its removal serving as shorthand for a character's rejection of exploitative conditions framed as culturally or religiously Islamic—a pattern evident in films such as *Anam* (dir. Buket Alakuş, 2001) and *Lola + Bilidikid* (dir. Kutluğ Ataman, 1999) (Selfe 219). *Nur eine Frau* reproduces this narrative logic by coding

Aynur's act of unveiling as a moment of self-liberation and an assertion of agency; at the same time, through its aesthetic alignment with club and nightlife culture, the scene locates that agency within a mainstream narrative of empowerment and women's emancipation, implicitly positioning veiling as incompatible with female self-determination.

This incompatibility is echoed in a later scene involving Evin, Nuri's girlfriend at the time of the killing and eventual key witness in the murder trial. A classmate of Aynur's sister Shirin, Evin is introduced alongside her mother Dilber, of whom the voiceover says: "Dilber liebt ihre Tochter über alles. Ein Kopftuch hat Evin nie getragen" (01:11:29-01:11:33). Equating maternal love with a refusal to impose the headscarf, the line implies that mothers who do require it or allow their daughters to wear one are less loving or less protective, strengthening the film's framing of the headscarf as a marker of oppression. Under Shirin's influence, Evin adopts the Sürücü family's strict moral and religious code, illustrated in a scene where Shirin reads from the Quran and instructs Evin to veil in order to "protect her honour," thus framing female sexuality as dangerous and honour as contingent on women's self-policing (01:12:19–01:12:36). Moments later, Evin puts on a headscarf in the hallway of the Sürücü family home, mirroring Aynur's earlier act of unveiling. Both scenes culminate in the woman gazing at her reflection, visually linking them as opposites: one veils to conform, the other unveils to assert autonomy. That Evin's veiling signifies lost agency is affirmed in the epilogue: after testifying against Nuri, she removes her headscarf upon leaving the police station, which solidifies the film's coding of unveiling as an act of personal liberation (01:25:21–01:25:26).

Equally significant to her removal of the headscarf, both as a marker of emancipation and a perceived transgression of family honour, is Aynur's decision to enter into a romantic relationship. The man she becomes involved with, Tim—a character based on Hatun Sürücü's

real-life German ex-partner—is positioned via voiceover as the antithesis to her brothers' oppressive masculinity. While introducing Bekir, Aynur's training supervisor, who is also Kurdish and a Muslim, the voiceover observes: "Es gibt die einen Muslime und es gibt die anderen. Es gibt meine Brüder und es gibt andere Männer" (00:45:12-00:45:19). This line establishes a dualistic framework that maps religious and gendered binaries onto one another: coercive patriarchy on one side, and egalitarianism and personal freedom on the other. Tim's alignment with the latter model is emphasized by the timing of his introduction, which follows immediately after in a scene set outside Aynur's vocational training centre (00:45:16-00:45:57). His positive framing is established both formally and narratively: he is bathed in warm, diffused sunlight that softens his features and lends his figure a gentle luminosity while his cheerful demeanour and respectful curiosity—including his recognition of the meaning of Aynur's name, which he attributes to a recent trip to Turkey—reinforce his portrayal as an empathetic, open-minded counterpoint to the film's earlier depictions of controlling masculinity.

Aynur's relationship with Tim, while occupying limited screen time, is presented through emotionally resonant scenes that highlight a brief period of happiness and emotional stability in the protagonist's life, even as threats from her family escalate. The relationship is introduced through a scene of the two riding through Berlin on Tim's motorcycle, set to a high-energy, non-diegetic rock track that codes the moment as carefree and exhilarating (00:45:58–00:46:37). Notably, the scene recalls a similar sequence in Feo Aladağ's *Die Fremde*, in which the protagonist likewise rides on her German partner's motorcycle (01:13:29-01:14:01). While Hatun Sürücü's real-life German ex-partner was known to be a motorcycle rider, as noted by Deiß and Goll, there is no documented evidence of such an occurrence in the journalists' account or in other resources on the case, suggesting instead that Hormann's film is drawing on Aladağ's

imagery (Deiß and Goll 17). This reading is supported by the parallels in form: both scenes follow the man's flirtatious invitation to ride, both unfold at dusk or night to non-diegetic sound, and both centre on the couple's smiling faces as they ride through the streets of Berlin. A subsequent echo deepens this intertextual connection: after Aynur learns that she will receive tutoring to pass her training exam, a twenty-second scene shows her walking across a busy bridge, surrounded by cars and pedestrians, with the voiceover reflecting on her renewed sense of direction (00:58:35-00:58:55). *Die Fremde* stages an almost identical image of its protagonist walking across a bridge as cars and pedestrians pass by; while the scene is set to non-diegetic sound, unlike the one in Hormann's film, both are set at dusk and capture the protagonist walking alone across a busy urban bridge in a composition that signals forward motion and transition (01:14:52-01:15:09). The formal similarities between the two sequences, which have no basis in documented events from Sürücü's life, point to a distinct cinematic dialogue between the two films, demonstrating how *Nur eine Frau* draws on earlier engagements with Sürücü's story and situating it within a broader cultural imaginary that has come to define representations of her life.

The carefree tone set by Tim's introduction and the motorcycle scene carries into a later domestic scene in Aynur's apartment, where she is shown cooking while Tim plays gently with Can nearby (00:48:47–00:49:47). Though brief, the scene communicates Tim's integration into Aynur's everyday life and his acceptance into her chosen family structure, visually presenting them as a content family unit. A subsequent cut transitions to a close-up of Aynur and Tim lying naked in bed, bathed in dim light that traces Aynur's sweaty torso, suggesting the aftermath of intimacy (00:49:48). As she caresses her lover's face, he poses her a question:

TIM. Was wünschst du dir für dich?

AYNUR. Keine Ahnung. Das, was sich alle wünschen, glaube ich. 'ne Familie… einen Beruf…

TIM. Einen Mann?

AYNUR. Mal schauen. Und du?

TIM. Friede. Glück. Familie. Immer gut zu essen.

AYNUR. Und dein Motorrad.

TIM. Und mein Motorrad. (00:49:50-00:50:26)

This exchange is significant on several levels—most notably, it marks the first time in the film where Aynur is directly asked what she wants for herself in an implicit recognition of her autonomy and subjectivity, which have so far been overshadowed by familial expectations and social constraints. While her initial hesitation suggests that the opportunity to articulate her own desires may be unfamiliar or new, when she does respond, her wishes are modest and deeply human, painting the portrait of a life grounded in autonomy and emotional stability. Her articulation of these basic aspirations resonates all the more powerfully when viewed in light of her real-life fate, as the viewer is acutely aware that these desires will remain unfulfilled. The scene's visual composition further amplifies this poignancy: the soft bedroom lighting illuminates one side of Aynur's face, accentuating her smile and visually conveying a sense of emotional warmth and post-intimacy contentment (see fig. 55). Within the broader trajectory of the film, this moment stands out as a rare and intimate expression of happiness, fleeting yet intensely affecting—an image of the life Aynur was in the process of building but would ultimately be denied.

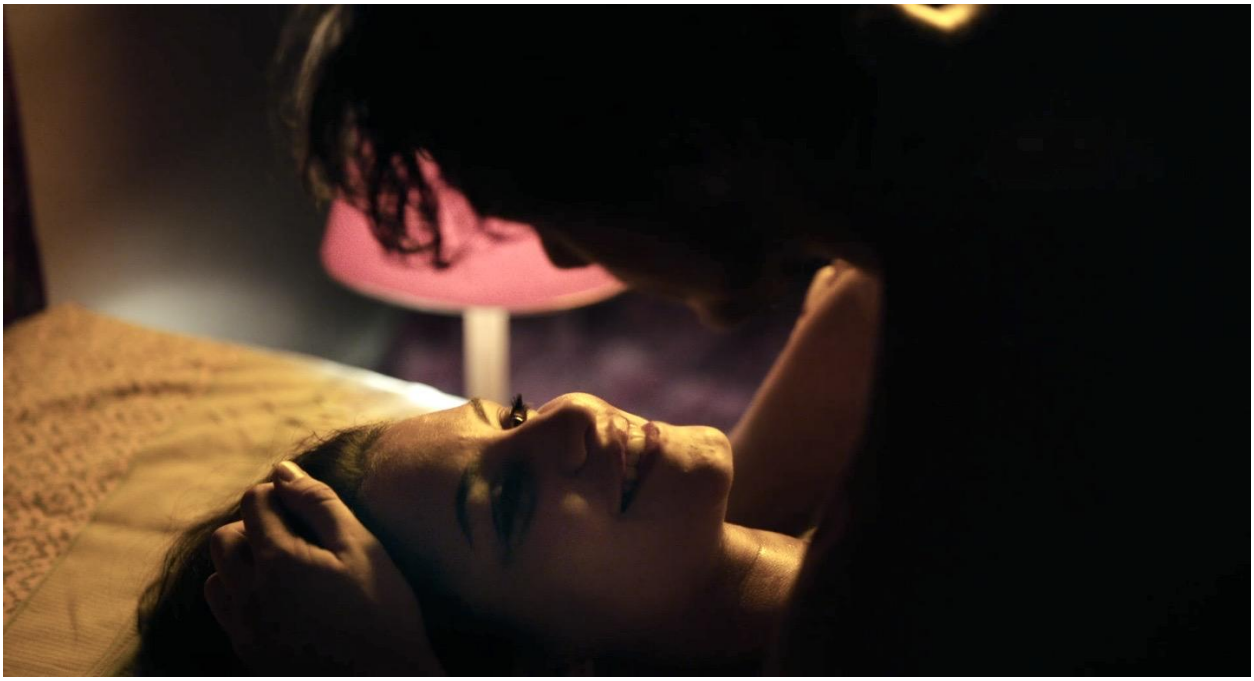


Fig. 49. Aynur and Tim in bed (00:50:06).

Yet the most emotionally resonant moment in the depiction of Aynur and Tim's relationship occurs not through dramatization, but through archival footage: a forty-second home video of the real Hatun Sürücü and her former partner (00:48:02–00:48:46). Provided by Sürücü's actual ex-partner, the footage was shot by an unnamed third party, likely a friend, and captures the couple on a rooftop during a sunny day (Karkowsky). This brief, unscripted moment carries considerable emotional weight, as it offers a rare glimpse into Sürücü's everyday life and presents her as smiling, carefree, and visibly in love; crucially, it is also the only moment in the film in which the audience hears her actual voice. The video opens with a shot of her partner at work on the rooftop, while an off-screen Sürücü remarks "Genau das ist mein Schatz," openly affirming her affection (00:48:02). When the cameraman teases her, she responds that he is "ein ganz Lieber," before the camera cuts to a medium close-up of her (00:48:06). Dressed in a white

spaghetti-strap top and a light blue skirt falling just above the knee, and with her hair cut in a short bob, she appears visually distinct from the film's representation of Aynur, who has until now been primarily shown in long pants and long-sleeved shirts. Even more striking than her clothing, however, is her demeanour: she is consistently smiling and radiantly at ease. Her laughter, casual gestures, and the way she playfully hides from the camera momentarily, all contribute to a vivid impression of a young woman full of life. The sunlight enhances this portrayal, illuminating her features and reinforcing her vitality. Positioned within the 2001 timeline and preceding the next segment dated 2003, the video likely dates to 2001 or 2002, meaning Sürücü would have been at most twenty years old—a detail that heightens the poignancy of seeing her so full of "Lebensfreude," a term often invoked by those who knew her personally to describe her spirit (Krämer).

The video concludes with a fifteen-second shot of the couple standing together on the rooftop, which leaves a lasting emotional impact (00:48:31–00:48:46). The full shot initially captures Aynur leaning in for a kiss, with her partner opening his arms in response. She kisses him gently and then embraces him around the shoulders, to which he responds by wrapping his arms around her waist. What follows is a long, intimate kiss, tender and unhurried. As the camera slowly zooms in, ending in a medium close-up, the shot draws the viewer into the intimacy of their embrace, which is visually rendered almost as a merging of two bodies (see fig. 56). This tactile closeness is underscored by a soft non-diegetic instrumental track, composed of slow piano notes and delicate strings; according to the filmmakers, this is the original audio from the home video (DVD bonus discussion). The diegetic sound drops out entirely during the video's final twenty seconds, allowing the music to dominate and reinforcing the emotional gravity of the moment. More than just a romantic interlude, the sequence deepens the film's

portrayal of Aynur not only as a victim of familial and cultural violence, but as an emotionally rich person who experienced and openly celebrated love, joy, and connection. The quiet intensity of the scene, made all the more powerful through its authenticity, reclaims Sürücü's subjectivity and humanity, reminding the audience of the life that was lived and violently lost.



Fig. 50. Hatun Sürücü and her ex-partner kiss on a rooftop in a home video included in the film (00:48:33)

5.4 "Wie 'ne Deutsche"

While Aynur's emancipation from her family forms the emotional and narrative core of the film, significant attention is devoted to the family's perception of her actions in an attempt to contextualize the conditions that led to her murder. By consistently intercutting scenes of Aynur's growing autonomy with her relatives' reactions, the film squarely depicts her

emancipation as, in their eyes, a direct affront to family honour. This backlash is initially mapped onto Aynur's brothers, especially Tarik, who is portrayed as the most rigidly devout and ideologically hardline. Tarik consistently shifts blame onto Aynur—whether for the abuse she endured in Istanbul or for the assault committed by their brother Sinan—thereby reinforcing a patriarchal logic that holds women responsible for the violence inflicted upon them. His alignment with the oppressive model of masculinity presented by the voiceover discussed earlier is also underscored visually: several scenes depict him boxing, often with Nuri, a sport coded as aggressive and physical, thus reinforcing the film's gendered framework in which male power is expressed through control and violence.

Tarik functions as the most rigid and punitive embodiment of patriarchal authority, even resorting to physical violence when that authority is challenged, as illustrated by the moment when Aynur refuses to sit beside their father on the bus. Following her decision to unveil, Tarik emerges as the narrative mouthpiece for the family's strict honour code: in a conversation with Nuri and Rohat, he urges their father to intervene, invoking communal perception: "Baba, alle reden über uns. Weil sie rumläuft wie 'ne Deutsche. Wie eine Hure" (00:37:49-00:37:59). This line explicitly equates unveiled German womanhood with sexual promiscuity, casting Aynur's appearance as both threatening and dishonourable. Tarik begins to cry as he utters the final insult, which undercuts his hypermasculine role by hinting at the fragility that underpins the violent enforcement of honour codes—a form of masculinity built on emotional suppression and the symbolic control of female relatives. Notably, his language also directly reproduces a notorious comment made by a Turkish-German schoolboy in the wake of Hatun Sürücü's murder, who blamed the victim for her death, stating: "Die Hure lief rum wie eine Deutsche" (Deiß and Goll 101; Hasselbach). Triggering widespread public outrage and media attention, the

phrase became a flashpoint in debates around gender and integration in Germany, serving as a shorthand for the perceived incompatibility of Turkish Muslim masculinity with democratic values (Berghahn 130; Ewing, *Stolen Honor* 151; Lau). By incorporating this line and assigning it to Aynur's brother, the film anchors its narrative in real sociopolitical discourse and signals that Tarik's worldview is not isolated but emblematic of a broader cultural logic, one that views female autonomy as a destabilizing threat to patriarchal order and community respectability.

This emphasis on sexualized insults continues the logic articulated by Tarik: that Aynur's perceived violation lies not simply in her autonomy, but specifically in her sexual self-determination. A recurring element in her brothers' characterizations of her is their use of slurs such as "Hure" and "Schlampe," insults that equate her newfound autonomy with sexual promiscuity. These culminate in a series of threatening phone calls, which intensify following the family's discovery of her relationship with Tim, with one brother (likely Tarik or Sinan) even threatening to kill her with his bare hands (01:02:54–01:03:08). The repeated use of these terms underscores the degree to which Aynur's assumed sexual autonomy is construed as the ultimate transgression and, by extension, the point at which control must be violently reasserted. This framing aligns with the 2011 BKA-commissioned study the film draws from, which found that, in 80% of the murders classified as "honour killings," the decisive motive for the murder was the perpetrator's perception that the victim was in an "illegitimate" relationship (Oberwittler and Kasselt 120, 168). The study's authors interpret this finding as evidence that so-called "honour killings" are fundamentally acts of control over female sexuality—an interpretation echoed by the film itself, as seen both in the repeated use of sexualized slurs and, as will be examined later, in the framing of the murder sequence itself (ibid. 121).

Yet it is ultimately Nuri who murders Aynur, with the film devoting considerable attention to his growing resentment and gradual ideological radicalization. He is initially portrayed as close to Aynur, warmly greeting and hugging her upon her return from Istanbul. However, the tensions her return triggers soon begin to affect him, casting him as increasingly withdrawn and susceptible to his older brothers' view of Aynur as a transgressor and a threat to the family honour. After Aynur leaves the family home and unveils, his resentment intensifies—a shift visualized through shots of Nuri returning from boxing practice, his downcast gaze and shadowed face conveying a sense of menace and foreshadowing his internalization of the family's honour code as a motive for the violence to come (00:52:36-00:52:43). As the father becomes increasingly absent and Tarik leaves the household following his marriage, Nuri assumes a position of patriarchal authority, made explicit when the mother refers to him as "der Mann im Haus" (01:00:02). Notably, this narrative choice simplifies the real-life case by presenting a clearer trajectory of Nuri's role as the sole perpetrator: in reality, Ayhan Sürücü's (Nuri's real-life counterpart) authority within the family was never formally established and remains contested, with Ayhan himself having provided inconsistent accounts on the matter (Deiß and Goll 24–26, 44–45).

At the same time, Nuri's growing hostility toward Aynur is closely tied to his deepening alignment with his older brother Tarik, whose influence proves pivotal in shaping Nuri's attitudes toward gender and honour. After Sinan sexually assaults Aynur and is ordered to leave the house, a brief scene shows Tarik blaming Aynur for the incident, telling their father that she poses a threat to the family; meanwhile, Nuri is depicted listening nearby, his solemn expression suggesting the internalization of Tarik's framing (00:23:15-00:23:36). This influence becomes

more explicit in the subsequent scene set in the boys' room, with Tarik issuing a striking set of instructions to his youngest brother:

> TARIK. Du musst eigentlich nur zwei Wahrheiten begreifen, Nuri. Egal, was ein Mensch sagt. Egal, was Baba für richtig hält. Ein guter Muslim hält sich an den Koran und hört zuerst auf das Wort Allahs, verstanden?
>
> NURI. Ja. Und das Zweite?
>
> TARIK. Nimm dich in Acht vor Frauen. Du kannst denen einfach nicht trauen. Okay?
>
> NURI. Ja. (00:24:17-00:24:45)

In framing these pronouncements as "truths," Tarik confers on them the status of absolute, incontestable values—authority that supersedes even the father's judgement, as he explicitly states. By placing piety and distrust of women on the same moral plane, he equates religious observance with misogyny, implying that both are non-negotiable principles of a "good Muslim." This equation not only sets the ideological foundation for Nuri's future actions, but also further complicates the film's broader attempt to distinguish between religion and tradition, instead blurring them together through Tarik's rhetoric. The power dynamic is visually reinforced: Tarik stands above, delivering his words from a position of moral and physical elevation, while Nuri, gazing upward with wide, attentive eyes, is visually cast as an impressionable recipient of his brother's worldview (see fig. 57). This absorption is confirmed in the final exchange of the scene, in which Nuri shyly asks if he can accompany Tarik to the mosque (00:24:48-00:24:53). Tarik's surprised but approving response, coupled with Nuri's hesitant tone, suggests this will be his first visit—a moment that further links his emerging religious orientation to Tarik's ideological influence, and foreshadows the fusion of faith, control, and gendered violence that will culminate in Aynur's murder.



Fig. 51. Tarik delivers a set of instructions to Nuri in the boys' room at home (00:24:16).

The mosque Nuri references becomes a key site of his religious radicalization, with several scenes depicting the mosque's teachings, delivered by an unnamed preacher. The setting is modeled after the Ashabi Kehf Camii in Berlin's Wedding district, a mosque known to have been frequented by Mutlu Sürücü (the real-life Tarik figure), who later introduced his youngest brother to it (Deiß and Goll 46). The real-life community depicted here is affiliated with the teachings of Metin Kaplan, an Islamic fundamentalist who proclaimed himself "Caliph of Cologne" ("Kalif von Köln") and led the "Caliphate State" ("Kalifatstaat"), an extremist movement banned in 2001 by Germany's Federal Constitutional Court (ibid. 47). That the film frames the mosque's teachings as rigid and extreme is communicated both formally and narratively: formally, the mosque's interior is visibly darkened, with shutters and curtains

blocking out daylight—a stark contrast to the bright, open atmosphere of the mosque attended by their father, Rohat—thereby casting the preacher's space as secretive and ideologically rigid. Narratively, the preacher's sermons are delivered in a harsh, moralizing tone, focusing on women's sexuality outside marriage as a transgression—one described as shameful, unforgivable, and punishable. Together, the scenes depicting the preacher's sermons and their impact on Tarik and, more critically, Nuri, emphasize the ideological conditioning that legitimizes honour-based violence by recasting it as religious obligation. As a result, the film further blurs its attempt to distinguish between religion and tradition in delineating the path that seals the protagonist's fate, instead constructing a causal link between Nuri's religious radicalization and Aynur's murder by foregrounding the role of misinterpreted religious duty in justifying patriarchal violence.

This link is reinforced in the sequence depicting the decision to murder Aynur, which the film frames not as the action of a lone perpetrator but as a collective resolution. Composed of a montage of stylized stills and short live-action scenes, the sequence offers a visual framework of moral complicity, implicating each family member—male and female—as well as the mosque preacher, whose teachings are portrayed as providing ideological sanction for the act (01:06:18–01:07:23). While the voiceover concedes that broader involvement cannot be legally proven, echoing the court's conclusion, the visuals align with the dominant public interpretation of the case: that Hatun Sürücü's murder was orchestrated by the family and ratified by the fundamentalist ideology preached at the mosque attended by her brothers (Deiß and Goll 18, 167, 196). To illustrate this, one still shows the preacher with a finger pressed to his lips in a gesture of secrecy that communicates presumed complicity; in another, Aynur's parents gaze directly at Nuri, visually designating him as the chosen perpetrator (01:06:42; 01:06:50).

Moments later, this designation is explicitly recognized by the voiceover: “Die alten Regeln sagen, der Jüngste muss die Reinigung vollziehen” (01:07:12-01:07:16). While this reference to “old rules” infuses the act with a ritualistic quality rooted in cultural tradition, it contradicts the journalistic account on which the script is based, which attributes tasking the youngest male family member with the act to the fact that he is likely to receive the most lenient legal sentence (Deiß and Goll 18). Indeed, Ayhan Sürücü, who was eighteen at the time of the murder, was tried as a juvenile and received a sentence of nine years and three months for the crime. By framing the decision to task the youngest brother with the act as culturally ordained, the film sidesteps this practical rationale, once again privileging symbolic clarity over factual ambiguity.

Overall, the decision sequence crystallizes the film’s interpretive framing of the Sürücü case, presenting a unified narrative of culpability that extends beyond Nuri to implicate the entire family, tacitly sanctioned by religious doctrine through the mosque preacher. This depiction not only aligns with the dominant public perception of the murder as a coordinated act but, importantly, is also rooted in the testimony of Melek A., the real-life counterpart to the film’s Evin. Her account—such as Ayhan taking her to a trash can in Berlin’s Görlitzer Park the day before the murder to show where he had practiced shooting—is not only reenacted on screen but also validated narratively, with the voiceover directly addressing Evin with the words “Ich glaube dir” (01:15:08). This affirmation, voiced by Aynur herself in the first person, asserts narrative authority over the truth, retroactively validating Melek A.’s account and elevating her testimony from contested legal evidence to moral certainty. By presenting this version of events as Aynur’s truth—and, by implication, *the* truth—the film not only reinforces its own interpretive stance but also offers a powerful gesture of recognition to the real-life witness, positioning her as a trusted figure within Aynur’s reclaimed narrative. The emotional and

political weight of this moment is heightened by its placement just before the murder, anchoring the film's retelling of the act in the lived experiences of those who paid a profound personal price to speak out against the Sürücü family: both Melek A. and her mother, Ayla A., the real-life counterparts of Evin and Dilber, have remained in witness protection since the 2005 trial, having been forced to forsake their identities and sever ties with the rest of their family.

5.5 "Ich entscheide für mich"

Aynur's murder is preceded by a sequence of scenes that reinforce her portrayal as strong, determined, and resilient. The sequence initially focuses on how she endures heartbreak after Tim breaks up with her following a night out during which they are verbally harassed by a group of young Turkish men, echoing Sürücü's real-life ex-partner's decision to end their relationship due to the mounting emotional toll of her family's threats (Deiß and Goll 101-02). The film intercuts scenes of Aynur mourning the relationship with images of her raising her son while working and completing her vocational training, all while enduring escalating threats from her brothers. While her initial passivity in response to these threats might risk casting her as naïve or indecisive, she ultimately takes action after receiving a direct death threat by reporting the abuse to the police, paralleling a similar action taken by the real-life Sürücü in the spring of 2004 (Deiß and Goll 72, 87). Throughout this period, the voiceover remains a steady narrative anchor, offering posthumous commentary that foregrounds both Aynur's attempts to manage her growing responsibilities and her emotional turmoil as she tries to reconcile her love for her family with the violence they direct toward her.

Crucially, however, Aynur's desire to maintain familial ties is reframed in the film's final half hour as the very force that endangers her. This narrative shift is captured in a brief scene of her walking across a busy urban bridge —another visual echo of Feo Aladağ's *Die Fremde*, as

previously observed—with the voiceover breaking the fourth wall to pose a biting rhetorical question: “[ich] ahne, was ihr gerade denkt. Ist die immer noch so doof wie früher? Oder hat sie endlich mal was kapiert und hält sich fern von ihrer Hater-Familie?” (00:58:46-00:58:55). By attributing this critique to the viewer, the narration suggests a posthumous awareness that Aynur’s longing for reconciliation was a fatal misjudgment. This implication is reinforced in a later scene, where Aram—the only brother portrayed as supportive—explicitly warns her to stay away from the rest of the family, questioning her choice to visit the family home and let Can spend the night (01:03:51-01:04:27). Aynur’s repeated response to this criticism throughout the film, arguing that she loves her family and believing that familial bonds should outweigh all else, articulates the central conflict she faces: a deep emotional attachment to her family set against the increasing danger that this closeness poses. While the film acknowledges this inner turmoil, it ultimately frames her pursuit of connection as naïve, exemplified both in the voiceover’s question and in Aram’s warning, thus assigning Aynur a degree of responsibility for her fate. In doing so, the film casts autonomy and familial allegiance as irreconcilable within this cultural framework and presents violence not as an aberration, but as the inevitable cost of defying that binary—despite the reality that Hatun Sürücü could not have predicted the extent of her family’s response.

The magnitude of that response is made clear in the following scene, in which a birthday party for Can at Aynur’s apartment is presented as the catalyst for the final escalation toward her murder. The mise-en-scène conveys a sense of warmth and domestic happiness: the apartment is brightly decorated, children’s laughter fills the space, and sunlight streams through the living room windows, producing lens flares that create an atmosphere of joy and innocence (01:04:28–01:05:14). This celebratory tone is abruptly disrupted by Nuri’s arrival, however, whose initially

friendly expression shifts when he notices several male guests among those gathered. His gaze lingers on Aynur with visible contempt before he exits, slamming the door and throwing the present he had bought for Can in the trash, while the voiceover addresses him directly:

> AYNUR. Das war der Moment, wirst du später aussagen. In dem Moment war deine Seele gekränkt durch die fremden Männer in meiner Wohnung. Und weil dich mein Lebenswandel auch sonst so fürchterlich abgestoßen hat, hast du in diesem Moment ganz alleine entschieden, dass ich sterben muss. So hast du es bei Gericht gesagt. Du weißt genau, dass das Bullshit ist. (01:05:54-01:06:17)

The scene and accompanying voiceover reference an incident described by Ayhan Sürücü (the real-life Nuri figure), who told a court-appointed psychologist of his disappointment at not having been invited to his nephew's birthday party; defying Hatun's request to stay away, he showed up at her apartment, saw several male guests, and claimed to have felt so offended that he decided in the aftermath that his sister had to die (Deiß and Goll 29). However, in other statements, Ayhan has contradicted this claim, suggesting there was no single triggering event; rather, his motivation stemmed from a broader sense of outrage at Hatun's life choices and his fear that she would negatively influence their younger sisters (ibid. 26). The film foregrounds this contradiction and uses the voiceover to directly confront and reject the lone-perpetrator narrative presented during the trial, which would ultimately lead to the acquittal of the two older brothers. Crucially, by denouncing this version as a lie, the voiceover strips away any pretence of neutrality and asserts full control over the narrative, positioning itself as a corrective to the legal record. Aynur's voice is thereby elevated once again, affirming the film as "her" story, as declared in the opening monologue.

The mise-en-scène of Can's birthday party, with its evocation of joy and innocence, carries into the final scene depicting Aynur before her murder, set in a sunlit park on her twenty-third birthday, with mother and son shown playing and laughing (01:08:23–01:08:46). Accompanied by an ambient non-diegetic score, the scene evokes a sense of maternal intimacy and fleeting domestic joy in the days before the murder. After Can presents her with a birthday cake, the voiceover announces that Aynur has secured a new job in another city and plans to move there with Can after her final exam. The voiceover's flat, detached delivery contrasts sharply with Aynur's visible joy and with the sense of hope and forward momentum the announcement is meant to convey, once again foregrounding the inevitability of her death by intensifying the viewer's awareness that this escape will never occur. When Senna and her daughter join, Senna gifts Aynur a CD with her favourite song; as Will Smith's "Gettin' Jiggy Wit It" starts playing, Aynur dances with Can, the camera lingering on her for nearly thirty seconds (01:10:10–01:10:38). Sunlight falls directly on her, creating a halo-like glow that visually sanctifies her figure, pushing the film's portrayal of its protagonist toward hagiography (see fig. 58). The intermittent slow motion, lens flares, and saturated colours lend the scene a dream-like beauty, while the voiceover foreshadows its finality by reminding the viewer that Aynur's plans will never come to fruition. Her joy is thus rendered radiant yet achingly fragile; framed at the threshold of a life defined by autonomy, love, and maternal connection, Aynur appears on the brink of everything she has fought to build, just before it is irreversibly taken from her.



Fig. 52. Aynur dancing at a park on her birthday days before her murder (01:10:22).

The next time Aynur appears on screen, it is on the evening of her murder—a contrast that directly juxtaposes the sunlit joy of her birthday with the impending horror of her death. The murder sequence begins on a quiet, intimate moment, showing Aynur in a medium close-up in her apartment, caressing her son's hair as he falls asleep (01:15:18). Bathed in warm bedroom light, her faint smile conveys a sense of maternal safety and peace, quickly interrupted by the appearance of Nuri's dark silhouette in the background. After Can has drifted off, Aynur silently leaves the room and a cut takes the viewer into the kitchen, where rising tensions between the siblings erupt into a visceral confrontation:

NURI. Aynur, pass auf, du hast zu Hause nichts mehr verloren, und schon gar nicht, wenn ich nicht da bin, hast du verstanden?

AYNUR. Nuri, beruhig dich, ich wollte einfach nur Mama sehen, okay?

NURI. Es ist mir scheißegal, was du willst! Du gehörst nicht mehr zur Familie! Das war's!

AYNUR. Ach, und das hast du zu entscheiden, ja?

NURI. Nein, aber daran bist du selber schuld, du und dein Scheißverhalten, Aynur!

AYNUR. Warum, warum, weil ich wieder herumhure? Ist das, was du sagen willst?

NURI. Ja, weil du mit jedem Typen rundfickst, Alte, schämst du dich nicht mal?

AYNUR. Du sagst mir NICHT, wie ich mich benehmen soll!

NURI. Doch, ich sag dir, ich sag dir alles!

AYNUR. NEIN! MACHST DU NICHT! Du sagst mir nicht, wie ich mich benehmen soll! Ich rede, ich lache, ich FICKE, wann und mit wem ich will! Ich entscheide für mich. Hast du das verstanden? (01:15:47-01:16:18)

The confrontation articulates the ideological core of Aynur's conflict with her family: that their most fundamental objection was to her assertion of sexual autonomy. Her declaration that she is free to sleep with whomever she chooses echoes the account given by Hatun Sürücü's real-life brother, who argued that it was a similar statement by his sister that caused him to "switch off" and proceed to shoot her—an account that remains disputed by those closest to Hatun (Deiß and Goll 38, 99). The film's inclusion of this line and its implicit presentation as what finally triggers Nuri, whose quietly menacing expression follows his sister's declaration, not only lends credibility to the brother's version of events, but also casts Aynur's sexual self-determination as the ultimate transgression—one for which death becomes, in the logic of the family's honour code, the only perceived resolution. At the same time, the film seeks to reconstruct what might have preceded such a moment by granting Aynur a forceful declaration of agency: she refuses to accept her brother's authority over her behaviour and insists on her right to autonomy, directly

opposing the values their family upholds. The specific acts she names—speaking, laughing, and engaging in sex—are framed as interconnected forms of freedom, each one a rejection of the silencing and control to which she has long been subjected. Her mention of speech and laughter in particular recalls her mother's warning on her wedding day not to become "loud," a caution that equates femininity with passivity and submission (00:06:32). Aynur's emphatically defiant rejection of these norms, punctuated by her final, unambiguous claim to agency ("Ich entscheide für mich"), marks the culmination of her arc, elevating self-determination as both a radical act and a personal ethic. Yet the tragedy of this assertion lies in the inevitability of the murder that succeeds it, as it is precisely this declaration of autonomy that will seal the protagonist's fate. In this way, Aynur's assertion of self-determination, particularly with regard to her sexuality, emerges not only as empowering but also as fatal—an act which, under the family's rigidly patriarchal honour code, becomes her ultimate undoing.

That it is Aynur's assertion of sexual agency that ultimately seals her fate is underscored by the film immediately cutting to the sixth and final purported motive for an honour killing, presented both visually via title card and audibly through the voiceover: "Nummer sechs: Die Frau unterhält eine außereheliche oder von den Eltern nicht geduldete Beziehung. Dabei kann allein der Verdacht ausreichen" (01:16:23-01:16:31). This rationale corresponds to what the authors of the BKA-commissioned study categorize as the victim being perceived by the perpetrator to be in an "illegitimate" relationship; accounting for 80% of all crimes classified as "honour killings," as mentioned earlier, the dominance of this pattern reinforces the function of the honour code as a system for policing women's sexuality (ibid. 120-21, 168). The addition of the second clause in the film emphasizes the complete erasure of the female perspective under such a code: a woman's intentions, choices, or lived reality are rendered irrelevant, as the mere

suspicion of transgression is sufficient grounds for her elimination. By placing this "reason" directly between Aynur's impassioned declaration of self-determination and Nuri's request that she walk him to the bus station—the very location where the audience knows the murder will soon occur—the film draws a direct causal link between female sexual autonomy and lethal retribution, underscoring the danger inherent in women asserting bodily autonomy within a patriarchal framework that denies them agency and sanctions even suspected deviations with violence.

After Aynur agrees to walk her youngest brother to the bus, the camera cuts to a close-up of her stovetop, where she puts out the cigarette she was smoking and then picks up a cup of coffee and her cigarette pack (see fig. 59) (01:16:48-01:16:50). The focus on this simple gesture is loaded with symbolic resonance: on one level, it suggests that Aynur believed she would return shortly, underscoring the normalcy and vulnerability of her final moments. On another, the mug itself carries historical weight: it is a replica of the exact model that the real Hatun Sürücü was holding at the time of her murder, fragments of which were later recovered at the crime scene—a detail the filmmakers meticulously sourced and included to anchor the film in lived reality (DVD bonus discussion). This quiet gesture is mirrored moments later by another intimate shot: as Aynur and Nuri exit the apartment, the camera lingers on the key hook by the door, capturing only a blurred sliver of their bodies (01:16:56–01:17:03). Heightened by the silence that dominates the apartment sequence, these seemingly minor details imbue the scene with haunting significance, grounding what would become Aynur's final moments in the quiet, ordinary acts she did not know would be her last.



Fig. 53. Aynur puts out a cigarette and picks up her coffee mug before walking Nuri to the bus station (01:16:48).

The pervasive silence that marks Aynur's final moments in her apartment continues into the scene of her and Nuri walking to the bus station, shaping the atmosphere of the walk. Tracking shots follow the siblings as they move side by side in near-total quiet, broken only by the low hum of passing traffic, heightening the sense of foreboding (01:17:04–01:17:24). All the while, Nuri's gaze remains fixed downward, his expression solemn and unreadable, while Aynur's posture is relaxed, her arms swinging loosely, and her gaze shifting casually between her brother and the street ahead. The contrast between their body language intensifies the emotional tension: she remains unaware of the gravity of the moment, while he is singularly focused on his purpose. As they approach the station, Nuri slows down, letting Aynur walk a few steps ahead. He then draws a gun from his pocket, cocks it, and raises it toward her without a

word as the voiceover breaks the silence: “Der Ablauf ist streng geregelt: Der Erlöser der Familie muss ihrer Schande ins Gesicht sehen, bevor man ihr eine Frage stellt, seit tausend Jahren die gleiche” (01:17:28-01:17:36). Mythologizing the act as ritualized, the line is accompanied by a medium full shot that frames the siblings together, positioned on opposite ends of the frame, looking one another directly in the eye (see fig. 60).



Fig. 54. Nuri aims a gun at Aynur a few steps from the bus station (01:17:34).

The shot’s composition is simple yet powerful: Aynur’s posture is relaxed, holding her mug in one hand, the pack of cigarettes visible in her back pocket—ordinary details that betray her obliviousness to the imminent danger. Nuri, by contrast, stands rigid, arm fully extended, gun pointed at his sister’s head. The ambient lighting casts both in a subdued glow, outlining their silhouettes while also exposing more of their setting: a bus station at night, with the earlier

glimpses of passing cars reminding the viewer that this act unfolds in a public space, in full sight of others. This quiet acknowledgment amplifies both the brazen character of the murder and the degree to which "honour" operates not just within the private sphere of the family but before society, as a performance directed toward the community. The ritualized logic of violence invoked by the voiceover thus finds its visual counterpart in this haunting frame, where the ultimate exercise of patriarchal control is unabashedly enacted in plain sight.

The question the voiceover foreshadows is delivered moments later, as Nuri, gun still levelled at his sister's head, asks in an emotionless tone: "Bereust du deine Sünden?" (01:17:37). While the line is taken directly from the real-life brother's account of the events of the murder, there is no reference in either the journalistic documentation or the BKA-commissioned study to this question being part of a codified ritual—let alone one repeated for a thousand years, as the voiceover claims. As with the earlier invocation of "old rules" that prescribe the youngest son as the designated killer, this narrative addition appears to be a deliberate stylistic choice by the filmmakers to imbue the murder with a sense of ritualistic gravity and cultural continuity. Yet this dramatization comes at a cost: by framing the act as part of an ancient, almost mystical tradition, the film risks elevating the killing to the level of a sacred rite, a practice opaque to outsiders and preserved by a group governed by values fundamentally incompatible with those of mainstream German society. In doing so, the filmmakers ultimately reinforce the very notion of "parallel societies" they elsewhere claim to challenge, upholding the dichotomy between "German" and "Other" by invoking the image of a closed community operating under shadow systems of justice and morality (Garcia; *Nur eine Frau Presseheft* 13; Schwickert).

After Nuri poses the question, the voiceover continues to guide the viewer through the act of murder, its characteristically clinical tone sharply juxtaposed with the brutality of the moment.

As the voiceover coldly states that “der Erlöser [löscht] das Gesicht der Schande aus,” a medium close-up of Aynur captures her final moments onscreen: she looks at her brother in stunned terror, unable to fully register the betrayal unfolding before her (01:17:39). This image is immediately followed by a cut to Nuri in a medium close-up, his face hardened with resolve as he pulls the trigger. Notably, this depiction diverges from the real-life account offered by the youngest brother, who claimed that his sister pleaded for her life in her final seconds (Deiß and Goll 12). By omitting this plea, the film silences Aynur at the very end, presenting her instead as a figure frozen in disbelief—a young woman whose final expression is one of fear rather than resistance or appeal. A subsequent cut to black, held for four seconds, marks a stark visual rupture that underscores the abrupt and violent extinguishing of her life. During this blackout, the voiceover delivers a final blow, stating that Aynur’s family has won back their “honour” in this moment (01:17:43-01:17:51). The line leaves no doubt as to how the act is to be understood: not as a moment of individual rage, but as the culmination of a communal logic and a symbolic restoration of patriarchal honour. After Nuri fires two more shots at his sister, a cut transitions to a wide, blurred shot of him fleeing the scene, followed by a downward tilt revealing Aynur’s feet, now lifeless on the pavement; the shakiness of the handheld camera and surrounding silence heighten the emotional impact, rendering this final moment quietly devastating (01:17:50–01:18:02).

What follows is a montage of stylized stills that recreate details from crime scene photographs, focusing on Aynur’s now-lifeless body under a white sheet (01:18:03–01:18:14). Close-ups of the cigarette still between her fingers, her apartment keys on the ground, and the shattered mug beside her poignantly recall earlier shots that had emphasized the ordinary nature of Aynur’s final acts, underscoring her humanity. This fictional recreation is immediately

anchored in documentary reality through the inclusion of real video footage from the crime scene, with Hatun Sürücü's corpse, similarly covered by a white sheet, captured in a wide shot from across the street—footage already seen in the film's opening sequence, thereby completing a structural and emotional circle (00:01:30–00:01:34; 01:18:15–01:18:20). The inclusion of this material reinforces the film's connection to lived violence, making the sight of the lifeless body all the more harrowing now that the viewer has come to know the woman behind it. As this image appears, the voiceover calmly states: "Das bin ich. 23 Tage später hätte ich meine theoretische Prüfung bestanden. Aber das ist egal. Can ist nicht egal" (01:18:18-01:18:27). This brief monologue serves multiple functions: it reasserts Aynur's self-identification, gestures toward the life she was about to step into just weeks away from passing her certification exam and relocating to a new city, and foregrounds the magnitude of the loss, not just for her but for her five-year-old son. The affective weight of this statement is intensified through camera movement: in two successive shots, the camera slowly zooms in on Sürücü's corpse, once from the distant street view and once from a closer vantage point, until the sheet-covered body fills the screen (see fig. 61). The culmination of these shots brings the viewer suffocatingly close with Sürücü's lifeless body, while details such as the shoes still on her feet, the broken mug, and specks of blood on the sheet ground the scene in tragic realism. Aside from a photograph in the film's final seconds, this will be the final time Aynur is shown in the film, both as a fictionalized figure and as the real woman behind it. That her story ends in this way, as a silenced, violated body, gives the final image devastating weight, becoming a chilling memorial to how female identity is erased when it defies socially sanctioned roles. At the same time, the stark visual of her dead body can also be read as a reclamation, a refusal to let the brutality of her death be

sanitized or ignored; by making her body hyper-visible, the film memorializes its subject by insisting that viewers confront the reality of her murder.



Fig. 55. A zoomed-in view of Hatun Sürücü's corpse under a white sheet at the crime scene (01:18:26).

Following the murder, the film's final ten minutes function as a kind of epilogue, guiding the viewer through the aftermath of Aynur's death, key developments from the trial, and the long-term fates of both her son and the Sürücü family. These developments are conveyed through a combination of live-action scenes, stylized stills, and archival footage; throughout, the voiceover remains as a narrative anchor, going beyond recounting events to actively interpreting them, with Aynur continuing to assert agency and narrative authority even beyond death. This is especially evident in the voiceover's critique of surviving family members, most notably Shirin,

whom she derisively nicknames “die Schlange” for acting as a co-plaintiff in Aynur’s name to funnel information to her brothers’ defense lawyers (01:26:49). The tone of this naming suggests betrayal and duplicity, casting Shirin as complicit in both Aynur’s murder and its subsequent legal obfuscation. Even more significantly, the voiceover voices full support for Evin’s testimony, who maintained that the murder was not the act of a lone perpetrator but the result of a premeditated family conspiracy, directly implicating Tarik for supplying the gun and Sinan for keeping watch—claims Evin argues were based on Nuri’s own confession to her (01:19:02). This framing elevates Evin from key witness to the film’s moral compass in the legal proceedings, with her version of events—based on the testimony of Melek A., her real-life counterpart—accepted as the film’s narrative truth. By aligning the film’s account with Melek A.’s testimony and reinforcing it through the voice of the protagonist herself, the film lends the testimony additional moral and emotional weight, casting it as not only legally plausible but as Aynur’s own truth in a final act of solidarity and narrative vindication.

Importantly, this act of truth-telling is not framed as the result of legal pressure alone, but as the outcome of maternal support and female solidarity—themes that form a central pillar of the film’s epilogue. After initially providing a false alibi for Nuri under pressure from him and Tarik, it is only through her mother Dilber’s unwavering support that Evin is finally able to reclaim her voice. When Dilber learns of her daughter’s interrogation, her sudden appearance at the police station marks a decisive turning point: entering the room without hesitation, she embraces Evin, who collapses in her mother’s arms (01:23:50-01:23:58). After Dilber reassures her that she will stand with her no matter what, the two share another prolonged embrace, with the image of Dilber’s arms wrapped tightly around her daughter evoking a powerful expression of maternal protection (01:24:49–01:24:56). Moments later, as mother and daughter exit the

police station, Evin removes her headscarf and undercap in swift motions, an act accompanied by the voiceover's comment that she "[kann] sich nicht mehr erklären, wie alles so weit kommen konnte" (01:25:21-01:25:26). Along with this assertion, the timing of the act—immediately following her confession and her mother's emotional support—once again code unveiling as a moment of personal liberation. Within the symbolic economy of the film, this scene solidifies the veil's framing not as a complex religious or cultural garment but as a visual shorthand for patriarchal oppression, which must be shed in order to reclaim one's truth and agency.

This symbolic framing continues into the courtroom scenes, where Evin, now unveiled and with her hair worn loose, testifies before the judges and the Sürücü family, who attempt to intimidate and discredit her. As the voiceover outlines the trial's outcome, particular emphasis is placed on the role of key witnesses such as Evin in preventing the Sürücü family from gaining custody of Can, a petition they had actively pursued. Accompanying this narration is a slow-motion sequence showing the witnesses seated on the stand, each breaking the fourth wall by looking directly into the camera in a symbolic act of bearing witness. Notably, every witness shown—Evin, Dilber, Beck, and Senna—is female, and all appear without head coverings (01:28:37-01:29:09). This detail gains further symbolic resonance in the following shot, which shows the Sürücü women—Deniya, Shirin, Sema, and Lorin—sitting side by side in court, all veiled and bearing solemn expressions (01:29:10-01:29:22). The contrast is striking and deliberate: the unveiled women, framed as truth-tellers and protectors of justice, are set in opposition to the veiled female relatives, who are cast as passive participants or willing enforcers of the family's patriarchal code. The film thus reaffirms its broader symbolic logic, aligning unveiled women with emancipation and moral legitimacy, while continuing to code veiled women as embodiments of gendered constraint.

One final, devastating shot succeeds the juxtaposition of the key female characters in court, serving as a farewell to Aynur's son. Drawn from real archival footage also used in the film's opening, the shot captures a makeshift memorial assembled at Hatun Sürücü's murder site, with people gathered around to pay their respects (01:29:23). As the camera slowly zooms in on a black-and-white photograph of Sürücü holding her young son, the voiceover delivers its final line: "Mein letzter Gedanke bist du. Can, mein Sohn. Ich liebe dich" (01:29:29–01:29:36). Spoken in a gentle, affectionate tone, the delivery of this declaration sharply contrasts with the otherwise detached voiceover that has guided the viewer through the film. Simple and emotionally disarming, Aynur's final words are paired with a freeze frame of the zoomed-in image of mother and child, which fills the screen and holds for six seconds before cutting to black (see fig. 62) (01:29:33–01:29:39). Once again bringing the viewer face to face with the real-life Hatun Sürücü, this moment forces a confrontation not only with the violence of her death but with the enduring emotional toll it leaves behind. In giving Aynur the final word, the film affirms her voice, love, and humanity, culminating in a gesture of maternal care that transcends death. This final expression of love completes Aynur's transformation from silenced victim to agent of her own legacy, closing the film with an affirmation of enduring relational ties in the face of irrevocable loss.



Fig. 56. A close-up of a black-and white photograph of Hatun Sürücü holding her son (01:29:34).

5.6 “Es geht um die Selbstbestimmung”

As a cinematic retelling of Hatun Sürücü’s life and death, *Nur eine Frau* positions itself not only as an intervention into the public memory of the Sürücü case, but as a contribution to broader representational discourses surrounding Turkish Muslim femininities in contemporary Germany. At its centre is Aynur, the fictionalized version of Sürücü, who claims narrative ownership through a posthumous, self-aware voiceover. More than recounting events, the voiceover actively interprets them, positioning Aynur as both subject and storyteller, and granting her narrative authority over her life and legacy. From the outset, this act of self-narration is framed as the film’s central project and its only possible form of restitution: the audience is directly addressed and told that their act of listening is the one redeeming aspect of Aynur’s fate. This imbues the film with a sense of representational justice, further strengthened

by its anchoring in archival material and formal grounding in aesthetics associated with the documentary and true-crime genre. At the same time, the film's visual and narrative framing of the murder as a family-orchestrated act, sanctioned by religious doctrine, positions the film as a corrective to the legal record, thereby aligning its account with the dominant public interpretation of the case—even as it simplifies the cultural and factual complexities of the case.

While this privileging of narrative clarity over interpretive nuance can be attributed to the film's broader pedagogical aim as an educational tool intended for a young German audience, this representational stance significantly shapes *Nur eine Frau*'s approach to gender, religion, and tradition. While both the voiceover and filmmakers express a desire to distinguish between religion and tradition in tracing the forces that led to Aynur's death, the film ultimately constructs a direct causal link between the youngest brother's religious radicalization and Aynur's murder by foregrounding misinterpreted religious duty as the ideological justification for patriarchal violence (DVD bonus interview Hormann; Garcia). On one level, this underscores the difficulty of disentangling intersecting discourses of faith, culture, and gendered violence; on another, it places *Nur eine Frau* in line with representational conventions found in earlier German films about "honour killings," such as Feo Aladağ's *Die Fremde* and Su Turhan's *Ayla* (2009). As Lauren Selfe observes, both films attribute misogyny in Turkish Muslim contexts to a generalized conception of Islamic patriarchy—a logic echoed in *Nur eine Frau*, most notably in Tarik's instructions to Nuri, where religious observance is explicitly tied to the control and distrust of women (220). The film's invocation of honour further reinforces this conflation: though explicitly framed as cultural tradition, the logic of honour-based violence is ultimately coded as religious obligation through the ideological conditioning of the mosque sermons. In this

way, *Nur eine Frau* extends dominant cinematic narratives that essentialize violence against Muslim women as a defining feature of their religious environment (Selfe 207).

Crucially, the inevitability of Aynur's death is established as a structuring device from the outset. Her murder is not only a given but framed as the inescapable endpoint of a trajectory shaped by unyielding patriarchal forces. The film codes scenes involving her brothers with escalating menace, portraying the systems that oppress her, from familial control to religious authority, as immovable and impervious to intervention. As a result, Aynur's hard-won steps toward emancipation—her physical separation from the family, economic independence, and plans to relocate—are stripped of narrative suspense or potential resolution, granting the viewer no space to hope for her escape. This fatalism casts her pursuit of autonomy as ultimately futile: no matter how resilient she is or how robust the support she receives—represented here by a positively framed German welfare system—it is all rendered insufficient against the crushing force of honour-based violence. This aligns *Nur eine Frau* further with *Die Fremde* and *Ayla* in its portrayal of Turkish Muslim communities as governed by a homogenous set of patriarchal codes, reinforcing a representational framework in which violence against women is both endemic and inevitable (Gramling 34; Selfe 212).

This essentializing framework must also be situated within the film's creation context. Unlike previous engagements with Sürücüs' story, such as *Die Fremde*, Hormann's film emerged in the aftermath of the 2015 "migration crisis" and the subsequent New Year's Eve attacks in Cologne, which, as discussed in chapter one, revived long-standing Orientalist tropes of hypersexualized, violent Muslim masculinities by casting Muslim men as inherently violent and oppressive. *Nur eine Frau* reproduces this logic by narratively and visually coding male family members through authority, control, and aggression, while foregrounding the hypocrisy of

the Islamic migrant male: pious and insistent on female modesty, yet themselves perpetrators of verbal, physical, and even sexual abuse. By contrast, Aladağ's film grants the male relatives a degree of psychological depth, highlighting the ambivalence and fragility that underpins violent enforcement of patriarchal codes—which leads the perpetrators to appear as victims themselves, as critics note—while avoiding framing religion as a motive for the killing (Böcking 214; Buß). This divergence illustrates the impact of the Cologne attacks on German discourse of Muslim masculinities, strengthening the case for reading of *Nur eine Frau* in light of its historical context: despite addressing the same subject less than a decade after Aladağ, Hormann's film is shaped by, and contributes to, a discursive environment that constructs Muslim men as uniformly violent and oppressive, and essentializes such violence as an inherent expression of male Islamic identity.

The film reinforces its construction of Muslim men as inherently violent by positioning Muslim women exclusively as their victims, thereby establishing a rigid gendered binary. Female characters are consistently portrayed as bound by expectations of modesty, obedience, and submission, which they themselves internalize and reproduce across generations. These expectations are repeatedly communicated to the viewer, most explicitly through the headscarf's function as a visual shorthand for female subjugation, which symbolically assimilates all veiled women into the trope of the "oppressed Muslim woman" discussed in chapter one (Ferree 168; Scharff, *Repudiating Feminism* 59–66; Selfe 17-18, 24). The headscarf's symbolic weight is further underscored by the film's emphasis on its removal: Aynur's unveiling, later mirrored by Evin, as well as her entry into paid labour and a romantic relationship, are all cast as milestones of liberation. These actions correspond to what dominant discourse imagines as markers of emancipated Western living, reflecting a framework in which Muslim women's liberation is

often measured by the extent to which they reject practices coded as Islamic and adopt those associated with Western modernity (Selfe 22–23). This framing is most evident in the film's stylization of the unveiling scene, whose visual and sonic language link Aynur's rejection of the veil with a version of freedom and modernity imagined through her implied participation in club culture.

If Aynur's unveiling repositions her from the trope of the "oppressed Muslim woman" to that of the "emancipated Western woman," her perceived sexual autonomy becomes the clearest marker of this shift. As Beverly Weber observes, public discourse on the Sürücü case frequently frames Hatun Sürücü's visibility in public space through her status as a German—a notion reinforced by the subtitle of Deiß and Goll's account, *Ein deutsches Schicksal* (*Violence and Gender* 66). This Germanness, Weber argues, is constructed not through Sürücü's formal German citizenship but through the visibility of her body in modern clothing, which codes her as sexually available and exposes her to the German gaze; Sürücü is thus seen as "'becoming' German through her sexual availability" (ibid.). This logic is directly echoed in the film, where Aynur's brothers liken her to a "German" and a "whore" for appearing unveiled. Strikingly, both the patriarchal family framework and dominant German narratives conflate German womanhood with sexual autonomy, positioning it as either aspirational or condemnable. Sexual autonomy thus emerges as the film's central transgression and the point at which patriarchal control is most fiercely reasserted, strengthening the empirical observation that "honour killings" are ultimately about the control of female sexuality (Oberwittler and Kasselt 121).

While Aynur's perceived sexual autonomy is what ultimately seals her fate, the film frames it as part of her broader pursuit of self-determination—a notion repeatedly emphasized both within the narrative and by the filmmakers themselves. When asked about the film's

intended target audience in the film's premiere, director Sherry Hormann insisted that the topic concerns everyone because "[es] geht um die Selbstbestimmung" (Nurtsch). Elsewhere, she describes her motivation for telling Sürücü's story as stemming from a desire to foreground "das Selbstbestimmungsrecht dieser jungen Frau" (Schwickert). This sentiment is echoed by producer Sandra Maischberger, who characterizes Hatun Sürücü's struggle as one "gegen männliche Dominanz und für Selbstbestimmung" (Nurtsch). In this rhetoric, self-determination is elevated to the film's moral and thematic core, framed as a direct challenge to the patriarchal authority exercised not only by Aynur's male relatives but also internalized and upheld by the women in her family. Although the term "feminism" is never explicitly used, the film positions itself as a feminist intervention by consistently coding Aynur's emancipation as a resistance to gendered constraints. Through her actions—from leaving her abusive marriage to unveiling, working, and pursuing a romantic relationship—she claims autonomy in defiance of a system that demands her submission. Her posthumous voiceover reinforces this defiance, framing her choices as deliberate assertions of subjectivity against a patriarchal order that systematically denies it. Hormann's repeated descriptions of Aynur as "eine Jeanne d'Arc der Berliner Hinterhöfe" further cements this heroic framing, casting her as a martyr of gendered resistance within an urban, immigrant context—a framing made especially visible in in Aynur's near-hagiographic portrayal during the birthday park scene (see fig. 58; Köhler; Krämer).

At the same time, the film's implicit feminist positioning—and that of its filmmakers—is complicated by a reliance on an individualist framework that echoes contemporary feminist discourse as discussed in chapters one and two. As observed in the introduction to the present chapter, Hormann has defended her authority to tell Sürücü's story by insisting that "es geht um 'ne Frau," invoking gender as a unifying and authorizing framework (DVD bonus interview).

Yet this claim to cross-cultural solidarity grounded in a shared female experience ultimately remains underdeveloped within the film itself: despite gesturing toward the broader sociocultural conditions that enabled Aynur's murder, exemplified primarily through the mosque scenes, the narrative remains narrowly focused on the Sürücü family, framing the violence as the product of individual actors. This individualized lens risks obscuring the systemic dimensions of patriarchal violence in favour of a more digestible narrative of familial dysfunction—a critique also articulated by *Die Tageszeitung*'s Volkan Ağar, who notes that "[das] Systematische kommt nicht in den Blick" in *Nur eine Frau* (Ağar). Hormann herself has affirmed this approach as a narrative strategy in an interview with *Die Zeit,* arguing "[uns] geht es darum, eine konkrete Familie zu zeigen" instead of presenting an overarching narrative about Islam or Turkish-German communities (Schwickert). While this strategy reflects a conscious effort by the filmmakers to prevent the film's appropriation by far-right discourse, it nonetheless weakens the film's representational claims (ibid; *Nur eine Frau Presseheft* 16). By foregrounding a singular, familial story over a structural critique, *Nur eine Frau* ultimately undermines the potential for a universal or intersectional feminist message, reducing the promise of cross-cultural solidarity to an individualized narrative of resistance and violence.

This individualizing tendency, which undercuts a feminist positioning that might otherwise emphasize the systemic nature of the constraints placed on women, is mirrored in Hormann's own ambivalent stance toward feminism and gendered authorship. While she has not publicly identified (or disidentified) as a feminist, her reflections on gender and authorship reveal both an awareness of the structural obstacles women face in the film industry and a simultaneous reluctance to claim a shared female representational politics. In a 2013 retrospective on female graduates of the HFF München, Hormann acknowledges the additional pressures women face

around homemaking and child-rearing and concedes the existence of both a male and female gaze yet simultaneously expresses a desire for an "individual gaze," untethered to gender (Kaiser et al. 99-101). She echoed this perspective in a 2016 interview explaining her decision to leave the gender parity initiative Pro Quote Film, citing a lack of belief in quotas and describing herself as "kein Klub-Typ," a phrasing that recalls the reluctance to identify with feminism for fear of being labeled or pigeonholed (Kruse). These positionings suggest a politics of authorship that privileges individual creative identity over collective gendered identification—a stance that also informs *Nur eine Frau*, whose emphasis on personal autonomy, rather than structural critique, aligns with this preference for individual over systemic framing.

Ultimately, *Nur eine Frau* offers a powerful yet ambivalent portrait of Hatun Sürücü—one that frames her life and death through the lens of self-determination while simultaneously reinforcing the inevitability of her fate. The film positions Aynur as a symbol of feminist resistance: resilient, autonomous, and self-aware. Yet in emphasizing her individual agency and personal strength, the film narrows the focus away from a critique of the systemic forces that constrain and ultimately destroy her. This tension is reflected both in the film's narrative structure, which renders Aynur's murder predetermined from the outset, and in its paratextual framing, where the rhetoric of female empowerment is undercut by an individualized view of emancipation and violence. Rather than foregrounding collective struggle or structural critique, *Nur eine Frau* isolates its protagonist as a singular case, heroic but exceptional—a woman whose story gestures toward broader patterns but stops short of challenging them directly. In this way, the film affirms Hatun Sürücü's legacy as one of courage and defiance, yet ultimately reinforces the notion that she was, in the end, "nur eine Frau."

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to examine how contemporary German films authored by women respond to and participate in broader gender discourse and developments in women's cinematic representation, with a particular focus on questions of authorship, feminism, and agency. A close reading of formal and narrative strategies in three selected films—Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann,* Annika Pinske's *Alle reden übers Wetter*, and Sherry Hormann's *Nur eine Frau*—revealed the diverse ways in which women filmmakers construct their protagonists and negotiate gendered subjectivities. Each film approaches the representation of womanhood with distinctive emphases, ranging from *Toni Erdmann*'s exploration of women in corporate culture, to *Alle reden übers Wetter*'s negotiation of regional and generational identity, and finally to *Nur eine Frau*'s dramatization of migration, religion, and gendered violence. Together, these analyses highlight both the heterogeneity and the thematic convergence of women's filmmaking in contemporary Germany, demonstrating that while individual films respond to different socio-cultural contexts, they collectively articulate nuanced engagements with gendered identity and feminist politics. By synthesizing these findings with insights from the broader discursive and cinematic landscapes examined in chapters one and two, this dissertation illuminates the contours of women's authorship in German cinema and the kinds of female images constructed in these films, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of women's representation in contemporary German cinema.

While the three films selected for this project situate their protagonists in markedly different contexts and confront them with diverse challenges, several commonalities emerge which both affirm and challenge dominant representations of women in German cinema. To begin with, all three protagonists are slim, heterosexual women in their twenties and thirties—

albeit distributed within this age bracket, with Aynur in *Nur eine Frau* in her late teens and early twenties, and Clara in *Alle reden übers Wetter* in her late thirties. This situates them within the demographic norm of female characters on German screens, aligning them with the "sichtbar, aber nicht vielfältig" descriptor that points to women's visibility yet simultaneous lack of diversity in German cinema (Prommer et al. 25). While Aynur's Kurdish Muslim background complicates this pattern, her narrative trajectory assimilates her into the trope of the "emancipated Western woman," most strikingly conveyed through her unveiling. Along with her family's subsequent perception of her as "German"—echoing the real Hatun Sürücü's positioning in public discourse, as observed in chapter five—this symbolic assimilation ultimately minimizes her cultural and religious distinctiveness and further aligns her with the homogeneity of the average German cinematic woman.

Despite aligning demographically with the typical female figures prevalent in German cinema, the analysis has shown that the protagonists in the selected films are constructed with a striking degree of complexity, emerging as multidimensional figures who undergo significant development across their respective narratives, thereby supporting the finding that films authored by women tend to feature more complex female characters than those authored by men (Prommer et al. 26). All three protagonists in the films analyzed are portrayed in multiple meaningful contexts—work, family, relationships, and friendships—where they negotiate their often conflicting roles as daughters, friends, professionals, and mothers. Importantly, each film devotes sustained attention to the protagonist's friendships with other women: Ines is frequently shown socializing with Steph and Tatjana, Clara maintains a close friendship with her advisor Margot, and Aynur's bond with Senna provides emotional support throughout her emancipation and beyond. While these relationships differ in dynamics and emotional intensity, they offer the

protagonists spaces of recognition and shared experience: Steph and Tatjana mirror Ines' own expat status among Bucharest's business elite, Margot empathizes with Clara's navigation of academia as a woman, and Senna shares Aynur's struggles for independence as a fellow Turkish single mother. Accordingly, these friendships function as vehicles for mutual understanding and solidarity, offering each protagonist crucial sites of identification and affirmation within otherwise isolating circumstances.

In constructing their protagonists as complex figures, all three films foreground the tensions generated by women navigating intersecting and often conflicting contexts. This complexity is underscored through the protagonist's simultaneous embodiment of strength and vulnerability, which the films make visible through formal and narrative strategies, ranging from take duration and frame composition to voiceover narration. While each film emphasizes the forms of gendered submission expected of its protagonist—Ines to her male colleagues and superiors, Clara to patronizing men both in Berlin's academic circles and in the rural East, and Aynur to patriarchal family codes—the women resist being defined through submission. Instead, the films consistently highlight their protagonists' independence, conviction and resilience—qualities which are typically reserved for male figures, as observed in chapter two, and which for these heroines manifest in moments of heightened expressivity and emotion. All three women are shown giving voice to anger and frustration, thereby subverting the dominant representational norm of the good-natured, emotionally accommodating cinematic woman: Ines belts her way through a song in a defiant confrontation with her father; Clara lashes out at her mother for disregarding corporal punishment; and Aynur curses her brother for restricting her independence. In doing so, these women reject expectations of silence and compliance, embodying instead

alternative models of loud, expressive womanhood that testify to their inner tensions and multidimensionality.

The most radical departure from dominant models of cinematic womanhood emerges in the character of Ines in *Toni Erdmann*, whose portrayal builds on discursive constructions of "career women" and women managers. Ines is depicted as dominant and ruthless—traits typically ascribed to male characters on screen—and is consistently attributed with a position of masculinity, which she herself tirelessly performs as a strategy for belonging and advancement. Other characters, almost exclusively male, reinforce this positioning by referring to her in animalistic or combative terms, mirroring discursive constructions of women managers discussed in chapter one. While this aspect of Ines' characterization has been widely noted in scholarship on the film, its significance for the present study lies in the contrast it poses with the other two protagonists analyzed, as Ines is the only one of the three who is not a mother. Both Clara and Aynur embody maternal roles, not only in relation to their children but also in their care for friends and family: Clara, for instance, by bringing her drunk advisor home and returning her phone, and Aynur by consistently expressing care and affection toward her partner and family members. In contrast, Ines is portrayed as relentlessly hard and uncaring—with only the final scene gesturing toward a softening of her demeanour —and even chastized by her contractor and by her father for failing to display care and empathy toward others. A similar reproach is leveled at another childless character in the films: Margot, Clara's advisor in *Alle reden übers Wetter*, who is accused by former student Hanna of being too harsh. In both cases, the humanity of these hard, uncompromising women is questioned or undermined: Winfried asks Ines whether she is "eigentlich ein Mensch," while Hanna labels Margot a "böser Mensch." Laying bare the persistence of essentialist assumptions that equate femininity with empathy and

caregiving, these moments reaffirm the projection of a supposedly "innate" maternal nature onto women in the German cultural imaginary, as observed in chapter one, by exposing that women who neither mother nor perform maternal behaviour are readily cast as deficient and even inhumane.

The representation of motherhood in the films analyzed offers powerful alternatives to the normative maternal model dominating German perceptions of motherhood, which, as discussed in chapter one, is centred on the nuclear family and the idealization of the biological mother as the primary caregiver. Both Aynur and Clara are mothers in fragmented family contexts: Aynur's son is born of an abusive marriage that she leaves in order to to protect herself and the child, whom she subsequently raises on her own, while Clara's teenage daughter lives primarily with her father and his new family, with Clara only seeing her occasionally. Clara's arrangement in particular subverts conventional ideas of motherhood that emphasize constant physical and emotional proximity, instead redefining maternal practice through negotiation and complexity. In doing so, the film extends the lines of inquiry present in debates on motherhood, as explored in chapter one, by presenting a model that challenges the assumption of motherhood as the culmination of womanhood without resorting to idealization or pathologization. Crucially, both Clara's and Aynur's deviations from normative maternal roles are motivated by their children's well-being: Aynur protects Can from her abusive husband and later her family, and Clara refuses to uproot Emma from her home and social environment. These portrayals thus present alternative maternal arrangements rooted in deep love and care, while simultaneously affirming the possibility of women's fulfillment beyond motherhood, thereby rejecting the notion that maternal devotion should be the defining role or ultimate expression of womanhood.

Extending the lines of inquiry pursued in the films of West and East German women filmmakers of the past, all three films analyzed in this study position their protagonists in moments of crisis produced by the need to negotiate between distinct and often incompatible contexts while simultaneously confronting gender-based discrimination: Ines is caught between a male-dominated, performance-driven corporate environment and a father who insists on disrupting its façade; Clara struggles to balance her quest for belonging both in Berlin's patronizing academic circles and in her East German hometown with its regressive social codes; and Aynur seeks to reconcile her desire for independence with the patriarchal norms imposed by her family. Together, these narratives attest to the complexities of women's lives in contemporary Germany, foregrounding how female subjectivity is shaped through constant negotiation across competing social, familial, and professional spheres. Importantly, the films also register intersectional dynamics: class emerges distinctly in *Alle reden übers Wetter*—where Clara is othered both in Berlin's academic circles for her East German working-class background and in the East for her *Bildungsaufstieg*—and more implicitly in *Toni Erdmann*, where the devaluation of local labour in the name of modernization reflects the disregard of a globally mobile business elite for whom workers are merely numbers. Race and religion are central in *Nur eine Frau*, where Aynur's Kurdish Muslim identity shapes both her marginalization and the terms (and ultimate cost) of her emancipation. By attending to these overlapping axes of power, the films collectively highlight the multiple and intersecting forces structuring women's lives, testifying to women's film authorship as attuned to the complexity and diversity of female experience.

Not only do all three protagonists in the films under consideration here experience gender-based discrimination, but, crucially, the films foreground gender as the very condition that shapes their marginalization: Ines' gender is consistently framed as a liability in the

corporate world of business consulting, Clara must endure sexist jokes and essentialist gender assumptions in her hometown while confronting male-favouring hierarchies in Berlin's academia, and Aynur explicitly attributes her fate to being "just a woman." By exposing the gendered demands that permeate women's personal and professional lives, the films articulate a structural critique of gendered power relations that resonates both with the sensibilities expressed in the films of West and East German women directors—through their explorations of class, motherhood, sexual violence, and workplace discrimination—and with contemporary German gender discourse, as seen in debates around quotas and the ubiquity of sexism in everyday life. Importantly, the two films whose plots unfold in the post-#aufschrei discursive climate (*Toni Erdmann* and *Alle reden übers Wetter*) depict sexist discrimination not as exceptional or isolated but as a pervasive reality embedded across social contexts. This echoes the observation by Laura Himmelreich (the journalist whose 2013 accusation of sexual harassment against Rainer Brüderle triggered the #aufschrei campaign) cited in chapter one that, whereas pre-#aufschrei debates focused on whether sexism existed in Germany at all, post-#aufschrei discourse revolves around the extent of its ubiquity ("Viele Männer"). At the same time, the influence of the 2015 "migration crisis" and the subsequent New Year's Eve attacks in Cologne is evident in *Nur eine Frau*, whose depiction of Turkish Muslim masculinities frames men as uniformly violent and oppressive, essentializing acts of violence as inherent expressions of Islamic male identity. Collectively, these dynamics demonstrate the influence of public discourse on cinematic representation, highlighting the importance of situating films within their broader socio-political contexts to illuminate the ways in which cinema participates in and negotiates shifting representational frameworks.

Beyond confronting their protagonists with direct forms of gender-based discrimination, the films encode their gender critique through distinct formal and narrative strategies. Ade and Pinske ground their critique in realist aesthetics, Ade through extended takes that allow tensions to unfold temporally, and Pinske through wide compositions that situate her protagonist in relation to her environment, with both techniques exposing inner conflict without explicit verbalization. By contrast, Hormann's highly stylized film adopts a more didactic mode, addressing the audience through voiceover narration and directly confronting them with the structures of gendered oppression central to its narrative. Yet even in *Nur eine Frau*, the most extreme moments of gendered violence are rendered with stark realism: both Aynur's sexual assault and her eventual murder are captured in natural light and diegetic sound, stripped of stylization as a way of exposing their brutality. The decision to adopt realism in these pivotal scenes aligns Hormann's film with Ade's and Pinske's work, suggesting that realism emerges as a primary mode of rendering gendered violence visible and affectively immediate. These strategies highlight how women filmmakers mobilize different cinematic languages to interrogate the gendered conditions shaping women's lives, strengthening the case for examining women's films in relation to one another across aesthetic boundaries by revealing how diverse formal strategies can nonetheless converge in a critique of gender inequality.

One particularly revealing way in which the films articulate their gender critique is through the introduction of a secondary female figure who functions as a cautionary example of the dangers of succumbing to gendered demands. Largely peripheral to the narrative, this figure operates as a counterpoint to the protagonist, her behaviour implicitly or explicitly coded as negative or misguided: in *Toni Erdmann*, Henneberg's wife Natalja is portrayed as a "trophy wife" whose identity is reduced to consumerism; in *Alle reden übers Wetter*, Sandra embodies

the "eternal assistant," signaling the long-term costs of resigning oneself to institutional marginalization; and in *Nur eine Frau*, Nuri's girlfriend Evin momentarily personifies the kind of subjugation to patriarchal authority that Aynur vehemently resists throughout the film. The recurrence of this character type across the three films demonstrates that women's cinema not only constructs complex female protagonists but also delineates the consequences of conforming to prescriptive gender roles. Perhaps best described as the "cautionary mirror," this recurring archetype serves a crucial narrative and ideological function, providing a foil against which the protagonist's struggles and agency are sharpened while simultaneously illustrating the persistence of gendered scripts curtailing women's autonomy.

Against the pervasiveness of gendered power hierarchies that systematically marginalize their protagonists, the films' central intervention is their insistence on the protagonist's pursuit of self-determination. Self-determination emerges as the unifying project across the films: although the protagonists hail from different socio-political contexts and face distinct challenges, each is marked by an effort to assert agency and autonomy against the gendered scripts that seek to constrain them. Whether implicitly or explicitly, self-determination is consistently framed as the guiding principle of the protagonists' lives, enacted in relation to the particular contexts in which they move. Ines embodies a complex struggle to assert autonomy within a corporate world that demands conformity and performance; Clara mirrors her advisor's call to live "selbstbestimmt," navigating Berlin's patronizing academic circles and the regressive social codes of her East German hometown; and Aynur emphatically rejects the strict familial codes governing her body and future, instead carving out her own path. Read together, the films frame self-determination as a principle that extends across the spheres of work (*Toni Erdmann*), academia and small-town belonging (*Alle reden übers Wetter*), and family and migration (*Nur eine Frau*). If the

"cautionary mirror" figures embody the dangers of submitting to gendered demands, then the women at the centre of these narratives embody the "self-determined protagonist"—a woman who resists external definition and prescriptive roles, instead enacting a mode of living and acting on her own terms.

This mode of self-determination resonates with the genealogy of German women's cinema identified in the Berlinale's 2019 Retrospektive series discussed in chapter two, which presented almost fifty films by women directors between 1968 and 1999, and was aptly titled *Selbstbestimmt: Perspektiven von Filmemacherinnen*. The companion volume to the series defines "Selbstbestimmung" as follows:

> Der Begriff Selbstbestimmung, das Leitmotiv dieser Untersuchung, steht zweifellos im Gegensatz zu dem der Fremdbestimmung. Damit hat man allerdings zunächst den ersten Teil des Wortes eingekreist. Der zweite Teil, 'Bestimmung,' ist weniger klar verortbar, er kann für Entscheidungs- oder Handlungsmacht stehen. Selbstbestimmung kann etwas sein, worüber man bereits verfügt oder das man verteidigen will, es kann aber auch etwas sein, was man sich erwerben, kämpfen muss. Letzteres ist ein Prozess, der häufig auch als 'Selbstermächtigung' bezeichnet wird. Das Wort 'Selbstbestimmung' sagt nicht aus, ob man sie für sich allein innerhalb bzw. für eine Gruppe gewinnen will. Die hier besprochenen Filme gehen allen Wegen nach, die der Begriff impliziert, manchmal auch mehreren gleichzeitig. (Dietze, "Sich ein eigenes Bild machen" 19)

This definition highlights both the breadth and the ambivalence of *Selbstbestimmung*, oscillating between acquisition and struggle, possession and defense. The films analyzed in this dissertation exemplify this spectrum. In *Toni Erdmann*, Ines' *Selbstbestimmung* is largely articulated as defense—most strikingly in her refusal to be penetrated during a sexual encounter and thereby

lose her "bite," a metaphor for her agency. In *Alle reden übers Wetter*, Clara's attempt to chart a "selbstbestimmt" path in male-dominated academia, mirroring that of her advisor and mentor figure, is portrayed as a continuous negotiation, underscoring the difficulties of self-definition within structures that remain both patriarchal and classed, her East German working-class background further complicating this pursuit. In *Nur eine Frau*, self-determination takes its most radical form, as Aynur must fight for every dimension of autonomy against the oppressive codes of her family and community. Together, these films illuminate how contemporary German women directors mobilize cinema to render visible the struggles for women's personal, professional, and sexual self-determination against structural forces of marginalization.

Despite situating women's struggles within broader structural axes of gendered marginalization and inequality, the films analyzed here largely refrain from framing *Selbstbestimmung* as a collective project, as articulated both in the definition above and in West German feminist filmmaking, whose encounter with feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s produced collective expressions of gendered critique. By contrast, the contemporary films discussed in this study concentrate predominantly on individual trajectories of self-determination. Only in *Alle reden übers Wetter* does a collective perspective surface, embodied in the figure of Margot, whose mentorship gestures toward a broader feminist critique of institutional structures. In *Toni Erdmann* and *Nur eine Frau*, however, the narratives return to individual cases and individualized solutions: while each film speaks to wider milieus, their protagonists' struggles are framed as personal rather than collective, a tendency particularly pronounced in *Nur eine Frau*, where Aynur's story is ultimately rendered as an isolated case, deflecting attention from the systemic forces that constrain and destroy her. This emphasis on the individual over the collective resonates with the broader individualist orientation that permeates

much of contemporary feminist discourse in Germany, as outlined in chapter one, where feminism is frequently reframed in terms of personal empowerment and self-realization rather than collective struggle.

In laying bare the forces that constrain female agency—albeit limiting their engagement to individualized trajectories rather than collective ones—these films do not frame self-determination in teleological terms, as a project with a fixed or discernible endpoint, but rather as an ongoing process. This is most evident in the open endings of *Toni Erdmann* and *Alle reden übers Wetter*, which prolong a moment of transformation without resolving it, suggesting that, while the protagonists have been altered by their experiences, their pursuit of a self-determined path remains ongoing. *Nur eine Frau* similarly resists finality, as the narrative does not end with Aynur's murder but with the voices of the women in her life testifying on her behalf and insisting that her son not be returned to her family; in this way, the film conveys that, even though Aynur's own pursuit of self-determination was violently curtailed, its impact reverberates beyond her life. Self-determination, then, is not presented in these films as the telos of female emancipation—an aim that, as Erica Carter observes, the Retrospektive curators attribute to the films presented in the Berlinale series—but rather as a continuous process, conditioned by shifting constellations of gendered power and marginalization (Carter 33-34).

Importantly, self-determination is expressed in the selected films as the assertion of agency in the face of gendered constraints; as such, the pursuit of self-determination takes the form of feminist resistance. Despite explicitly disavowing feminism, Ines in *Toni Erdmann* gradually resists the male and corporate gazes that seek to delimit her, culminating in a radical act of feminist empowerment that challenges the oppressive standards imposed on women's bodies. For Clara in *Alle reden übers Wetter,* feminist resistance manifests in quiet but persistent

refusal to conform to gendered expectations—whether by modeling an alternative arrangement of motherhood or by explicitly countering the regressive gender presumptions that dominate her East German hometown. Finally, *Nur eine Frau* expressly positions Aynur as a symbol of feminist resistance by coding her emancipation as a resistance to gendered constraints rooted in patriarchal authority. Together, these films reflect what Muriel Cormican identifies as a "feminist consciousness" in the oeuvre of directors such as Maren Ade, whose work "disrupts normativity and reclaims representability for certain women who do not fit neatly into comforting interpretations of a contemporary world in which everything will work out all right" (Cormican, "Willful Women" 122). Extending this observation to the works of Annika Pinske and Sherry Hormann studied here, the mode of feminist resistance foregrounded in these films points to the centrality of exposing and challenging gendered power hierarchies for contemporary German women directors, who collectively articulate a shared "feminist consciousness" through protagonists who resist containment and assert agency by insisting on living *selbstbestimmt*. These readings thus affirm current scholarship identifying an emerging feminist film practice among women filmmakers in Germany, as identified in chapter two, while also extending this insight by foregrounding self-determination as a unifying project and a connective lens through which feminist interventions become visible in women's films.

The pursuit of self-determination by the protagonists in these films extends into questions of authorship, offering a productive framework for analyzing how contemporary women directors articulate feminist politics through their work. The present analysis has taken into account the filmmakers' own positioning with regard to gender and feminism, particularly as expressed in connection to their respective films, as a way of contextualizing the films' engagement with gender and of tracing continuities with public discourse and broader

developments in women's cinematic representation. While only one of the three directors has explicitly identified as a feminist—Annika Pinske, who, as the youngest of the three, may be less burdened by the polarized debates surrounding figures such as Alice Schwarzer in German feminist activism, as discussed in chapter one—the other two express feminist sensibilities in interviews and emphasize self-determination as central to their protagonists. In characterizing her *Toni Erdmann* protagonist, Maren Ade describes Ines as a "free and self-determining" woman rather than a "suppressed" one—a binary that risks simplifying women's subjectivity into categories of victimhood or autonomy but nonetheless elevates self-determination as the defining measure of female agency (Ratner 48). Similarly, Sherry Hormann frames Hatun Sürücü's story as rooted in her "Selbstbestimmungsrecht" (Schwickert), insisting that the story concerns everyone because "es geht um die Selbstbestimmung" (Nurtsch). Along with Pinske's explicit nod to carving out a "selbstbestimmt" path in *Alle reden übers Wetter*, self-determination functions here as the articulation of a feminist politics, even when the label "feminist" is resisted. The films by these filmmakers can thus be read as feminist interventions, expanding what Gabriele Dietze identified in the *Selbstbestimmt* Retrospektive companion volume as "das Projekt 'Selbstbestimmung'" advanced by German women directors across three decades, now rearticulated in the cinematic landscape of the twenty-first century (Dietze, "Sich ein eigenes Bild machen" 18).

Given what chapter two identified as a male-dominated film industry marked by pervasive gender bias that systematically disadvantages women across all stages of production and distribution, it is crucial to recognize that the kind of complex engagement with gender politics evident in the films analyzed here is only possible through women's sustained access to the means of production. Significantly, all three films examined in this study were produced in

women-led contexts: *Toni Erdmann* was primarily produced by Ade's own Komplizen Film, which she co-founded in 1999 with Janine Jackowski; *Alle reden übers Wetter* was co-produced by Pinske's company, pennybooth production, together with the DFFB and New Matter Films, another women-owned company; and *Nur eine Frau* was produced by journalist Sandra Maischberger through her production company, Vincent Productions, in collaboration with regional German broadcasters. The predominance of women-owned and women-led production companies across these films exemplifies the broader interventions across gendered lines mapped in chapter two, from production collectives and mentoring initiatives to advocacy for women's representation in the film industry. These structures provide the material conditions for a plurality of women's film authorship which, as this dissertation has shown, expresses itself in diverse aesthetic and political registers. In this sense, *Selbstbestimmung* extends beyond the protagonists and into authorship itself, as women filmmakers claim agency not only in the stories they tell but in the structures that make their filmmaking possible.

While the interventions mapped out here attest to women staking their claim in the German film industry by coming together across gendered lines to expand women's authorship and to create works reflecting the diverse experiences of women and the forces shaping their lives, institutional support remains equally crucial for sustaining and broadening these initiatives. Just as a high degree of institutional support amplified advocacy by the Verband der Filmarbeiterinnen (VdF) in the 1970s and 1980s—by opening up funding sources specifically for women's films and films on women's issues, as well as production and distribution schemes that ensured their visibility—so too would a stronger funding landscape provide a vital platform for contemporary women filmmakers. Despite disappointing political developments at the federal level, such as the removal of the diversity clause in the 2024 revision of the Film Funding Act

presented in chapter two, recent regional measures indicate a growing commitment to institutional support for women's cinema. Based on the Austrian model introduced in 2017, the FilmFernsehFonds Bayern (FFF Bayern) launched the Gender Incentive in 2023, a funding instrument awarding €30,000 to projects in which women, non-binary, or gender-nonconforming individuals occupy at least two of the three positions of producer, writer, or director. The first of its kind in Germany, FFF Bayern's Gender Incentive has already seen forty projects qualify, with two having received the complete funding package as of September 2025 (Steinbauer). The inaugural recipient, Mia Maariel Meyer's *22 Bahnen* (2025)—based on Caroline Wahl's bestselling 2023 debut novel of the same name—was released in September 2025 and hailed as the "calling card" for the new funding instrument, with all three key creative roles occupied by women (ibid.). Its planned sequel, *Windstärke 17*, has likewise qualified, benefitting from funding that supports development from the earliest script stage. These developments attest to the growing recognition of the need for institutional support as a precondition for diversity in cultural production. Read in conjunction with the women-led interventions discussed in chapter two, they underscore how material support enables women filmmakers to work *selbstbestimmt*, and how even limited but sustained institutional initiatives can foster an expanding representational landscape in German cinema.

This extension of opportunities to include non-binary and gender-nonconforming filmmakers, as exemplified by FFF Bayern's Gender Incentive, also points to the limitations of the present study, which has focused on women's filmmaking and gender representation in binary terms. Future research on gender in German cinema would profit from exploring intersections between women's cinema and queer cinema, as illustrated by Henrika Kull's *Glück* (2021), which portrays the relationship between two Berlin sex workers, or Leonie

Krippendorff's *Kokon* (2020), a lesbian coming-of-age narrative awarded the Iris Prize for Best Feature. Another fruitful direction lies in the intersection of women's cinema with migration cinema, represented by Milena Aboyan's *Elaha* (2023), which follows a young Kurdish-German woman navigating the pressures of hymen reconstruction surgery ahead of an arranged marriage, or Sarah Blaßkiewitz's *Ivie wie Ivie* (2021), which explores the bond between two Afro-German half-sisters. Mother-daughter relationships likewise emerge as a significant thematic strand, visible not only in *Alle reden übers Wetter* but also in fellow DFFB graduate Tanja Egen's debut *Geranien* (2023), where, similar to Pinske's film, a young woman's return to her rural hometown provokes intergenerational conflict. Beyond these smaller-budget, festival-oriented films, more commercially-oriented productions also warrant attention for the ways they bring diverse female characters to mainstream audiences. Karoline Herfurth's ensemble films *Wunderschön* (2022) and *Wunderschöner* (2025) trace the intersecting lives of women of different ages negotiating gendered expectations, while Nicolette Krebitz's *A E I O U – Das schnelle Alphabet der Liebe* (2022), produced by Maren Ade's Komplizen Film, tells the story of a sixty-year-old former actress's relationship with a younger man. The oeuvres of individual directors also provide rich material for sustained study: filmmakers such as Tatjana Turanskyj and Julia von Heinz, both vocal advocates for diversity in German cinema, have crafted works attuned to the gendered experience by centring multidimensional female protagonists. Another example is Maria Schrader, who followed up her widely discussed *Ich bin dein Mensch* (2021)—a science-fiction romance about a researcher living with a humanoid robot—with *She Said* (2022), dramatizing the investigative journalism that exposed Harvey Weinstein's history of sexual abuse (Riedel). Taken together, these films and filmmakers demonstrate the thematic breadth and reach of contemporary German women's cinema, as well as its intersections with queer, migrant, and

mainstream filmmaking. Notably, some of these works explicitly invoke *Selbstbestimmung* as a guiding principle for their protagonists: Nina in *Geranien* is described as living a "selbstbestimmtes Leben" ("Geranien") while Elaha in *Elaha* is framed as negotiating her own "sexuelle Selbstbestimmung" ("Elaha"). These references strengthen the case for closer attention to both explicit and implicit invocations of self-determination in contemporary German women's cinema, extending the analytical framework of this dissertation into future research.

Another avenue for future research lies in situating the films and discursive trends analyzed here within the framework of a transnational women's cinema, considering women-directed films both in their specific national and cultural contexts and in comparative perspectives to identify shared articulations of feminist politics and approaches to gendered subjectivity. Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light* (2024), the first Indian film to win the Grand Prix at Cannes, exemplifies such work with its bold engagement with marital abandonment and premarital sexuality. Similarly, Mati Diop's *Atlantique* (2019), a formally hybrid film addressing gender, class, and oppression, marked a milestone as Diop became the first Black woman director in competition at Cannes. Extending beyond film, parallels could also be drawn with theatre: recent debates in the German theatre scene engage with the continued underrepresentation of women in key creative positions such as directing, even as advocacy initiatives—most prominently Pro Quote Bühne, which calls for a minimum 50% quota for women and LGBTQIA+ individuals in theatre roles—have mobilized critiques of exclusion ("Frauen im Theater"). Collectively, these examples underscore the value of examining women's cinema not in isolation but in dialogue with transnational feminist practices across media, highlighting both convergences and differences in how gendered subjectivities and struggles for self-determination are represented.

Contemporary German women's films are marked by a sustained engagement with gendered struggle and a persistent foregrounding of self-determination in constructing their protagonists. These figures implicitly and explicitly acknowledge the structural forces that place them at a disadvantage, aligning themselves with contemporary gender discourse and feminist thought—even when disavowing the feminist label—and seeking, through quiet yet deliberate acts of resistance, to assert agency within personal and professional contexts that systematically marginalize them. These works participate in a genealogy of German women's cinema that resonates with previous East and West German women's filmmaking by constructing complex female figures despite operating within a male-dominated industry marked by pervasive gender bias that disadvantages women across all stages of production and distribution. Yet against this backdrop, women filmmakers are actively staking their claim to the German film industry through collaborative networks, women-led production infrastructures, mentoring initiatives, and advocacy groups. Most importantly, they are asserting their vision through their films themselves, which articulate a shared feminist consciousness and foreground women's efforts to live *selbstbestimmt*.

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