MURDEROUS MOTHERS:
FEMINIST VIOLENCE IN GERMAN LITERATURE AND FILM (1970-2000)

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ABSTRACT

Claire E. Scott:
Murderous Mothers: Feminist Violence in German Literature and Film (1970-2000)
(Under the direction of Kata Gellen)

This dissertation analyzes literary and filmic representations of violent mothers from late 20th-century Germany. It employs feminist theories of language and theories of the voice and the body in film to enhance close readings of texts in which female protagonists defy gendered expectations by perpetrating acts of aggression. Through an interplay between thematic violence and the transgression of aesthetic conventions, these works generate an imaginary of feminist violence that advances feminist politics. Highlighting this dynamic reveals female bodies and voices as important sites for working through both past and contemporary violence in the German context. In addition, this work has broader theoretical significance as an intermediary between feminist theories of language and materialist feminist theories. Instead of strategies for emancipation, these texts generate female subjectivities that are engaged, not in assertions of individuality, but in collective and collaborative storytelling practices.

The first chapter considers Dea Loher’s Manhattan Medea (1999) and Christa Wolf’s Medea. Stimmen (1996). Both of these texts use the story of Medea to come to terms with a historical context in which the voices of outsiders are excluded. To counteract repetitive mythmaking, these texts push the formal boundaries of genre, advocating for heterogeneous storytelling in which more than one voice is expressed.
The second chapter analyzes Elfriede Jelinek’s *Lust* (1989) in terms of pornographic and melodramatic tropes. By contrasting pornography (with its emphasis on fulfilled desire) and melodrama (with its emphasis on thwarted desire), Jelinek confronts the inescapable violence in even the most intimate human relationships.

The third chapter discusses Margarethe von Trotta’s film about the militant violence of the Red Army Faction, *Die bleierne Zeit* (1981). By highlighting this film’s engagement with the mythological story of Antigone, this chapter demonstrates how the sisters in the film engage in collaborative mothering and memory work.

The final chapter brings together R.W. Fassbinder’s *Martha* (1974) and Helma Sanders-Brahms’s *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* (1980). The protagonists of both films are drawn into cycles of domestic violence that leave them paralyzed and prone to acts of self harm, thereby alerting viewers to the ways in which they have uncritically accepted narratives about gender, history, and marriage.
To all of the women I have known who are not afraid to be angry.
To all of the women who practice “Elegant Violence.”
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION

Violence .................................................................................................................................................. 1
Late 20th Century Germany: Violence and Division ............................................................................... 7
Early Postwar Feminist Literature ........................................................................................................ 13
Feminist Theory: Language and Materialism .......................................................................................... 17
Female Bodies in Postwar German Film .................................................................................................. 25
Mythology and Melodrama .................................................................................................................... 27
Literature and Film ................................................................................................................................ 32
Chapter Descriptions .............................................................................................................................. 34

### CHAPTER 1: DE-MYTHOLOGIZING MEDEA

Power, Gender, and Storytelling in Christa Wolf and Dea Loher ......................................................... 40

Medea Stimmen ...................................................................................................................................... 45
Maternal Inheritance .............................................................................................................................. 51
Paternal Inheritance .............................................................................................................................. 55
Total Victimhood and Authorial Agency ................................................................................................. 60
Manhattan Medea ................................................................................................................................... 70
Medea and Velazquez ............................................................................................................................. 77
Medea and Jason .................................................................................................................................... 83
Medea and Deaf Daisy ............................................................................................................................. 89
INTRODUCTION

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In this passage from the fragmented novel *wir sind lockvögel baby!* (1970),¹ the Austrian feminist author Elfriede Jelinek describes violence as cyclical and repetitive. Violence is a loop from which one cannot escape, even though the punctuation and the intensity of the experience of violence may fluctuate. Particularly taken out of context, as it is here, this passage confounds any effort by the reader to make sense of it beyond the numbing effect of its repetitions. Not only that, but the act of reading it becomes more of a visual experience than a literary one as the reader’s eye skims over the text instead of focusing on the meaning of the words themselves. The passage experiments with a number of punctuations, each with a slightly different effect, from the shouting frustration of all capital letters to an odd one-item list led with a colon. Violence (or power, since Gewalt in German implies both) is difficult to pin down in language because it is always moving, spiraling out of our grasp. In addition to invoking the cyclical nature of violence, Jelinek also genders her description through the choice of the verb “zeugen” (to sire, to father, to testify to) rather than the feminine “gebären” (to give birth to) or the mechanized “erzeugen” (to produce, to procreate). Violence is figured as a process of masculine birthing, a male reproduction that generates new versions of itself over and over again.

¹The passage appears on page 204 of the 6th edition of the text.
In my dissertation I aim to unpack the cyclical nature of violence that Jelinek so diligently draws our attention to in this passage. However, I will do so while also asking what it would mean to gender violence differently than Jelinek does here. What happens when violence is co-opted and usurped by the feminine? What does it mean when women commit gruesome acts of violence on the page, stage, or screen? In what follows, I will look at late 20th century German-language representations of violent mothers who commit acts of aggression, often against their own children. Taking seriously the association that Jelinek builds between cycles of violence and cycles of reproduction, I turn to murderous mothers to consider what it means for women to violently confront oppressive discourses and their own reproductive bodies. In a theoretical, literary, and filmic landscape that offers women little possibility to overcome the roles they have been assigned, how are they able to resist in language or with their bodies?

I begin by looking at adaptations of the mythological story of Medea written by Christa Wolf, Dea Loher, and Elfriede Jelinek. In these literary texts, one play and two novels, I examine three very different explanations for child-murder in order to consider the meaning (or meaninglessness) of this act of vengeance. From there I move on to an examination of films concerned with political and domestic violence directed by Margarethe von Trotta, R.W. Fassbinder, and Helma Sanders-Brahms. By concentrating on the portrayal of violent mothers, I demonstrate how New German Cinema engages with the interplay between physical and psychological acts of violence through a focus on the inherent division between sound and image in film. Overall, examining these works together generates an imaginary of feminist violence, aggression that seeks to advance feminist political aims, including gender equity and reproductive freedom.
This new understanding of feminist violence functions on the level of character as well as the level of aesthetic form. Just like the repetition in the above passage from Jelinek, feminist violence provides no opportunities for emancipation or liberation. Instead of a discourse about freeing oneself from oppression, these texts imagine a feminist politics that is not about a (masculine) process of breaking free as an individual subject, but a (feminine) process of collaborative pulling in and absorption. Rather than offering an escape from the discourses and bodies that entrap it, the model for female subjectivity as generated by feminist violence is one that draws others into itself to create collaborative and multi-faceted identities. The goal of this aggressive behavior is not to allow the woman to speak as one, but to live as many. Feminist violence necessitates a unity not only between individual and other, but also between language and body. By engaging with tensions between female bodies and female voices, these works provide us with new ways for thinking about the relationship between aesthetic and real-world violence in German culture. By critiquing tropes of mythology and melodrama these texts demonstrate how female bodies and voices have been co-opted by oppressive masculine discourses in literature and film. The female body (and voice) becomes the grounds on which, even feminist, wars are fought. In a postwar period in which both past and present violence was a major concern, these filmic and literary works turn to the aggressive subversion of genre conventions as a means for channeling political frustrations into aesthetic ones, thereby turning art into counter-violence.

**Violence**

As the above passage from Jelinek reminds us, violence is difficult to define because of the many different levels on which it operates. Due to the frequent use of the term, it is easy to delude ourselves that we know what violence means, even if that meaning is not very precise.
Hannah Arendt tries to give us some precision by defining violence in relationship to the related terms of power, strength, force, and authority. Her primary argument is that violence is distinguished from power by its use of instruments. Contrasting, power refers to the ability of a group to act together. In other words, violence involves the use of particular tools of domination and destruction, often in an effort to maintain the power of a group. Based on this definition, “the extreme form of power is All against One, [while] the extreme form of violence is One Against All” (Arendt 141). In the texts that I read in this dissertation, the instruments of violence are the media of literature and film, including language, narration, sounds, and images. The violence that these texts enact and represent seeks to transform the “one against all” logic of violence into the “all against one” construction of power. By forcibly creating links to others or by refusing to let go of bonds with their children, the protagonists in these texts try desperately to establish themselves as whole in both mind and body. They seek to turn the tables on systems of oppression by using the tools of violence to generate collective forces of power.

This task is difficult and not without its setbacks in large part because of the multifaceted nature of violence itself. In addition to defining violence in relationship to other related concepts, there are numerous scholarly efforts to divide violence up into different categories, based on how it is employed and who wields it. For example, social scientists working on domestic violence including Sarah Wendt and Lana Zannettino often describe the relationship between physical violence and psychological violence. Even though marks on the body are visibly different from marks on the mind, the implication is that these two forms of violence have similar effects in that they both destroy their victim’s sense of self. Both forms of violence are represented in the literary and filmic works under discussion here, which also leads us to

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2Importantly, as I have already mentioned, the German term Gewalt encompasses the ideas of both power and violence, thereby making Arendt’s distinction difficult to linguistically apply to the German context.
consider the distinction between artistic representations of violence and acts of violence that exist in the real world. The violence represented in these works of art can only ever be fictional, but these texts also depict oppressive conditions that exist in the real world and that have life and death consequences for the people involved. Whether representing a woman who endures abuse at the hands of her husband or a left-wing militant who endures inhumane conditions in prison, these artistic works draw attention to the ways in which physical and psychological violence are inherently linked.

In addition to having stakes in questions about identity formation and the role of fictional representation, in order for violence to become feminist it also needs to have a specific political agenda. To make the argument that the literary and filmic works I examine are doing political work, I have to consider how violence relates to politics. The most useful line of thinking in this arena is William Pawlett’s distinction between systemic violence, counter-violence, and intra-genic violence. Systemic violence is the “violence of modernity or modern life in the broadest sense,” encompassing everything from capitalism to patriarchy (Pawlett 2). It is excessive in that it “may exceed the limits of what was previously considered possible, desirable, manageable, or ‘human’” (Pawlett 4). In addition to forming the foundation of genres such as mythology and melodrama, this kind of excessive, large-scale violence is the enemy of progressive political movements, including feminism. Counter-violence, on the other hand, while still violence (and therefore not reducible to justice), “generally requires and pre-supposes limits – either those set by the systems it opposes or limits of its own fashioning” (Pawlett 5). It is violence that seeks to push back against systemic violence. Intra-genic violence is violence from within the system, generated between people who are supposedly “on the same side.” It develops as counter-violence becomes incorporated into and co-opted by systemic violence “not simply reflecting or
typifying it, yet complicit with and internal to it” (Pawlett 92). Intra-genic violence is the seemingly inexplicable violence that takes place when counter-violence stops working. The vast majority of the violence that I speak about in my dissertation, both aesthetic and thematic, can be classified as counter-violence. These authors and characters seek to attack the conditions of systemic violence, revealing its operations in their society and their language. However, the specific act of child-murder, referenced primarily in the first two chapters of my dissertation, also takes on some of the features of intra-genic violence in that by killing their children these mothers also end up killing a part of themselves. Because of the ways in which it mimics masculine violence, their violence becomes ineffective as counter-violence and serves to reinforce the structural violence that oppresses them, rather than breaking it down. The difficulty confronted by these characters (and the authors and filmmakers who create them) is the act of turning intra-genic violence into counter-violence again. They struggle to turn aggression without limit or proper object back into aggression that works productively against the forces of systemic violence, insofar as that is ever possible. Although this fight is difficult, I argue that when they succeed the discourses that isolate female bodies from female voices are also challenged.

In dealing with the distinction between the voice and the body it is also important to articulate a general understanding of the interrelation between the subject and the object. Drawing on the work of film scholar Vivian Sobchack, an understanding of subjectivity and objectivity as always already interrelated is important to my project. Sobchack writes that, “The mutual origin of aesthetic sensibility and ethical responsibility lies in the subjective realization of our own objectivity, in the passion of our own material” (310). The concept of violence brings the physical and the mental into relation with one another. Violence is often a physical response
that is drawn out of us by our feelings and emotions. This cooperative agency between two seeming opposites is also reflected in terms of the subject’s potential relationship to the object. Sobchack explicates this when she defines interobjectivity as “not an object for me as a subject for itself, but the object as always already a subject” (312-313). Cooperative or collaborative identity categories and formations are critical features of the texts that I examine in this dissertation and one of the primary ways that feminist authors and directors seek to push back against oppressive discourses. Unfortunately though, these webs of connected relations do not prove to be enough to fully extricate characters from the oppressive social and narratological conditions in which they find themselves, thereby leading to frustrated and aggressive behavior.

**Late 20th Century Germany: Violence and Division**

The historical period in which these texts were written contains more than its fair share of frustration that becomes violent and divisive. The history of postwar Germany is, in many ways, all about coming to terms with violence. Particularly in the late 20th century with the rise of the student movement and the German New Left in West Germany, confronting Germany’s fascist past was seen as an essential goal in politics as well as art. When articulating a political position in postwar Germany the aim was usually to define one’s own position in relationship to fascism.\(^3\) The process of denazification opened up the door for the articulation of a myriad of political positions, as long as they did not conflict with the policies of the occupying forces and one could point to some aspect of Nazi policy or culture that one wanted to upend or reverse. In addition to its role as part of the broader context of second-wave feminism, the New Women’s Movement

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\(^3\)See for instance Dagmar Herzog’s book *Sex After Fascism* (2005) in which she describes how everyone from commune members to religious, anti-sex dogmaticians defined their beliefs about sex as anti-Nazi. “Free love” or sexual modesty could both be justified based on different understandings of the relative openness or repression of sexuality in the Nazi period.
(Neue Frauenbewegung) in West Germany was no exception to this rule, characterizing itself as an effort to take the fascism out of the relations between the genders.

The general consensus is that the New Women’s Movement in West Germany began with the founding of the Action Council for Women’s Liberation (Aktionsrat für die Befreiung der Frauen) in 1968. This faction broke away from the group of Socialist German Students (Sozialisticher Deutscher Studentenbund, SDS), when it became clear that women’s concerns were not taken seriously by the male-dominated student organization. Famously, after the feminist filmmaker Helke Sander gave a speech about gender equality at the September 1968 conference of the SDS, the male leadership refused to discuss her arguments at the meeting. In response women threw tomatoes at the men on stage, an image that marks the beginning of a separate feminist movement in West Germany. The early efforts of the movement involved converting abandoned storefronts into childcare centers (Kinderläden) and opening health care centers and bookstores for women. One of the issues most central to the movement was reproductive rights and efforts to repeal §218, the law prohibiting abortion in West Germany. In June 1971 the magazine Stern ran the infamous cover story “Wir haben abgetrieben!” in which over 300 women, including prominent figures such as the actress Romy Schneider, attested to their experiences with abortion. The format of the article was adopted from a similar story in the French magazine Le Nouvel Observateur and proves the debt that West German feminism owed to the example of feminist movements in other countries. The New Women’s Movement in West Germany looked not only to France, but also to Great Britain, the United States, and even their East German neighbors for ideas and inspiration. The action in Stern is also significant because of Alice Schwarzer’s involvement in publishing the piece. Schwarzer would become (and in many ways remains) one of the leaders of German feminism. In 1975 the publication of
Schwarzer’s book on gender difference, *Der kleine Unterschied und seine großen Folgen*, marked the beginning of a wave of feminist activism in West Germany that would last (more or less) until Reunification (Ferree 74-75). With the founding of Schwarzer’s feminist magazine *Emma* in 1977, the New Women’s Movement solidified itself as a force in West German media and politics that could not be ignored.

The year 1977 is also significant as a peak of left-wing militant violence in West Germany. As the German New Left developed, it became increasingly obvious that removing the fascist violence of the state was a difficult process that might require the use of violence itself. Particularly in the 1970s, leftist activists in West Germany increasingly turned to counter-violence as a political strategy.\(^4\) The most notable of these organizations was the Red Army Faction (Rote Armee Fraktion, RAF), a group of left-wing militants led by the radical activist Andreas Baader (1943-1977) and the feminist journalist Ulrike Meinhof (1934-1976). Responsible for numerous bombings and robberies targeting the enemies of the New Left (the conservative media conglomerate Axel Springer SE, symbols of capitalism including department stores, banks etc.), the activities of the group reached a peak in 1977. The original leaders of the RAF including Baader and Meinhof had been arrested in 1972 and were now residing in Stammheim prison while they were being tried for their crimes. In an effort to get the prisoners released, members of an RAF cell kidnapped Hanns-Martin Schleyer, a former member of the SS who was now the President of the Federation of German Industries (Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie). Shortly after the kidnapping, a commando of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) took possession of a Lufthansa plane and also demanded the

\(^4\)The term counter-violence in the German context (*Gegengewalt*) was most prominently discussed by Walter Benjamin in his 1921 essay “Zur Kritik der Gewalt.” Benjamin was certainly sympathetic to antiliberal uses of force during the Weimar period and his essay was later used by many leftist militant organizations to justify their actions. In his essay, Benjamin makes a distinction between violence that is “rechtsetzender” and violence that is “rechtserhaltender” (Benjamin 63). This distinction between violence used to create new rights and violence used to preserve existing rights is complicated by this new landscape of political violence in the late 1970s.
release of the RAF members imprisoned at Stammheim. The combination of these two events led to international media coverage of left-wing militancy in West Germany and captured the imagination and fear of the German public. On October 17th a West German counterterrorism unit breached the plane, which was parked at the Mogadishu Airport in Somalia. The raid ended the standoff and left three of the four hijackers dead. After hearing about the raid, three of the remaining Stammheim prisoners, Baader, Gudrun Ensslin (1940-1977), and Jan-Carl Raspe (1944-1977) committed suicide.\(^5\) The next day, Schleyer’s body was found along the German-French border, with the RAF claiming responsibility for his murder.\(^6\) (Scribner 30-32) With acts of militant counter-violence like these occupying the public’s attention in the present, not to mention the specter of the past violence of the Nazi era, it is not surprising that coping with and understanding violence became an important task taken up by numerous writers, filmmakers and other artists during this period. For example, the events outlined above became the subject of films on all levels of the artistic spectrum from avant-garde films such as the collaborative project of the New German Cinema Deutschland im Herbst (Germany in Autumn, 1978) to documentary films including Heinrich Breloer’s docu-drama Todesspiel (Death Game, 1997).

In recent years, new scholarship on the violence of the so-called “Red Decade” of 1967-1977 by scholars such as Charity Scribner, Patricia Melzer, and Katharina Karcher has revealed a connection between left-wing militancy and the New Women’s Movement in West Germany.

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\(^5\) There was public debate for many years about whether or not the Stammheim prisoners actually did commit suicide. Many on the left believed that they had been murdered by the state because, while there is evidence of a suicide pact, the deaths were staged to look like potential murders. This rumor has since taken on a life of its own and has been repeated in many artistic representations of the RAF, including Die bleierne Zeit, a film that I will examine closely in the third chapter of this dissertation.

\(^6\) For more information about the history and activities of the RAF, particularly the involvement of women in the movement, see: Charity Scribner, After the Red Army Faction (2015) and Patricia Melzer, Death in the Shape of a Young Girl (2015).
This link is most directly established by examining the explicitly feminist militant organization, Rote Zora.\(^7\) Organized in large part as a response to a federal court’s walking back of the 1974 decriminalization of abortion, the group’s first major action was to plant a bomb at the headquarters of the German Medical Association (Karcher 61). In subsequent years the group claimed responsibility for numerous bombings of institutions deemed oppressive to women, including everything from department stores to sex shops. The participation of women in militant groups including the RAF and Rote Zora was met with disbelief and trepidation, even by many of their fellow feminists.

In addition, the involvement of women in militant activity was sensationalized by the West German media, generating a strong sense of the importance of gender in relationship to these actions. In her thorough analysis of the media’s coverage of violent women during this period, Clare Bielby argues that the media’s fascination with violent women went so far as to eliminate the distinction between criminal violence and politically-motivated counter-violence when it came to female perpetrators. She writes that, “as far as the majority of newspapers and magazines are concerned, there is no such thing as a politically violent woman; regardless of why she may think she is being violent, it is actually all about her body, her sexuality, her oedipal history, and her uncontrollable emotions” (Bielby 1). This sensationalism and refusal to see women as political agents was certainly true in terms of the coverage of the women of the RAF. Although it is never clear that such a weapon was ever actually used, photos of so-called “Baby-Bombe” devices, in which a bomb was disguised to look like a pregnant woman’s stomach, circulated in Der Spiegel and other notable publications (Bielby 26). During the Schleyer kidnapping, a photograph of a stroller that was used by the kidnappers to carry weapons

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\(^7\)The militant group takes its name from the 1941 children’s book Rote Zora und ihre Bände by Kurt Held. In the story, a red-headed Croatian girl leads her friends on crusades against injustice that reflect the communist politics of the author.
was named the “Bild der Woche” by the Axel Springer owned newspaper *Welt am Sonntag* (Bielby 27). The circulation of such images clearly indicates concerns about a perversion of femininity that was supposedly happening through the involvement of women in counter-violence movements. Not only that, but it frames the female body and femininity as dangerous and as a means of concealing violent intentions. In addition to this symbolic interest in the connection between terrorist bodies and female bodies, the individual women who joined these militant organizations were scrutinized and critiqued in terms of their roles as mothers and wives. For example, Ulrike Meinhof’s suicide was frequently described as if she killed herself because of her failures as a mother; she hanged herself on Mother’s Day, supposedly after failing to receive a visit from her daughters (Bielby 34). The refusal of the media to examine these women for their political and criminal actions alone, as was almost exclusively the case for men, indicates a particular gendering of this militant activity in the media. Even though the fight to overcome the fascist past is typically framed as a conflict between progressive young men and their fascist fathers, it is clear that women played an important role in counter-violence movements that was not ignored, and in fact even exploited, by the press at the time.

It is also relevant to note that these events occurred and influenced politics primarily in West Germany. In the period covered by my dissertation (1970-2000) three different German nations come into play: West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany, BRD/FRG), East Germany (German Democratic Republic, DDR/GDR) and the current Federal Republic of Germany founded after German Reunification in 1990. Since the New Women’s Movement and these militant counter-violence movements are largely a part of West German cultural history, that nation is the primary location for my project. That being said, East Germany and the fall of the DDR play an important role in the first chapter of this dissertation as I compare the post-
Reunification work of East German author Christa Wolf with West German playwright Dea Loher. In addition, my second chapter engages with the work of the Austrian author Elfriede Jelinek. Although her work is deeply Austrian in its language and setting, it has been highly influential in terms of the development of Germanophone feminist movements. Although it was primarily associated with efforts to abolish anti-abortion legislation and establish equality for women in West Germany, the New Women’s Movement of the late 20th century featured theoretical and artistic contributions from authors from a variety of German-speaking countries. For example, one of the most influential works credited with jump-starting the establishment of consciousness-raising (Selbsterfahrung) groups in Germany was Swiss author Verena Stefan’s memoir *Häutungen* (1975) in which she details her experience coming-out as a lesbian (Ferree 67-69). In my writing I use the term “German” to refer to an understanding of Germanophone culture that is centered during this period around the literary and filmic markets of West Germany. When referring to national and legal matters I use the names of the nation states to which they apply.

**Early Postwar Feminist Literature**

The early postwar period saw the rise of a number of prominent female authors, whose work established a foundation for female engagements with violence. Although many of these authors were Austrian, their work was taken up by the West German postwar literary establishment in the form of invitations to meetings of the *Gruppe 47*. Drawing on techniques of Austrian literary Modernism, they engaged with gendered memories of violence that were relevant for Germans and Austrians alike. For example, in her 1971 novel *Malina* Ingeborg Bachmann literally writes her protagonist into a wall. As is typical of women’s writing in the early postwar period, Bachmann’s novel reflects the struggle for women to find a voice, not only
in the aftermath of the atrocities of World War II, but also in an environment in which there seems to be no language appropriate for capturing female experience. In her very rich analysis of Bachmann’s work, Sara Lennox writes that, “Of all the authors mentioned in Malina, not a single one is a woman: for Bachmann, there is no female narrative voice” (92). At the very least, Bachmann sees no possibility for an authentic female voice that has not already been consumed by the masculine. As a result, Bachmann divides her character into two, a narrating voice and a physical body that ultimately cannot remain in the world. The narrator rather directly relates how: “Ich bin an die Wand gegangen, ich gehe in die Wand, ich halte den Atem an” (Bachmann Malina 354). The breathlessness at the end of this description is mirrored in the way the clauses keep restarting, as the narrating voice struggles to properly capture this moment. Lennox writes that Malina is about “the absence of a female voice” in that it “shows what women lose when they try to accommodate themselves to the categories of male subjectivity” (91). Not only is there an absence, but Bachmann draws special attention to this lack of communicative ability when her protagonist literally holds her breath, taking away the physical aspect of her voice. The narrating “I” goes on to describe how “Es kommt niemand zu Hilfe. Der Rettungswagen nicht und nicht die Polizei. Es ist eine sehr alte, eine sehr starke Wand, aus der niemand fallen kann, die niemand aufbrechen kann, aus der nie mehr etwas laut werden kann” (Bachmann Malina 356). To find a mode of escape, Bachmann has her character narrate her own disappearance into a wall. Bachmann literalizes the entrapment that her character feels through this impenetrable wall that offers no hope of freedom. Although some part of her voice seems to continue on to narrate these final moments, for Bachmann’s narrator, there is no overcoming the fact that in order to speak she, like all women, “must become the genderless (that is to say, male), liberal, bourgeois subject, suppressing their female qualities” (Lennox 99).
This struggle to find a narrative voice for women through which they can remain present in body and in voice, eludes not just Bachmann, but many other prominent female writers from the early postwar period. Take for example Ilse Aichinger who in her short story “Spiegelgeschichte” from the collection Der Gefesselte (1953), divides her protagonist into a narrative voice and a dead body so that she can narrate the story of her death back to herself. As I have written elsewhere about Aichinger’s text, this division is a double-edged sword in that:

Her divided self is a blessing in that by narrating this story in the second person she is able not only to unsettle the reader’s expectations, but also to undermine or invalidate the behaviour of the other figures in the story […] However, it is also a curse in that it represents a major obstacle for the narrator in her efforts to establish a single, first-person subjective voice. (Scott 312)

By dividing her character into narrating and narrated selves (much as Bachmann does with the interjection of Malina, the male (counter)part to her female narrator), Aichinger creates a female narrating voice that is too uncertain to narrate with the confidence of a masculine subject. At the same time that this division of body and voice becomes limiting, it also opens up different modes and ways of thinking about narration for women. For example, in a move that is counter to the chronology of her death, it enables Aichinger’s protagonist to demand that her abortionist restore the life of the fetus that was removed from her womb. There may be some kind of power and agency for women in this divided self, but as I will demonstrate in my analysis of works of feminist literature and film from later decades, there is even more potential for female subjectivity and expression when women find a way to reconnect their bodies with their voices.

As Lennox writes, Bachmann provides us with a small glimmer of this hope through her own act of writing: “Bachmann is neither the “I” nor Malina; she found a language to write the story of women without language” (115). The works in my dissertation suggest that when language fails
to be enough for female expression, there is also potential in turning to the body and its capacity for physical aggression.

Instead of separating the female body from the female voice as Bachmann and Aichinger have done, later writers such as Christa Wolf and Elfriede Jelinek make an effort to hold the body and the voice of their characters together, thereby imagining strategies for remaining alive even within a system that offers no real escape. When writing about her novel *Malina* in July 1973 Bachmann wrote that, “Der Faschismus ist das erste in der Beziehung zwischen einem Mann und einer Frau, und ich habe versucht zu sagen, in diesem Kapitel [the second chapter of *Malina* in which the narrator describes a nightmare full of Holocaust references], hier in dieser Gesellschaft ist immer Krieg” (Bachmann *Gü* 144). This way of thinking about gender oppression and authoritarian right-wing politics as two sides of the same coin was a hallmark of early postwar feminist thought in West Germany.\(^8\) The state of war between the genders that Bachmann articulates here does not go away, but is modified in subsequent decades, as we will see in texts by Elfriede Jelinek, Helma Sanders-Brahms, and others. Bachmann’s pessimistic contention that “Es gibt nicht Krieg und Frieden, es gibt nur den Krieg” (Bachmann *Gü* 144) is certainly explored in the texts that I will examine. However, the fixed terms of this conflict in which men commit acts of violence against women is challenged and refigured to include women as both victims and perpetrators of destruction.

Feminist authors and filmmakers after Aichinger and Bachmann found that simply equating gender relations with fascism failed to encompass various other potentially oppressive aspects of the female experience, including most prominently in my project, the physical and physical aggression.

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\(^8\)Even though Bachmann distanced herself from mainstream feminism during her lifetime, I argue that her engagement with questions of gender relations in novels like *Malina* make her work central to the history of feminist thought in German-speaking countries. In fact, I will speak about several artists in this dissertation (perhaps most notably Margarethe von Trotta) who publically deny any connection to feminism even though their work was highly influential in the development of feminist thinking and feminist artistic practices.
emotional realities of childbirth and motherhood. The texts that I examine move past the suggestion that by liberating ourselves from fascism, we also do away with gender inequality. Instead, they dwell in the messiness and inescapability of a variety of oppressive discourses. Rather than searching for a way out that may lead them into a wall, authors including Christa Wolf and Dea Loher ask: How do we fight to make conditions within oppression bearable? What opportunities are there for banging on the cage, and what purpose does such resistance serve?

**Feminist Theory: Language and Materialism**

These struggles with the difficulty of finding a language for women to narrate their own stories are mirrored in larger theoretical (and specifically feminist theoretical) discussions of the late 20th century. As the authors and filmmakers in my dissertation explore the complex realities of women who defy gender stereotypes and engage in violent behavior, they arrive at an essentially pessimistic understanding of the ability of women to fully escape their social and cultural circumstances. Contemporaneous theoretical discourses about the inescapability of not only the law, but also identity categories (including gender), generally align with this negative view. This positions the representation of feminist violence in this dissertation at a crossroads in feminist thought between a discussion of oppressive discourses and language that reaches its height in the 1970s and 1980s and an emphasis on materialist feminism that characterizes the theory of the 1990s and 2000s.

In the line of philosophical thinking about language and subjectivity from Hegel and Nietzsche to Foucault and Butler, it appears that we cannot think ourselves out of the discourses that shape us and by extension the identity categories that these discourses create. The works under discussion in my dissertation take this inescapability to heart and try to find some way for their characters to live together, given the possibility that these limiting discourses simply cannot
be overcome. In his writings from the early 1970s, Michel Foucault was pessimistic about the ability of human beings to escape their own cultural or social conditions. When he writes about the law in the modern nation state, Foucault is uncertain about our ability to ever truly overcome its force. In an essay on the work of Nietzsche, he writes that while leaders may change, there is no way out of the rules themselves because the people in power simply “redirect them against those who had initially imposed them” (Foucault “Nietzsche” 86). In this closed system, even though the specific rules may change, the force of the law writ large is still present and cannot be overcome. Using graphic metaphors to describe this inescapable system of the law, Foucault writes that “the law is a calculated and relentless pleasure, delight in the promised blood, which permits the perpetual instigation of new dominations and the staging of repeated scenes of violence” (“Nietzsche” 85). Repetitive violence is part of what holds the system together.

Foucault goes on to connect this violence of the law to a violence of discourse, a violence of interpretation, when he writes that interpretation is “the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning.” (“Nietzsche” 86). For Foucault, there is nothing outside of our violent interpretations of the world, and by extension, no meaning without violence. As he explains, even when founding a new discourse, figures including Marx and Freud “have created a possibility for something other than their discourse, yet something belonging to what they founded” (Foucault “Author” 114). Even as new discourses are created, there is no real possibility of overcoming them, or finding an outside to the closed set of systems that they create. If you leave the realm of one closed discourse, you will enter another. Not only that, but you will not even have escaped the first because its definition also includes its opposite. As Teresa de Lauretis argues, in Foucault we are presented with the notion that power is “a productive force that weaves its way through the social body as a network of discourses and
generates simultaneously forms of knowledge and forms of subjectivity or what we call social subjects” (“Violence” 15). As far as Foucault is concerned, there is never a way out of this web of language and laws, but that does not mean that we cannot use language against itself to aggressively combat these conditions.

Following Foucault’s line of thinking, Judith Butler continued to worry about the potential inescapability of socially constructed discourses towards the end of the time period under discussion here. In her now famous text Gender Trouble (1990) she discusses gender as a performative construct writing that, “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework” (Butler Gender 33). If the aim of feminist politics is escaping gendered discourse, the “rigid regulatory framework” identified by Butler is extremely troubling. For Butler, similarly to Foucault’s skepticism about escaping the law, the possibility of escaping gender or finding an outside of gender is difficult to imagine. She writes that, “Because there is neither an “essence” that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts there would be no gender at all” (Butler Gender 140). Gender generates itself through a self-reinforcing loop. Acts of gender reinforce our conception of gender and that conception of gender in turn influences our actions. The only way out is to get rid of gender entirely. However, this kind of escape is very difficult to imagine in practice, at least for the time being.

Butler links her own thinking directly back to Foucault in her description of gender as performative, arguing alongside him that “the body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations” and that, therefore, “the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of its self and the law of its desire” (Gender 92). Motherhood is a site where
numerous discourses on gender, identity, and the body come together, making it an ideal place to look at the question of how one can simultaneously resist all of these oppressive conditions. Since there is no clear way out, the question becomes how we live within this confinement. This is the question taken up in the set of texts I will discuss in this dissertation, a question that they answer by engaging with the theatrical and performative genres of melodrama and mythology. By the beginning of the 21st century Butler writes that, “Our capacity to reflect upon ourselves, to tell the truth about ourselves, is correspondingly limited by what the discourse, the regime, cannot allow into speakability” (Account 121). In other words, we can only know anything about ourselves based on already established discourses and categories. As in her notion of gender performativity as identity creating, Butler concludes in Giving an Account of Oneself (2005) that in order to respond to the demand to be a subject, one has to confront the conditions of the formation of the self (historical and social) and the relation of the self to responsibility (i.e. The question of how responsible one can actually be for their actions?) (135). While neither Butler nor Foucault wants to completely give up on the idea of free will or eliminate the body entirely, they repeatedly paint us into a corner from which it seems nearly impossible to escape with our complete selfhood intact. There is always a barrier created by language through which we lose the ability to truly know ourselves.

Before Butler began writing on gender performativity, other feminist thinkers, including prominent figures such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, articulated arguments about gendered oppression as generated by language. As a psychoanalytic feminist theorist, Irigaray is interested in how forcing the structure of language onto the child changes his or her relationship to the world. She compares language to breast milk writing that language “like and yet quite unlike the mother’s breast or her milk, is able to nourish but also to kill, rape, or poison the
sexuate body of the child” (Irigaray *Speculum* 37). The trouble with language is that we need it, even though it potentially does such irreparable damage to us. According to Irigaray this problem is particularly difficult for women to overcome because of the way language objectifies and covers over them (unlike men who at least have the option of seeing themselves reflected through their use of language). She writes that “Women, having been misinterpreted, forgotten, variously frozen in show-cases, rolled up in metaphors, buried beneath carefully stylized figures, raised up in different idealities, would now become the “object” to be investigated” (Irigaray *Speculum* 145). The issue with language is that it obscures female truth; it hides women under layers of ideas and metaphors. It is clear from Irigaray’s work that no feminist revolution can take place if change does not also happen on the level of language.

Cixous offers some thoughts about the importance of women taking back language for themselves when she writes:

> If woman has always functioned “within” the discourse of man […] it is time for her to dislocate this “within,” to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of. (887)

In Cixous’s very corporeal language we see the beginnings of an argument that violence will be required to create a new female language. The process requires exploding and biting. Although this violence may be purely metaphorical in Cixous’s writing (perhaps proving Irigaray’s point about metaphor), this is less true in the works I examine in this dissertation. In Jelinek’s work, for instance, we encounter language that actually does seem to attack its readers and their beliefs. Cixous also introduces a mythological element to her reading of the relationship between women and language when she coyly writes:

> Wouldn’t the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth that women aren’t castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its
meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing. (885)

By invoking the Gorgon who turns men to stone and figuring her not as a hideous monster, but as a jubilant woman, Cixous challenges women to take back their own truth and sense of themselves.⁹ Not only will woman be returned to herself in a metaphoric way, but Cixous assures us that “By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display” (880). If women can truly learn to write themselves, they will be reunited with their bodies in the process of discovering a new feminine language.

Even though she is primarily talking about language and its ability or lack thereof to represent the feminine, this hint of a turn towards the body in Cixous’s work will flourish in the works of feminists writing in the 1990s and 2000s such as Donna Haraway and Karen Barad. These feminists were and are interested in turning feminist theory away from language and discourse and toward the body and the material world. One of the earliest precursors of this is Donna Haraway’s 1985 essay “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” in which she advocates for women to think of themselves as cyborgs, beings of half-organic and half-inorganic materials. In her view, a “cyborg politics” would entail “transgressed boundaries, potent fusion, and dangerous possibilities” (Haraway 71). Although she is still interested in the idea of a feminist language she writes that, “We do not need a totality in order to work well. The feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams for a perfectly true language, of perfectly faithful naming of experience, is a totalizing and imperialist one” (Haraway 92). Instead of falling into the imperialist trap of seeking to create a female language, Haraway encourages us to embrace our

⁹This question of what women see when they look into the shield/mirror resonates with a wide range of feminist theories about female identity, including feminist film theory as articulated by Teresa de Lauretis in Alice Doesn't (1984). Even though Cixous is primarily concerned with written language, I believe her provocations are applicable to a range of media.
imperfect bodies saying that “a cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generates antagonistic dualisms without end” (99). The messiness of bodies, their porous leakiness that always keeps the subject from being completely separate from their world, is a big part of why feminist theory is increasingly drawn to the material and corporeal over the course of the period I examine in this dissertation. However, as we will see in these literary and filmic works, the (female) body is still often used as a metaphorical stand-in for something else, be it cultural guilt or the fear of repeating the mistakes of the past. Even though language and discourse is still what is primarily at stake in my dissertation, by representing physical violence these texts are forced to contend with some of the “antagonistic dualisms” that Haraway identifies, including the dualism between the body and language.

The topic of violence and its concern with physical signs as marked on the body pushes the works of these German feminist authors and filmmakers towards a more material understanding of the implications of gendered oppression. This more corporeal view anticipates the dominance of a materialist strain of feminist theory in the early 21st century and creates a new category of feminist artistic production that sees violence as a means for linking language with the body. In an effort to move away from even psycho-somatic readings of the body, in her essay “Gut Feminism” Elizabeth Wilson argues that the “aptitude for condensation, displacement, connotation, repetition, or identification cannot be contained in the ideational realm” but is also expressed by the body itself (and not as part of a link between mind and body) (73). Looking specifically at eating disorders, Wilson suggests that “mood is not added onto the gut, secondarily, disrupting its proper function; rather temper, like digestion, is one of the events to which enteric substrata are naturally (originally) inclined” (85). This understanding of bodies
as important in and of themselves is expanded in Karen Barad’s call for “a robust account of the materialization of all bodies – “human” and “nonhuman” – and the material-discursive practices by which their differential constitutions are marked” (128). Barad advocates for the same amount of attention to be paid to the body as has been paid to language, insisting that, “objectivity means being accountable to marks on bodies” (142). According to Barad, accounting not just for how we describe the world, but our material place in that world is critical because “matter is a substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency” (146).

Even though the literary and filmic works in my dissertation are not yet thinking about their female protagonists as fully embodied in this sense, they reveal something like this “congealing of agency,” the multi-faceted and messy way in which female subjectivity is formed. What I label feminist violence for the purposes of this work resembles Barad’s notion that it is actually a combination of language and the intra-action of bodies that creates identity. By forcefully incorporating others into the self, feminist violence serves as an important link between German feminist art and larger trends in feminist theory. While aggressively grappling with the gendered language problem as illustrated by Irigaray and Cixous, authors such as Jelinek and filmmakers such as Sanders-Brahms begin to also consider material solutions to these problems. They acknowledge the inescapability of gendered discourses, as Butler insists that they must, but this does not mean that these texts find no means of resisting this linguistic destiny. Ultimately, language is transformed into a tool through which they can represent the process of recapturing or refiguring their own bodies. Instead of becoming a dismal fate, both language and image become the instruments of violence that allow women to imagine ways of forcibly holding themselves together.
Female Bodies in Postwar German Film

According to Kaja Silverman, film faces many of the same obstacles that literature does in terms of communicating authentic female experiences. In a quotation that is reminiscent of Bachmann’s protagonist’s disappearance, Silverman writes that, “the female subject’s gaze is depicted as partial, flawed, unreliable, and self-entrapping. She sees things that aren’t there, bumps into walls, or loses control at the sight of the color red” (31). Silverman goes on to say that even in cinema “the female voice is often shown to coexist with the female body only at the price of its own impoverishment and entrapment” (141). Therefore, film, just as much as literature, struggles to present women as both physically and linguistically whole. Women on the screen experience a division between body and voice that is reminiscent of the division between narrated and narrating selves in the early postwar literature of Bachmann and Aichinger. This correlation is not exact, because disembodied language is not the same as the, at least partially, embodied voice. However, the use of women in film to disrupt connections between the body and language through female voices provides a significant point of overlap between feminist literature and film.

It was a struggle for early postwar cinema to even get off the ground in Germany. This was in large part a result of the Allied occupation and the control that Hollywood established over West German cinemas. Taking up the perspective of the filmmakers of the New German Cinema, many have considered the early postwar years to be a dry spell in terms of innovative German filmmaking. In its founding document, the Oberhausen Manifesto of 1962, New German Cinema seeks to distance itself from the reactionary politics and corporate interests of early postwar cinema, creating a new German avant-garde cinema that engages in cultural critique. Books such as Hester Baer’s Dismantling the Dream Factory have begun to productively
question this narrative about the value of early postwar cinema, arguing that the 1950s and 1960s have been ignored in the history of German film in large part because the films produced during this period were primarily melodramas and *Heimatfilme*, meant to attract a film-going audience that was nearly 70 percent female (Baer 3). While a debate about the merits of these early postwar films such as *Die Sünderin* (*The Sinner*, 1951), *Der Förster vom Silberwald* (*The Forester of the Silver Wood*, 1955) or *Das Mädchen Rosemarie* (*The Girl Rosemarie*, 1958) is a discussion for a different time and place, I do want to highlight how at least one of these early postwar films prefigures the use of women and female bodies as a stand-in for concerns about masculinity and the nation that will become a hallmark of the New German Cinema. In the 1946 film *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers are Among Us*) directed by Wolfgang Staudte, the responsibility for rebuilding Germany and the traditional family is placed squarely on Susanne, the female protagonist (played by Hildegard Knef). As Baer points out, from the earliest shots of the film, the female character’s vision is clear, focused, and realist, while her male counterpart languishes in an expressionist and blurry filmic landscape (Baer 31-33). Germany is building itself up from the rubble on the backs of women (sometimes both literally and figuratively) and the filmic engagement with female bodies throughout the postwar period does not shy away from representing Germany’s reconstruction in this gendered way. Susanne is the one who sets up a home amidst the rubble and ends the cycle of wartime violence by interceding when the male protagonist, Hans, attempts to take revenge on his criminal wartime commander. Appearing in and alongside broken glass, Susanne is the glue that will bind up this shattered, war-torn world. Not only that, but she does all of this at the expense of her own voice. Unable to tell her own story of wartime suffering as a concentration camp survivor, she
nevertheless listens to all of Hans’s stories, providing him with an outlet for healing and a means for moving on to which she, herself, has no access.

Even in the earliest German postwar films, there is evidence that women play an important role in the revival of German cinema. However, this role is initially confined to the front of the camera, as the objects of film. By looking at films by female directors, I investigate how the political value of female bodies on screen is altered when women are also the ones behind the camera, controlling the shots. This is especially important because of the way that the films of the New German Cinema often get swept up in the identities of their directors. Names such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, Alexander Kluge, Volker Schlöndorff, and Wim Wenders are extremely recognizable in the context of both German and international cinema. The female filmmakers I examine in this dissertation, Margarethe von Trotta and Helma Sanders-Brahms, are beginning to become more recognizable, while other female filmmakers from this period including Helke Sander, Ulla Stöckl, or Helma Ottinger remain in relative obscurity. While a project such as mine does not have the scope to draw attention to all of the German female filmmakers of the New German Cinema, what I hope to do is continue the work of Julia Knight in her book *Women and the New German Cinema* by showing how these women fit into both a history of feminist film and a history of German cinema.

**Mythology and Melodrama**

Based on my interest in women both in front of and behind the camera, I have chosen to focus my analysis on the genres of melodrama and mythology, two forms in which women feature prominently as both authors and characters. Broadly conceived, the texts in my dissertation revitalize and critique the genre of melodrama and the process of adapting mythological material for contemporary contexts. In seeking to better understand what it means
to be a woman in their society, these texts return to genres and periods in which understandings of gender and difference were being formed and negotiated. By unearthing aggressively defiant mythological figures, these authors and filmmakers place their work inside of a broad cultural trajectory, while also seeking to put pressure on these conventions and question their validity. The same is true for melodramatic tropes that both capture female experiences and seek to force women to identify with their own oppression. In other words, these texts unearth and attack the ways in which the female has been, in part, constructed by so-called “female genres.”

For my definition of melodrama, I am primarily drawing on postwar films in which heightened or exaggerated emotional states characterize the figures, especially the female ones. The German director Douglas Sirk, who made numerous popular movies in the United States in the 1950s, is considered one of the masters of this genre and so his work forms a particularly important backdrop to the texts, both filmic and literary, that I will examine here. Importantly, the heightened emotional states of melodrama most often involve negative emotions such as anger or grief and, therefore require the suffering of the female protagonist in order for the film to reach its resolution. The figure of the self-sacrificing woman, who suffers greatly and gives up everything for her husband and family thereby achieving domestic peace, is one crucial example of this phenomenon. Comparing melodrama to pornography and horror Linda Williams writes that pornography is sadistic, horror is sadomasochistic, and melodrama is masochistic. The danger inherent in the self-sacrificing woman is that she gives up so much of herself that she no longer has a self. Not only that, but when she is a literary or filmic character, she also encourages her audience to do the same. Williams outlines this dynamic when she writes that “Masochistic pleasure for women has paradoxically seemed either too normal – too much the normal yet intolerable condition of women – or too perverse to be taken seriously as pleasure” (“Film
Bodies” 7). This dissertation looks to confront this problem by demonstrating how the portrayal of women as both victims and perpetrators of violence works to disrupt melodramatic narratives of masochism in which women are denied access to their own pleasure.

Writing about the melodramatic mode in literature Peter Brooks writes that melodrama is “excess,” “a mode of heightened dramatization” bound up in the “effort to signify” (ix). This tendency of melodrama to oversignify is also true of physical violence in that the marks left behind on the skin often come to mean much more than the actual acts of violence that generated them. Clearly biased as a scholar of literature himself, Brooks also connects melodrama with the novel in terms of its ability to “realize the importance of persecuted women, struggling to preserve and impose moral vision” (Brooks 87). The works in my dissertation seek to question the ways in which women and their experiences have been put to such symbolic use through melodramatic discourses. When they increase the stakes of this debate by linking these concerns to the process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung and the atrocities committed during World War II, they also question the validity of this objectification of women. Of additional importance to my discussion of melodrama is the roots of the genre in Victorian fiction and, more specifically, gothic fiction.10 In the texts I examine, there are many instances in which the relationships between characters are vampyric in nature, in which one character’s survival depends upon the destruction of another. These dynamics of “kill or be killed,” or at least the feeling that one’s own survival is predicated on hurting someone else, helps to explain why many of these characters may turn to violent behavior. Lastly, the discourse of melodrama also prefigures the inescapability of the oppression faced by these protagonists. If Brooks is correct and

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10The history of melodrama can be traced back to 18th century France, most notably the work of Pixrécourt, where the term referred to a combination of recitation and music in which the female protagonist and the orchestra engage in a dialogue. Although I focus my attention on understandings of melodrama that are more relevant to the 20th century, it is important to keep in mind that, even in its earliest forms, melodrama was a genre that pitted a woman against a much larger collective force. For a useful summary of this history, see Peter Brooks’s book, The Melodramatic Imagination (1985).
“Melodrama cannot figure the birth of a new society […] but only the old society reformed” (205), then all of the texts I examine here share this melodramatic feature. When it is not possible to create a new world, we have to wrestle with the world as it is.

In the German context at least, the melodramatic and the mythological often complement one another. The mythological serves as the source for many of the basic plots of the stories related in my dissertation and there is a long history of combining melodramatic forms with mythological stories in Germany. In fact, one of the earliest and most popular German melodramas (in the 18th century French sense of the word) was Jiří Antonín Benda and Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter’s 1775 work, Medea. Drawing on classical Greek stories first written down by the playwrights Euripides and Sophocles, the authors and directors in my dissertation bring their work into dialogue with a literary history that spans back through the centuries. In addition to drawing on a historical trajectory, adaptations of mythological material represent a cyclical retelling of narrative that serves as a point of comparison with the reproductive cycles of violence that I referenced at the beginning of this introduction. Particularly as women, the authors and filmmakers I examine are constantly negotiating between an effort to legitimate themselves through connections to mythological material, while at the same time seeking to innovatively bring female voices into these classical stories. In the process of adapting mythological stories for a contemporary audience, violent female characters like Medea or Clytemnestra are reproduced and reformed in ways that draw our attention to the cyclical nature of both aggressive behavior and narrative structures. Furthermore, by reproducing mythological stories these authors/filmmakers also inflict violence on both their readers/viewers and the stories themselves through these acts of repetition.
At stake in my discussion of mythology is not only an understanding of repetition (or in my case reproduction), but also an understanding of how the mythological has been employed to discuss female passivity and powerlessness, particularly in the German context. In her work on the connection between violence and language de Lauretis writes that, “the subject of the violence is always, by definition, masculine; ‘man’ is by definition the subject of culture and of any social act” (“Violence” 23). By taking over or attempting to take over masculine subject positions and by committing acts of violence themselves, female characters encounter unfamiliar territory. Not only that, but de Lauretis also suggests that a splitting of women in two (reminiscent of the literature of Bachmann and Aichinger) is a potential consequence of the attempt to wield violence as a female weapon. Speaking about mythological stories de Lauretis writes that the work of symbols is the “splitting of the female subject’s identification into the two mythical positions of hero (the human subject) and boundary (spatially fixed object or personified obstacle – her body)” (“Violence” 25). Mythology, then, gives us a foundational understanding of how women are figured only as obstacles within masculine discourse. Since the obstacle can never overcome itself, woman must split herself in two in order to also become the active hero. In this situation, putting oneself back together again becomes an act of feminist resistance that requires the use of force to hold everything and everyone together.

A similar understanding of mythology is prevalent in early German feminist literary criticism. For instance, in her hallmark book on German women’s writing Sigrid Weigel again invokes the story of Medusa as an explanation for female voicelessness:

Medusa aber, wenn sie zu reden begönne, müßte aus ihrer erstarrten Position – sowohl im Stadium des Erschreckens als auch in ihrer Funktion als Zierde – herausreten und in die Position jener hinüberwechseln, die an ihrer Bändigung und Domestizierung beteiligt waren. Denn eine Stimme der Medusa als Medusa gibt es nicht – es sei denn ihre andere, lautlose Sprache. (7)
Like Cixous, Weigel uses the Gorgon to articulate the movement away from the status quo that is required for women to take up literary space and tell their own stories. Medusa, like female German writers, must find a new language that speaks for her as she is, not as she has already been constructed to be. Since mythological stories have such a rich history of adaptation it is understandable why feminist authors seeking to engage in a language discovery project might turn to these stories as locations for confronting normative discourses. By invoking the mythological and putting it under attack, these authors and filmmakers challenge the understanding that female voices must forever be obscured. They also recognize that the release of those voices must happen through means that are unusual within the context of a narrative space that has, up until this point, been dominated by the masculine. Alternative narratological choices must be made and that is precisely what the women in my dissertation achieve by engaging with violence as a means for establishing collaborative female subjectivities.

**Literature and Film**

The decision to bring film and literature together in this dissertation was based on my belief that both media have something to say about the difficulties of female expression and the discourses of mythology and melodrama as outlined above. In her essay about the violence of rhetoric de Lauretis argues that “the representation of violence is inseparable from the notion of gender” and that “violence is not simply ‘in’ language or ‘in’ representation, but it is also thereby en-gendered” (“Violence” 12, 22). I would like to expand on de Lauretis’s statements about language by demonstrating how violence can be generated by narrative voice in literature. In addition, I extend de Lauretis’s argument and show how film also has the potential to perform this representational violence. Siegfried Kracauer writes about film as a moment of dreaming before disconnection when he writes that the camera “just now extricated [natural objects] from
the womb of physical existence […] as if the umbilical cord between image and actuality had not yet been severed” (164). Not only is Kracauer’s umbilical cord metaphor apt in terms of the mothers in my project, but I want to show in my examination of film what happens when the tenuous bond that Kracauer describes is intentionally severed, when the dream of film is interrupted and disrupted by female filmmakers.

Even more so perhaps than mythology, my discussion of the genre of melodrama is enriched through the inclusion of both literary and filmic texts. A project that crosses over between different media is well suited to a discussion of melodrama because, as Brooks suggests, the genre is so adaptable and “its premises, of structure, rhetoric, vision, can be exploited for a range of subjects in many different media” (Brooks 89). Furthermore, throughout the course of the 20th and into the 21st century melodrama has been theorized more and more through film and other visual media, so it seems necessary to account for this in my analysis. Whether the conventions of melodrama or mythology appear on screen or on the page, they still have a similar inescapable quality that the authors and filmmakers I examine in this dissertation confront head on. The female characters that populate this dissertation are caught between two extremes. They are not male subjects and yet, their desire to break free from the discourses and situations that confine them marks them as not quite female either. They oscillate violently between different gender and subject positions, unable to overcome the confinement of the system itself, which makes adhering to one of two categories necessary. In the end, they discover that it is only through collaboration, a sometimes violent joining with the other or rejoining with their children, that they are able to find any way of articulating their experience as women.
Chapter Descriptions

The structure of my dissertation is thematic and genre-based, rather than chronological. I begin by establishing how the theme of violent mothers functions in literary works before demonstrating how film expands on and revises these representations. In each of these two sections, one on literary and one on filmic works, I begin with a chapter devoted primarily to the mythological and conclude with a chapter more directly focused on melodrama. This allows me to account for both categories of form and genre equally in my analysis. I am not trying to tell a historical story, but rather to develop an overall conception of feminist violence as it is articulated in German literary and filmic works throughout the late 20th century.

In the first chapter I compare Christa Wolf’s novel Medea. Stimmen (1996) with Dea Loher’s play Manhattan Medea (1999). I selected these two adaptations of Medea because of their shared interest in relating this story to the complicated process of German Reunification. In addition, these texts serve as representatives of two strands of feminist engagement with the Medea story that I identify in 20th century Germany. The first strand, represented most prominently by Wolf’s text and Dagmar Nick’s Medea. Ein Monolog. (1988), seeks to redeem Medea by characterizing her as a misunderstood figure, framed for the murder of her children by men seeking to maintain their power. The second strand, exhibited best in Loher’s work and Ursula Haas’s novel Freispruch für Medea (1987), seeks to turn Medea into an aggressive soldier for women’s liberation, raging against the system and equating Medea’s murder of her children with contemporaneous abortion politics. As the most canonical authors within these categories, Wolf and Loher serve to introduce the complex relationship between Medea and feminism within the German context.
In my analysis of these works I look at how both Wolf and Loher confront the difficulties associated with female storytelling by critically examining the repetitive process of mythmaking itself. Both authors use the form of their texts to push back against traditional genre distinctions. In Wolf’s case, she stretches the limits of the form of the novel by turning her text into a series of theatrical monologues. In Loher’s case this occurs through a breakdown of written linguistic structure that manifests itself in a reflection on theater and performativity within her play. Although their characterizations of Medea as a literary figure could not be more different, they both seek to combat the ways in which repetitive storytelling, as one encounters it in mythology, serves to normalize stories as if they could never be otherwise. In order to challenge this process and establish room for women to enter into the discourse of mythology, Wolf and Loher develop modes of collaborative storytelling in which multiple voices are given space to express themselves. Although at times they end up reinstating the hierarchies that they try to overcome, these forms of collaborative storytelling generate female subjects that embrace their own connection to others.

In the second chapter I examine tropes of melodrama and pornography in Elfriede Jelinek’s *Lust* (1989). I turn to Jelinek not only because of her canonical status in terms of German-language and feminist literature, but also because of her penchant for depicting graphic sexual violence. The most widely discussed (and frequently maligned) work of Jelinek’s that combines all of these features is *Lust*. This text has primarily been read as a work of anti-pornography in the sense that it exaggerates and renders uncomfortably visible the underlying oppression and brutality of this genre. Working against this understanding, I argue that an analysis of melodramatic tropes in this novel is equally relevant to its critical project. By paying close attention to the protagonist’s relationship to her son, I argue that Jelinek combines and
undermines tropes of pornography and melodrama in order to highlight the abuse and violent nature of even our most intimate relationships. Furthermore, she implicates her readers in this violence through a shifting narrative voice that is difficult to completely pin down. Jelinek makes the experience of reading her novel as difficult as the content of the plot, thereby deploying feminist violence on both a thematic and an aesthetic level. After suffering innumerable abuses at the hands of her husband and her lover, Jelinek’s protagonist sees no alternative but to kill her young son, thereby figuratively reabsorbing him into her womb and literally preventing him from becoming his father. By temporarily stopping this cycle of substitution Jelinek’s protagonist achieves not liberation, but a moment of peace.

In the third chapter I move on to film, but return to mythology in my examination of *Die bleierne Zeit* (1981). Directed by Margarethe von Trotta, this film represents one of the few filmic engagements with the RAF directed by a woman. Since the portrayal of militant counter-violence movements in the media was so gendered, the gender of the person behind the camera when depicting this history takes on a particular relevance that I explore in this film. In addition, I chose to examine this film because it has been so ruthlessly critiqued as both too reactionary and too progressive in its politics. The contentious political status of *Die bleierne Zeit* makes it an especially noteworthy foray into the topic of violent mothers. Building off of this dichotomy, I turn to the mythological story of Antigone and Ismene to structure my analysis. *Die bleierne Zeit*, like Sophocles’s play *Antigone*, brings together two sisters who initially appear to stand on opposite ends of the spectrum of political activism. Those sisters eventually become unified in a battle between the interests of the individual versus the interests of the state. Von Trotta’s film also brings the question of motherhood to the fore by staging this debate within the context of left-wing militancy. First, she uses flashback sequences to unsettle our understanding of
historical cause and effect. Then, by giving her Antigone-figure a child and questioning who will raise him, von Trotta’s film develops an understanding of collaborative mothering and memory work that again seeks to consolidate female subjectivity, rather than individualizing it.

In the fourth, and final, chapter I read *Martha* (1974) alongside *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* (1980) in order to gain a better understanding of the way New German Cinema engages with melodramatic tropes. Directed by R.W. Fassbinder and Helma Sanders-Brahms respectively, these films engage with situations of domestic violence in which homes become nightmarish and oppressive for women. I have chosen to look at films by one male director and one female director in order to continue the process of establishing a place for the female directors of the New German Cinema alongside of their male counterparts. I turn to Fassbinder specifically because of his reputation for directing films in which women are the center of the plot, usually employed as a mechanism for critiquing larger social issues. Because of their shared interest in directly confronting the Nazi era, Fassbinder’s better-known film *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (1979) might seem like a more natural point of comparison with Sanders-Brahms’s very historically engaged film *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*. However, I have chosen to look at *Martha* instead because of the fact that, in my view, it more directly addresses the melodramatic tropes of self-sacrifice that I want to draw out of both films. Sanders-Brahms’s film combines an equally powerful critique of melodramatic self-sacrifice with the careful development of a new understanding of female storytelling, making it a useful text to conclude this dissertation. Sanders-Brahms’s ability to synthesize the concerns of both melodrama and storytelling that I build up throughout the dissertation makes this film an essential object of analysis within the scope of my project.
Both *Martha* and *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* are concerned with melodramatic models that force women into positions where they accept their own suffering. As they repress their own desires the female protagonists of these films lash out against themselves and their children. In order to unmask this self-sacrifice for what it is, Fassbinder’s film confronts its female protagonist with a sadist who has no ability to read her melodramatic performances as she intends them. Sanders-Brahms’s film highlights the act of the daughter’s witnessing of her mother’s suffering and leverages it into a new model for female storytelling. In this way both films functionalize female characters to think about larger social issues, keeping their protagonists entrapped, but not alone, in their suffering. As spectators of these films, we have to make sense of a disjointed relationship between sound and image, a level of contradiction that is also inherent in these self-sacrificing female characters. We are forced to understand feminist violence not as a breaking out, but a process of consolidating partial female subjectivities until we arrive at something resembling unity.

The search for a consolidation of the mind and the body is an ongoing one, but the protagonists in this dissertation do their best to achieve this goal. In their efforts to use physical violence to overcome their difficulties and to find a language to articulate themselves as women and as mothers, they come to realize that an understanding of female subjectivity must include language, the voice, and the body. Furthermore, the authors and filmmakers of these texts use aggressive aesthetic techniques to lead us towards an understanding of female subjectivity that is generated by the combination of multiple bodies and voices into an uneasy harmony. By refiguring subjectivity not as an assertion of a unique, individual self, but as multi-faceted collaboration, these authors do not completely solve the problem of the woman who disappears into the wall. However, they come much closer by directly confronting the question of female
voices and female bodies in their work, thereby revealing the parameters of this fight against oppression and imagining new roles for women within discourses about history, memory, narration, and storytelling.
CHAPTER 1: DE-MYTHOLOGIZING MEDEA: POWER, GENDER AND STORYTELLING IN CHRISTA WOLF AND DEA LOHER

πρὸς δὲ καὶ πεφύκαμεν
γυναικὲς, ἐς μὲν ἑσθλ. ἀμηχανώταται,
κακῶν δὲ πάντων τέκτονες σοφώταται.
And furthermore we are women, unable to perform noble deeds, but most skillful architects of every sort of harm.

As Medea utters these words in Euripides’s play from around 400 BCE she has just been granted a one-day reprieve from banishment. She intends to use this time to carry out a bloody revenge against her husband, Jason, who has left her for another woman. Euripides’s Medea describes a world in which women have been forced into a corner out of which there is no clear escape. They are excluded from participation in civic life and, therefore, have no access to nobility. Instead, they must resort to acts of violence and do harm to others in order to assert themselves. Medea is certain that violence is not only the answer to her problems, but also the only option available to her as a woman.

In Euripides’s Medea, which has become the foundational text for the vast majority of subsequent Medea adaptations, Medea is the epitome of the vengeful and monstrous woman scorned. In his version of this mythological story, Medea is a princess and sorceress from Colchis who assists Jason, the leader of the Argonauts, in capturing the Golden Fleece. She marries him, runs away with him to Corinth, and gives birth to twin sons. As the play opens, however, Medea discovers that Jason is planning to marry Glauce, the daughter of King Creon, in order to increase his own political position and power. In anticipation of her wrath, Creon tries

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11This quotation is taken from Euripides’s Medea, pages 320 and 321 in the Loeb Classical Library edition.
to send Medea into exile, but he makes the mistake of giving her twenty-four hours to get her affairs in order. Medea uses that day to exact her violent revenge against Jason, poisoning Glaucce and Creon with a gift of golden robes and killing her own children, so that Jason will have no progeny. In the end, she escapes to Athens with her children’s bodies to take refuge at the court of Aegeus, promising to cure his infertility. Medea’s actions demonstrate that she is driven towards one goal and one goal only, to cause Jason suffering, whatever the cost, even if it means taking the lives of her own children.

Medea’s brazen and desperate act of revenge has been the subject of numerous adaptations and retellings since Euripides. In this chapter I will examine two such adaptations within the context of the late 1990s in Germany, Christa Wolf’s Medea. Stimmen (1996) and Dea Loher’s Manhattan Medea (1999). In my readings of these texts I will demonstrate how both authors use the adaptation of mythological material to aggressively critique the process of mythmaking itself. In addition, I will highlight how they offer us heterogeneous models of storytelling in which multiple voices come together in uneasy associations, much like the difficult process of German Reunification, a historical context that is central to both works. These texts simultaneously engage with three different German nations (East Germany, West Germany, and the post-Reunification Federal Republic of Germany) in order to process the tensions of reunification, both economic and social. By taking up the story of Medea, a character who feels that she is forced into a gruesome act of violence because it is her only hope to reclaim her dignity, Wolf and Loher confront the violence of control inherent in the process of mythmaking and attack their readers’ assumptions about what it means to tell a story.

The process of adapting mythological material is one that is predicated on a sense of mastery or control. Authors use the familiar plot to draw readers in, while they highlight a
specific aspect of their contemporaneous society or culture. Through their controlled
manipulation of a story that is much older, they create a work of art that speaks to their
contemporary moment. In their writing on the mythological, Adorno and Horkheimer contend
that this attempted mastery of the myth works not only through the changes that an author makes
to a source text, but also through the repetition of plot and character elements. Repetition is
essential to the function of mythology in that: “every mythical figure is compelled to do the same
thing over and over again. Each of them is constituted by repetition: its failure would mean their
end” (Adorno and Horkheimer 45). Mythical figures are defined by their recognizable qualities
and their repeated actions. We know when Odysseus is present because he lives up to his name
as “the man of twists and turns” (Homer, I.1), winding his way home and twisting the words and
deeds of others through his cleverness. In order for a mythological adaptation to be recognizable
as such, the characters must reproduce at least some of the same qualities and actions that
defined them in the source story. However, in a successful adaptation the characters will also be
altered enough to enable the author to communicate something about their contemporary context.
Adapting mythological material then implies working within an established system of structures,
while also trying to restructure or critique that system in some way. Ultimately, as we will see in
the work of both Wolf and Loher, it is impossible to escape the required repetitions of
mythology, even though reworking them may enable the author to aggressively confront the
exclusion of alternative possibilities that is generated by these repetitions.

This tension between the repetition of classical plots, characters, and themes and their
application to contemporary contexts is particularly cogent in German-language adaptations of
the Medea story throughout the 20th century.12 By the end of the century the monstrous nature of

12For instance, in two of the better known examples of 20th-century German engagement with this material, Hans
Henny Jahn’s play Medea (1926) and Heiner Müller’s play Verkommenes Ufer / Medeamaterial / Landschaft mit
this mythical female figure became a site of contention as feminist writers began the process of trying to redeem Medea from her own horrendous deeds. Authors including Dagmar Nick and Christa Wolf referred to citations of a different source text, Eumelos’s epic poem *Korinthiaka* from the 6th century BCE, and presented their readers with a Medea who was framed for the murder of her children and did not, in fact, enact the bloody revenge around which Euripides’s play hinges. Simultaneously, other feminists, including the playwright Dea Loher and the author/librettist Ursula Haas, tried to stake out a different kind of feminist territory for Medea, one that did not rely on presenting her as a victim of scapegoating and misinformation, but instead presented her as creative and manipulative woman intent on violently exposing society’s double standards and injustices. By comparing texts from both of these groups in this chapter, I demonstrate how these feminist strategies for engaging with the Medea material work together towards critiquing and imagining alternatives to a repetitive, and therefore limiting, mythmaking model.

In the 1990s, as the German Democratic Republic (East Germany, DDR) dissolved and was incorporated into the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD), the question of how to

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*Argonauten* (1982-1983), we see examples of authors making significant changes to this material in order to reflect current social conditions. In each of these plays, the authors emphasize different aspects of the Medea story in an attempt to communicate something about the anxieties of their contemporary society and culture. Jahn, writing after the collapse of Europe’s biggest empires after World War I, chooses to emphasize the conflict between the two nations of Corinth and Colchis, turning the Medea story into a racially-charged Oedipal conflict between father and sons. Writing later in the 20th century, Müller applies his postmodern fragmentary and montage notions of theater to this material, creating a text that breaks down all traditional notions of dramatic plot and character. However, each of these authors also retains something of the terrifying child-murderess of Euripides so that Medea is recognizable to us as readers and viewers of these plays. For both Jahn and Müller this recognizable action is Medea’s murder of her own children.

It is important to note that one major feature of Euripides’s text that is absent in both of these categories is the question of race. Although these texts highlight Medea as an outsider in terms of her socio-economic class and her gender, one of the limitations of all of these adaptations is that in their efforts to functionalize Medea in the service of feminist causes, they ignore important racial questions that are overtly present in Euripides.

remember the old socialist state was of direct relevance. Wolf and Loher’s decision to take up the Medea material during this time period is indicative of their interest in questioning how to most responsibly unite the histories of the two Germanys together. What kind of myth or story would be told about East Germany and the complicated choices made by the citizens of the DDR to cooperate with the Stasi secret police? What kind of role did women specifically have in negotiating the cultural tensions generated by Reunification? These questions form an essential backdrop to the two texts under discussion here and help to explain the interest on the part of both of these authors in interrogating the power structures that dictate how different stories, whether mythological or not, are told. Although Wolf lived in East Germany and Loher in West Germany, both authors are sympathetic to the politics of socialism, and therefore, have a vested interest in how the DDR is remembered as both a socialist experiment and a repressive regime. Despite their vastly different strategies for engaging with the figure of Medea, I want to emphasize the similar way in which both Wolf and Loher understand the myth as mutable and constructed. In both of these texts, the oppressive repetition of mythology is confronted violently through the characters’ relations to one another and the authors’ relationships to both character and genre. By attacking the process of myth-making through adaptations of the mythological story of Medea, Wolf and Loher generate space for a multiplicity of new voices in a system that seeks to structure how and by whom stories are told. By creating heterogeneous storytellers and performers whose voices are always collaborative, these texts advocate for an understanding of East German history and German gender politics that is complex and multivalent. By pulling together multiple voices, by force if necessary, we are able to see a more complete picture of the political and social landscape of post-Reunification Germany.
In this line from Euripides’s play the chorus responds to Medea after she outlines her plan for revenge. The chorus describes a world which has been turned upside down by the deceitful ways of men, thereby potentially opening up space for women to step into this vacuum of nobility and civic virtue. Medea argues that this is impossible, but the chorus pushes back suggesting that in a world in which the definition of good and bad is changing, women have the ability to claim a new, more positive reputation for themselves. The question then becomes whether or not Medea takes advantage of this opportunity when she commits her acts of bloody revenge. The monstrous Medea we see in many adaptations of this story would suggest that when confronted with Jason’s betrayal she does not take advantage of the chance to “be the bigger person” (so to speak). Instead, she opts for an act of revenge that makes her even more evil and hideous than her male counterparts. Fortunately for Medea, in Christa Wolf’s novel Medea. Stimmen she is given a second chance to take this noble path.

Efforts to recover the reputation of maligned women are central to Wolf’s project in Medea. Stimmen. She uses the narrative technique of monologue to create the illusion of a real, historical Medea, rather than just a fictional character. Then she encourages her readers to join her in an attempt to recover this authentic Medea. In order to give her readers access to this revised Medea story Wolf channels a series of voices (Stimmen) from fictional eyewitnesses to these events. The body of her text is made up of a series of monologues from six different characters including both recognizable figures from Euripides’s play like Medea, Jason, and Glauke (Glauce) as well as figures specific to Wolf’s text including: Agameda, a former student

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15Euripides’s Medea pages 320 and 321.
of Medea’s, Akamas, the head astronomer of Corinth and Medea’s enemy, and Leukon, another astronomer in Corinth and Medea’s ally. Although each character is set up to have his or her own independent voice i.e. to have the opportunity to speak, it is still clear that the text is centered around and driven by Medea, whose perspective is always the most prominent. Medea has four separate monologues, whereas the other characters have only one, or at the most two, opportunities to speak. This gives her voice, as constructed by Wolf, the upper hand in terms of how this story is represented. By bringing together multiple voices in the service of recovering a more flattering legacy for Medea, Wolf critiques the power structures that have labeled Medea a murderer (and by extension those that judge Wolf for her work as a Stasi informant). Ultimately, in _Medea. Stimmen_ Wolf confronts discourses of inheritance and storytelling by aggressively challenging narrative and social norms and putting pressure on the form of the novel.

Wolf’s Medea is presented as a very different kind of character from the Medea we encounter in Euripides. No longer a child-murdering sorceress, she is an herbal healer who has been turned into a scapegoat by the male leaders of Corinth. Always an outsider in Corinth, Medea uncovers a terrible secret when she follows the queen down into the catacombs and discovers the bones of Iphinoe, Creon’s other daughter who was murdered to protect his hold on power. As a plague ravages Corinth, Medea’s position becomes even more precarious, as she tries to use her skills as a healer to help the citizens of her new country, but instead ends up convincing them that the disease follows her every move. The murder of Medea’s children occurs at the hands of the state and as a result of the demands of a vengeful mob, which blames Medea for the plague that is ravaging the city. In this version of the story, Medea’s betrayal by Jason is tempered by the fact that she has already taken a lover of her own, the sculptor Oistros, before Jason even entertains the notion of marrying King Creon’s daughter, Glauke. As a result
of these plot additions, Medea’s banishment becomes all the more sorrowful in that she leaves behind both her children and her lover. The critic Liliana Mitrache argues that instead of creating a monster, “Christa Wolf humanisiert Medea, die sich als eine begabte und selbstbewusste Frauengestalt entpuppt” (210). While it may be true that Medea is humanized in Wolf’s text, in my reading I want to put pressure on the extent to which Medea achieves independence and/or self-reliance. Although (or perhaps because) she is not violent and vengeful, Medea is stylized as the victim of a system that is rigged against her from the start. She is victimized in terms of her position as a woman, as an outsider, and even to some extent as a mother. There is nothing that she, or any of the other women in the text for that matter, can do to disrupt the male figures’ quests to attain and maintain their power. The only options women have in the world Wolf has created are to align themselves with a male figure or to get completely stamped out by the powerful men who surround them. There is seemingly no way for this passive, “humanized” Medea to exist as anything but a victim in a system in which discourses of gendered power are operable and inescapable.

In the prologue to this novel Wolf frames her readers’ understanding of this text as an act of redemptive storytelling in which the true story of Medea will be revealed. Wolf writes: “Wir sprechen einen Namen aus und treten, da die Wände durchlässig sind, in ihre Zeit ein, erwünschte Begegnung, ohne zu zögern erwidert sie aus der Zeittiefe heraus unseren Blick. Kindsmörderin? Zum erstenmal dieser Zweifel” (9). From the very beginning of the text, the narrator offers her readers the opportunity to accompany her on a journey of time travel through which they will begin to doubt even the most established plot points of the Medea story, including Medea’s killing of her children. Readers are asked to consider how they would feel about a Medea, who is not a fictional character, but rather, a real woman standing in front of us
and sharing her life experiences. The narrator wonders if this positioning would not force us to question everything about the way in which this story has previously been told. If we acknowledge Medea’s humanity, what then? Wolf’s Medea learns the hard way that, as Judith Butler contends, “what I can “be,” quite literally, is constrained in advance by a regime of truth that decides what will and will not be a recognizable form of being” (Account 22). Particularly since she is a mythological character, Medea is what we make her. Merely rewriting mythology is typically not very jarring because we are simply substituting one fiction for another. However, by rewriting this myth as history, Wolf forces us to engage with questions of accuracy, an accuracy that is ultimately indeterminate because of the fictional nature of the characters.

In the prologue, the narrator takes it upon herself to change the “regime of truth” surrounding this story, a task that, when one considers the deep and rich history of mythological stories, is easier said than done. As the title of Nikolaus Ioannis Koskinas’s article about this text prompts us: “Ist eine Medea ohne Kindermord überhaupt denkbar” (91)? Instead of arguing, as Koskinas does, that Wolf’s text envisions a new model of femininity that no longer necessitates the killing of her children, I will argue that instead of having Medea the character enact her personal revenge against Jason, Wolf transfers Medea’s violence to herself as author. By imagining a real, historical Medea Wolf gives herself the ability to aggressively narrate this story in defiance of how it has traditional been told, in defiance of the (patriarchal) power structures that say “this is the story of Medea and there can be no other.” Wolf skillfully plays with our understanding of both fiction and historical truth in order to give herself the authority to imagine the voices of a multiplicity of outsiders and present them to her readers.

Mythological stories and their repetitive adaptation draw out questions about the inheritance of particular narratives. In Wolf’s text, the historical Medea that Wolf creates suffers
not just initially at the hands of the people in power in Corinth, but into the present because of the lie about her that is passed down through the generations. There are power structures that control how this trans-generational storytelling progresses and how stories, particularly mythological ones, thereby shape our view of both past and present events. As the first book published by Wolf after it was revealed that she had served as an informant for the Stasi, numerous critics have written about Medea. Stimmen as Wolf’s attempt to redeem herself and to justify her own past behavior. When Medea. Stimmen was first published in 1996, many of the book reviews in German newspapers argued that this novel was Wolf’s attempt to defend herself and her actions in the DDR (see for example Volker Hage’s review in der Spiegel or Thomas Anz’s review in the Süddeutsche Zeitung). Literary critics, including Georgina Paul, Liliana Mitrache, Peter Arnds, and Robert Pirro took up this line of argumentation to suggest that this text is actually a way for Wolf to grapple with her various struggles and disappointments regarding German Reunification. There is indeed a convincing argument to be made that Wolf sets up Colchis, Medea’s homeland, to represent the DDR and Corinth to represent the capitalist West. Transforming what in Euripides is a question of racial otherness into a question of economics and politics, Wolf’s Medea describes to her mother how capitalist Corinth “ist besessen von der Gier nach Gold” (Wolf 36). In addition, Jason describes Colchis as “diese östlichste, fremdeste Küste“ and „ein barbarisches Land” (Wolf 44). However, in my reading, I will focus on what this historical context means for questions of storytelling. After Reunification, Wolf experienced her own battle with the stories told about her and was concerned about how she would be remembered. Therefore, it is not surprising that she would want to rage against the power structures that determine how an individual’s story is remembered. By telling Medea’s story with this series of voices, rather than just one unified voice, Wolf tries to give outsiders the
opportunity to tell their own stories, even if this means violently rupturing everything that we may think that we know about Medea, or mythological storytelling more broadly.

My intervention into the understanding of Wolf’s text as an engagement with her DDR past is to demonstrate how these questions about the power structures inherent in storytelling also relate to broader discourses about motherhood and inheritance in the work of contemporaneous feminist theorists, such as Luce Irigaray. Medea. Stimmen ingeniously links the ability (or lack thereof) of mothers to raise children who are able to resist the oppressive law of the father to Wolf’s own post-Reunification dilemmas. The question of inheritance and what gets passed down from one generation to the next is, in my view, central to Wolf’s text both in terms of its form and its content. The voices Wolf draws out in this text purport to give readers access to a different Medea story, one that is more accurate than the one we have inherited. Not only that, but they also stretch the form of the novel to its breaking point by pushing this work in the direction of more theatrical genres. Medea’s downfall within the text is precipitated, in part, by her failure to inherit the proper abilities from her parents, which would allow her to assimilate into the Corinthian way of life and to interact appropriately with the Corinthian power structure. In Wolf’s text, I argue, the details of Medea’s inheritance are critical to understanding how this text engages with questions of gendered storytelling. For Wolf’s Medea, it is the skills, attitudes, and legacies\(^\text{16}\) that she inherits from her parents that trap her in the position of the victim within Corinthian society.

Based on this story of inheritance alone, the implications for female subjectivity and agency in this novel are extremely bleak. Wolf transforms the Medea story from a story of revenge (and therefore a certain degree of re-empowerment) to a story of a permanently

\(^\text{16}\)As previously mentioned, in Euripides’s Medea one would also have to include race in this list of inherited traits. However, Wolf finds it necessary to leave this factor out of her text almost entirely in order to focus on her own political and personal concerns about German Reunification.
oppressed woman caught in a cycle of victimization from which she cannot escape. However, as we saw in her prologue, Wolf does provide a space for partially overcoming this victimized status by shifting the power and violence of this story onto the act of narration itself. Wolf asserts herself when she engages in the authorial act of recovering this “authentic” Medea story. Wolf’s text builds off of the idea that in writing this book, Wolf is able to redeem Medea as a figure by setting the record straight about her story. Although, Medea may have been victimized by slander and lies in the past, the contemporary female author will use her narrative agency to pull Medea’s real story out of the annals of time and (re)present her to us in a way that is more authentic. However, this authorial agency only comes at the expense of her character, thereby implicating Wolf in the same hierarchies of storytelling she is trying to escape. In what follows I first outline the role of both maternal and paternal inheritance in Medea’s victimization before examining Wolf’s own act of feminist narration more carefully.

**Maternal Inheritance**

Most versions of the Medea story describe Medea’s lineage as linking the aristocracy of Colchis with the gods. Medea is described as the daughter of the king of Colchis, Aeëtes, and his wife Eidya. Aeëtes’s exact lineage varies depending on which sources one reads, but when Medea’s extended family is brought up, it is most often to emphasize her connection with the sun god Helios, supposedly her paternal grandfather, and the nymph/sorceress Circe, her aunt. Although Circe does make a brief appearance in Wolf’s text, overall Wolf deemphasizes Medea’s connection to the magic and intervention of the gods in order to foster an image of Medea as a natural healer, rather than a witch. Instead of this magical heritage, in *Medea. Stimmen* Medea inherits a set of domestic and medicinal skills from her mother, which ultimately hinders her ability to assimilate into Corinthian culture, marking her as a permanent outsider.
In order to help me talk about gendered inheritance in this text, I turn to Luce Irigaray’s 1981 article in *Signs* “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other.” In this essay Irigaray speaks from the perspective of a child caught between her mother and her father. The girl debates who she should emulate and identify with, ultimately concluding that her greatest desire is to maintain her bond with her mother, but not at the expense of her mother’s own subjectivity. For instance, at the end of her essay Irigaray’s young female narrator claims that, “what I wanted from you, Mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive” (“One Doesn’t” 67). This call for equality, this call for both mother and daughter to exist on the same plane together, not in competition, but in harmony, forms the foundation for Irigaray’s essay in which she investigates the strain put on the mother-daughter relationship by the fact that the mother, because of her own position as a victim within patriarchal society, cannot give her daughter the freedom that she desires. There is no unity or harmony in this picture, only a separation between mother and daughter that can never fully be breached. Because of this divide between the female victim and the male perpetrator of violence the mother herself has no independent identity, and so she tries to recapture that identity in her daughter: “You wanted me to grow up, to walk, to run in order to vanquish your own infirmity” (Irigaray “One Doesn’t” 64). However, this effort fails because the mother is in no position to give her daughter any of these freeing abilities: “With your milk, Mother, I swallowed ice. And here I am now, my insides frozen. And I walk with even more difficulty than you do, and I move even less” (Irigaray “One Doesn’t” 60). According to Irigaray, this immobility, this inability to establish an independent, individual identity for oneself, is the foundational inheritance passed down from mother to daughter. There is no avoiding it and it is always bittersweet, just as the infant in Irigaray’s essay is both nourished and paralyzed by her mother’s milk.
In her novel Wolf interrogates this same dynamic of motherly inheritance, coming to conclusions similar to Irigaray’s in terms of the inevitability of this inheritance and the, often paralyzing, form it takes. However, Wolf adds a dimension of cultural specificity to this discussion, which puts some pressure on Irigaray’s notion of a general, all-inclusive mother-daughter inheritance. In her first monologue, Medea talks directly to her mother, speaking about all of the important skills that she learned from her, most of which revolve around traditional domestic tasks. For example, she begins a description of a day in her childhood saying, “ich ziehe das weiße Kleid an, das ich selbst gewebt und genäht habe, wie du es mir beigebracht hast” (Wolf 15). Medea also learns healing skills from her mother that are slightly more specialized and even border on the magical. For instance, she describes how her mother also taught her to read palms saying, “[du hast] mir meine Hände dicht vor die Augen gehalten und mir die Linien in den Handflächen gezeigt, zuerst die linke, dann die rechte, wie verschieden, du hast mich gelehrt, sie zu lesen” (Wolf 13). This lesson in palm reading has increased symbolic significance because Medea’s mother imparts this knowledge to her after she menstruates for the first time and becomes sick.¹⁷ Medea’s mother, therefore, appears to impart these skills to her daughter because she thinks that they will help to empower her, that they will help her to overcome the difficulties, both physical and emotional, that come along with being a woman. Just like the mother in Irigaray’s essay, however, it is precisely in her efforts to set her daughter free, to nourish her, that she opens her daughter up to victimization.

Once Medea arrives in Corinth her skills as a natural healer become an immediate liability. For example, King Creon’s head astronomer Akamas describes being taken aback when a very pregnant Medea walks off of the boat in Corinth declaring that, “Solange eine Frau kalte

¹⁷In the text, Medea emphatically claims that her menstruation and her illness are not connected to one another. As readers we may be skeptical about the truth of this claim, but even if we take Medea at her word, it is still clear that her mother uses this lesson in palm reading to try to empower her daughter in a difficult situation.
Füße hat, geht die Geburt nicht los” (Wolf 111). Her very first words in Corinth mark Medea from the start as a woman who knows more than she should, as a woman who knows, at least to some extent, how to take control of her own body and health. The threat that she poses because of her medicinal skills only continues to grow from this moment onwards, culminating in her being blamed for carrying a disease that she is actually trying to cure. As Medea’s friend Leukon, describes: “Medea hat in diesen Wochen mehr als jeder andere getan, die Kranken verlangen nach ihr, sie geht zu ihnen. Aber viele Korinther behaupten, sie ziehe die Krankheit hinter sich her. Sie sei es gewesen, die der Pest gebracht habe” (Wolf 170). In trying to use the healing skills she inherited from her mother to help the Corinthians, Medea ends up being misunderstood and blamed for the illness. Because of the cultural differences between Colchis and Corinth, Medea’s maternal inheritance is not empowering. Instead, it puts her in the position of becoming a scapegoat for all that is going wrong in Corinth.

This reading of the way Medea’s actions are misinterpreted and falsely judged by the Corinthians is further supported by Leukon’s explanation for why Medea is so easily turned into a scapegoat. He links Medea’s victimization to a failed or lacking maternal inheritance when he describes how:

Irgend etwas fehlt dieser Frau, was wir Korinther alle mit der Muttermilch einsaugen, das merken wir gar nicht mehr, erst der Vergleich mit den Kolchern und besonders mit Medea hat mich darauf gestoßen, es ist ein sechster Sinn, eine feine Witterung für die kleinsten Veränderungen der Atmosphäre um die Mächtigen, von der wir, jeder einzelne von uns, auf Leben und Tod abhängig sind. (Wolf 158)

Because she has a mother who was not brought up in the cultural context of Corinth, Medea lacks the same survival strategies that those native to Corinth received from their mothers, a skill, symbolically at least, transmitted through the primal act of breast feeding. Just as in Irigaray’s essay, it is the mother’s milk that initially nourishes, but then goes sour. Medea does
not have an innate sense of how to navigate the political conditions in Corinth and, therefore, her status as both a racial and a cultural outsider makes her an easy target for those looking to cement their own power. Just as much as her status as a woman is limiting, so too is her status as a foreigner. Furthermore, it is impossible for Medea to overcome this status because these conditions derive from Medea’s maternal inheritance. Wolf agrees with Irigaray that there is something inevitable and paralyzing about the nature of maternal inheritance within a patriarchal system. However, Wolf reminds us that this powerlessness may also be culturally contingent and reveal itself differently within different cultural contexts.

**Paternal Inheritance**

On the other hand, paternal inheritance operates in the same way no matter what the cultural context. As Medea follows Creon’s wife, Merope, into the catacombs where she discovers Iphinoe’s bones, she describes her ability to move silently saying, “du hast mir sehr früh diese Art der Bewegung beigebracht, Mutter, die aus winzigen Nichtbewegungen besteht […] ich brauche das in meines Vaters Palast, sagtest du, ehe ich verstand, warum” (Wolf 22). The ability to avoid being seen or heard is Medea’s only way to limit the amount to which she is a victim of paternal power. Just as being able to move silently was an asset in her father’s palace, it is also useful to her as she discovers the bloody secret that is literally buried within the foundation of the Corinthian power structure. Although she does not understand at the time of the lesson, she realizes soon enough the often deadly consequences of drawing too much attention from powerful men.

The father for Irigaray is a figure who naturally draws the attention of the child because of his power and independence. According to Irigaray, the primary difference between what the mother offers and what the father offers to the infant is a difference between closing off or
plugging up the body and opening it up or leaving it exposed. In describing the affects associated with breastfeeding Irigaray’s infant narrator says, “I want no more of this stuffed, sealed up, immobilized body. No, I want air” (“One Doesn’t” 62). Instead of being filled, the child desires to be porous and exposed, not initially realizing what this means for her as a woman in a society dominated by men. Almost as an act of rebellion against the mother’s efforts to fill her, the infant threatens to reject her mother saying, “I’ll turn to my father. I’ll leave you for someone who seems more alive than you. For someone who doesn’t prepare anything for me to eat. For someone who leaves me empty of him, mouth gaping on his truth. I’ll follow him with my eyes, I’ll listen to what he says, I’ll try to walk behind him” (Irigaray “One Doesn’t” 62). The daughter wants to follow in her father’s footsteps because she recognizes that he has a kind of energy and power that her mother does not. In trying to emulate him, her senses come alive as she sees, hears, and feels, having her first experiences of contact with the world outside of herself.

While the infant may make some initial progress towards independence and establishing herself as a subject by trying to follow the father, unfortunately for her, this kind of power and independence is ultimately the inheritance that the father gives to his sons, not to his daughters. Eventually, the daughter will realize, as the infant narrator of Irigaray’s text eventually does, that like the mother: “I, too, am captive when a man holds me in his gaze; I, too, am abducted from myself. Immobilized in the reflection he expects of me. Reduced to the face he fashions for me in which to look at himself” (Irigaray “One Doesn’t” 66). The paternal inheritance given to daughters is again an inheritance of paralysis and entrapment. Instead of being immobilized by her mother’s attempts to live through her, the female child is now fixed in place by the gaze of her father and the expectations of the male power structure. She becomes a canvas on which her father can see himself and his desires reflected and she becomes a tool to be used by her father to
maintain his position. Ironically, all of this happens at the same moment that the daughter is forced to take on the role of the mother herself, thereby repeating the cycle of paralyzing maternal inheritance she tried to remove herself from in the first place. Within the system of power as it is, there is no way out of this cycle. According to Irigaray, with each successive generation this same pattern is re-inscribed on the daughter. Women are locked into a cycle in which they can never overcome the male power structure as mothers or as daughters, a condition that only exacerbates the tension in the relationship between mothers and their children.

In Wolf’s text, this cycle of paralyzing inheritance is deeply tied to the maintenance of royal lineages, often at the expense of mothers and daughters, but also to some degree as we see with Medea’s brother, at the expense of sons as well. Medea spends a great deal of time in her monologues considering the similarities between her brother’s murder and the murder of Iphinoe, Creon’s other daughter. Medea reflects time and time again on the experience of following Merope into the catacombs to discover Iphinoe’s bones. Her response to discovering the secret of Iphinoe’s death is visceral and emotional. She describes feeling the bones of the dead girl for the first time saying:

> An der Stelle, an der Merope gehockt hatte, ließ ich mich auf alle viere nieder und kroch hinüber zu der Wand, auf die die Königin gestarrt hatte, ertastete mit widerstrebenden Fingern die tiefe Einbuchtung im Stein und fand, wovor ich mich gefürchtet hatte, steiß einen Schrei aus, der in dem Höhlensystem widerhallte. (Wolf 23)

After her encounter in the catacombs, Iphinoe haunts Medea’s thoughts and she, like Merope, finds the knowledge of the lengths to which the leaders of Corinth have gone to ensure their power difficult to live with. As Medea describes: “[Ich] kann seitdem an nichts anderes denken als an diesen schmalen kindlichen Totenschädel, diese feinknochigen Schulterblätter, diese zerbrechliche Wirbelsäule, ach. Die Stadt ist auf eine Untat gegründet” (Wolf 23). The detail with which Medea repeatedly remembers this scene is striking and confirms its importance in
terms of her understanding of her position within Corinthian society. Over and over again, Medea thinks back to the intimacy of this moment in which she touches Iphinoe’s skeleton, a physical representation of the sacrifices required to maintain the order of the state.

Georgina Paul argues that both Iphinoe’s death and Medea’s eventual banishment from Corinth represent “die Verdrängung des Weiblichen” because both women threaten to reveal the violence of the patriarchal system (231). Medea herself feels that rather than her own banishment, Iphinoe’s death is more closely tied with the fate of Medea’s brother, challenging Paul’s notion that the system of patriarchal power only serves to hurt women. Medea, just like the daughter in Irigaray’s theoretical work, is paralyzed when she is forced to deal with the emotional ramifications of the deeds of these royal fathers, both King Creon, and her own father King Aeëtes. Medea almost immediately makes the connection between the reasoning behind Iphinoe’s death and the death of her own brother. She even goes so far as to say that Iphinoe is actually a truer sister to her brother than she ever could be because of their similar fates. For example, as she again relives the experience of touching Iphinoe’s bones she describes how:


Medea’s direct repetition of language when describing the bones is one indication of her inability to move on from this knowledge. Interestingly, these bones, these physical signs of the unspeakable sacrifices made to maintain patriarchal power, take on a kind of mythic quality in that Medea continues to repeat the telling of her encounter with them. In addition, the connection that she draws between Iphinoe and her own brother, both killed in order to maintain their fathers’ power, demonstrates the uncanny similarities between how male power functions in both
Colchis and Corinth. Unlike the domestic and medicinal skills of her maternal inheritance, the culture of violence inherited from the father does not seem to have the same kind of culturally contingent elements. Just as the myth can be repeated and adapted for different historical moments and places, the bones of the child sacrificed for power link Colchis and Corinth together in a male-dominated power structure from which there is ultimately no escape.

The similarities between them are so stark that Medea’s emotional responses to the death of her brother and the death of Iphinoe become indistinguishable from one another. Her tears flow for both of them simultaneously because their deaths were part of the same system of paternal violence. Again, this sentiment, like Medea’s description of the bones, is repeated multiple times in almost the same language. For instance a few pages after the passage above, Medea declares that, “Sie hatten Korinth retten wollen. Wir hatten Kolchis retten wollen. Und ihr, dieses Mädchen Iphinoe und du, Absyrtos [Medea’s brother], ihr seid die Opfer. Sie ist mehr deine Schwester, als ich es je sein kann” (Wolf 106). Just like the cycles of victimization and paralysis highlighted by Irigaray, Medea’s memory keeps circling back to these two acts of patriarchal violence. The force of these stories takes over her mind and keeps her trapped in their repetition. There is no relief from these physical signs of oppression that overwhelm Medea mentally.

Ultimately, in Wolf’s text, as in Irigaray’s, the primary inheritance that is passed down from fathers to their daughters is the knowledge that their lives are an expendable resource to be used in support of masculine power. After all, as Jason describes, the power structure in Corinth is always to some degree based on the ability to control women: “Ich habe verstanden. So ist es gemeint. Wir sollen die Weiber nehmen. Wir sollen ihren Widerstand brechen. Nur so graben wir aus, was die Natur uns verliehen hat, die alles überspülende Lust” (Wolf 208). Jason clearly
buys into the idea that he has a natural right to power and a natural right to women’s bodies. Even though some women, like Medea, may be able to see this power structure for what it is, both Wolf and Irigaray suggest that because these conditions have been naturalized through mythology, escaping this cycle of violence is difficult, if not impossible.

**Total Victimhood and Authorial Agency**

If it is impossible to escape these cycles of inheritance and the repetition of traumatic stories, what can one ever really do to initiate change within this system? Critics who have written about *Medea. Stimmen* are divided in terms of how much autonomy and agency they are justified in affording Wolf’s Medea. Some, such as Britta Kallin and Nikolaos Koskinas, argue that, at least by the end of the text, Wolf’s Medea has become “ein autonomes Subjekt, das konsequent hinter seinen Entscheidungen steht und das Schicksal alle Frauen und das eigene durchschauen kann” (Koskinas 99). While it is true that by the end of the novel Medea has uncovered, literally in the case of Iphinoe’s bones, some uncomfortable truths about the way her society works, I am skeptical about how much this really implies that she has become an autonomous subject. As other critics, such as Liliana Mitrache, have argued, the realization that you are oppressed does not necessarily make you any less so. Therefore, Wolf’s Medea is and remains a victim. For example, Mitrache writes that, “Medea scheint in Wolfs Roman zu einer Opferfigur reduziert worden zu sein, eine Märtyrerin, welche die Ungerechtigkeiten, denen sie ausgesetzt ist, ohne großen Widerstand zu leisten, akzeptiert” (212). I agree with Mitrache’s assessment of Medea’s victim status, but want to extend this line of critique to consider how Wolf as author also plays a role in the oppression of her own character.

Wolf’s Medea, herself, articulates a binary between perpetrators and victims, suggesting that there is no middle ground when it comes to these terms. As she speaks to her dead brother,
she remarks that, “Auf dieser Scheibe, die wir Erde nennen, gibt es nichts anderes mehr, mein lieber Bruder, als Sieger und Opfer” (Wolf 106). From Medea’s perspective at least, there is no alternative to victimhood if one is not born into a position of power. While Medea may be able to see and understand her fate at the end of the text, this knowledge alone is not enough to drive her towards any kind of effective action. Although she may understand why she is victimized, this does not mean that she has any power or even any will to change her situation and fight back against her own inherited fate. Instead, her final monologue ends is a sense of hopelessness and despair. Wolf, as the author of this text, is left with the task of redeeming Medea centuries later.

In order to contextualize Medea’s status as an unquestioned and therefore, fully sympathetic victim in this text I will first examine how Medea is victimized by other women and then how she ultimately accepts her own victimhood.

Although Wolf tries to demonstrate her support of Medea by redeeming her story, there is no sense of solidarity amongst the female characters within this text (a distinction that will become important when we get to the collaborative agency exhibited by characters in Loher’s play). Other women like Agameda and Glauke contribute in their own ways to Medea’s mistreatment, even though they are also, to a lesser extent, victimized by the power structure in Corinth. In her monologue, for example, Agameda speaks about how good it feels to be useful to powerful men like Akamas and describes how she uses whatever limited powers of persuasion she can to attach herself to powerful men. As she states, the world of Corinth is one in which, “Jede Frau nutzt die Gaben, die sie hat, um einen Mann an sich zu fesseln. Turin hat mir den Weg ins Königshaus geöffnet, Presbon zeigt mir den Weg, mich an Medea zu rächen” (Wolf 85). Agameda needs men, and needs to prove herself useful to them, in order to have any chance of success in her own plans of revenge against Medea. The implication of Agameda’s self-
reflection here is that it is in part because Medea is unwilling to play this game, that she so easily becomes a scapegoat. As Agameda articulates, it is Medea’s lack of ruthlessness that puts her in a victimized position: “Medea in ihrer Verblendung setzt ja auf die Stärken der Menschen, ich setze auf ihre Schwächen” (Wolf 79). Medea gains nothing by trying to play to people’s strengths and by trying to lift them up along with herself. Medea does not recognize, as Agameda and Irigaray do, that between two women there always seems to be one who gains life, power, and/or autonomy at the expense of the other.

In this vampyric system, even when Medea does have allies, the system of power remains too big to fight, even for the men who benefit from it. Leukon, Medea’s ally, becomes emotional as he realizes that there is nothing he can do to stop the tide of events from turning against Medea saying, “Medea ist verloren. Sie schwindet. Vor meinen Augen schwindet sie, und ich kann sie nicht halten” (Wolf 153). He fluctuates back and forth between feelings of powerlessness, as in his statement above, and feelings of guilt, for example, when he bemoans the fact that “Auch ich habe nichts getan, um sie zu retten” (Wolf 213). Leukon’s statements in which he tries to absolve himself from his feelings of guilt echo those of Jason who at one point remarks that, “Nichts von allem, was geschehen ist, habe ich gewollt. Aber was hätte ich tun können. Sie hat sich selber ins Verderben gestürzt” (Wolf 201). In Wolf’s text Jason emerges as surprisingly sympathetic to Medea, despite the fact that he is still willing to betray her and marry Glauke. Unexpectedly, Medea’s real battle in Medea. Stimmen is primarily with the astronomer Akamas and her former husband can actually be seen as a kind of weak ally. It is clear that these men, while they benefit from the gendered power binary in Corinthian society, are also themselves trapped within this power structure. They are unable to help those who are victimized by the system, even if they wanted to do so. By including these examples, Wolf suggests that the
differences between male and female agency in Corinth may be more a matter of degrees, rather than an all or nothing, gender-based distinction.

Most unsettling of all, Jason’s insinuation that Medea contributes to her own downfall is supported by the rest of the text. Medea’s victimization is helped along not only by the men and women around her, but also by her own acceptance of this status. As the anger of the mob grows, Medea’s resistance to it diminishes. She accepts, perhaps too easily, that there is nothing she can do to quiet the mass of people gathering against her. As she rather matter-of-factly states, “Die Menge suchte nach Opfern, um ihren Rachedurst zu stillen” (Wolf 189). She feels that her imprisonment is inevitable saying, “So hat es kommen müssen” (Wolf 179) and argues that she no longer has any influence at all over the direction of her own life saying, “Alles lief nach einen Plan ab, auf den ich keinen Einfluß mehr hatte” (Wolf 196). These are not the statements of an autonomous subject setting herself up in resistance to the mob and fighting for justice. Wolf’s Medea presents herself as a figure who calmly accepts the imposed justice system without defiance. She complies with her own role as victim to a degree that seems at odds with Wolf’s efforts to present her to us as a more authentic and human Medea-figure, as someone who actually lived and whose true story we as readers are able to recover with Wolf’s help.

It is only after her children are killed that Medea begins to regret this calm acceptance of her fate. At the very end of the text, Medea finally tries to do something in her own defense when she makes a feeble attempt to curse the people of Corinth. Medea rails against the people who have ruined her life and killed her children, but unfortunately Wolf has already stripped her of the magical powers that would make this threat an effective form of revenge. In other versions of the Medea story, this threat would indeed be sinister and worth taking seriously. However, Wolf’s Medea is only a natural healer and so she can only really play at cursing the Corinthians.
The impotence of Wolf’s Medea is most striking in this final moment, which ends in despair rather than triumph. Instead of heading off to the sanctuary of the court of Aegeus, Wolf’s Medea has nowhere to go as she laments: “Wohin mit mir. Ist eine Welt zu denken, eine Zeit, in die ich passen würde. Niemand da, den ich fragen könnte. Das ist die Antwort” (Wolf 224). Medea is out of time and place and she has seemingly lost everything, including the right to control how her own story is told (feelings that potentially mirrors those of Wolf, who, as she writes this novel, faces life in a new country that misunderstands her past actions).

Wolf’s Medea is truly victimized from all sides within the world of this text. She suffers at the hands of a maternal inheritance that leaves her ill equipped to assimilate into Corinthian society. She suffers at the hands of the men in her life, the women in her life, and even at her own hand, in that she does nothing to fight back against the mob that will eventually rob her of her children. She even suffers at the hands of her author because of Wolf’s decision to make her a completely blameless and passive bystander to her own destruction. Wolf’s redemptive project requires that Medea maintain a status of perfect victimhood in order to keep the full sympathy of the readers of this novel. Wolf’s Medea simply lies down and accepts her fate, rather than fighting back in any way, let alone through the extreme means of child-murder. In Wolf’s understanding of this story, Medea’s act of vengeance is actually a further source of her victimization. By trying to correct this one source of victimization and relieve Medea of the responsibility for murdering her children, Wolf piles even more sources of oppression onto her character.

Wolf wants to draw our attention to the ways in which Medea is victimized by the gendered and unequal distribution of the power to write and interpret history. In her book about Christa Wolf’s relationship to time Heike Polster argues that, “Wolf calls for a new way of
writing that does not accept any topics or materials as predetermined. She contests reality as already pre-interpreted” (24). Polster contends that, Wolf tries to open up history and as we see in Medea. Stimmen, mythology, to new, previously unthinkable possibilities. Polster is right to suggest that one of Wolf’s goals in her writing is to uncover “different, artificial, veiled and repressed relationships to the past” with which to challenge established conventions (Polster 81). However, it is important to also think critically about the power and agency that Wolf affords herself as author through this act of challenging established narratives. When Polster ultimately argues that Wolf employs a heterochronic temporal scheme in her writing, i.e. one that reveals the extent to which “the present is understood as a “simultaneity of stories-so-far” that demands to be read as a complex textual matrix of interrelated connections” (Polster 105), it is clear that she has not taken works like Kassandra (1983) and Medea. Stimmen fully into account. In Medea. Stimmen, for example, Wolf does not merely attempt to present the culmination of a network of Medea stories in order to create a Medea for the present. Her efforts are not to synthesize, but to expunge the Medea stories of the past in order to create space for her more “accurate” and ideally more feminist, history of Medea. In addition to the sorrow that she feels for her children, at the end of Wolf’s text Medea is also particularly concerned with the way in which her story will be told to future generations. She knowingly describes the smear-campaign that will ensue against her saying, “Sie sorgen dafür, daß auch die Späteren mich Kindsmörderin nennen sollen” (Wolf 224). Although Medea herself is powerless to change her fate and the way that she will be represented, Wolf tries to provide one hopeful voice in this regard, namely herself and her own work as the author of this text.

Koskinas argues that the Medea story in general is about confronting and breaking cultural taboos. According to him, this is why the figure of Medea generally makes people so
uncomfortable. In addition, he maintains that, “Medeas Rache [i.e. The killing of her children] ist
ihr einziger Ausweg, ihre einzige Möglichkeit, aus den Kreislauf der zerstörenden Geschichte,
aus der patriarchalischen Welt auszutreten und die für sie zugedachte soziale Rolle (dienende
Mutter und Ehefrau) zu verweigern” (Koskinas 95). Based on this understanding of the text,
when Wolf’s Medea is not the one to kill her children, one could argue that Wolf fails to
demonstrate the true depths of Medea’s desperation. However, it seems more likely to me that
Wolf has merely transcribed this same desperation onto the act of storytelling itself, placing the
author, rather than Medea in the position of the one who performs a desperate action in an
attempt to escape the cycle of patriarchal power. As Wolf describes in the prologue, “Das
Eingeständnis unserer Not, damit müßten wir anfangen” (Wolf 9). We must begin this act of
storytelling by uncovering our own suffering. The act of writing this book then becomes a
substitute for the murder of the children as a last ditch effort to break out of the established
patterns of power that characterize Euripides’s Medea myth. In addition to giving herself a
position of special access to this material, Wolf also puts herself as the author in the position of
the hero, who, along with her readers, is finally going to rescue Medea from her fate. In her
prologue to this text Wolf’s narrator describes how we as readers will somehow be able to warn
Medea about the way in which she has and will be misunderstood: “Wir müssen sie warnen.
Unsere Verkennung bildet ein geschlossenes System, nichts kann sie widerlegen” (Wolf 10).
Medea is warned about what is to come, but false judgments still keep her entrapped. Even by
telling Medea’s story in this way, Wolf is never really able to escape the power structures of
Euripides’s text and the process of mythmaking itself.

Initially, the structure of Wolf’s text gestures towards a more inclusive process of
storytelling in which multiple voices and perspectives are accounted for. After all, we as readers
are asked to contend with six total “Stimmen” and not just one. This series of monologues makes this novel almost theatrical in its engagement with this story, an innovation that puts pressure on the form of the novel, while re-inscribing the theatrical legacy of Euripides’s play. As Mitrache correctly points out, many of Wolf’s characters find themselves “in einer Art Selbstgespräch” and throughout the text we as readers gain access to the internal monologues of six different characters (Mitrache 210). If, as Butler writes, “narrative capacity constitutes a precondition for giving an account of oneself and assuming responsibility for one’s actions,” then it would seem that Wolf is trying to fictively give her characters a similar power of self-expression (Account 12). However, these are literary characters and not real people. Therefore, there is always an author behind these voices. Wolf privileges Medea’s voice above all others and thereby reinstates the hierarchies of storytelling (one narrating subject and a variety of described objects) that she initially sets out to avoid. In their monologues most of the characters maintain an interior monologue, talking about themselves in the first person. In addition to this kind of introspective monologue, Medea’s voice also seeks out contact with and addresses other figures, most notably her mother and her dead brother. It is through the ability of Medea (and Medea alone) to speak outside of herself, to talk to others as well as herself, that Wolf liberates and strengthens Medea’s voice, privileging it beyond the voices of the other characters. By refusing to exist in isolation, Medea’s voice aggressively breaks out of the confines of interior monologue and makes contact with both the living and the dead. Through her position as the author of this text, Wolf restores to Medea the power of communication, part of her humanity. If Medea has any power in this text, and she certainly does not have any that Wolf does not directly and explicitly create for her, it is in the way that her narrative voice has more options for its own expression than the other voices.
in this text. Ultimately though, instead of Medea, it is Wolf herself who is the heroine of this Medea story.

In Wolf’s version of the Medea story there is, despite the plurality of voices invoked by the title, little room for compromise and minimal room for multiple individuals to share the spotlight and to wield power together. As Butler warns, her “I,” the “I” of the author, has become “an instrument of that norm’s [the norm of mythological storytelling’s] agency” (Account 26). In order for Wolf as the author to emerge as a feminist hero, Medea’s agency has to be reduced and her status as a victim emphasized. This gesture is hopeful and empowering for 20th century feminist scholars and writers who were seeking to rewrite literary and political history and to (re)present the stories of the women who helped to shape European and American culture and literature. In addition, it is potentially empowering for Wolf herself, who may have felt trapped by the negative narratives that were being told about her with regard to her involvement with the Stasi. However, as I hope to have demonstrated through my discussion of Irigaray and the notions of maternal and paternal inheritance, this text does not provide a lot of hope for women who are not authors, for women who are the objects of stories rather than their narrators. While the multiple voices channeled by this text start to invoke a kind of freedom, this freedom is ultimately, a false one in terms of a broader, more inclusive feminist politics. Wolf suggests that paternal inheritance largely takes the same form, no matter what the cultural context, locking daughters into a cycle, which forces them to grow up into mothers who will in turn alienate and disempower their daughters, just as they were themselves oppressed. Unlike paternal inheritance, Wolf argues that maternal inheritance is more variable, more open to interpretation, more culturally contingent and therefore, more easily misinterpreted. However, it is only through Wolf’s authorial intervention that we as readers are given access to “die wilde Frau” (Wolf 10),
Medea. In Wolf’s text the narrator ultimately wields complete power over the victimized, narrated object of the story, thereby ironically realigning Wolf’s project with the oppressive model of mythmaking that she initially seeks to subvert. As Butler argues in Giving An Account of Oneself, since norms and subjects are intertwined, i.e. since speaking subjects come out of a historical context, “if there is any operation of agency or, indeed, freedom in this struggle, it takes place in the context of an enabling and limiting field of constraint” (19). In trying to set Medea free, Wolf encounters constraints due to the hierarchy automatically set up between author and character.

In conclusion I would like to return to the question of whether or not Wolf’s text qualifies as a recognizable adaptation of the Medea mythology because of the fact that Wolf’s Medea does not actually murder her children. If Medea’s identity is all about being a child-murderer, then Wolf’s Medea clearly does not qualify. However, if being Medea is about being a desperate mother running out of options in her attempt to secure a future for herself and her children, then Wolf’s Medea should be allowed to sit right alongside the Medeas of the past. Even though Wolf sets Medea up to be a completely different and more authentic Medea, Wolf’s Medea is not really as different as she initially appears. Even in not killing her children, Wolf’s Medea highlights the precarious position of mothers within a society that both needs them to reproduce, but which also does not want to see too much power escaping into the hands of women. In this respect, the final word, ironically, may belong to Creon’s daughter Glauke who describes how her feelings of hatred for Medea grow, despite the fact that Medea tries her absolute best to heal her: “Sie [Medea] sprach von Wiedergeburt. Es waren Tage voller Hoffnung, bis sie mich im Stich ließ, wie meine Mutter mich einst im Stich gelassen hat, es war das, was sie niemals hätte tun dürfen. Ich hasse sie” (Wolf 141). As Wolf’s Medea. Stimmen, and the story of Medea in
general, seem to prove, while we cannot live without mothers, we also cannot live without hating
and rejecting them for never doing enough to set us free from whatever ails us, be it actual
disease or spiritual discomfort. Our mothers can never give us enough and in trying they give us
too much, forcing us to turn to the violent law of the father, which only further entraps us within
a cycle of familial, political, and personal discontent. Wolf wants to believe that we can begin to
escape these conditions by writing ourselves out of them. Ultimately though, through that act of
writing Wolf finds herself right back where she started, replicating the power structures she
sought to use her writing to overcome.

MANHATTAN MEDEA

ἀλλ᾽ ἐσμὲν οίον ἐσμὲν, οὐκ ἐρω κακόν, γυναικεῖς.
Well, we women are, I will not say bad creatures, but we are what we are.18

In this line from Euripides’s Medea the title character articulates a very closed view of
what it means to be a woman. Women are what they are and there is nothing that they, or anyone
else, can do to change that. Within the context of the play, however, it seems fairly clear that
Medea does not really believe that this is true. She articulates this idea within a series of lies,
which she uses to trick Jason into believing that she is no longer angry about his betrayal. In this
scene that is full of deception, she uses the possibility that the category of woman might be a
fixed and stable thing to lull Jason into a false sense of security. Medea performs the role of a
passive and forgiving woman in order to set up its contrast, her violent revenge. In doing so, she
draws attention to the potential disconnect between what one does or says and who one is,
forcing us to question how identity categories form in the first place.

Christa Wolf’s impulse was to write a Medea story designed to change her readers’
perceptions of Medea. As I have demonstrated, she seeks to transform her readers’ image of

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18Euripides’s Medea, pages 364 and 365.
Medea from the vengeful monster of Euripides’s text into a misunderstood, herbal healer. In her play, *Manhattan Medea*, Dea Loher offers us not a more docile and victimized Medea, but rather an exaggerated and extremely violent one. Instead of taking away Medea’s capacity to perpetrate violence and replacing it with victimhood, Loher has her Medea perform violence on a grand scale, emphasizing the performative aspects of violence itself. Instead of changing Medea to fit more acceptable and normative ideas of what it means to be a good woman and mother and transferring aggression against the status quo over to the author, Loher pushes her Medea to the extreme, interrogating the implications of a world in which Euripides’s Medea is actually telling the truth, and women are what they are, unalterably and without question. This understanding of Medea again offers no real escape from the discourses and process of mythmaking that have come to define Medea as a character. Loher uses her self-reflexive and exaggeratedly performative Medea to reinforce for her readers a message that is similar to Wolf’s, namely that even though we are stuck with this story the way it is, it could have been otherwise. Even if we cannot fully escape it, the myth is mutable if we engage in a process of collective and collaborative agency and storytelling.

Loher’s play *Manhattan Medea* was written for the *Steirischer Herbst* avant-garde art festival in Graz, Austria, where it premiered under the direction of Ernst Binder in October 1999. Subsequently, it has been translated and performed in numerous countries. Most recently there have been productions in Germany (Stuttgart 2013), France (Paris 2009 and Marseille 2012), Greece (Athens 2013), and Canada (Quebec 2011), indicating an international and perhaps, slightly Francophone, interest in this material. In her play, Loher transplants the Medea story into a highly fictionalized version of contemporary, capitalist New York City. Although the time

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19 I am not sure what to make of the particular success of the French translation of this play, especially since I have not, as of yet, been able to see any live productions of it.
and place is altered drastically from the classical Medea story, the characters and their actions remain largely unchanged from the Euripides version. Medea is still betrayed by Jason and banished. She still kills her child and Jason’s new wife. King Creon takes the form of the Sweatshop Boss, a wealthy capitalist who has married off all of his daughters save one, but his actions and concerns in banishing Medea remain largely unchanged. Loher’s only major plot addition is a story that Jason tells, detailing his guilt for drowning his own mother in the process of escaping his war-torn, Eastern-European homeland. In addition, it comes out over the course of the play that Medea and Jason are responsible for killing Medea’s brother, due to a scarcity of food on their trip to the United States, a trauma that further unites them. These details make Jason’s betrayal sting even more because in Loher’s play he and Medea are both immigrant outsiders who have made brutal sacrifices in order to start a new life in America.

Loher’s cast of secondary characters is significantly unrecognizable from any previous version of the Medea story. This eclectic group includes the artist/doorman Velazquez (likely intended as a reference to the Baroque portrait artist Diego Velázquez, whose work was famously copied and adapted by such artists as Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali) and Deaf Daisy, a deaf transvestite. Both of these significant character additions represent the blurring of a certain kind of binary, Velazquez the binary between original and copy and Daisy the binary between male and female. It is through a critique of binaries (one might also include here the binary between East and West) that Loher’s play begins to advocate for a model of storytelling that is not based on a hierarchy of speaking subject and silent object. Instead, through the interaction of these characters, she generates collaborative models for action and representation.

Dea Loher is a feminist and a Marxist known for her politically engaged and often controversial plays. In her work she takes up a variety of themes and causes connected to the
political left including child abuse, sexual violence, unemployment/poverty, and the terrorist organization known as the *Rote Armee Fraktion* (RAF). Loher’s interest in socialism and Marxism makes her perspective on the process of German Reunification of particular interest. Unlike Wolf, who was from East Germany, Loher was born in West Germany, specifically Traunstein in Bavaria, so she has no Stasi history to contend with in her play. Nevertheless, she engages with the period of transition going on in Germany in the 1990s with a critical eye. A critique of the capitalist West is implicit in her adaptation of *Medea*, which she sets in a heavily fictionalized version of contemporary New York City.

Additionally, her ambiguous relationship to the pastiche and fragmentation of the postmodern theater as modeled by her teachers and contemporaries makes her work formally unique. In her extensive scholarly work on Loher, Birgit Haas, argues that instead of following the aesthetics of deconstruction and subject decentralization of her postmodern predecessor and teacher Heiner Müller, Loher’s work represents a new 21st century realism, which, in certain ways, harkens back to the realism of the Brechtian epic theater (Haas “Rekonstruktion” 280-282). According to Haas, Loher’s work, like that of Brecht, has a foundation in Marxist theory in that she attempts to offer her audience a “Gesellschaftskritik, die sich an den materiellen Verhältnissen entzündet” (Haas *Das Theater* 14). In her efforts to offer up a materialist critique of society, however, Loher does not abandon the effort to create individualized and psychologically complex characters. Loher’s innovation in the world of contemporary German theater, then, is to provide a space where the audience can sympathize with and feel close to the characters on stage, while also receiving an education in political issues through techniques of *Verfremdung*, such as highly structured scenes, self-reflexive plot lines, and characters who are

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20Loher’s 1993 play *Leviathan*, which rather directly meditates on the relationship between RAF members Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin, forms an interesting bridge to the third chapter of my dissertation in which I look specifically at films about the legacy of the RAF, focusing on Margarethe von Trotta’s *Die bleierne Zeit*. 
outsiders, themselves distanced from their own society (Haas “Rekonstruktion” 284). While we come to understand something about Loher’s characters psychologically, they are also postmodern in the sense that they resist easy categorization. For example, Deaf Daisy’s motivations to ruin the Sweatshop Boss are articulated as the result of both past individual trauma and her larger poverty and socio-economic class standing. Arguably, Loher’s work moves towards the melodramatic through this oscillation between poles. As Peter Brooks argues, one of the key features of melodrama is when dramatic interest is generated through the “violent oscillation” between polarized concepts, something we see in the content and form of Loher’s play (Brooks 93).

For Loher the audience both internal and external to the play is important because it is the audience, which ultimately helps to shape the story that is told to them. In other words, not only is Loher’s work itself a play performed for an audience, but it is also a series of performances by one character for the others. Judith Butler’s most cited and noteworthy contributions to the field of feminist theory are her notions of gender performativity and compulsory heterosexuality. In Manhattan Medea Loher builds on Butler’s arguments, applying these concepts more specifically to the literary realm. In the preface to Gender Trouble Butler asks, “Does being female constitute a “natural fact” or a cultural performance, or is its “naturalness” constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?” (viii). Nine years after the publication of Butler’s book, Loher considers a similar question in her reworking of the Medea material, albeit her line of questioning is less broad. She asks: Does being Medea, does being an othered, child-murdering, monster, constitute a inescapable and, therefore, “natural fact,” or is being Medea rather a cultural performance that can be manipulated by the author of a mythological adaptation to serve her own political ends?
In other words, Loher brings us back to the question that triggered my reading of adaptations of the Medea story in the first place: How does one contend with the necessity for both repetition and change in adaptations of mythological stories? Loher’s work forces her readers to confront the question of what it even means to play a role in the first place, to fit oneself into any kind of category through performative acts. Where Butler’s work thinks about the construction of the category of woman itself, Loher invites us to think more specifically about different female “types” and to consider how one performs as a wife, as a mother, and most uniquely, how one performs as a specific literary, mythological, or dramatic character. When talking about the call to give an account for oneself, Butler returns to her notion of performativity, writing that “an account of oneself is always given to another, whether conjured or existing, and this other establishes the scene of address as a more primary ethical relation than a reflexive effort to give an account of oneself” (Account 21). By making Medea perform for other characters, Loher highlights the ethical relations involved in performance and Medea’s efforts to understand who she is. In doing so, Loher is able to highlight the constructed nature, not just of gender or political actors, but of mythological figures as well.

In order to confront these traditional power structures and hierarchies Loher organizes her play around a series of performances by Medea for various other characters internal to the play. Loher’s Medea is just as violent as any monstrous Medea of the past, if not more so because she performs most of her acts of violence on stage rather than off it. Each of Medea’s acts of violence is presented as its own performance, directed towards a specific audience internal to the play and with a specific intention. Through these reflections on the act of performance itself, Loher critiques the very process of repeated mythmaking in which she herself engages by writing

\[\text{21 There is some precedent for having Medea commit acts of violence on stage, most notably in Seneca’s version of the story from around the year 50. However, the amount of violence that takes place on stage in Loher’s play stands in stark contrast to the majority of the stage and screen adaptations of this material.}\]
this play. Additionally, she adapts and complicates Butler’s notion of gender performativity by carving out a space for the performer to both experience and reflect upon her own act of performance. In doing so, Loher directly addresses the question of biological determinism with regards to sexual difference, equating this tension in feminist theory with the efforts of mythological protagonists (perhaps most famously Oedipus) to escape their fates. Loher offers us, through the concept of performance, the possibility of a cooperative agency between performer and audience that can and must serve as a substitute for the incapacity and/or failure of the individual to exhibit agency outside of their prescribed role(s). This collaboration does not provide a complete escape from the oppressive conditions inscribed by the repetitive discourse of mythology. However, it does allow us to start to challenge certain aspects of the status quo, including some of the hierarchies of storytelling that were so vexing for Christa Wolf.

Over the course of the play, Velazquez, Jason, and Daisy each serve as an audience for Medea’s calculated (and often violent) performances. By looking closely at how Medea’s performances change depending on the identity of her audience, the stakes of Loher’s political and literary project begin to come into focus. Because performance can and is tailored to its audience, it becomes difficult to think of the performer as a completely independent subject, acting in a way that asserts only their own individual agency. At the same time, it is only through her performances that Loher’s Medea is able to act in ways that establish and confirm any kind of subjective identity whatsoever. The only way that Medea can assert herself is through collaborative performance. She must recognize that her voice is not entirely her own and embrace the intrusion of an audience into her performance. By exposing the literary world of myth and the process of mythmaking to the same scrutiny and contingency that Butler’s theoretical work gives to gender, Loher exposes the way that gendered roles in literature and in
life become limiting for women. At the same time, Loher contends that it may be possible through performance to assert a productively queer and collective agency that starts to push beyond these binary categories, albeit without breaking them down entirely. Haas has cautioned against reading Loher primarily as a feminist author, arguing that it is materialism, which ultimately dominates her plays: “Vielmehr vertritt Loher die Position des feministischen Materialismus, d.h. die Performanz von Weiblichkeit ist mehr oder weniger offen an die soziale Situation der Figuren geknüpft” (Haas Das Theater 234). However, in my reading of Manhattan Medea I argue that, at least in Manhattan Medea, Loher’s engagement with feminist concerns is equal to if not greater than her concerns with regard to material culture and capitalism. In order to analyze this feminist critique, I look specifically at how Loher’s Medea performs for three different audiences internal to this play: Velazquez, Jason, and Deaf Daisy.

**Medea and Velazquez**

Through the interactions between Medea and the doorman/artist Velazquez, Loher directly confronts the notion of what it means for a work of art to be an original versus a copy of that original. In addition to considering the repetition inherent in the process of retelling mythological stories, Loher’s decision to take on this line of questioning gives us a model for thinking about the way that gender performativity plays out in the supposedly timeless landscape of mythology. One of the major concerns that Butler highlights at the beginning of Gender Trouble is that if we argue that gender is culturally constructed, we run the risk of merely replacing a “biology-as-destiny” mentality with a culture-as-destiny understanding of gender (8). Loher takes this idea of culture-as-destiny to its extremes through her Medea character, who over the course of the play, tries both to reject and to embrace the implications of her role and her name. Loher’s Medea is caught between the sense that her role as Medea is already laid out for
her and her desire to undermine and question the nature of this role, unmasking it for its constructedness. Loher compels her audience to ask questions about what this kind of identity/subjectivity crisis means for a literary character, who is herself a construction of someone else’s imagination, rather than a human being. Do we construct literary characters, particularly those with the long mythological history of Medea, in the same way that subjectivity is constructed by gender performance? Loher suggests that the two are comparable and therefore, subject to the same kind of scrutiny. Unlike in Wolf’s text, which seeks to create the illusion of a real Medea, Loher directly confronts Medea’s position as a mythological character. Furthermore, just as Butler asks questions about how gender constructs the subject, Loher asks questions about how literary history constructs the identity and subjectivity of characters themselves.

Before Loher’s Medea can even begin to establish herself as a subject, she needs to establish the roles that she can and cannot play, depending on her audience. The audience of Medea’s first performance is the doorman and painter, Velazquez. Instead of immediately revealing her identity to him, she presents herself as “Eine Diebin, Dealerin. Vielleicht nur Hure, harmlos” (Loher 9). Medea wants information about Jason and his new fiancée, Claire, but fears that if she reveals her true identity, the doorman will resist telling her the truth. Her efforts to perform believably as a normal figure from within this inter-city milieu actually goes too far in that Velazquez initially thinks that she is not quite human saying, “Als ich die Augen aufschlug in der Morgendämmerung, glaubte ich an ein Phantom” (Loher 9). The play veers into the melodramatic in this moment in which the attempt to name leads to “irresolvable conflict and contradiction” (Brooks 100). Medea, therefore, resists naming herself at all costs. Furthermore, Velazquez later mistakes Medea for a journalist, interested in uncovering some tabloid-ready information about the Sweatshop Boss and his family. Medea’s first performance in front of the
doorman repeatedly lacks conviction and never ends up being particularly persuasive. She is not good at pretending to be normal. For example, when Medea expresses a lack of knowledge about the weddings of the Sweatshop Boss’s other daughters Velazquez comments, “Hören Sie Ma’m, Sie sind gar nicht von der Presse, wie — sonst wüßten Sie doch Bescheid” (Loher 12). Medea cannot blend in with the other New Yorkers and she is forced to admit: “Ich bin nicht von hier” (Loher 12). Medea’s performance fails because it lacks specificity. In her efforts to merely be anybody other than herself, she cannot succeed in coming across as real or authentic. In other words, the character that she tries to play here is difficult to perform because that character has no backstory. It is impossible for Medea to convincingly play the role of essentially anyone who is not Medea. She might be able to speak like the every-woman and confuse Velazquez for a little while, but ultimately as Sebastian Wogenstein argues, even mastery of the language of the everyday person is not enough for Medea to achieve a “dauerhaften Aufenthalt in ihrer physisch wirklichen Welt” (303). At the end of this first scene, Medea, thankfully, gives up her failed attempt to perform the general role of the every-woman. However, she persists in her efforts to mold performative language and narration to her individual will and desires.

After Velazquez reveals that he sympathizes to some degree with the mother of Jason’s child, Medea asks him to fetch her husband saying: “Sagen Sie ihm— / Sagen Sie Jason— / Ich bin hier. / Seine Frau ist hier” (Loher 16). Importantly, Medea does not refer to herself by name throughout the entirety of this first scene. Even when she tells Velazquez who she is, it is not through her given name, but in terms of her position as Jason’s wife. It is as if Medea is still trying to find a way to be absolutely anyone other than Medea, anyone other than the monstrous, largely unsympathetic, child-murderer of Euripides’s play. She tries to establish herself as a presence in the text without having to attach herself to all of the implications that come from
being Medea, from being set on a course towards revenge, destruction, and violence.

Nevertheless, this course is ultimately unavoidable and since she cannot overcome it, she quickly learns to embrace it. As Stephanie Catani argues, “Sie versucht nicht, sich vom tradierten Mythos zu emanzipieren, sondern beruft sich konsequent auf diesen. Lohers Medea ist, was Medea immer schon war — und anders kann sie nicht sein” (326). At least in terms of her actions on stage, Medea must embrace her own Medea-ness, her own destiny as a perpetrator of violence and revenge. In doing so, she draws attention to the performativity and the constructedness of this role. While she might not be able to control the fact that she is Medea, she can control the manner in which she plays this role and even more importantly, through language-play and the act of performance itself, she can reshuffle the binaries between performer and audience, subject and object, original and copy. It might initially seem that Loher’s Medea makes a huge concession by virtue of the fact that she fulfills all of her audience’s expectations of violent revenge. However, as all of Medea’s performances attest, there is also space for collective subjectivity within these acts of performance and adaptation.

In his “art” Velazquez copies the work of the artist Diego Velázquez not in order to become a new Velázquez, but so that he will become the only Velazquez (Loher 11, Wogenstein 305). His goal, paradoxically, is to create a “Nachahmung, um unnachahmlich zu werden” (Wogenstein 306). Instead of trying to copy the emotional intentions of the original artist, Velazquez merely copies the forms that he sees, his own artistic/creative innovation being the act of copying itself. In order to become the artist left standing over the course of history, Velazquez teaches us that it is best not to add any of one’s own emotions to one’s art. This may explain why he prefers to let Medea replicate her vengeful path without any interference. He effectively absolves himself from the guilt of having to watch Medea suffocate her son with a garbage bag.
saying, “Ich kann keinen Abschied sehen” (Loher 60). Yet, it is actually his failure to watch over her that gives Medea the opportunity to kill her son in the first place. Her performance is too emotional for him to handle and to integrate into his worldview of emotionless reproduction. If Wogenstein is right and Medea’s subjectivity is characterized by the combination of both her “rationale Willen” and her “Affekte und die beschriebenen Zwänge” (Wogenstein 302), then she completely goes against Velazquez’s own artistic ideal of creating emotionless copies, designed to stand the test of time. Velazquez is the “Meister der Kopie” (Loher 11), and yet ironically, he cannot watch Medea’s reproduction, her Nachahmung of her most important action as Medea, the killing of her child. The added emotionality of the scene where Medea kills her son creates a glitch in the system of reproduction in which Velazquez engages, thereby proving that the process of mythmaking can never be without its own emotional and political registers. Velazquez’s copies of shapes and colors may stand the test of time, but when we copy stories and create mythologies this distance may be impossible to achieve.

Scholars including Catani and Wogenstein have drawn particular attention to the way that Velazquez’s copy of the Diego Velázquez painting The Infant Philipp Prosper (1659) transforms into Picasso’s recreation of another Diego Velázquez work, Las Meniñas (1957) inside of the fire that consumes the home of the Sweatshop Boss at the end of the play. This doubling or layering of copies is another way of understanding Loher’s critique of the process of mythmaking itself. Wogenstein finds this image at the end of the play to be crucial to understanding Loher’s self-reflection on the process of creating a copy/adapting older material. Wogenstein argues that fire symbolizes an authentic performance, in the sense that the physical changes caused by fire are undeniable and cannot be faked: “Das, was verbrennt, verwandelt sich im Verbrennen, wird

22Due to the potentially graphic nature of this scene the audience may wish that they had the same luxury.
zerstört und spielt nicht bloß sein Verbrennen” (Wogenstein 311). There is an ironic kind of authenticity in change, in alteration, because of the very fact that the changed object bears little to no resemblance to the original. The painting that disappears into the fire looks nothing like the painting that emerges out of it. As Haas articulates, the point here is that, “Aus einem Abbild kann in der Nachdichtung nicht nur stilistisch, sondern auch inhaltlich etwas völlig Neues hervorgehen” (Das Theater 259-260). Ironically, the best copy may be one that changes the original entirely and develops something completely new. This is part of what Loher sets out to do in her retelling of the Medea story. By copying Medea and having Medea copy previous versions of herself, albeit in an entirely new setting, Loher generates her own distinctive work of art. Both of the paintings in the play are copies, just copies of a different sort. Velázquez’s copy of the Velázquez painting duplicates the shapes and colors on the canvas as closely as possible. Picasso’s copy of another Velázquez painting is a reinterpretation of older material that is personalized to Picasso’s unique artistic style and his historical context. What emerges then from the fire of authenticity is not the work that most closely resembles the original visually, but the work that has taken the original as a starting point and imbued it with all of the artist’s own emotions and artistic vision. Therefore, in her process of self-reflection on the art of copying/adapting older works of art through the character of Velazquez, Loher argues that the most authentic copies are, surprisingly, those which stray the most from the original, the copies that most reflect the time period and individual style of the copier. Loher’s Medea must understand that not only is the most successful copy a subjective one, it is a collectively subjective one, which combines the interests and desires of a variety of individuals.
Medea and Jason

Jason is one of the characters with whom Medea shares this deep, collaborative bond. Together Jason and Medea have been through a number of traumatic experiences, including the death of Medea’s brother. In Loher’s version of this story, it is significant that both Medea and Jason are immigrants and therefore outsiders in the United States. Instead of that burden being placed solely on Medea, they share a bond forged by the sacrifices required to build a new life for themselves in a new country. Despite Jason’s efforts to deny this bond, their destinies are inevitably linked. According to Butler, in addition to being constructed through performance, subjectivity is also built through exclusion and rejection. For instance, much has been said in psychoanalysis about the rejection of the maternal body as part of the grounds for establishing subjectivity. As Butler explicates for us, scholars such as Julia Kristeva work from a foundation built by Lacan in which language itself represents a rejection of the maternal body because “language, in turn, structures the world by suppressing multiple meanings (which always recall the libidinal multiplicity which characterized the primary relation to the maternal body) and instating univocal and discrete meanings in their place” (Butler Gender 79). Multiplicity links back to the maternal, while clear expression from one voice or subject invokes the paternal. What does this rejection of the maternal body by adopting structured language mean for a figure, like Medea, who is now completely a mother and no longer a wife? Does she embrace or disavow this rejection of her body by her children (and by extension in this story, at least, her husband)? According to Butler, one answer can be found within Kristeva’s work when she argues that, “In effect, poetic language is the recovery of the maternal body within the terms of language, one that has the potential to disrupt, subvert, and displace the paternal law” (Butler

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23 Multiplicity is also a hallmark of the postmodern/the postmodern theater, indicating Loher’s indebtedness to these theories of performance at the same time that she is interested in challenging them.
However, Butler cautions that this argument, just like Wolf’s act of storytelling in *Medea. Stimmen*, merely reinstates that same paternal law that it tries to avoid. Butler’s primary critique of Kristeva is that, “her naturalistic descriptions of the maternal body effectively reify motherhood and preclude an analysis of its cultural construction and variability” (Butler *Gender* 80). Loher’s Medea follows through on Butler’s postmodern reading of Kristeva in that she inhabits the character of Medea, but she does so in a way that is also self-reflective. Medea performs the actions necessary to live up to her name, but she does so through a negotiation with her audiences internal to the play. This self-reflexivity is particularly apparent in her altered relationship to Jason, through which Loher complicates Butler’s sense that language from within the system cannot also be subversive, to a certain degree. Medea uses both performative actions and performative language in order to remind Jason of the bond they share as immigrants. Furthermore, by drawing attention not only to what they narrate, but how they narrate the traumatic events of their past, Loher aggressively challenges both her audience’s expectations and the gendered ways mythological stories are often told.

Although Medea’s introductory performance for Velazquez is, as she herself describes it, mostly harmless, this is not the case in her subsequent performances. Particularly where Jason is concerned, it is clear that self-directed violence is an important part of Medea’s communication strategy. Wogenstein argues that in the cases of both Medea and Jason, “die Selbstfindung erst durch den gleichzeitig stattfindenden Selbstverlust bedingt wird” (Wogenstein 300). However, I would like to argue that Medea and Jason’s tragic paths take on a slightly different trajectory in that their journeys of self-discovery are not necessarily based on a loss of self, but rather on the

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24Kristeva specifically argues that this occurs through semiotic language, i.e. “through rhythm, assonance, intonations, sound play, and repetition” (Butler *Gender* 82). Importantly, most of Medea’s performances in Loher’s play are physical and do not contain these elements. As we will see, the one exception to this is her narration of her brother’s death right before she kills her child. This kind of semiotic language will become more important in later chapters of my dissertation.
all-too-present and, on a certain level inescapable, roles that literary history has laid out for them. As soon as Jason enters the scene, violence cannot help but enter into the equation. After all, as Wogenstein points out, in almost all versions of the Medea story, including Wolf’s, “Männerfiguren zeichnen sich durch Skrupellosigkeit und kalkulierte Gewaltausübung zur Machtbefestigung aus” (310). What is significant here is the way that Medea, herself, adopts some of this violence (and directs it against herself) as a kind of alternative language to be used for communicating with Jason. Medea endeavors to speak with Jason on his own aggressive, masculine terms. By mimicking the violence she has witnessed, Medea tries to imagine a different future.

At first, the violence surrounding Jason and Medea’s relationship appears in the form of the memory of past violence. In one of Loher’s most significant alterations to the Euripides plot, Medea is quick to remind Jason of the fact that he drowned his own mother in order to save himself. In a performance of his own that is designed to directly parallel Medea’s killing of her son in terms of tone and style, Jason recounts the tragic events of the past, describing his mother’s death as a sacrifice that she, herself, desired for the sake of her son. He relates the story of her death with a strange combination of violence and tenderness: “Ich / nehme ihren Kopf in beide Hände sacht wie sie / es mit mir getan als Kind und / küsse ihre Augen und / halte den Kopf fest unter Wasser” (Loher 21). It is challenging to imagine the effort and force required to hold someone underwater as their body instinctually fights for its own life as occurring with the delicate tenderness with which Jason describes it here. Therefore, it is clear that he is trying to retell this story in this way in order to assuage his own sense of guilt for his past actions. In her

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25This trope of women recreating and/or mimicking the violence that they have seen or experienced (usually perpetrated by men) will reappear in every chapter of my dissertation, making it an important model for the relationship between women and violence as presented in these texts. Each of these texts questions the effectiveness of duplicating male forms of violence in an effort to support feminist goals. While these efforts may initially seem ineffective, it is one of my goals in this project to draw attention to the ways in which these acts, when supported by an aesthetic form that challenges its readers or viewers, can, in fact, support feminist political aims.
reading of another Loher play, the controversial *Unschuld* (2003), Katrin Sieg argues that, “Guilt saps characters’ life energy, shrinks their libido, turns love to hate and violence, and elicits rituals of remorse and atonement that are as extravagant as they are futile” (124). In *Manhattan Medea* many of these same markers of guilt appear to be at work (except for perhaps, the shrunken libido, since Jason appears to have no trouble wooing Claire). Jason’s extravagant effort to atone for his past through storytelling is complicated by the presence of Medea, who knows the truth about their violent history together.

The juxtaposition of Jason killing his mom and Medea killing her son, supports the idea that in any effort to establish independence, the mother must be cast off. We must act as Jason does, or she will destroy us, like Medea. However, the act of casting the mother aside is difficult to live with. At the conclusion of his story Jason articulates that after killing his mother, “da / gab es niemand mehr / der mir näher war als ich mir selbst / und keinen der mir fremder war als ich mir selbst” (Loher 22). Jason’s expression of both closeness and distance from himself upon killing his mother is important because it serves as a parallel to what Medea feels after performing the reverse action and killing her own son. After suffocating her son Medea declares, “Von jetzt an / werde ich / eine lebend Tote sein” (Loher 61). Just as Jason experiences the feeling of being in-between two extremes after killing his mother, Medea too exists in a nebulous space in-between life and death after killing her son. In both of these deaths what should be the intimate love between mother and child breaks down into extreme violence and both Jason and Medea experience the discomfort of guilt over their past actions.

Furthermore, this shared guilt confuses the boundaries between victim and perpetrator of violence. Christine Künzel has argued that the violence in Loher’s plays is a violence that comes “von innen […] wie ein Trieb” (360). However, as Künzel herself points out, this would imply a
naturalization or a biological determinism of violence when in fact, in *Manhattan Medea* at least, we are presented with quite the opposite (Künzel 363). Violence is what is used to mark the unnatural and unacceptable nature of the perpetrator’s past actions and current situation. It is through the shock value of performed violence that Medea attempts to draw attention to her status as a victim, as someone who suffers because of Jason’s betrayal. Within a legal justice system that requires evidence, that requires signs of harm done, Medea takes it upon herself to mark her physical body in a way that reflects her emotional pain. Her wounds become like Iphinoe’s bones in Wolf’s text, signs that a wrong has been committed. As Haas argues, Loher tries to demonstrate that, “die offene Gewalt manchmal die letzte Möglichkeit und einzige logische Folge der sozialen Umstände darstellt” (*Das Theater* 86). By contrasting Jason’s description of past violence and Medea’s aggressive response to Jason’s betrayal, Loher draws her audience’s attention to the irony of characters who find it necessary to perpetrate acts of violence, specifically acts of self-harm, in order to establish themselves as victims worthy of sympathy. Like Wolf’s novel, Loher’s play ascribes to the logic that sympathy is derived from victimhood, even if that victimhood is self-imposed.

While Jason’s performance in front of Medea is directed at assuaging his own guilt, Medea recreates the pain of her past indiscretions in front of Jason. After Jason claims to love Claire, Medea pulls out the knife that was used to kill her brother and cuts her own palm and both of her cheeks with it. Jason recognizes that this is a performance, intended for him when he inquires, “Was willst du mir beweisen” (Loher 33)? At first Medea avoids his query, trying to direct his attention to the way the knife is marking her face. After cutting her first cheek she, perhaps sarcastically, appeals to Jason’s appreciation of her appearance asking, “Ist es dir egal geworden, / wie ich aussehe” (Loher 33)? After proceeding to cut her other cheek Medea also
goes for a jealous response remarking, “Dir ist es egal geworden, / wer mich ansieht” (Loher 34). Ironically, Medea tries to perform a seduction while in the process of cutting up the very means through which that seduction might be successful. She attempts to use her physical beauty to gain an upper hand, while at the same time attempting to destroy that beauty, marking her own body with the signs of the emotional pain that Jason has caused her. Therefore, her performance in front of Jason challenges the notion that performance always performs its own intentions. That being said, Medea’s bloody performance does allow her to communicate openly with Jason.

Because of Medea’s violent performance, Jason can no longer deny the bond of violence and guilt that binds them together. By cutting herself in front of Jason, Loher’s Medea channels Butler’s later contention that:

> Indeed, if, in the name of ethics, we (violently) require that another do a certain violence to herself, and do it in front of us by offering a narrative account or issuing a confession, then, conversely, if we permit, sustain, and accommodate the interruption, a certain practice of nonviolence may follow. (Account 64)

Medea confesses the violence of her past on her body, thereby forcing Jason to account for it. By confronting this past Medea hopes they might both be able to overcome it. Even though she is ultimately wrong about her potential for peace, Medea’s efforts are still significant. When Jason fails to respond to her dramatics in the way that she would like, Medea eventually goes back to his initial question and answers it. The knife, she tells him, binds the two of them together: “Das verbindet. / Diese Nacht. / Und alle die Nächte danach, / in denen wir in dieser Schuld lagen, / die wir teilen.26 / Für immer” (Loher 34). The new marks on Medea’s face as well as the knife itself serve as reminders of the violence in which both Medea and Jason have already been complicit in order to secure their future together in America. Medea argues through her

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26The use of the word “teilen” here is particularly interesting because it can mean both separation/division as well as sharing, the primary meaning invoked by this passage. Whether or not Medea intends this to be the case, the knife and their shared guilt ultimately performs both of these functions within the text.
performance that these bonds of mutual violence and mutual guilt are inescapable, just as the scars that will form over the places she has cut herself may fade over time, but will never completely vanish from the canvas of her skin. As Medea demonstrates, the past is never gone, but will perform itself over and over again, casting a dark shadow over the present.

Medea and Jason represent two different kinds of storytellers: those who use stories as a way to alter the past or the future, thereby taking away their own responsibility for their actions, like Jason, and those who use stories to bring the pain of the past back into the present, like Medea. Unfortunately for Jason, the past is something that is impossible to fully overcome and it is because Medea understands this, that she is able to find some degree of success in her future. By working with and not against the dictates of her past, Medea establishes herself as an artist, as a creator of performances in a way that Jason is never fully able to do. If Velazquez is the master of copies, Medea is the master of remembrances, a different, more politically progressive type of copying. Medea insists that the violence of the past cannot be whitewashed by pretty words retold until one is convinced that they are true. Instead it must be brought into the present and accounted for, just as the memory of the Holocaust and contemporaneous difficulties to come to terms with the authoritarianism of the DDR cannot be ignored. Through Medea then, Loher argues that instead of trying to erase a violent past by telling stories, one must deal with it together, in the present.

**Medea and Deaf Daisy**

After forcing Jason to acknowledge the shared bond of guilt that inextricably links them together Medea turns to a third and final audience for her most dramatic performance yet. In collaboration with Deaf Daisy Medea’s violent revenge finally plays itself out on stage. Because of her status as a model of performativity, Daisy is perhaps Medea’s most important and
influential audience. In her work Butler asks us to “consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Gender 139). Similarly, Loher invites us to think about literary roles and our own acts of retelling certain stories as contingent and constructed. Character and/or narration, Loher argues, can also be seen as an act, a performance in which the act of performing creates an identity for the narrator/character despite the fact that the central illusion of the theater, like in gender performance, is to deny the origins of this performance. We are not supposed to see the cultural constructedness of the mythological stories that we tell, much like we are not supposed to see the constructedness of the genders we perform. It is a kind of violence to reveal this underlying constructedness and that is precisely what Loher’s self-reflexive Medea ends up doing. Fortunately, as Butler and Loher remind us, the cultural structures that underpin these performances sneak out from behind the curtain from time to time, drawing our attention to the fact that what we might like to consider “normal” or “timeless” is, in fact, little more than a “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler Gender 140) and “a norm that can never be fully internalized” (Butler Gender 141). Every time that Medea performs her acts of violent revenge on stage, she repeats and reinforces the fact that these actions constitute the character of Medea. However, by drawing attention to this very fact, Loher also questions the extent to which this is actually true. Medea may not be able to escape all of the implications of her role as Medea, but she is, through her interactions with Deaf Daisy, able to establish a collective agency that, at the very least, puts pressure on the binaries of male versus female, and perhaps even more importantly in this case, performer versus audience.

It is through her interaction with Deaf Daisy that Medea truly becomes a collaborative performer. In their first scene together Medea asks Daisy to procure her a red leather dress that
will kill its wearer. As in the Euripides story, Medea intends to kill her rival, Claire (Glauce), with this gift. Eventually, Medea succeeds when the dress sends the Sweatshop Boss’s entire house up in flames, presumably killing all those inside. Daisy agrees to help Medea, but reminds her that, “Das hat seinen Preis” (Loher 45). Medea acknowledges her willingness to pay, but no price is settled until Daisy returns. When she arrives with the dress in a trash bag, which will eventually be used to suffocate Medea’s son, Daisy finally reveals what this service will cost Medea saying, “Sagen wir, ich gebe diesen Müllsack für ein Schauspiel. Wird es Komödie, wird es Tragödie, es tut nichts, wenn es nur ein echtes Spiel ist” (Loher 54). As payment for the dress, Medea has to perform for Daisy. She has to act out her role as Medea by taking her violent revenge. However, she must do so in a way that also incorporates Daisy’s desire to see a real (i.e. subjective and authentic) performance. Far from trying to hide from the implications of her name any longer, Medea now owns her role saying, “Ich werde dir ein Feuerwerk zu sehen geben. Die Unschuld soll brennen” (Loher 54). Medea is ready to give the performance of a lifetime and even more importantly, she is ready to make herself guilty in order to achieve vengeance and fulfill her debt to Daisy. Through a negotiation with her audience, Daisy, Medea has established the terms of her performance and now is prepared to follow through with it, even if it means living up to the name that she initially fought so hard to overcome or deny.

Unlike in other versions of the play, it is an outside character, Daisy, who stokes Medea’s vengeful fire, rather than trying to calm her down (as the chorus so frequently attempts to do in Euripides’s play). Instead of presenting Medea as an angry and rash figure, Loher presents us with a Medea whose interaction with her audience internal to the play both literally and figuratively gives her the tools she needs to carry out her calculated, vengeful acts. Because it is the result of a collaboration, Medea’s revenge becomes about both something specific to her and
something bigger than herself. If she acts both for herself and willingly on behalf of Deaf Daisy, her actions become not just about the anger of one jilted woman, but about the frustration of a whole class of people who have been mistreated and overlooked by an unfair system. If Medea cannot fully assert her agency as one individual, than she will do so as a figure representing a collective group of people. As the audience of this performance, Daisy goads Medea on, especially since this act of revenge is partially for her benefit. While Medea questions whether or not murder is the correct path, wondering, “Sollte ich Mitleid mit der Schönheit haben” (Loher 55), Daisy revels in the total destruction that is to come saying, “Ein Feuerwerk — das die Engel dieser Stadt zu Asche macht, die längst ihre Seelen verloren haben. Ihre blassen Gesichter werden rot, brennen, und wehen, grauer Staub, ins Nichts” (Loher 55). Daisy’s social isolation because of her disability and poverty renders her even more eager for the downfall of the Sweatshop Boss and his family than Medea, whose injury is of a more personal nature. In this performance, the internal audience has just as much influence as the performer herself in terms of initiating the violent acts of revenge performed on stage. Simply by following through and playing her role properly, Medea generates some kind of justice for Deaf Daisy, even though this justice does nothing to help either of them escape the difficult conditions in which they find themselves.

Although Daisy’s status as a transvestite never becomes a focal point within the dialogue of the play, the stage directions clearly describe her as such, and one assumes that this would also be highlighted in the staging of the play itself. 27 In Bodies That Matter Butler cautions her readers not to understand drag as exemplary of gender performativity, but rather as just one

27 In my analysis of this play I have purposefully avoided much discussion of the external audience’s response, treating this play more like a novel. I do so in part out of necessity, as I have not yet been able to gain access to footage of this play being performed. There are specific moments, though, like this one where it becomes important to offer some logical speculation about the potential affects of this material on the play’s external audience.
instance of it (175). Nevertheless, drag has an important role to play in Butler’s analysis. She writes that drag makes visible to us a kind of “heterosexual melancholy” (Butler *Bodies* 180), in which the straight subject mourns the loss of the same sex person that he/she never loved by becoming that man/woman. Butler tells us that, “What drag exposes, however, is the “normal” constitution of gender presentation in which the gender performed is in many ways constituted by a set of disavowed attachments or identifications that constitute a different domain of the “unperformable”” (*Bodies* 180). Essentially, Butler argues that gender performativity does not mean that there is a preexisting subject on top of which gender is assembled, like putting on a mask or an outfit, but rather that it is the performance of gender itself that creates the subject. Drag is important because it shows us that there is nothing inherently natural about gender and/or heterosexuality. In addition, it reveals to us the fact that gender performance stems from things that are melancholic and, therefore, on a certain level outside of the realm of performance/action. It is because there is a social or cultural prohibition on doing certain things, like having a sexual partner of the same sex as oneself, that these things become integrated into our own gender performance and therefore our own subjectivity.

Although Daisy’s drag is not a focal point of the dialogue, her function within the play is similar to the deconstructing function of drag that Butler describes. Because of her disability and appearance, Daisy forces Medea to respond differently to her, thereby upsetting and destabilizing Medea’s normal mode of interacting with others. Daisy’s presence on stage reminds not just Medea, but the audience of the play as well, that the choices available to a given person may look different depending on that individual’s class status and/or their level of disability/able-

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28 This understanding of melancholia is derived from Freud’s writing on the subject. Butler’s logic here would seem to lend credence to Freud’s notion of “polymorphous perversity,” as the initial state of human sexuality. However, it is important to note that throughout her work Butler challenges the existence of any sexual subject prior to the assignment of gender.
bodiedness. When they first meet, Daisy has to remind Medea several times to face her when she is speaking, so that Daisy can read Medea’s lips. This insistence on accommodations for Daisy’s disability clearly upsets Medea and she initially refuses to change her behavior, only giving in when it becomes clear that Daisy can get her what she wants (Loher 41). Furthermore, Daisy draws attention to the fact that even the world of the streets is filled with infinitely more options for role-playing and identity formation than first appearances might suggest. After she describes the clothing of her parents in great detail, as if these adornments were their most essential features, Daisy remarks that, “Sie haben hier nicht zufällig interessante Kleidung herumliegen sehen, Hüte Schuhe Taschen. Man sollte meinen, die Leute in dieser Straße wären großzügig, wenn schon nicht verschwenderisch, im Wegwerfen ihrer Garderobe” (Loher 42). Although Butler rightfully argues against the notion that “the clothes make the woman,” Daisy reminds Medea and the audience of the play that there are always plenty of options available for one’s own self-presentation, none of which are natural and all of which are either chosen or rejected by each individual depending on their context and, I would argue, the audience they are trying to impress and/or manipulate.

Daisy also serves as a representative of Freudian melancholy of the kind that Butler so aptly applies to gender. Daisy is quick to pick up on Medea’s sorrow in being denied husband, child, and brother because she herself has experienced a great deal of loss. As she describes how she lost her hearing after watching her mother being severely beaten by her father Daisy tells Medea that, “Das erste Lied, das ich lesen lernte, heißt ‘Accidents will happen.’ Daran halte ich mich” (Loher 43). Daisy’s psychosomatic symptoms explain her pleasure in watching violence play out against the power structure represented by the Sweatshop Boss. Because she was never able to fully cope with the violence committed against her mother, Daisy seeks to draw out and
encourage similar levels of violence from others, passing this violence off as “accident,” rather than as the calculated actions of an intentional agent. This disparity between the actions/performances that establish us as subjects and are therefore, on some level out of our control, versus the actions/performances that we choose to adopt for specific, often nefarious, purposes is a central concern of Loher’s play, particularly as regards Medea and her ability or inability to live up to her name.

Now that the stage has been set for a dramatic and bombastic performance, Medea’s relationship to language undergoes a temporary, but significant change, one that marks an act of aggression toward the external audience of the play on the part of Loher. Instead of linking language to the paternal, Loher demonstrates the potential for language to reflect a maternal and collaborative subjectivity in which the voice of the individual is always interwoven with the voices of others. In what is potentially a rather unsettling moment for the reader, forced to confront a passage that is aggressively unclear, Medea proceeds to have a language breakdown as she retells the story of her brother’s death. Her sentences run together making it difficult, if not impossible, to determine where one thought ends and another begins. For example, she describes being on a ship headed for America with Jason and her brother, remembering a debate about the limited resources:

…Sie ißt für zwei Mein Bruder Feines Paar Das sagt ihr jetzt Jason Nicht dein Geschäft Mein Bruder Wir sind zu dritt auf dieses Schiff gegangen Wir werden dieses Schiff verlassen zu dritt Ich sage Schwein Mein Bruder Wir haben nicht das Geld für vier Ich Ich habe es Mein Bruder Das reicht nicht für ein viertes...(Loher 57)

Unlike Jason, who alters the story of his mother’s death in a way that makes it comfortable to tell and absolves him of his guilt, there is nothing comfortable or soothing about Medea’s narration of her brother’s murder. Instead she uses this act of storytelling as an opportunity to engage deeply with the trauma of her past (and present), rather than trying to suppress it. Furthermore,
this form passes some of that discomfort onto the readers who must engage with this confusing and unpunctuated section of text.

Importantly, instead of using this breakdown of grammar to call meaning or truth itself into question (as would be typical in a work of postmodern theater), Loher uses it to draw out a rich abundance of possible meanings from Medea’s recollections. As Haas articulates, “es geht nicht um das Entstellen von Sinn, sondern darum, die Sätze zusätzlich mit Bedeutung aufzuladen, ihnen mehrere Realisierungs- und Deutungsmöglichkeiten zu verleihen” (Das Theater 263). The way that Medea’s words refuse to organize themselves into punctuated sentences allows the reader of this play or the actor performing this role to create her own organization and draw her own meanings out of this passage. In this way, Medea, the character, also collaborates with the audience external to the play. For instance, in selecting quotations to pull from this passage in order to talk about Loher’s technique here I, myself, have to make somewhat arbitrary decisions about where one thought begins and ends. For example, if I provide this quotation: “Dann tu ich es Jason sagt Nein Mein Fleisch wird dieses neue Land sehen Unsere Zukunft” (Loher 57), one might interpret this as a conversation between Jason and Medea in which Jason wants to do something which Medea believes will threaten their ability to make it to the United States alive. However, if I extend the quotation: “Dann tu ich es Jason sagt Nein Mein Fleisch wird dieses neue Land sehen Unsere Zukunft Mein Bruder Nicht die meine” (Loher 57), one’s impression of the meaning of “unsere Zukunft” changes dramatically to potentially include Medea and her brother rather than Medea and Jason. Therefore, the meanings one can draw from this passage vary depending on how one wants to organize these thoughts and where one wants to establish the sentence breaks. In this moment, Medea’s language resists all manner of imposed organization and categorization. Each individual actor reading these lines
must establish order in this monologue for herself and thereby is forced to communicate something of their own subjective perspective on this text to the audience. In this way, Loher’s Medea re-invokes the problem of the copy and the original identified with the character of Velazquez. If there is no decipherable original then every performance of this speech is a copy. Medea is able to break free from playing a role and following a specific, unchangeable script, but only with the assistance of someone else, someone external to the play as in Wolf’s act of authorial freedom. As she remembers her brother’s murder, Medea’s monologue defies any attempt to assign it one clear and correct structure, thereby giving her, the actors in the play, and the reader/audience the temporary freedom to overcome their initial discomfort and imagine a variety of possible meanings for this string of words. We are allowed some degree of creativity within the confines of a system of grammar that still plays an ordering function. As in Wolf’s text, a multiplicity of voices is the closest thing that we get to a solution to the problem of repetitive mythology.

In addition, the structure of this monologue also takes on the qualities of someone literally reading a play. The interjection of character names into the sentences gives the impression that this monologue could actually be a very literal reading of dialogue from a script. For example, the lines “Jason Sie ißt für zwei Mein Bruder Feines Paar Das sagt ihr jetzt Jason Nicht dein Geschäft Mein Bruder Wir sind zu dritt auf dieses Schiff gegangen” (Loher 57) might be punctuated as follows:

Jason: Sie ißt für zwei.
Mein Bruder: Feines Paar. Das sagt ihr jetzt.
Jason: Nicht dein Geschäft.
Mein Bruder: Wir sind zu dritt auf dieses Schiff gegangen.

This reading would ironically turn Medea’s monologue into a dialogue between her brother and Jason that Medea is mechanically reading out, as if directly from a script. Medea engages in
some kind of storytelling here, but it is extremely uncertain to what degree that act is or is not co-opted by Jason, Medea’s brother, or even Loher, herself as the playwright of this piece. Just like Wolf’s Medea, it is very difficult for Loher’s Medea to tell her own story, and thereby generate a meaningful understanding of herself, without interference. The theater is a means of expression, but it is one in which multiple voices are always intruding into any one effort to speak as an individual subject. Loher draws out both the violence and the politically productive nature of these intrusions by highlighting them in her adaptation if the Medea story. If our voices can never be completely tethered to our bodies, at least we can work together through performance.

In her grief Medea loses her ability to form coherent sentences uninterrupted by the interjection of the names and/or the voices of the two men to whom she is figuratively telling this story, Jason and her brother. Medea’s monologue has a multilayered audience internal to the play in that she speaks to the two men in her life who are not present, just as much as she speaks to Daisy who quietly watches in the background. Like Wolf’s Medea, her monologue reaches out to others and, in doing so, challenges the traditional dialogue structure of the play, a move that owes a debt to her postmodern predecessors, including Heiner Müller. Although she speaks in the first person, Medea struggles to establish a narrative voice in which her audience, both figurative and literal, does not interject. Because her subjectivity is based on repeated performances of her gender, her roles as wife and mother, and her status as an outsider, and because performance is always already influenced by its audience, Medea’s narration cannot help but include other voices. Ironically, it is only once Medea accepts and embraces this fact and understands the limitations of her own individuality that she is able to forge any kind of space for herself, a space as she describes it, in-between life and death. In embracing the multi-
valence and ultimately collaborative nature of her own voice, Medea is more effectively able to imagine herself outside of her given role.

Where Velazquez refuses to be Medea’s audience, Daisy continues to observe as Medea proceeds to suffocate her son with the garbage bag provided by Daisy. Again Medea establishes a dual diegetic audience for this, her final performance saying, “Mein Bruder. Du hattest recht. / Es reicht nicht für vier. / Es reicht nicht einmal für drei. / Ich gebe dich zurück. / Und dann wird Frieden sein. / Und ich werde endlich / allein sein mit mir. / Nur für mich. / Für mich. / Für mich” (Loher 61). Medea delivers this speech to her brother, but what starts out as an act of deference to him and an attempt to reinforce the notion that resources are too limited to allow everyone’s survival, quickly turns into an affirmation of individual autonomy. In a stark contrast to the Medea at the beginning of the play who introduces herself as anybody but Medea, this Medea ultimately takes ownership of her actions, articulating that they are done for her and her alone. She kills her son and she does so for herself, for Medea, or at least so she claims. Medea’s claim to autonomy here is potentially undermined when one remembers that this action is also a performance for Daisy as payment for the dress. However, Medea’s articulation of her own subjectivity here still represents an important moment of minimal independence, albeit within the limited sphere of her role as Medea, her guilt for the murder of her brother, and within the stipulations of her collaboration with Daisy. Her final words before she actually suffocates her son are “Ich liebe dich” (Loher 61). Here again, Loher’s Medea uses her voice to connect with others, but she does so through an ambiguous statement in which it is unclear whether she is expressing her love for her brother, her love for Jason, or her love for her son. She recognizes that even in performing this act of violence, as she claims, for herself, there are other presences and audiences who will always have some influence over her performance. This realization is
powerful, because it allows Medea to move forward, maintaining an awareness of the influence of the past, without becoming completely crippled by it, as Jason seems to be. After she kills her son, she is both dead, in that she has committed a horrible and violent crime and yet, alive in that she will move forward from these events.

In dramas about the story of Medea it is very rare for Medea to kill her son(s) on stage. More often than not, this act of violence happens off stage with Medea reappearing afterwards, bloody weapon in hand, to tell the audience about her feelings now that the deed is done. Loher’s play is one of the few exceptions to this in that the stage directions specifically call for Medea to suffocate her son while still in view of the play’s external audience. It is here that this external audience becomes especially important in my analysis of Medea’s performativity.\textsuperscript{29} Depending on how this moment is staged, the audience could respond to it very differently. The stage directions give no indication about whether the suffocation should occur with the unnatural ease with which Jason describes drowning his own mother or with a battle for survival on the part of the silent son making it necessary for Medea to use great physical force to overpower him. Based on the past differences in the storytelling styles of Jason and Medea, my impression is that this moment should be staged with the same animation and pain as Medea’s other performances, potentially making it very difficult for the audience to watch without a strong emotional response. In staying true to herself and to the path dictated by her past and her name, Medea potentially loses the sympathy of a theater-going audience made uncomfortable by this display of violence. Such a staging would undermine Loher’s own project of generating audience sympathy, while simultaneously reinforcing her commitment to elements of the Brechtian

\textsuperscript{29} Again, I want to own the fact that until now I have primarily been reading this play like a novel or other piece of literature. I find that overall there are more scenes in this play which lose some of their interpretive value if one does not consider how they appear on the page as well as how they appear on stage. Nevertheless, I do feel justified here in also engaging in a bit of reasonable speculation as to the way in which this play might be staged for an external audience.
Verfremdungseffekt. Through this jarring act of violence on stage the audience is forced to consider the performative nature of Medea’s role and to think about how Loher’s Medea becomes exactly what we as a culture have created her to be through repeated storytelling, a monstrously violent and vengeful woman. Confronting the process of mythmaking is designed to attack the reader and their assumption about what mythology means. As in Wolf’s text, we are asked to consider the violence that we have potentially perpetrated against Medea through the process of mythmaking.

Although Medea may start to isolate herself from the audience of Loher’s play with this action, she simultaneously endears herself to her diegetic audience, Deaf Daisy. At the very end of the play, Medea’s violence is overshadowed when Daisy breaks free from her role as audience member and becomes the focal point of the play’s final scene. It is the dress which Daisy provided that sets fire to the house of the Sweatshop Boss, burning Velazquez’s copied painting into yet another copy. As the house burns to the ground, Daisy sings a song about taking revenge on one’s former lover after having been jilted. As she sings, it is unclear whether or not she sings for herself or for Medea. What is clear is that the prophecy of the song, that betrayal will end in flames, just like the prophecy inherent in the name Medea, that she will kill her children, comes to fruition at the end of this play. Even in performance every character in Loher’s text is exactly who he/she seems to be: Medea is Medea, Jason is Jason, the Sweatshop Boss is an exploitative capitalist and Velazquez is the artist imitator. It is ultimately the deaf transvestite, Daisy, the paradigmatic performer, who ties them all together and destructively cleanses the scene with fire at the end. Daisy is the one who best understands how performance works and so it is she who is given the last word and the last attempt to interpret these events for the external audience of the play. For Daisy, collaborative performance is about disarming your opponent; it is about creating
a spectacle that generates loss and destruction, in this case of both life and property. In this final moment she brings the anti-capitalist undertones of the play out into the open singing, “Was du besitzt, mein Herz, will ich in Flammen sehen” (Loher 62). Revenge is about collaborating with others to destroy the possessions, both physical and mental, of the people who have wronged you, even if those things, as in the case of Medea, are also near and dear to your own heart. It is only this kind of sacrifice, the sacrifice of being willing to destroy it all, the sacrifice of being willing to destroy a piece of oneself, which truly achieves vengeance. By confronting her audience with this uncomfortable reality, Loher’s play engages in an aesthetics of aggression, an act of feminist violence that forces her viewers and readers to question what they think they know about the relationship between identity, storytelling, and history. In his work on melodrama Brooks figures the melodramatic mode as a successor to the process of individualized mythmaking that he claims occurs in Romanticism arguing that, “melodrama represents both the urge toward resacralization and the impossibility of conceiving sacralization other than in personal terms” (Brooks 16). If this is true, than Loher moves beyond the melodramatic in this work by arguing that nothing is sacred that is not produced, not by a single individual, but through interpersonal relations.

When describing Loher’s play Adam Geist (1998) Künzel writes that, “Der Protagonist scheint hier eher Objekt der Handlung als selbst Handelnder zu sein” (364). At first Loher’s Medea seems like a similar victim of fate. It appears that because she is called Medea her destiny is already mapped out for her and there is little that she can do to control it. However, when one looks closely at the way that Loher’s Medea tailors her performance of this role to each of her diegetic audiences, it becomes clear that there is more going on than the simple creation of a character who becomes the object of a plot that literary history has created for her. Medea tailors
her performances to each of her audience members in order to elicit specific responses from
them. Velazquez sympathizes with Medea’s plight and brings Jason down to talk to her. Jason
relives the night that he killed his mother and has second thoughts about marrying Claire. Deaf
Daisy witnesses and enjoys the anti-capitalist revenge that she so desires. Through performance,
Medea negotiates her way into a story that, on a certain level, tries to exclude her. All of the
characters have individual goals and desires, which initially have nothing to do with Medea, but
by the end of the play she has taken on a central role in all of their lives. Jason tries to start a new
story by marrying Claire, but he cannot do this because Medea intercedes. The Sweatshop Boss
has a narrative in his mind about the marriage of his final daughter and Medea is not included in
that script, until she forces her way in. Medea interferes with these and other narratives, inserting
her own in their place through the use of violent and dramatic performances.

Medea is an outsider and an interloper, but at the same time none of the events in this
play would happen without Medea’s performances driving them. She is the author of this story,
the glue that holds it all together, the driving force behind the plot. Her aestheticized violence
gives her the power of narration, the power to dictate whose stories matter and who has a voice.
When Butler connects performativity and subjectivity, arguing that there are no subjects which
are not already gendered and which do not already have to repeat that gendered performance in
order to remain subjects, she reminds us that subjectivity relies on ever-changing culturally
constructed notions of what it means to be male or female. Similarly, in Manhattan Medea Loher
shows us that there is no mythology, no literary history, without the repetition of certain roles
and characters. Yet, these characters too must be seen as adaptable to different audiences and to
different times and places. Just as there is no standard gender, there is no essential literary role.
There are only performances, which are simultaneously geared toward and influenced by the
audiences to whom they are directed. With Manhattan Medea Loher has indeed created a Medea for the 21st century, a Medea who is forced to recognize and come to terms with the fact that her subjective voice will always represent a collaboration with her past and her audience.

CONCLUSION

In this moment from the final scene of Euripides’s Medea Jason and Medea try to place the blame for the death of their children onto each other. They address these condemnations to their sons as if trying to get them, even in death, to take sides in this gender and culture war. Most importantly, however, these lines draw attention to the question of blame. In the constellation of this story at least, violence is always something that needs a perpetrator, that needs someone to blame for its occurrence, who can then be punished for their actions. Within the world of Euripides’s play, the purpose in representing and talking about acts of violence is so we can figure out who is responsible and achieve some semblance of justice.

In their adaptations of the Medea mythology Christa Wolf and Dea Loher are also looking for a certain kind of justice. Wolf seeks to engage in a fictionalized process of feminist historiography, recovering the “authentic” story of a woman who has been wronged by the people who have narrated her story in the past. Loher, on the other hand, creates characters who seek justice for the wrongs inflicted on them by a xenophobic and discriminatory capitalist

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30Euripides’s Medea, pages 406 and 407. Interestingly, Jason and Medea use different words for “children” here. The word used by Jason (τέκνα) is more technical, like the English word offspring, whereas the term used by Medea (παιδες) is more affectionate.
system. In both instances, these authors seek fairness in the way the DDR and German socialism is processed and remembered in the newly unified Germany. Despite these similar aims, these authors take very different approaches to the question of violence as it is perpetrated by women, and specifically in this case, mothers. While Wolf intentionally negates the violence of Medea in order to create a figure that is unequivocally sympathetic for her to redeem, Loher’s Medea engages in exaggerated performances of violence in order to draw attention to the constructedness of the role of Medea as a mythological figure. Both Wolf and Loher have similar goals of recovering the figure of Medea as a fruitful site for enacting feminist politics and both of them are successful in this project to a certain degree. Wolf establishes the agency of the author through her ability to recover the stories of women misrepresented in the past, while Loher establishes a collective agency through the interaction between performer and audience.

However, despite this success in blurring certain established categories like male and female or victim and perpetrator, neither of these authors ever really succeeds in moving beyond the systems of power that generate these binaries in the first place, the power structures that determine whose stories get told and how. Neither Wolf nor Loher is able to move beyond a system in which women are forced into a fixed position as victims of their own gender roles, constantly seeking justice in a world that is biased against them and will never fully provide the recompense they seek. In adapting this mythological material, both Wolf and Loher run into the problem of being unable to imagine something beyond the hierarchical power relations on which Euripides’s story is structured. Even with all of the changes that they make to this story, Wolf and Loher ultimately end up repeating the world of the myth in which the distinction between those with power and those without it is clearly defined. In their attempts to undermine the process of mythmaking in terms of both form and content, Wolf and Loher begin to highlight
what I mean when I describe feminist violence as a violence directed, not towards emancipation, but towards finding a way to live within oppressive conditions. If what Butler writes is true and “To know oneself as limited is still to know something about oneself” (Account 46), than Wolf and Loher have potentially made some progress in terms of writing Medea out of the mythological system of mastery into which she was initially inscribed. By rewriting the story of Medea, Wolf and Loher create versions of Medea that they consider bearable (if just barely) within their own historical moment and within their personal understandings of the politics of gender. In the next chapter, I will introduce a maternal character whose unbearable conditions lead her to perform actions violent enough to rival any Medea figure, the protagonist of Elfriede Jelinek’s Lust (1989).
CHAPTER 2: A FORCIBLE RETURN TO THE WOMB: PORNOGRAPHY AND MELODRAMA IN ELFRIEDE JELINEK’S LUST

-- Alice Schwarzer, Emma, December 1987

There is a long-standing debate about pornography within feminist theory and feminist activism. Beginning in the 1980s, in what came to be known in the United States as the “sex wars,” sex-positive feminists, including Gayle Rubin and Wendy McElroy, argued that access to pornography was a way to increase tolerance for a variety of non-traditional sexual practices. These feminists pitted themselves against anti-pornography feminists, including Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, who contended that pornography was a matter of sexual discrimination against women and that the industry was impossible to redeem in the service of feminist political goals. In West Germany, with prominent, mainstream feminist figures such as Alice Schwarzer leading the charge, the anti-pornography movement was particularly virulent in its efforts to expose the flagrant and inherent sexism and violence of the pornography industry. As the epigraph to this chapter illustrates, at the forefront of the debate over pornography is the dehumanizing violence of the images often depicted in it, images despised by the supporters of Emma magazine’s infamous PorNO campaign of 1988. It is within the context of this high-energy political debate about the nature and role of pornography that Elfriede Jelinek wrote her 1989 novel Lust, a text that has simultaneously been denigrated as “pornographisher Haßliteratur” and vaguely characterized as “kompromißlose Sozialkritik” (Vis 228).
Lust, which is full of brutally violent sexual encounters, appears poised to make an intervention into this contemporaneous discourse surrounding pornography and feminism. However, as with much of her work, the Austrian feminist author’s relationship to this broader debate is deeply complicated and controversial. Jelinek targets her work at both sides of the pornography debate. The same year that she published part of her novel in Claudia Gehrke’s pro-pornography collection Frauen & Pornografie (1988), Jelinek gave an interview to Stern magazine in which she characterized her text as a work of anti-pornography. She described her intentions for how Lust should be read saying that the novel “should not be consumed like commercial pornography. Through aesthetic mediation it should, as it were, be thrown back into the face of the reader. What I aim to achieve is that the reader no longer can roll around in lust, like a pig in its sty, but instead grows pale in the process of reading” (Jelinek quoted in Hanssen Critique 219). In a gesture that defies the underlying goals of the pornographic medium itself (i.e. to generate pleasure and elicit fantasy), Jelinek outlines a different model for writing pornography, one which, rather than indulging its readers, confronts and attacks them. In another interview, this time with the scholar Tobe Levin in 1991, Jelinek describes the writing of Lust as a failed attempt to write female/feminist pornography:

Ich habe gedacht ursprünglich, ich konnte das. Dann habe ich gesehen, daß, bei der derzeitigen gesellschaftlichen Lage der Frau in der Pornographie als Objekt …, daß das vollkommen unzulässig wäre, unkritisch dieses Muster zu übernehmen…ich habe gesehen, daß es eigentlich weiter gehen muß, die Pornographie im pornographischen Gegenstand zu denunzieren und analysieren mit der Sprache. (quoted in Struve 94)

The publication of Lust represents a watershed moment in Jelinek’s career, particularly in terms of her public persona and interactions with the media. Public readings of this text were immensely popular and it sold extremely well, but at the same time, Jelinek received a lot of personal criticism as the “Dame in Leder, vor der Männer Angst haben und auch Frauen nicht sicher sind” (Mayer and Koberg 167). The text was so controversial that Jelinek even reportedly received a copy of the novel in the mail from a man who had crossed out every line by hand. “Er wollte damit ausdrücken, so schrieb er, das er jeden Satz erst zur Kenntnis genommen und dann für sich gelöscht habe” (Mayer and Koberg 166). After the media circus surrounding this book, Jelinek became much more reclusive and hesitant about communicating with the press. Most famously, Jelinek accepted her Nobel Prize in 2004 via video message, rather than attending the ceremony.
In order to write the kind of “pornography” that she envisions, Jelinek proposes attacking pornography with its own language and tropes, ultimately generating what numerous critics have labeled anti-pornography.\textsuperscript{32} These two quotations suggest that Jelinek’s intentions with \textit{Lust} are to critique pornographic discourse and the way that it objectifies women. When describing the obstacles that Jelinek encounters while attempting to write female pornography, Maria Stehle points out that, “Desire defines, consumes, injures, and destroys the female body, and sexual desire is always ‘male’” (Stehle 232). If this is true, and Jelinek seems to agree that it is, any attempt to write pornography from the perspective of a female subject is impossible. The question then becomes how Jelinek ultimately deals with this impossibility. In this chapter, I intend both to take Jelinek at her word, as the vast majority of scholarly critics who have written about this text have done, and unpack the social critique inherent in this text’s uncomfortable relationship to pornography.\textsuperscript{33} However, I also want to look beyond the pornographic aspects of this text and consider the ways in which melodramatic notions of love and motherhood also characterize \textit{Lust} and potentially work with and against its pornographic elements. When we see this text as an engagement with both the “masculine” genre of pornography and the “feminine”

\textsuperscript{32}I don't necessarily like the term anti-pornography with regards to this novel. I hope that in this chapter I will be able to show that Jelinek’s relationship to the pornographic is not as simple as taking a stance either in favor of it or against it. Rather, I think that Jelinek uses pornography (and for that matter melodrama) as a lens through which to reveal the violent underpinnings of the gendered and economic power structures that influence her society.

\textsuperscript{33}Scholars writing about Jelinek’s work as social critique offer up a variety of categories into which one might place the author and her controversial texts. Some see Jelinek as a postmodernist, seeking to disrupt all categorization and genre (Beatrice Hanssen, Andreas Heimann, Annette Doll etc.), others as a Marxist-Feminist bent on showing the connection between gender and capitalism (Dagmar Lorenz, Linda C. DeMeritt, Veronica Vis, etc.), and still others see her as a feminist extension of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, provoking her readers out of slumber and into critical reflection (for example, Chieh Chien). Perhaps even more productively, there are scholars who place her as an intermediary between two or more of these categories, a maverick occupying the spaces in-between various critical discourses (Brenda Bethman, Brigid Haines and Margaret Littler, etc.). No matter what camp of Jelinek scholarship one finds most compelling, it is clear that her work draws on something that is both complex and important in terms of the relationship between literature and politics, in this case, feminist politics. There is something that Jelinek wants us to see through her use of the metaphoric language of literature, but she might not guide us directly there.
genre of melodrama, the subtleties of Jelinek’s critique emerge. We are introduced to a female, a maternal subject who, instead of lashing out against oppression, violently reabsorbs the identity of her child in order to deny the cycle of objectification and substitution represented by reproduction. Ultimately, I will show how the linguistic and narrative structures of Jelinek’s text contribute to her larger project of revealing the violence that inevitably characterizes even our most intimate interpersonal relationships.

Before I unpack the specifics of Jelinek’s literary and political project, I want to be clear about what I mean when I use the terms pornography and melodrama, the two genres and/or cultural categories that I see Jelinek working most closely with in Lust. Both of these terms are somewhat difficult to define because of their rather wide cultural use, so I want to be clear about the set of ideas that I invoke when I use each. Pornography is perhaps the most notoriously hard to define. Consider, for example, US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s famous uncertainty about how to define pornography saying, “I know it when I see it” (Sullivan and McKee 1). Although a declaration of the failure to define pornography in any meaningful way, Justice Stewart’s comments point to the observer or reader as an important piece of the puzzle in terms of defining what is or is not pornography. Sullivan and McKee provide one of the most useful definitions when they write that:

At its most fundamental, pornography refers to the graphic depiction of sexually explicit acts made available for public consumption on a media platform. Moreover, these acts are deemed pornographic because their intention is understood to be primarily for the sexual pleasure of the audience member. (Sullivan and McKee 4)

Based on these definitions it is reasonable to conclude that pornography is so difficult to define primarily because the response of a subjective viewer is crucial to its definition. The ambiguity

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Another approach towards defining pornography involves examining it as a middle ground between obscenity and erotica -- obscenity being sexually explicit material with a strong value judgment placed on it as something considered not suitable even for private viewing and erotica as sexually explicit content with a higher production
created by the role of the viewer or reader in pornography will be of particular importance in my analysis of *Lust*. In pornography, despite the “intimacy” of the acts being depicted, there is always a physical distance between the performers of these acts and the audience that is aroused (Sullivan and McKee 5). Importantly, the viewer must have a stable perspective from which to view this sexually explicit material. They must be brought close, but not too close, to these acts in order to achieve maximum pornographic pleasure.

In addition to the oft-discussed pornographic tropes at work in this novel, I suggest that Jelinek is also drawing on the conventions of melodrama as both a partner and a counter to the pornographic. Melodrama is traditionally defined as a counter to realism with “realism signifying rationality, order, pragmatism, and clear-headedness, while melodrama stands for feeling, excess, sentimentality, and grandiose gestures” (Kelleter and Mayer 10). In this way, the genre has, until recently, been unnecessarily denigrated as a “feminine” or “popular” genre, not necessarily worthy of serious critical attention. Feminist film theory has begun to change those perceptions, however, with scholars such as Linda Williams and Monique Rooney claiming that melodrama may actually be modernity’s “dominant aesthetic form,” a “preeminent mediator of modern subjectivities,” and a longing for life as it should be or could be, rather than how it is (Rooney 3). Instead of a “conservative genre that tends to reinforce the status quo,” more and more scholars are now considering melodrama to be an important “mode that generates melancholy and thwarted wish fulfillment” (Rooney 2). In other words, melodrama, while not necessarily a catalyst for social change, helps us to dream, to wish, to struggle, to imagine different possibilities.
The genre of melodrama is also anxiety producing and traditionally connected to the discomfort associated with social change. For instance, in his seminal text on melodrama in literature Peter Brooks writes that, “Melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue” (Brooks 20). Melodrama is about trying, often desperately, to assign a feeling of moral order to a world that has been thrown into chaos. This makes it a prime vehicle for anti-feminist and reactionary artistic production, and a means for addressing the feelings of disorder that new social movements are apt to cause. The suggestion by feminist scholars and activists, including MacKinnon, that all heterosexual relations are a form of violence, challenged the core principles of romantic love and marriage that play an important role not only in American, but also in German, society. Melodramatic discourse is designed to confront challenges like this by reinstating traditional values. With its extremely dark take on marital sexual relations, however, Lust could easily be employed to promote MacKinnon’s highly debated claim that it is nearly impossible to distinguish meaningfully between rape and not-rape. Yet, as I will demonstrate in my analysis, this text is also melodramatic in many of its features, thereby challenging the purely reactionary classification of melodrama outlined by Brooks. Lust demonstrates how melodramatic tropes need not be tied to a sense of moral order. What is most important is the fact that melodrama does not provide the fulfillment of desire as we see in pornography. The importance of thwarted desire as a hallmark of melodrama is crucial for my discussion of Jelinek’s work because it functions as a counter to the pornographic experience of using someone else to fulfill one’s desires. Melodrama can be seen as the “female” side of pornography, as pornography from the perspective of the person being used and therefore denied access to their own wants and needs.
Jelinek engages with the tropes of pornography and melodrama on the level of plot, on the level of character, and on the level of language/narrative. These categories are, of course, interrelated, but by attempting to separate them out, I am able to highlight the layers of Jelinek’s societal critique across the levels of content and form. In my reading of *Lust*, I demonstrate that it is not enough to say that Jelinek’s interests lie solely in drawing the attention of her readers to various forms of oppression and inequity, be they gendered or economic. Jelinek actually goes a step further in that she pushes her readers to consider the ways in which the violence used to enforce these inequities actually operates. By setting up a contrast between the protagonist, Gerti’s pornographic relationships with adult men and her melodramatic relationship with her young son, Jelinek uses the language of pornographic violence and melodramatic passivity against itself, thereby undermining the notion that victimhood is an essentially female category. Unlike the critique leveled at Jelinek by Beatrice Hanssen, who writes that Jelinek “fails to examine the victim politics through which German feminism, sometimes too easily, has collapsed women’s oppression and the historical phenomenon of fascism” (*Critique* 231), I argue that a full and complete examination of *Lust* actually reveals a critique of any simple equation between femininity and victimhood. If one departs from the work of most critical scholarship on this text and considers the relationship between mother and son as an equally central and important relationship in *Lust*, it becomes clear that Jelinek’s understanding of the so-called “gender wars” is far less black and white than she is usually given credit for. Through the mother-son plot in *Lust*, Jelinek moves beyond the fascism equals sexism philosophy of earlier 20th century feminist writers35 and demonstrates how the relationship between gender and

35 For example, Jelinek’s work directly contrasts with Ingeborg Bachmann’s statement that, “Der Faschismus ist das erste in der Beziehung zwischen einem Mann und einer Frau” (Bachmann in Chien 70). Instead, she argues that violence is a part of all human relationships, including those between mothers and children.
violence is more nuanced than a simple matter of pitting male, fascist, capitalist perpetrators against female, democratic, socialist victims. Whether male or female, we are all not only capable of, but driven to perpetrate acts of desperate violence in even our most intimate interpersonal relationships.

Plot

The plot of Lust is fairly straightforward. The number of truly significant events in the novel is kept to a minimum, and Jelinek’s style favors tensions generated by detailed description, rather than tensions created through an action-packed plot. Nevertheless, it is on the level of the plot that both the pornographic and melodramatic tropes of this text are most clearly and directly articulated. By engaging with tropes of the pornographic plot, such as sexual acts observed by an aroused viewer, as well as tropes of the melodramatic plot, including the unhappy housewife who seeks solace in an affair, Jelinek draws attention to the ways in which these plots become limiting for women, offering them no forum for self-expression. It is important for Jelinek to establish these pornographic and melodramatic tropes on the level of plot so that she can then begin to unmask and subvert them through character development and language.

A melodramatic set-up is evident from the very beginning of Lust. The story starts with the reader’s introduction to the townspeople, a group of exploited factory workers who blend together just as much as they are distinct. As the narrator rather paradoxically remarks, “nur das immer gleiche scheident sie” (Jelinek Lust 7). They are differentiated only through their sameness, their ability to fit the factory worker mold. They have a distinctive ability to be interchangeable, a quality that, as we will see in my discussion of character, also frequently applies to the named characters in this text. Out of this group, a figure of power emerges, Gerti’s abusive husband Hermann. He is the individual, the masculine subject who has the power to distinguish himself
from the crowd. Gerti subsequently emerges from this group as well, but only by nature of her specific relationship to Hermann. Just as he exploits the workers in his factory, Hermann exploits his wife’s body. Using his possession of her as a shield to protect himself from HIV/AIDS, while still satisfying his sexual needs, he violently assaults her and, in exchange, he takes care of Gerti financially. In order to cope with her situation, Gerti frequently gets drunk and goes for walks in the snowy alpine landscape. These initial conditions invoke the melodramatic trope of the unhappy housewife. Gerti is trapped in a loveless marriage and is driven to drink in a desperate attempt to escape her current conditions. Rooney argues that melodrama involves “perpetuating a restless, endlessly dissatisfied way of being” (Rooney 3). Gerti’s drinking and drunken stumbling over the mountains is evidence of the novel’s relationship to this kind of melodramatic discourse. This striving dissatisfaction is a quality that we will see time and time again in the character of Gerti, even though it is neither empowering, nor particularly sympathetic.

Although much of the criticism on Lust focuses on the abusive relationship between Gerti and her husband, as well as her cruel rejection at the hands of the student Michael, there is another significant male figure in the text who often flies under the radar, namely Gerti’s son. As the reader follows Gerti’s story, the son initially appears to be a distraction from the larger plot. However, when she unexpectedly murders him at the very end of the text, the significant role played by the son is thrown dramatically into the spotlight. Although the son is easy to miss until his death, his importance in Gerti’s life is already established in one of the novel’s very first scenes. Walking through the snow, mother and son discover the carcass of a dead bird. The child’s desire to engage in athletics and snowball fights rather than walk calmly by his mother’s side is described as a parallel to the “natürliches Schauspiel” of the half-eaten bird with its blood strewn all over the snow (Jelinek Lust 8). Jelinek casts a dark shadow over the boy’s seemingly
innocent childhood games, equating them with the innate and sensational violence of the animal world. Hanssen argues that one of Jelinek’s goals is to “expose the fault lines of society where chronic violence turns into acute violence” (Critique 212). In other words, through her depiction of aggression and abuse, Jelinek draws her reader’s attention to the larger systemic violence inherent in all relationships, including our familial ones. The association between the recreational activities enjoyed by Gerti’s son and the broader structures of violence that exist in nature is one such move, which draws a connection between chronic or structural violence and acute or interpersonal violence. This linkage between larger structural concerns and more personal or intimate issues is directly related to the discourse of melodrama and its insistence that interpersonal interactions can be loaded with an excess of larger meaning. We are in the realm of melodramatic oversignification from the very beginning of our entry into this text and more specifically, our entry into the relationship between Gerti and her son.

This relationship, the one non-sexual relationship in Gerti’s life, is so crucial because it creates space for the reader to witness violence and power-relations that are related to, but not fully caught up in, the sexual violence perpetrated by the adult men in Gerti’s life. That being said, the relationship between pornography and violence is also crucial to my reading of Lust. Sullivan and McKee argue that, “In much current debate pornography is defined as an act of violence and violence is defined as an inescapable part of human sexual relations” (Sullivan and McKee 74). They say that according to contemporary feminist anti-porn activists:

If consent is excluded from the debate, than any depiction of extreme or heavily physical sex acts is wrong because it is violent. Really, any depiction of any sex act is violent because the very act of representing it is an instance of objectification, and objectification constitutes psychological harm. (Sullivan and McKee 97)

The idea that sex itself is inherently objectifying is certainly at the heart of Jelinek’s novel in which we are provided with no examples of sexual behavior that is not brutal, violent, and
abusive on one level or another. None of the sexual encounters depicted in this text contain elements of loving care, whether they are marital or extra-marital, with a man Gerti claims to love or with her meal ticket. A few years before Jelinek wrote this novel, Andrea Dworkin argued that one of the myths propagated by pornography is that, “The penis causes pain, but the pain enhances the pleasure. It is as if the ability of the penis to cause pain were an intrinsic quality of the penis, not a use to which the penis is put” (42-43). This confusion of pain and pleasure (also a characteristic of melodrama) is employed by pornography to assuage one’s own conscience about the pain that one inflicts on another in the process of following through on one’s desires. As Sullivan and McKee point out though, the trouble with defining pornography in this way is that one runs the risk of reinforcing a dangerous understanding of men as inherently violent and women as inherently passive and victimized (Sullivan and McKee 102). Jelinek manages to engage with this pornographic discourse while innovatively resisting the temptation to uphold this binary between men and women. Instead, Jelinek goes after the cycles and discourses that repeat these myths in the first place.

The first half of the novel consists primarily of pornographic-style scenes in which Gerti is repeatedly raped by her husband, her body constantly penetrated and torn apart as she is forced to comply with a variety of increasingly degrading and humiliating commands. 

The melodramatic plotline also continues when, during one of her alcohol-fueled treks, Gerti is picked up by the student Michael, who eventually has his way with her. Despite the fact that he also abuses her and eventually gang rapes her with his friends, Gerti inexplicably feels that she is in love with Michael. Another important aspect of melodrama is its attempt to establish some

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36I use the term “rape” in this context to highlight my reading of these scenes as acts of penetration to which Gerti does not consent. This is an interpretation based on my own understanding of the power structures at play in Jelinek’s text. The use of this term should not be read as labeling these acts under the legal definition of rape. In Austria, spousal rape was not outlawed until 1989, the same year that Lust was published. The Federal Republic of Germany did not officially outlaw spousal rape until 1997.
kind of relationship between pathos and action. As Michael Stewart argues, “We expect the best melodramas to dissect, inhabit and re-script the traumas, memories and desires that define us” by presenting us with characters who feel and then act on those feelings (Stewart 12). What makes melodrama interesting, then, is how this balance between pathos and action is weighted. In Jelinek’s story, the trauma of her marriage leads Gerti into an imagined love-relationship with Michael. The strong emotions she feels for him become so powerful that in true melodramatic fashion, she eventually tries to act on them, running away to him one night.

However, the plot twists when Michael refuses to let Gerti into his cabin, watching from the window and eventually masturbating as her husband rapes her before taking her back home. Michael’s presence as voyeur makes this the most salient example of pornography in the entire novel. In this scene, all of the figures required for pornography are present. We have two “performers,” Hermann and Gerti, and a viewer who derives pleasure from the act of viewing, Michael. According to Nancy Bauer, “the world as pornography depicts it is a utopia in which the conflict between reason and sexual desire is eliminated, in which to use another person solely as a means to satisfy one’s own desire is the ultimate way to respect that person’s humanity and even humanity in general” (4). In other words, “the porn world encourages us to treat ourselves and others as pure means” (Bauer 5). This is exactly what Michael does when he refuses to help Gerti and instead takes voyeuristic advantage of the situation in order to satisfy his own sexual desire. As the narrator describes, “Michael späht aus den Fenster und strengt sich an, erneut zu wachsen, um aus sich das Beste, das meiste zu machen” (Jelinek Lust 248). Michael’s selfishness is an example of the kind of behavior that is normalized and seen as laudable within the pornographic landscape. Just like with her husband, what starts out as melodrama with Michael turns out to have been pornography all along.
By employing both pornographic and melodramatic tropes, Jelinek unveils not the pleasure and cathartic emotion that her readers expect, but rather uncomfortably violent truths about the connection between sex and power. Instead of ending with Gerti’s return to a life of abuse as one might anticipate in a melodramatic plot line in which satisfaction is denied, the story ends when Gerti kills her young son and deposits his body into a river. The reader encounters a Gerti in the last five pages of this novel who acts in ways that directly contradict the victimized Gerti they encountered in the previous two hundred fifty pages. Gerti’s actions in this final scene come as a surprise because she has generally been so passive up to this point. Besides killing her child, the only other substantive action that Gerti takes in the text is seeking out Michael and, as we have seen, that active impulse does not end well. The plot of this novel is mostly driven by the male characters and what they do to Gerti, rather than what she does to them or anyone else. However, this final moment is a large and noteworthy departure from that trend, which has been overlooked by the vast majority of scholarship on this text, almost as if critics themselves find this final act difficult to integrate into their readings of this novel.

When Gerti’s relationship to her son is discussed in the secondary literature it is usually to claim that in killing her son, Gerti achieves some kind of emancipation. In other words, they argue that killing her son is Gerti’s only way of fighting back against her adult male abusers. They see her act then as one of misdirected aggression. I agree that killing her son marks a drastic change for Gerti; however, I disagree with the idea that this scene represents a kind of emancipation. When Gerti kills her son, she asserts herself not just as a victim of violence or injustice (i.e. someone in need of emancipation), but as a potential perpetrator of it as well.

37 For an example of just such a plot line see my discussion of R.W. Fassbinder’s film Martha in the final chapter of this dissertation.
38 See Chien in particular.
Importantly though, this gesture does not get her out of the abusive situation in which she finds herself. In fact, killing the child, a favorite of his father, will in all likelihood only make Gerti’s situation worse. She does not save herself from anything, but rather temporarily blocks a system of substitution reminiscent of Foucault’s pessimistic model of the structured state, in which the oppression of the law remains stable, even while those in power change. Gerti is not emancipated, but she does find the strength to refuse to participate in a system of substitution in which her son becomes interchangeable with his father. Her actions are not empowering, but didactic because by mimicking the power structure being used to oppress her, she exposes its flaws and temporarily grinds it to a halt.\(^{39}\)

Gerti’s final actions represent the culmination of the tension between the passive, pornographic Gerti who goes numb as her husband rapes her and the emotionally active, melodramatic Gerti who desperately seeks out Michael, no matter what the cost or the humiliation. We see this tension playing out when, after entering her son’s room late at night, Gerti kisses him before placing a plastic bag over his head to suffocate him. As his life comes to an end, Gerti considers all of the activities in which her son will no longer participate, how he will no longer be “mobil bei Arbeit, Sport und Spiel” (Jelinek \textit{Lust} 254). She reflects on the fact that she has made him passive, rather than allowing him to grow into a man who would force other women into passivity. Earlier in the text the narrator describes how, “Dieses Kind, den frischen Geschlecht zugehörig, ist von der Mutter aufgezogen worden, und jetzt kann’s nicht mehr sum Stillstand gebracht werden, es läuft und läuft!” (Jelinek \textit{Lust} 218). When she kills him, Gerti is finally able to bring her son to a stop, to keep him from running away. She also considers the violence inherent in this now-impossible mobility calling him “ein kleiner Kriegsgott”\(^{39}\)

\(^{39}\)While my primary concern in this chapter is with melodramatic discourses, the refusal to go along with repetition that characterizes Gerti’s murder of her son can also be read as a critique of the mythological similar to what we encounter in Christa Wolf and Dea Loher.
By bringing her son and this novel to a stop, rather than indulging in a cycle of reproduction or substitution, Gerti keeps her son from becoming the violent animal referenced in the opening scenes of the novel. Gerti is no longer resigned to being passive, to being a dead bird, waiting for her flesh to be torn open, but this does not mean that she is emancipated. Instead of a bird of prey, her dead son becomes a harmless plant in Gerti’s arms, one in need of constant nourishment and care. As the narrator describes, “Sie trägt den Sohn auf ihren Armen dahin wie ein knospenden Strauch, der einzupflanzen ist” (Jelinek *Lust* 254). Gerti takes charge of caring for her dead son, and so she is never truly free of her responsibility towards him. Now, more than ever, Gerti’s son is in her care, a bond that is impossible to break.

In an effort to make Gerti’s continued powerlessness abundantly clear, the narrator unexpectedly interrupts the process of Gerti carrying her son’s body to the river, to focus instead on the indifference of the outdoor sportsmen to the real lives of the people who live on the mountain. The narrator describes how, “Donnernd laufen die Menschen um die Wette und bitten um schönes Wetter. Und die Schisportler gehen ins Gebirg, egal, wer sonst noch dort wohnt und selber gern gewinnen möchte” (Jelinek *Lust* 255). Even when she takes the dramatic action of killing her son, it seems impossible for Gerti to fully hold the attention of the narrator as they direct us through this story. Gerti’s suffering is so easily naturalized and contextualized that, on a certain level, it ceases to exist at all, even when she engages in this surprising and unthinkable behavior. Gerti still has no real capability to direct this story and/or to take control over her own life. She is not free, even after this gruesome act. The readers are assured in the end that the child’s dead body will be preserved for a long time in the icy river while, “die Mutter lebt” (Jelinek *Lust* 255). The scene reaches a stasis in which Gerti’s role as a mother is preserved, just
as her child’s body is preserved by the cold water. Although she has not managed to change any
of the essential conditions of her life, she has managed to pause/freeze things for a second.

However, this frozen moment is only temporary and will not last forever. The narrator
argues that the mistake women make is that, “Sie wissen nicht, wo sie all die Zeit hinter sich
verstecken können, damit keiner sie sieht” (Jelinek Lust 255). The past is presented in this final
scene as a force that is impossible for women like Gerti to hide (or hide from). It will always
come out to spoil the perfection of any peaceful moments that women are able to create for
themselves. The narrator uses a metaphor to connect mother and child asking, “Sollen sie sie
etwa verschlingen wie die Nabelschnüre ihrer Kinder? Mord und Tod!” (Jelinek Lust 255). The
mother is bound up in time, in history, just as her child was bound to her in the womb. She
cannot escape this bond, just as killing her son does not negate, but rather enhances his
connection to her. All that Gerti is able to do is shift her position slightly within already existing
binaries between men and women, mothers and children. She cannot remove herself from them.
Just as in the community chorus, in which all of the “schrecklich schwachen Stimmen” of the
townspeople fail to harmonize because of Hermann’s tyrannical leadership, all hierarchies,
whether sexual or not, disrupt the ability of individuals to come together and form a harmonious
group identity (Jelinek Lust 9). As we will see throughout this text, group unity is extremely
difficult, if not impossible, to achieve in such a climate of violence, thereby limiting our ability
to generate any sense of solidarity. If our collective identities are imposed upon us rather than
chosen in solidarity, they can never be used as a means of resistance against oppressive social
discourses and structures.
Character

In an essay that directly addresses the problem of implicit violence in gendered relationships Jelinek writes that, “Shame is the recognition of the most real forms of male violence; but shame often degenerates into a recognition of female helplessness” (Jelinek “Shamgrenzen?” 138). It is this delicate line between drawing attention to male violence without replicating female shame and helplessness that Jelinek struggles with when writing Lust. This battle is primarily fought on the level of character. More specifically, it is fought over the degree to which Jelinek’s characters can be viewed as representatives of larger identity categories or as unique individuals. Numerous critics have drawn attention to the ways in which Jelinek’s characters often lack depth or complex inner lives. For instance, Lust has been compared to the work of the Marquis de Sade in its detailed description of sexual acts, without any real interest in the complex emotions and motivations that underlie them. Annette Doll, argues that in both authors we see “Welten ohne Subjekte,” an accusation that, if true, would insist that Jelinek’s characters are more like representative types, stand-ins for all people of their race, gender, and class (Doll 176). This de-individualizing gesture is typical of melodrama, as Brooks argues when he writes that melodrama seeks “to make the world we inhabit one charged with meaning, one in which interpersonal relations are not merely contacts of the flesh, but encounters that must be carefully nurtured, judged, handled as if they mattered” (22). In Lust, Jelinek embraces this excess of symbolic meaning by making her characters into representatives of social groups. At the same time, she also breaks down this de-individualization by occasionally giving her readers fading glimpses of a unique psychic life within her characters. Overall, Lust emphasizes the

40Doll goes on to say that in Jelinek’s texts the characters are so flat that even “Mann und Frau sind bei Jelinek austauschbar” (Doll 168). While I recognize that both men and women perpetrate acts of violence in Lust I do not agree that the identity category of gender does not matter. Gerti’s position in the inherently gendered role of “mother,” for instance, makes her gender and reproductive body crucially important.
difficultly of forming collectives, of forming unified groups, that are not already imposed upon their members. While self-formed social groups may have the potential to resist oppression, such groups exist only rarely. I believe that a thorough examination of the characters in Lust, especially the relationship between Gerti and her son, reveals that even though her ability to express an individual inner life is severely limited by the narrator, Jelinek’s female protagonist does at times think and act as an individual, rather than a one-dimensional type. Gerti is both a representative for the abuse suffered by all women and a unique individual whose inability to see her son as anything other than a potential substitution for her husband leads her to commit the brutal act of child-murder. In this way, Gerti becomes a perpetrator of the same kind of objectification through which she herself is victimized.

First impressions might not be everything, but they certainly are important when it comes to describing Hermann and Gerti as characters. In these initial character sketches, Jelinek presents both Gerti and Hermann as symbolic types, rather than fully fleshed-out characters, albeit in very different ways. From the very first pages of the novel, the narrator presents us with two very different character descriptions, one that removes interiority through metaphoric abstraction and another that removes interiority by refusing to engage with the character on any level beyond the physical. Hermann is the first character to be distinguished out of the mass of people who live in this alpine town. He is the “ewiger Vater […] der ihnen die Wahrheit ausschenkt wie seinen Atem” (Jelinek Lust 7). Others, most notably Gertrud Koch, have pondered the religious symbolism at work in descriptions like these. Hermann is not just any father, but the eternal father, father to all. In a paternalistic, even religious, model for both the family and the factory, he is the one in charge in both a realistic and an abstract sense. This initial description of Hermann is characterized by poetic metaphors and symbolism, (giving out
truth like breath etc.) thereby ascribing to him a kind of spiritual or universalized power. His power is inscribed in an excess of meaning, meaning that exceeds the words used to describe it. Hermann’s dominance is felt even on the level of the abstract, the level of the artistic. In this respect, Ria Endres is correct when she writes that for Hermann “Das Herrschen in der Fabrik ist ihm genauso selbstverständlich wie das Herrschen zu Hause” (86). Hermann’s complete patriarchal dominance can indeed be seen as a kind of trope. He is a man who stands for something much bigger than himself, and the reader’s first impression of Hermann is as a poetic representation of patriarchal power.

Contrastingly, the reader’s first impression of Gerti is that of a figure in motion within a specific time and space. In the first reference to her beyond her role as Hermann’s wife, the narrator states that, “Die Frau geht mit ihrem Kind spazieren” (Jelinek Lust 7) and then informs us shortly thereafter that, “Die Frau hat einen großen reinen Kopf” (Jelinek Lust 7). Gerti’s first actions in the text are taken with her child, as descriptions of her as a wife give way to a description of her as a mother. The narrator’s charge that Gerti has a “clean head” resembles the charges made by numerous critics that Jelinek’s characters have little to no individual interiority. Jelinek does not describe Gerti’s head as empty (leer), but as pure/clean (rein), introducing the possibility that it could have been otherwise. When something is clean, it is often the case that there was something there that has been wiped away, whereas if something was empty to begin with, it had no potential in the first place. This mental blankness that Gerti exhibits is, therefore, not necessarily an inherent quality, but one imposed upon her due to the narrator’s limited access to her inner life. As Endres puts it, it initially seems that “Gerti fühlt sich leer und ausgehöhlt, obwohl sie mit dem Samen ihres Mannes angefüllt worden ist” (89). In other words, in these early moments of the text, Gerti functions only as a symbol for victimized women, and the reader
lacks access to her deeply personalized interior life. It is also true that the simple, descriptive sentences that give us an initial sketch of Gerti as a character contain nothing of the metaphor used to aggrandize her husband. Gerti is an individual in that she is what she does and her actions, in this moment at least, have no greater significance beyond themselves.

Gertrud Lehnert expands on the argument that Jelinek’s figures are de-individualized by describing the graphic scenes of sexual violence in *Lust* as “endless variations of the always identical” (45). This is certainly true in that the experience that one has as a reader of this text is one in which it is easy for the various rape scenes to meld together, making it hard to distinguish them from one another. Particularly at the beginning of the text, Hermann’s mechanized and constant drilling of his wife starts to bleed together and it is often difficult to figure out where one rape starts and another ends. Reading these pages feels like an endless stream of penetration, biting, thrusting, and tearing. In order to further reinforce the argument that Gerti is a de-individualized stand-in for all women who experience violence, Chieh Chien argues that Gerti often appears to be silenced by the violence she experiences (Chien 126). For example, as her husband abuses her, Gerti often goes numb, seemingly acquiescing to the abuse, rather than putting forth any strong protest. In a scene that harkens back to the dead bird in the opening walk with her son, the narrator describes Gerti as she is being raped:

Neben der Frau fallen Kleidungshaufen zusammen wie tote Tiere. Der Mann, immer noch im Mantel, steht mit seinem starken Glied zwischen den Falten seiner Kleidung, als fiele Licht auf einen Stein. Strumpfhose und Unterhose bilden einen feuchten Ring um die Hausschuhe der Frau, aus denen sie steigt. Das Glück scheint die Frau schlaff zu machen, sie kann es nicht fassen. (Jelinek *Lust* 17)

As she is raped, everything about Gerti goes limp, starting with her clothing as it is removed from her body. Gerti is no more alive than her stockings or a dead animal. The narrator makes it clear that this experience is not sexually pleasurable for Gerti through the ironic use of the term
Glück (happiness/luck) combined with the adjective schlaff (flaccid/limp). These language choices make it clear that we are in an androcentric, pornographic space in which all sexual response is thought to mirror the male erection. Instead of becoming erect, Gerti lies limp throughout this encounter. At the end of this quotation there is a moment of psycho-narration, where we as readers have a chance to enter briefly into Gerti’s thoughts. However, even this access into Gerti’s mind does not generate any profound or emotional reflection on what is happening to her. “Sie kann es nicht fassen” — she cannot grasp it, she cannot take the action necessary to process what is happening to her. In this moment she is completely passive, an object, the epitome of victimhood, just like the dead bird getting its body torn apart. Brooks argues that, “Melodrama is similar to tragedy in asking us to endure the extremes of pain and anguish. It differs in constantly reaching toward the “too much,” and in the passivity of response to anguish, so that we accede to the experience of nightmare” (35). This certainly is the case for Gerti as she is raped. Her excessive passivity puts her in a position where she appears to accept her abuse without question and even without thought.41 As her husband rapes her, the primary access we have to Gerti as a character is the knowledge of what is physically happening to her body. Gerti’s thoughts and feelings are obscured, thereby putting her in the position of a universalized victim of violent abuse.

This is not to suggest, however, that both Hermann and Michael use Gerti’s body in exactly the same way. As numerous scholars, including Crystal Ockenfuss and Linda DeMerrit, have stated, there is a different kind of economy at work in the violence Hermann inflicts on Gerti as opposed to the violence perpetrated by Michael. It is in these differences that a bit of individual character development starts to break through the narrator’s tight hold on the symbolic

41 This passive acceptance of one’s suffering will be taken up even more directly in my final chapter. There, I will discuss additional female characters who, at least initially, passively accept the violence perpetrated against them, as is celebrated in melodramatic discourse.
nature of these figures. In Hermann’s case, sex is a system of exchange. It is the price Hermann
exacts for the financial support he provides to Gerti as her husband. The narrator implicitly
makes this connection when she describes Gerti’s pleasure going shopping as connected to “das
stumme Reich ihres Körpers” (Jelinek Lust 45). Gerti’s monetary wealth is thoroughly and
inextricably intertwined with her body and its ability to be used by her husband for his sexual
release. In exchange for this abuse, Gerti is in a position where, “Doch sie pflückt nur die gütige
Frucht Geld vom Baum ihres Mannes” (Jelinek Lust 45). Gerti always gets something in return
for the use of her body, therefore according to Ockenfuss, “the text categorically refuses to
stylize her as an absolute victim” (Ockenfuss 75). This opinion is also shared by DeMeritt who
argues that Gerti sells her body to her husband, just like the workers in his factory sell him their
labor (DeMeritt 118). Based on these readings, Gerti makes an individual choice to participate in
this system of exchange.

In addition to implicating her in her own abuse, Gerti’s relationship to economics is
sexualized in a way that mirrors the language of the anti-pornography feminists of the 1980’s.
Even though Gerti may not be a complete and total victim, it is also true that Hermann “names
her housewife, fit only for the house, keeps her poor and utterly dependent, only to buy her with
his money should she leave the house and then he calls her whore” (Dworkin 18). Even though
she does get something out of this exchange, there is no evidence to support the argument that
Gerti has any say in its terms. For instance, the narrator describes how, “Drei neue Pullover
versteckt sie im Schrank, um keinen Anlaß zum Mißtrauen zu geben, sie wollte mit ihrer
blutigen Furche sich einen neuen Wonnemonat bereiten” (Jelinek Lust 45). This nervous
behavior is indicative of Gerti’s personal anxieties and reservations about this exchange
relationship. In a moment of erlebte Rede the reader also gains insight into Hermann’s opinion
about this situation when the narrator argues that, “Sie soll wissen, was sie an ihm hat” (Jelinek Lust 45). Hermann and/or the narrator insists that Gerti recognize the benefits that she receives from this exchange including the “Schutz seines hl. Familiennames” and the protection of the “Schirm seiner Konten” (Jelinek Lust 45). While Gerti and Hermann are typified based on their class status, their more individualized opinions of these roles begin to filter into the text ever so slightly. Gerti and Hermann each have unique, personal expectations and anxieties surrounding their pornographic exchange of rape for money.42

The economics of pornography in the relationship between Gerti and her husband serve as a point of contrast to the violence inflicted on Gerti by Michael. For this abuse of her body, instead of a capitalist prize in the form of money, Gerti receives the impression of being in love. In other words, instead of a commodified (i.e. pornographic) prize, Gerti receives an emotional (i.e. melodramatic) prize through the abuse she endures at the hands of Michael. Even though Michael is no less violent than Hermann, for instance when the narrator describes how he, “zerrt die Frau an den Haaren herüber, bis sie wie ein Vogerl darüber flattert” (Jelinek Lust 120), Gerti

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42Jelinek’s interest in pornography as an economic practice that places women in a compromised position is not confined to Lust. In die Klavierspielerin (1983) Jelinek preempt some of her work in Lust through Erika Kohut’s visit to the peep show. In this scene the sexually repressed piano teacher, Erika, visits a pornographic theater in order to enjoy a moment of freedom from her domineering mother. Referencing this scene, Yasmin Hoffmann writes that in Jelinek’s work “Pornographie ist nicht das Übel, sie ist nur das Symptom der Warenwirtschaft, Kommerzialisierung einer Marktlücke, die der Verdrängung” (Hoffmann 287). Hoffmann is partly right in that there is an interchangeability of bodies inherent to pornography. For example, the narrator describes how the men rotate “nach einem ganz bestimmten Unlustprinzip innerhalb einer ganzen Kette von Peep-Shows” (Jelinek Klavier 58). The economy here is simple, “Sie zahlen und bekommen dafür etwas” (Jelinek Klavier 60). However, Erika’s experience, like Gerti’s, also eventually transcends these economic terms. As she takes a “vom Sperma ganz zusammengebackenes Papiertaschentuch” and smells it, as she “atmet tief ein, was ein anderer in harter Arbeit produziert hat” she achieves a sort of peacefulness in that “sie will einfach still sitzen und schauen” (Jelinek Klavier 63). Similarly to the scene in which Gerti kills her son, it is possible that all Erika has the potential to gain for herself is a single moment of short-lived peace. Although she does not determine the terms under which the exchange in the peep show takes place, Erika still goes there as a temporary escape from her mother’s control. As Vis argues, Erika only accomplishes this when she “überschreitet hier die Schwelle von der weiblichen Welt zur männlichen Welt” (Vis 386). Erika must enter the male space of pornography spectator in order to win a moment of peace for herself. There is simply no other way to do so. In this way, Jelinek draws attention both to the potential evils of the commodification of sex, while still allowing for the possibility that these encounters could also contain a degree of agency or power for women. Both Gerti and Erika have something to learn from adopting masculine roles in this system of exchange.
has a very different emotional response to his aggression. Instead of remaining dead inside only to later relish in all of the skirts she can now buy, after one of her encounters with Michael, Gerti “spricht von ihren Gefühlen” (Jelinek Lust 120) and displays affection when she “bedeckt Michael mit flaumigen flauchigen Küssen” (Jelinek Lust 124). Inexplicably, what she gets from Michael is, at least initially, a feeling of being loved. This feeling completes her emotionally in the same way that Hermann supports her financially and draws on a melodramatic understanding of the relationship between suffering and love.

Based on the passages cited above it makes sense why critics including Andreas Heimann would describe Gerti as a character in which “fehlende Bildung und Naivität tragen ebenfalls zu dem Gefühl der Verzweiflung bei” (64). If all that one looked at were the scenes in which she is being raped, Gerti would indeed be the confused, pathetic girl that Heimann describes. However, what critics including Heimann have failed to address is the way Gerti’s passivity, when faced with her husband’s abuse, stands in stark contrast to her more lively emotional responses to Michael, and her deeply personal and thoughtful reflections about her relationship with her son. While the focalization of the narrative rarely shifts to Gerti’s perspective as she is being raped, brief moments with her son generate increased access to Gerti’s mind and emotions. For example, in a scene focalized through her towards the beginning of the text, her son wants Gerti to buy him something from a sporting goods store and her response is described as follows: “Lieb wirft sie sich über den Sohn, aber auch als rauschender Bach fließt sie unter ihm dahin, verhallt in der Tiefe. Sie hat nur dieses eine Kind” (Jelinek Lust 12). Unlike her lifeless responses to her husband’s abuse, this seemingly small request from her son sends Gerti into a flurry of emotional reflection. In addition to having only one child, Gerti has only one husband,
but it is the son and not the husband who elicits these emotional responses, at least in terms of what the narrator shares with the reader.

Gerti appears far more worried about what is going on with her son than what is going on with her husband. For instance, after a scene in which the son walks in on his mother being raped, the narrator indicates to the reader that in the midst of her own suffering Gerti thinks only about the effect that this experience will have on her son:

Die Frau zerstrüft sich in ihren Handfesseln. Sie strampelt mit den Beinen und hält die Augen ins Ungewisse ihres Kindes gerichtet, was wird wohl aus ihm werden? Ein junger Adler, der an einem Kleinwagon nagt? Mit Schnabellieben in die Brust eines Menschen hackt? Der beim Slalom, der hinterm Haus, zum Spaß und damit die Menschen sich an Umwege gewöhnen, gesteckt ist, sich besiegen lassen kann? Alles, was dieses Kind und dieser Mann sich wünschen, ist auf seine Weise gefährlich. (Jelinek Lust 54)

The narration shifts into erlebte Rede, or what Dorrit Cohn would call narrated monologue, as Gerti sees the potential for her son to become like his father, for her son to become a bird of prey, out for victory and blood. She distracts herself from her current circumstances by thinking about her son’s future, only to discover that this line of inquiry leads her right back to her current position, as the victim of violent abuse at the hands of a more powerful man. She concludes that the desire for domination in all men, whether adult or child, is dangerous in its own way. Ultimately, it is this thought that troubles her more than any physical or emotional distress directly caused by her husband’s actual behavior. The perpetuation of that behavior in future generations is her primary concern. She refuses to accept the fact that this cycle of abuse will continue uninterrupted. These kinds of reflections appear throughout the text, for instance when Gerti/the narrator thinks: “Wie wird dieses Kind erst aufgezogen, wenn es, nach Papas Vorbild im Reisepaar, ein Mann und Vater geworden ist!” (Jelinek Lust 38) or when he is referred to as her “Schicksalssohn” (Jelinek Lust 176). It is clear from moments like these that Gerti does have a specific interiority and a unique inner life. She reflects on her abuse and considers its
implications, just not necessarily in the way that the reader might initially expect. The narrator
only gives the reader glimpses of Gerti’s inner life when her son is present, primarily because
that inner life is focused on the kind of man her son will become. Gerti’s experience of
motherhood is what generates her melodramatic emotional life. However, in her efforts to be a
good mother, she ends up treating her son like the de-individualized type that so many critics
have seen in her own role as a character. Gerti never sees her son as the unique boy that he is, as
developing his own individual behavior and tastes, but rather sees him exclusively as either an
extension of her victimized self or a representative of his father, the perpetrator of masculine
violence.

It is not difficult to understand why Gerti views her son in this reductive way because
Hermann also establishes his identity in large part through his son. Dworkin argued in the 1980s
that, “Men develop a strong loyalty to violence. Men must come to terms with violence because
it is the prime component of male identity” (51). It is interesting to see just how much Hermann
ascribes to this educational model for his son. In a later scene focalized through him, Hermann
reflects on the fact that he must come to terms with “dem Tier in sich” (Jelinek Lust 151), as well
as the violent animal lurking within his child. The narrator describes how: “Doch zuverlässig
findet der Mann unter sich sein Ejakulat und wälzt sich in dieser Gewissheit: sein Kind wird
nach ihm weiterleben und andere Menschen in seiner Stadt weiter sekkieren” (Jelinek Lust 151).
Hermann takes comfort in the thought that the cycle of violence in which he participates will not
end with him, but will continue with his son. The boy will terrorize both in terms of his gender
and in terms of his class status within a capitalist system, just like his father before him. In fact,
even just by supporting the child and taking care of his immediate needs, Hermann is able to
further oppress Gerti. As the narrator comments, “Er kauft dem Kind neues Gewand, und die
Mutter, begrenzt wie Natur halt ist, muß es waschen” (Jelinek Lust 151). Taking care of the child puts additional burdens on Gerti, thereby keeping her in a subordinate position within the household. Hermann uses a conception of the natural to justify his abuse of Gerti, and draws his son into that process by implying that caring for the son and providing for his needs inevitably oppresses the mother, forcing her to perform the uncompensated household work of doing laundry. Just as he takes advantage of the workers in his factory, Hermann is more than happy to exploit his wife’s labor at home. Furthermore, he sees his son as an integral part of that exploitation. Hermann is proud of the way that his son takes to being a bully more readily than he takes to being a musician and is happy to see how he “beherrscht die anderen Kinder vollkommener all seine Geige” (Jelinek Lust 22). As the narrator points out, “Ohne etwas zu tun, erklärt das Kind, warum der Direktor lebt” (Jelinek Lust 126). The child’s very existence gives Hermann’s life meaning by ensuring that his legacy of abuse will continue. Therefore, the identities of both mother and father are wrapped up in their relationship to the son. It is the child who brings out what little interiority they do have and complicates a reading in which Hermann and Gerti are purely types or symbols. However, at the same time, the son himself becomes symbolic, bearing the added weight of the identities of his parents and leaving no room for him to establish his own character.

The son is actually the most mysterious figure in the text, in that the reader is provided the least access to his mental life. Significantly, he is the only major character for whom no name is provided, the most direct sign of a character that has been de-individualized or reduced to a type. In many ways this is true, the son becomes whoever Hermann or Gerti want him to be,

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43It is a hallmark of Jelinek’s work to delay naming her characters and to describe them first according to their roles as wives, husbands, mothers, workers, etc. This is one more reason that critics of her work tend to see her characters as types. However, when she does eventually give them names, it is often as if Jelinek is baiting her readers, demonstrating how easy it is to forget people’s individuality in our efforts to place them into identity categories.
displaying very little personality of his own, apart from their projections onto him. Despite all of the instances in which the son is represented as a future Hermann, capitalist exploiter and abuser of women, in select moments he also is like his mother, i.e. feminized and passive. For example, when he sleeps, the child escapes the violence between his parents and the example that it seems destined to set for him, if only briefly. In one such scene the narrator asks: “Wer in diesem Land ist ein Kind und hat einen Raum, wo es sich ausgeht, daß der Körper hineinpaßt? Wer kann Bärlis und Sportbilder dabei anschauen und die Popstars? Dieses Kind ist aus dem Anlaß des Sexgebrülls seiner Eltern an einen ruhigen Ort hingelegt” (Jelinek Lust 126). Even as the child is always already enmeshed in the cycle of violence and oppression inflicted by his father on his mother, he, unlike the other adults in the text, is also able to take refuge from this violence in the comforts of his own room and amidst his personal possessions. It is unclear how much these possessions serve to construct an individualized identity for him, or how much they serve to differentiate him from other children, thereby making this scene an odd mix of individuality and typification. The son is old enough to have individual possessions and tastes, but the reader is not provided any information about the specifics of these items. At best we can say that he seems to have an interest in sports and that he is something of a bully with regards to the other children, but beyond that, very little can be conjectured about the son as an individual. This mirrors the way in which his mother comes to consider him only in terms of the man he will become, not in terms of his unique personality or interests as a boy.

Contrary to the expectations of some branches of feminist psychoanalysis or even popular culture, Gerti and her son do not experience any kind of mystical or spiritual mother-son bond. This is not to say that mother and son are not connected from the beginning in terms of Gerti’s active concern for his well being. However, Gerti’s own expectations are thwarted when she
does not establish a deep spiritual connection with her son. Even the deeply theoretically and psychoanalytically symbolic act of breastfeeding is demystified in Jelinek’s account of this relationship: “Fest würde der Mutter die müde, die Muttermilch aus den Brüsten stürzen vor Schreck, daß dieses Kind keine unsterb. Seele zu haben scheint, denn es macht seine Mutter nicht selig” (Jelinek Lust 157). Gerti wants to experience a deeply resonant mother-son connection, but this is not possible due to the fact that, according to the narrator, there is something off about her son’s mortal soul, which prevents him from being a blessing to her by association. Gerti cannot see her son as a blessing, only as a burden, something for which she needs to care. For example, the narrator describes the attention and detail with which Gerti prepares her son’s food saying, “Die Mutter hat einen ganzen Teil des Vormittags Karotten fein durch ein Sieb gedrückt, damit sie den Augen des Kindes nützen. Das Essen fürs Kind macht sie selbst” (Jelinek Lust 60). Gerti clearly puts a lot of labor into nourishing her son, despite their lack of a spiritual bond through breast-feeding. Gerti’s son is in the precarious position of being both a vulnerable child and a future violent male abuser. It is this tension and its resolution, when Gerti becomes unable to see her child as anything but his father’s son, which causes Gerti to fixate so much of her emotional energy on him and ultimately, I argue, a big part of what drives her to murder him. In addition, her act of child-murder can also be read as her way of forcibly bonding her son to her forever.

In what little speculation has been done about why Gerti murders her son, it is sometimes argued that she acts in an attempt to realign some cosmic order in favor of women. For example, Chien argues that Gerti takes these drastic actions as a result of societal pressures, which try to

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44This particular quotation begs for a psychoanalytic reading following in the footsteps of Lacan and Irigaray. In this relationship between mother and child it is as if the pre-Oedipal unity of the two through the act of breast-feeding is impossible because of some specific deficiency on the part of the child. Symbolically, even at this early stage, the son is already a potential violent abuser of Gerti just like his father, at least in his mother’s mind. Because of her (premature) characterization of him as a type, any preexisting spiritual bond between mother and child is negated.
force her into the role of the mother, a role that she neither chooses, nor necessarily embraces. Chien highlights the paradox that, “Mutter zu werden ist im Patriarchat auch kein Recht der Frauen, sondern eine paradoxerweise von Männern zugleich glorifizierte wie missachtete weibliche Pflicht” (119). In other words, Chien argues that the only way out of this maternal role, which is forced on Gerti from the outside, is to eliminate the child. Contrary to Chien, I believe that in killing her son, Gerti ironically embraces her role as a mother, rather than denying or escaping it. When she kills her son, Gerti kills a little piece of herself, but she would rather commit this violent act than allow him the opportunity to move away from her and forge his own path by following his father’s example. Right before she suffocates him, Gerti approaches her son’s bedside and finds him in the middle of a restless sleep. The narrator describes him as “unbequem” in the eyes of his mother and “welk,” yet, as has already been established, it is this feeble being, who has come to constitute “ihre ganze Welt” (Jelinek Lust 254). As Chien rightly points out, Gerti is ambivalent about her impending act of violence and it is “einerseits aus Wut, andererseits aus Verzweiflung” that she eventually kills her son (Chien 124). The child is a part of her, but if he continues to live, Gerti believes that he will continue to align himself more closely with his father. Right before she kills him, the son shifts back into his role as a stand-in for the violent sexuality of his father when through erlebte Rede the reader gains access to Gerti’s conclusion that, “Es freut sich gewiß aufs Wachsen, ähnlich dem Glied seines Vaters” (Jelinek Lust 254). In life, anatomy trumps any hints of a spiritual mother-son bond. Gerti sees in her son the potential for the continuation of the pornographic myths of masculine desire and seeks to put an end to this cycle, if only for a moment. She cannot see her son as becoming anything but a replacement for Hermann.
Chien goes on to argue that this moment has further psychoanalytic symbolism in that in killing her son Gerti also rejects him in the Freudian sense as a penis substitute (Chien 160). Many critics, including Bethman and Doll, have made similar Freudian arguments about other Jelinek protagonists, particularly those who are artists. They describe the process of creating art as a masculine activity, a substitute phallus. Interestingly though, Gerti is not an artistic woman trying to make it in a man’s profession. Her roles are as mother and wife only, and these roles remain intact from the first page of Lust to the last page. It is not Gerti who lives in the end but “the mother,” a female type. The last time that Gerti is referenced directly, the narrator describes her as “Die Mutter” (Jelinek Lust 255), indicating that through the act of killing her son, Gerti has ironically lived up to her role as caretaker and nurturer. Gerti’s position as mother has not gone away just because she has murdered her child. Gerti has not succeeded in escaping her role as mother or her role as wife through her actions. The text emphasizes that she is still ultimately in the same position after she kills her son as she was before she killed him.

Therefore, Gerti’s murder of her son should not be read as a means through which she seeks to uncouple herself from Hermann and the systemic masculine violence he represents. That is simply not an option here. Rather than losing any part of her identity or losing any of the oppressive burdens that she faces, Gerti only gains one small thing from the act of murdering her son, namely a moment of peace. In the end, all that there is to do is rest, as the narrator understands commanding, “Aber nun rastet eine Weile!” (Jelinek Lust 255). By the end of the scene in which she kills her child, the narration has moved away, yet again, from the specifics of Gerti’s situation in order to extrapolate something about the status of women in general. It is not Gerti who is asked to rest at the end, but all of the women implicated by this second person plural “ihr command.” Enacting this small, temporary change against the repetition of violent,
gendered oppression has been unduly challenging and so we must rest, rather than run ourselves into the ground trying to make right a past for which justice can never truly and fully be served. There is no revolution against the patriarchy here, only an assertion of Gerti’s ability to perpetrate acts of extreme and in many ways, useless violence, much like her male counterparts. Gerti participates in the process of objectifying and typifying others the way that she has been made into a symbol by her husband and ultimately by Jelinek as well.

On the level of character then, when she murders her son, Gerti proves herself to be similar to Hermann in that she too turns to pointless violence in a search for stability and order. Hermann abuses Gerti in order to keep the destructive forces of sexually transmitted infections at bay, in order to keep his body and his life stable. Gerti, we see, achieves at least a moment of similar stasis and stability when she kills her son. In this way, Gerti imitates the behavior of her husband. Jelinek’s approach to the discourses of pornography and melodrama is theoretically then very similar to Luce Irigaray’s work on the concept of mimesis. Irigaray’s argument, primarily in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985), is that because women are excluded from discourse, their relationship to language is always mimetic. Mimicry reveals what is invisible in discourse, namely that it is entrenched in masculine *logos*. When women speak, they do so not as women, but as one who is “sexualized male (whether I recognize this or not) or as asexualized” (Irigaray *This Sex* 149). In mimicking the tropes of pornography and melodrama then, Jelinek engages in a process of what Irigaray might call “jamming the theoretical machinery itself” (Irigaray *This Sex* 78). In other words, instead of trying to create a space where women act as male subjects, Jelinek draws attention to the limitations and failures of this violent behavior in the first place. Gerti’s actions show us the temporary nature of the stability brought on by violent actions, thereby making it clear why Hermann’s abuses need to be nearly continuous in order to
be effective. Gerti’s final act of mimicry demonstrates how pervasive, and yet ineffective, this masculine strategy for achieving stability really is. When she is raped Gerti becomes a stand-in for all women. Although Gerti may differentiate between Hermann and Michael, for the reader they are often just men, committing acts of violence that come naturally to them. Contrastingly, when she acts to kill her child, Gerti establishes a gender reversal of these roles, thereby revealing the limitations of violence as a means for maintaining stability itself. In addition, as we will continue to see in the next section of this chapter, Jelinek’s narratological strategies further complicate any effort by the reader to ever truly get close to and understand these characters.

**Language**

In one of the most brutal and most talked about scenes in *Lust*, Michael and his friends rape Gerti. In the description of this gang rape, the narrator fluctuates between third and first person narration, constantly changing the perspective through which these events are focalized, and thereby preventing the reader from attaining any sense of who these characters are beyond their roles as symbols within a brutal power dynamic. For instance, the reader is confronted with moments of detached third person narration: “Die Buben halten ihr die lebendigen Hände oben unter dem Kopf zusammen” (Jelinek *Lust* 196). And they are also forced to engage with moments in which the reader themselves is implicated in the action through the use of the first person plural: “Na, gehen wir nicht so weit, daß wir, selber Knechte, mit Gewalt das unsere nehmen von der Gerti” (Jelinek *Lust* 198). Not only does the narration fluctuate between these two narrative modes, but various acts of narratorial reflection also interject into the scene. For example, the narrator inquires, “Das tut doch weh, denkt keiner daran?” (Jelinek *Lust* 197) and “Na also, warum treten Sie dann nicht zurück und lassen mich auch einmal im Video zornig ihre Geschlechter aufplusternde Menschen anschauen?” (Jelinek *Lust* 198). Brenda Bethman argues
that this shifting in narrative perspective is used to deconstruct the “traditional voyeuristic position of the reader in pornography” in which pleasure is derived from witnessing something erotic, often without explicit permission (60-61). This is certainly true of this scene in that the constantly shifting narrative perspective keeps the reader on their toes and prevents them from engaging in any kind of sympathetic identification with the characters, particularly the ones perpetrating this rape. Jelinek’s narrator even invokes a sense of inevitability in connection with these violent actions describing how, “Es ist unglaublich, was man mit den dehnbaren Schamlippen alles anfangen kann, um sie, als wär’s ihr Schicksal, in der Form zu verzerren” (Jelinek Lust 197). Not only is Gerti reduced to her anatomy in this quotation, but the violence done to her is normalized and even awe-inspiring. It is the fate of the labium to be stretched and brutalized in this manner. Furthermore, we as readers are challenged by a narrator who refuses to side with any of the characters in this scene, whether they be rape victims or perpetrators. This uncomfortable narrative situation, in which we are not guided towards sympathetic attachment with one character or another, reinforces the fact that this text wants to push back against the pleasurable and world-ordering discourses of pornography and melodrama, even doing violence to those discourses through language.

Endres writes that the words Jelinek uses in her writing “geben keine Ruhe” (82). But what does it really mean for language to create violence instead of peace? As we have already seen, a complete understanding of Jelinek’s text in terms of plot and character involves recognition of the fact that nuances and ambiguities abound within Lust. In one scene a character may seem more symbolic than realistic, while in another the reverse is true. Instead of getting easier to decipher, Jelinek’s text continues to get more complicated when the language and narrative strategies of her text are properly considered. For example, Jelinek frequently uses
poetic or metaphorical language as a weapon against traditional modes of narration, often themselves considered masculinist or violent. She, like Gerti when she kills her child, attempts to fight fire with fire. The challenge for Jelinek then is to be more successful than her character. She must replicate injurious language in such a way that it creates change rather than naturalizing the status quo.

One of Jelinek’s most characteristic literary moves is her engagement with and questioning of fairly common metaphors and symbols. She simultaneously reinforces, manipulates, and undermines her readers’ expectations and knowledge of the symbolic connotations of various words and idioms. To use a fairly straightforward example from Lust, when talking about genitalia Jelinek sometimes uses the rather conventional and recognizable pornographic language of “Glied” (Jelinek Lust 27) or “Schwanz” (Jelinek Lust 20) and “Muschi” (Jelinek Lust 145) or “Büchse” (Jelinek Lust 114), but she also gets rather creative and excessively metaphorical at times, also speaking about the “spuckender Spender” (Jelinek Lust 32) and the “PKW der Frau” (Jelinek Lust 25) or the “elektr. Leitung” (Jelinek Lust 26) and the “saugfähiges Tuch” (Jelinek Lust 46), just to name a few examples. While simultaneously building up a pornographic vocabulary with which her reader is familiar, Jelinek also pushes them outside of their comfort zone and forces them to accommodate a wide variety of euphemistic genital vocabulary that speaks to a broad range of connections between sexual politics and everyday life. With these metaphors and euphemisms, Jelinek both naturalizes and challenges existing pornographic vocabulary. Furthermore, this process of engaging critically with pornographic language is reminiscent of Brooks’s contention that melodrama, through its excesses, generates a feeling that “the represented world won’t bear the weight of the significances placed on it” (Brooks 11). The saturation of the linguistic world that Jelinek
creates, in which every truck or rag also represents the brutality of sexual violence, is then both pornographic and melodramatic in its move towards excess and oversignification.

Another example of this strategy occurs early in the text when Jelinek both plays with and challenges her readers’ understanding of the metaphoric significance of dirtiness and cleanliness. Hermann abuses Gerti in a variety of ways, one of which is by prohibiting her from cleaning herself, because “auch ihr Geruch gehört ihm ganz” (Jelinek Lust 56). He wants to make it so that, “wie einen Faden soll diese Frau ihre Gerüche nach Schweiß, Pisse, Scheiße hinter sich herziehen” (Jelinek Lust 56-57). However, because this information about Gerti’s stench is presented to the reader by a narrator who knows about Hermann’s desire to own and control Gerti’s body, instead of a metaphor for Gerti’s bad character, her lack of cleanliness becomes a reflection on Hermann’s abuse. In making her appear “dirty” Hermann ends up sullying himself, at least in the mind of the reader. This dynamic is reinforced a few pages later where we get a description of Gerti cleaning the house:


In this scene, which is focalized through Gerti, the reader sees that she is actually quite a diligent cleaner. It is her family situation that makes things dirty and Gerti is the one who cleans them up and sets things right again. Not only that, but this cleaning takes an emotional toll on her. When she organizes her clothing in the closet she laughs out of shame, a shame that is both a kind of helplessness, in that she feels trapped in her situation, but also a shame that draws attention to the fact that underneath her cleaning, the dirtiness of her suffering still remains. This is not a game. There are real abuses underlying everything that she does. She tries her best to maintain order,
but there is always some underlying dirt, ready to burst forth like her laughter. Jelinek, therefore, takes the common metaphors of dirtiness and cleanliness and manipulates them in such a way that it allows her readers to see behind the workings of the symbols and therefore, to mistrust them. She relies on the reader’s metaphoric association of cleanliness with goodness and dirtiness with immorality, and she builds this scene off of an assumption of this connection. However, through the positionality of her narrator, Jelinek also calls these traditional associations into question.

In her book *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory*, Hanssen provides an overview of the various ways in which violence has been connected to speech, ranging from claims by Habermas and Arendt that violence is external to speech/incapable of speech, to Derrida’s interest in the disruptive force of speech acts, to Butler’s understanding of speech as social agency and as a realm in which discursive conventions can be challenged (Hanssen 165, 172-173). Lust’s engagement with violence owes a little to each of these approaches. The abuse Gerti suffers silences her to a degree, but through the narrator, voice is also given to a variety of different characters and perspectives, demonstrating the violent potential for speech to undermine the expectations and conventions that the reader brings to the text. In Butler’s view, rebellious speech can be defined as a “risk taken in response to being put at risk, a repetition in language that forces change” (Butler *Excitable Speech* 163). Instead of giving in to the oppressive force of repetition, Jelinek challenges herself to replicate injurious language in a way that creates change rather than naturalizing the status quo. Consequently, Jelinek must engage in a process of linguistic violence, one in which she repeats the language of pornography, but in a way that de-familiarizes it, leaving readers no choice but to question their previously held assumptions. I argue that
Jelinek’s language is violent in that it productively implicates the reader in the events of the plot. This linguistic violence that pulls the reader into the text while simultaneously pushing them away from the internal lives of the characters, far more than the acts of physical violence depicted in the text, serves an effective critique of both pornographic and melodramatic structures. Just as pornography voyeuristically pulls us in and melodramatic excess stretches our capacity to make meaning, in her critique of these genres Jelinek’s language forces her readers into uncomfortable positions.

In her analysis of *Lust*, Ockenfuss argues that Jelinek’s text uses language to make the reader complicit in the rapes that are taking place on the page. She writes that readers are made vulnerable by the language of this text saying, “Not the book, but the reader, is opened” by Jelinek’s stylistic choices (Ockenfuss 78). This process begins on the level of narrative voice, where it is difficult for us as readers to pin down exactly who is narrating this text and for whom. According to Koch, for example, in *Lust* it quickly becomes clear that the “ich” is not “die mahnende, ordunrasschaffende und spendende Autorin […], sondern ein fragiles literarisches Geschöpf” (135). Furthermore, Struve highlights the fact that the text’s reflection on its own production “casts doubt on the integrity of this “ich” — it too might be only a changeable textual construct without a referent, not linked to any person outside the text” (97). Not only is the narrator not confident and authorial, lending order to the narrative, but it is possible that there is no one person or one voice to whom/which the reader can point as the source of this story. Building on these arguments, I characterize the first person singular narrative voice in *Lust* as stable only insofar as it desires to be mutable.

Subjective narration in the first person singular is broken down and challenged in *Lust* to such a degree that it becomes impossible for the reader to establish any secure sense of the
perspective from which this story is told. Jelinek uses the majority of instances of first person singular narration to draw attention to places where the narrator is presenting us with their opinion. This primarily manifests itself in the narrator’s desire to change themself and to be different than they are. For example, after describing the diligence with which Hermann works in his office, the narrator comments:


It is as if the narrator of this text has no desire to be a narrator at all. Drawing attention to Hermann’s position as a producer of paper and the connection between that job and the narrator’s own task of writing, the narrator reflects on their own complicity and participation in this text. In this moment of what Cohn might label autobiographical monologue, the narrator express the feeling that the pressure of narrating feels like a manipulation. They would rather have someone else reformulate their words for them than take on this responsibility. While this does not necessarily bode well for the faith that we as readers might want to place in this narrative and its narrator, it does start to establish a bit of a personality for the narrator. The narrator’s stability unexpectedly inheres in their desire to be mutable, to change so much that they become impossible to truly pin down.

This continues in a passage in which the narrator reflects on age and the inevitability of the young taking the place of the old, a concern shared by both Gerti and the narrator. After speaking first in general terms, the narration makes a sudden narratological switch, turning an initially abstract conversation personal asking, “Und warum ich? Warum ich mit über 40 schwer zu haben und schwerer zu wiegen bin als ein Kind, in den Fesseln der Waagebalken, die sich von
mir weineigen? Da ich für jede unerwartete Freude mich zu wandeln versucht und ein neues Gewand mir gekauft habe” (Jelinek Lust 178). The narrator is steadfast in their desire to be changed/changeable, to be someone other than who they are, even though the identity from which they are trying to escape is itself not necessarily clear. Jelinek simultaneously builds up and breaks down identity/subjectivity through a series of complicated and unconventional narrative choices. The narrator’s identity is based on their desire to change their identity, a starting place that hardly seems stable in terms of establishing a perspective through which the reader can comfortably engage with this material.

In addition, the narrator frequently uses the first person singular to remind the reader of the constructed nature of this narrative itself. For example, the narrator uses this mode to undermine authoritarian statements that they make about the plot, such as when the narrator says, “Ja, dieses Kind ist noch klein, aber es ist speziell als Mann geplant, glaube ich” (Jelinek Lust 219). Without the “glaube ich” this statement would stand alone as an omniscient reading of the child’s future, but by adding in the subjective presence of the “I,” the authority of the statement is intentionally undermined. The reader now has to decide whether or not to believe what the narrator believes. They must determine whether or not they trust a narrator who has already proven so challenging to definitively locate. This narrative pattern increases as one gets further and further into the text. For instance, when talking about Michael’s rejection of Gerti, the narrator claims that “Dieser Weg ist ihr jetzt verschlossen, fürchte ich” (Jelinek Lust 226). The narrator is not totally certain, but they have a hunch that whatever path Michael temporarily opened for Gerti, it is now closed. The narrator’s lack of certainty, particularly when attempting to speak in the first person singular, is itself one of the few certainties in this text. The narrator puts it best when they make the out of context remark that, “Ich glaube mir, aber ich glaube nicht
an mich!” (Jelinek *Lust* 222). As readers we have to believe this narrator’s account because it is the only access to this story that we have. However, this does not necessarily mean that we have to believe in this narrator as a fully stable and comprehensible figure in and of themselves. Jelinek forces her readers into the position of having to import a degree of narrative stability to this story, rather than providing it for them.

Since, as I have shown, the son is crucial to the establishment of Gerti and Hermann’s identities, it is not surprising that the first time this first person, supposedly subject-creating, narrative voice draws attention to itself is in conjunction with a description of Gerti’s son. After describing the vacation photos that populate the family home the narrator says, “Kein wahres Wort ist an diesem Kind dran, es will nur mit seinen Schiern losziehen, das schwöre ich Ihnen” (Jelinek *Lust* 12). The narrator goes out of their way to affirm the validity of their personal interpretation of the son’s desire to go skiing. In addition to the narrator’s swearing, it is striking that the readers are referred to here with the formal address (particularly when, as we will see, they are addressed together with the narrator as a collective, familiar “we” at other moments within the text). In this way, Jelinek sheds light on the illusion that any truly stable subjective identity can be established. To speak in a confident and independent first-person singular “I” is to place oneself in a false hierarchy above those to whom and about whom one speaks. This connection between the “I” and a formal address to the reader continues in an invitation for the reader to be complicit in the violence of this text. The narrator (perhaps somewhat sarcastically) emotes, “Ich fordere Sie ernstlich auf: Luft und Lust für alle!” (Jelinek *Lust* 105). This “I” starts by establishing a formal distance between the reader and the narration, excluding them from knowledge of these events that the narrator claims to have and will reveal to the reader on their
own terms. As if that were not complicated enough, this power structure, as established in the first person singular narrative voice, is also extended to the first person plural narrative voice.

By challenging her readers to do the work necessary to make sense of this story, Jelinek further implicates them not only in the violent actions of the plot, but also within the terms of the phallocentric violence of language itself. One of the most obvious ways that this occurs is through Jelinek’s repeated use of the first person plural throughout her text. This “we” confuses and destabilizes the audience of the narrative because in using “we,” the narrator implicates both themselves and the reader in the events taking place. Not only that, but this “we” often has different referents, sometimes indicating a group of men (as in the gang rape scene discussed earlier), sometimes the townswomen, and sometimes an even more abstract and nebulous collective. I want to start my analysis with an example of the “we” as a group of men. Scenes of sexual violence in Lust often begin in a typical third person narrative style. For instance, in a scene that prefigures Jelinek’s play with cleanliness and dirtiness, the narrator describes how, “Der Vater hat einen Haufen Sperma abgeladen, die Frau soll alles ordentlich wegputzen. Was sie nicht aufleckt, muß sie aufwischen gehn” (Jelinek Lust 40). Despite its unconventional content, the narrative voice that introduces this scene is fairly unremarkable and the reader receives no insight into the minds of the characters in this scene. The characters’ actions alone are described, nothing more and nothing less. However, as the scene goes on, the narrative voice switches from third person to first person rather abruptly:

Übrigens, wenn sie schon die Beine aufgeklappt hat, kann sie sich gleich über ihn stellen und ihm in den Mund pissen. Was, sie kann nicht? Stoßen wir ihr das Knie nach oben und treffen klatschend (Applaus, Applaus!) ihre weichen Futlappen, die sich gleich leise schmatzend öffnen werden, und wir Männer müssen sofort mit dem Maßkrug auf den Tisch hauen. Wenn sie dann noch nicht seichen kann, zerren wir ihr ganzes weibl. Geschlecht an den Schamhaaren nach unten, bis sie in den Kniegelenken einknickt und, aufs äußerste gespreizt, auf den Brustkorb des Herrn Direktor hinuntersinkt. (Jelinek Lust 41)
There is a lot to unpack stylistically from this passage. It begins, as expected, in the third person. The reader is informed about Gerti’s actions and engages with them as an external observer. However, hints of access to Gerti’s interiority are already beginning to form through the use of the modal verb “kann” in which the narrator introduces the notion of possibility, the implication that a decision-making process is taking place. This is what could happen under certain conditions. This transitions to a moment of narratorial commentary when the narrator asks, “Was, sie kann nicht?” All of a sudden, the reader’s experience as observer is interrupted by the interjection of this jarring question. Through this question, the narrator transitions into something like what Dorrit Cohn calls psycho-narration, a space where the narrator makes direct comments about the consciousness of a character, often revealing something that the character themselves cannot vocalize (Cohn 46). With this question, the narrator casts doubt on Gerti’s ability to perform the actions required of her by her husband, further reinforcing the brutality of the moment. Before the reader can adjust to this change in perspective, it entirely switches again as the narration moves into the first person plural. This mode of narration does not fit neatly into any of Cohn’s categories for first person narration because of the way that the plurality of this first person voice both implicates the reader in the action and starts to break out of the realm of fictional narration itself, at least in a narratological sense. All of a sudden we (the readers) are involved in the violence, forcing Gerti’s knee upwards and banging our beer steins on the table. We, men, even get a little extra-narratorial celebration of our brutality, as cries for applause also appear, applause from an audience whose location and identity remains ambiguous. Finally, it is important that this “we” is somehow separated from both Gerti and Hermann and yet, ultimately sides with Hermann. The “we” works in service of the director, forcing Gerti’s body down on top of him in an extremely violent manner. Not only that, but the rather clinical abbreviation of
“weibliches” in this passage further reinforces the notion that the actions of this “we” are a kind of labor, a service performed by “us” for the director, almost as if this text were a workplace report, rather than a work of fiction.

In just this one short passage we see examples of the plethora of stylistic choices with which any reader of this text must contend. This only becomes more destabilizing for the reader when, pulling back and looking at the text as a whole, it becomes clear that the “we” in Lust refers not only to a stable group of men working in the director’s interests. Each time the narrator talks about “we” the reader needs to do the work of figuring out who is included in that “we” all over again. In a move that calls into question any stable gender identity for the narrator as well as their audience, the “we” in this text is also sometimes used to reference a group of women, either all women generally or slightly more specifically, the women who live in the town. As we have seen, this change of referents often happens within a single scene. For example, when Michael and his friends rape Gerti, the narrator starts by employing a masculine “we” to refer to the men doing the raping. Eventually though, the text undergoes a shift and the “we” is used to refer to all of womankind:

Wir Frauen müssen uns halt selber besser einrichten und dann der fernhin hallenden Stille aus Ihren leblosen Geräten, meine Herren, lauschen, die noch unter der milden Spannung des Garantiescheins beben, daß ihre Frist nicht ablaufe. An uns denken die Männer zuletzt! Fremd ist Michael eingezogen, fremd zieht er ihn wieder heraus. (Jelinek Lust 203)

If the reader thought that they were secure in their knowledge of a presumed male narrator speaking to a presumed male audience, this quotation turns all of those assumptions on their head. The narrator, including themselves now in a category of women, argues that women need to position themselves better with regards to men. These men, now the opposing force to the “we,” never really think about the women with whom they interact and no real connection is ever
formed between members of the opposite sex. As love-struck as Gerti is, Michael both enters and leaves this encounter with her as a stranger. In addition, Jelinek’s narrative style here implies that this experience is the norm in terms of the interactions between all women and all men. Just as she appears to make a normalizing or generalizing statement about the “battle of the sexes,” however, Jelinek is also undermining her readers’ own ability to understand the position of the narrator in relation to this story. As she builds up a gender binary within the content of her text, Jelinek also breaks one down through narratological choices that make it nearly impossible to fit the narrator within this gendered frame. The narrator is both male and female, a part of the action and distanced from it. Not only that, but any pornography-like pleasure that the audience might get from the act of reading has been eliminated because they are narratologically brought both too close and pushed to far away from these scenes to derive any pleasure from the act of reading them.

As if these complications were not enough to attach to the little word “we,” Jelinek takes this one step further by also using “we” to refer to other, even more general, non-gendered groups of people. In another scene that stylistically follows a similar pattern to the scene in which Gerti fails to urinate in Hermann’s mouth, the narrator describes how:


Just as in the previous scene, extreme violence narrated in the third person gives way to psycho-narration in the form of questions, which eventually transitions into a first person plural celebration of brutality. This time however, the “we” is not gendered and so truly anybody could be implicated as a participant in the celebration of Hermann’s despicable actions. Interestingly,
this general “we” is followed up in the text by a “we” that appears to reference a group of people who stand in contrast to the “Bewohner des Landes,” who are “gescheucht von einem Ort zum nächsten” (Jelinek Lust 153). The narrator moves away from Gerti and Hermann temporarily in order to reference how, in contrast to the townsfolk, this mysterious group of outsiders has access to a greater range of experiences saying, “Doch werden wir inzwischen viel mehr erreicht haben, denn WIR gehen weiter, wir trauen uns: in ein Theater, ein Konzert oder eine Ausstellung, wo wir uns erkennen, getragen von nichts als vom Schein, der aus IHREN armen Augen gefallen ist” (Jelinek Lust 153). With her dramatic capitalization Jelinek doubly emphasizes the “us vs. them” nature of this comparison. Jelinek also draws on the distinctions of educational background and/or class between the presumed readers of her text and the people being described within the text itself. This description of art, or the leisure to appreciate it, as built on the sacrifices of working class people at first seems like an odd remark to directly follow a scene of such brutal sexual violence. However, Jelinek’s emphasis on this “us vs. them” dynamic suggests that these two situations, one of interpersonal violence and the other of capitalist-style exploitation, are not as different from one another as the reader might like to think. By destabilizing her reader’s notion of the narrator’s identity and the identity of “us,” Jelinek manages to implicate everyone in the abuses and exploitations that she uncovers on all levels of society within this novel.

As Bethman describes, Jelinek’s shifting narrative perspective makes the reader work for catharsis and clarity, thereby disrupting any pornographic or erotic identification they might have with the characters in the text as a voyeur allowed to watch, objectify, and receive pleasure from the performances of these characters. (Bethman 39, 51, 55, 60). Instead of watching as Michael begins to take advantage of Gerti, the reader, along with the other women in the town, is placed
into the scene: “Sie und die Dörflerinnen und wir alle: Stehen mit unsren Gesichtern, von denen es tropft und taut, den Küchenerd zugewandt und zählen die Eßlöffel, mit denen wir uns verausgaben” (Jelinek Lust 93). Just like the other townswomen, we are pulled into this moment with Gerti; we are pulled into the cycle of sexual abuse from which she cannot escape. In the end, no one is safe from Jelinek’s “we” because we are all complicit in the violence of this text as both male and female. We are all roped into this narrative and placed into unstable categories by the narrator. In the midst of these power dynamics, we are all simultaneously both the victims and the perpetrators, just as Gerti will become both the victim and perpetrator of violence in her own story.

The chaotic flexibility with which Jelinek employs these changing narrative voices stands in stark contrast with her use of bureaucratic language and abbreviation. By combining a narrative voice that is impossible to pin down and the language of an official report, Jelinek demonstrates the ability of unstable narration to unsettle and the power of technical language to reduce and oppress. Jelinek exposes how women are not only attacked by language on the levels of narrative and broader discourses, but also on the level of individual words and terms. Theorists such as Irigaray and Hélène Cixous have brought ample attention to an incompatibility between the feminine and language, at least in the abstract. They argue that traditionally the use of language has been the purview of masculine subjects, a space from which women, and more specifically female bodies, are excluded. For instance, Irigaray writes that if women “keep on speaking sameness, if we speak to each other as men have been doing for centuries, as we have been taught to speak, we’ll miss each other, fail ourselves. […] Absent from ourselves: we’ll be spoken machines. Enveloped in proper skins, but not our own. […] Not yours, not mine. We don’t have any” (This Sex 205). Heimann brings this kind of thinking to bear on Jelinek’s work
writing that, “In einer patriarchal geprägten und durchprägten Sprache ist die Individualisierung des Weiblichen […] nicht umsetzbar, da das verwendete Sprachinventar nicht von einem männlichen zu einem weiblichen Machtpotential umgewandelt werden kann” (198). The language of work, just like the language of pornography, is inherently and inescapably masculine. Therefore, there is perhaps no more concrete example of the masculine disembodiment that Irigaray applies to all language than the report-like bureaucratic language that permeates Jelinek’s text. We already looked at an example of this earlier with the abbreviation of “weibliches,” but I want to highlight a few more examples here to emphasize the importance of this kind of language within the text and to draw out a few more of its implications. For instance, in a passage that equates the ownership of land and the ownership of women’s bodies the narrator says, “Die Ansprüche des Mannes auf eigene Gebiete, deren himmlische Bergwanderwege nur er begehen darf, sind bereits angemeldet beim Katastrophenschutz österr. Frauen” (Jelinek Lust 30). This language of legal jargon attempts to mask an underlying culture of gendered violence and possession. However, it can never be fully effective because we as readers have access to more than just this description of the relationship between Gerti and her husband. This jargon and bureaucratic abbreviation of terms becomes almost humorous from the reader’s perspective when it is attached to scenes of bodily violation such as when, “Er nimmt sich Freiheiten heraus, gern z.B. uriniert er, wie es Hunde tun, gegen seine Frau” (Jelinek Lust 68). Abbreviating “zum Beispiel” as if this text were in an official document is terribly odd when contrasted with the content of this sentence in which a man is urinating on his wife like a dog. Ultimately, this language draws the reader’s attention to the pervasive nature of the oppression of women as depicted in this text. This oppression infiltrates all aspects of life, even the bureaucratic. According to Jelinek, the violence depicted here is so
normal that it falls into a linguistic realm outside of the fictional, one that references everyday occurrences in the language of civic life. Conjuring up a pornographic image, the narrator describes how, “An ihren Fesseln werden die Frauen ins Bild gezerrt, nur ihre tägl. Gewohnheiten sind erbarmungsloser” (Jelinek Lust 53). Everyday life, the lives of women as they are described in the civic world, is just as abusive as sexual violence or pornography. The language of bureaucracy itself does an additional harm to women beyond the physical violence they endure because it normalizes the violence perpetrated against them and inscribes them in the position of the victim. At one point the narrator remarks rather suddenly that, “Wir verdienen alle die meiste, das wir tragen können” (Jelinek Lust 119). However, I have shown that both the women in this text, and, quite frankly the readers of it, are given more to deal with than they can actually bear. The act of reading this text is designed to confuse, horrify, and disgust us as readers, thereby removing any joy, peace, or pleasure from the process of reading. The everyday action of reading, like sex, has had all of the joy sucked out of it through Jelinek’s linguistic and narrative choices.

Considering the narrative confusion generated by Jelinek’s text, it is difficult to establish a clear sense of what is going on stylistically in Lust. With this in mind, it is crucial to note that none of these confusing “we” and “I” formations appear during the final scene in which Gerti kills her son. This is one of the few scenes in the text told in an (almost) uninterrupted third person narrative voice, thereby lending credence to the sense that, contrary to the rape scenes, this moment ironically contains some form of stability and/or clarity. In addition, this scene remains in the realm of fiction, never straying into the realm of the report or the bureaucratic language picked up by so many other violent scenes in this text. In fact, this scene is one of the
more poetical, in that it employs metaphoric language and narrated monologue/erlebte Rede.45

The beginning of the scene where Gerti suffocates her child is narrated as follows:

Unbequem liegt das Kind unter dem Auge der Mutter, die an sein Bett tritt und es geraderückt. Welk ist das Kind und dennoch ihre ganze Welt: es schweigt wie diese. Es freut sich gewiß aufs Wachsen, ähnlich dem Glied seines Vaters. Zärtlich küßt die Mutter ihr kleines Boot, das die Welt umschifft. Dann ergreift sie eine Plastiktüte, legt sie dem Kind über den Kopf und hält sie unten ganz fest zu, damit der Atem des Kindes darin in Ruhe zerbrechen kann. (Jelinek Lust 254)

The action in this scene is presented in a straightforward third-person manner: Gerti goes up to the bed, moves it, grabs a plastic bag, puts it over the child’s head and holds the bottom tight. However, the narrator also comments on the situation, pitifully noting how this weak child has somehow become Gerti’s entire world. In addition to the narrator’s point of view, we are also given limited access to Gerti’s perspective. Considering the conflicted and troubled relationship that Gerti has had with her son up to this point, the metaphor of the child as a boat, while keeping with the fluid ebbs and flows of this scene more generally, also speaks to Gerti’s anxiety that her son will behave like his father. These anxieties and images almost certainly come from inside Gerti’s mind. This is further reinforced when she proceeds to take her son’s body outside, laying him in the river. Teresa de Lauretis writes that, “as we use signs or produce interpretants, their significate effects must pass through each of us, each body and each consciousness, before they may produce an effect or an action upon the world” (“Violence” 21). In this scene, Gerti’s abuse passes through the bodies of both mother and son as she reabsorbs him into her consciousness and her identity. However, the world in Lust does not change after this event as de Lauretis suggests that it will.

45In her work Dorrit Cohn draws a distinction between what she calls narrated monologue and the German erlebte Rede arguing that narrated monologue specifically refers to the exploration of only one consciousness by the narrator, while erlebte Rede can include multiple voices. I am choosing to group them together here because, as I have shown, the position of the narrator with regards to these characters and the reader is not always certain in Jelinek’s text.
The description of this child-murder becomes even more interesting narratologically when it transitions into a moment of clear narrated monologue, thereby giving the reader even more direct access to Gerti’s consciousness. The narrator continues describing this scene saying:

Üppig entfalten sich unter dem Zelt des Sackes, auf dem die Adresse einer Boutique aufgedruckt ist, noch einmal die Lebenskräfte des Kindes, dem vor nicht allzu langer Zeit Wachstum und Sportgeräte versprochen wurden. So geht’s, wenn man die Natur durch Geräte zu verbessern wünscht! Aber nein, es will doch nimmer leben. Dann treibt der Sohn hinaus ins offene Wasser, wo er gleich ganz in seinem Element (Mutti!) ist […] (Jelinek Lust 254)

The narrator draws attention to the commercial implications of the plastic bag and connects those capitalist tropes to the young boy’s lost potential. He will no longer grow up, nor will he ever receive the sporting goods that he was promised by his parents (their perverse and feeble attempt to smooth over the fact that he has been witness to acts of sexual violence perpetrated by his father against his mother). Metaphorically then, Gerti’s killing of her child also represents an effort to unsettle the forces of capitalism that keep her locked in a violent exchange with her husband and in which she is forced to trade the abuse of her body for financial support.

In addition to these metaphors, the exclamations in this passage draw attention to the odd and difficult relationship between mother and child. Like the calls for applause that were set off with parentheses in a previous passage, we have a similar call from an unidentified voice in this quotation. A voice, likely the son himself, but potentially also a narrantor, calls out, “Mutti!” just as the narrator describes the son as returning to his element. In death, the child returns to the watery womb where he is not independent, but a part of Gerti again. In what ironically may be considered the ultimate act of mothering, of being a mother, Gerti metaphorically reabsorbs her son back into her, shielding him from any identity that is not subsumed by his intimate and affectionate relationship with her. Gerti clearly does violence to her son by suffocating him and taking away his life and his independence, but the text also suggests that this violence is
committed out of a feeling of maternal care, of wanting to return to a state in which mother and son are inseparably bound together, a state in which the son can never become his father.

Furthermore, the other exclamation in this passage represents an instance of narrated monologue in which the thoughts of the narrator and Gerti’s thoughts are impossible to distinguish. The statement that, “So geht’s, wenn man die Natur durch Geräte zu verbessern wünscht!” channels both Gerti and the narrator’s emotional state as she suffocates her son. After her “love” for Michael ends in disaster, and she sees no future for herself except more of the same abuses, Gerti realizes that she cannot use material or commercial items to fix her situation. Buying a new pair of shoes will not provide her any relief from the abuses she suffers. One cannot use commercial objects to improve what is already broken in social structures. This thought occurs at the same moment that Gerti attempts to send her son back to nature, to surround him with the foundation of all life, water (both literally the water of the river and figuratively the amniotic fluid of the womb). Gerti cannot change the capitalist system and the gendered oppression it creates in the sphere of the family, and so she decides to send her son back to an imperfect state of nature in which he, at least, is insulated from the social world by water. De Lauretis argues that in mythology “the obstacle, whatever its personification (sphinx or dragon, sorceress or villain), is morphologically female – and indeed, simply the womb, the earth, the space of his movement” (“Violence” 23). The ebbs and flows in this final scene live up to this expectation as Gerti not only becomes an obstacle for her son, but his end when she returns him to nature/the womb. In this instance of narrated monologue, Gerti also reveals an inner life in which she understands more fully than the reader might initially anticipate both how she is being abused and her inability to fully bring that abuse to an end. The female obstacle can
never overcome itself, all it can do is continue to oppose and infringe upon male space, absorbing masculine qualities and, in this case, male bodies.

Returning then briefly to the rape scenes, it appears that, just like in pornography (and to some extent melodrama), the key lies in considering how the reader is affected by the narratological ambiguities and uncertainties within Jelinek’s text. Instead of identifying with the characters, Chien argues, Jelinek’s text encourages “eine selbstbewusste, individuelle, subjektive Denkarbeit” in its readers (Chien 18). Her writing is “eine provokative, avantgardistische und destruktive Art zu schreiben” (Chien 26). In this way, Chien moves beyond the troublesome appearance of universality sometimes adopted by the characters themselves in order to make the argument that this text is actually more about what this content evokes in the reader. In other words, the important thing here is how frustrated and disoriented the reader is made to feel because it is in this way that Jelinek is truly able to combat the mythologies of pornography and melodrama, which suggests that it is pleasurable for women to be used and abused. Struve argues that, “the narrative interventions in Lust represent an assemblage of differing and dispersed voices which mock traditional pornography’s assertions of male superiority and potency, of women’s joy about being used” (100). This is certainly true, however, I would extend this argument to agree with Ockenfuss that in fact Jelinek’s project is also to destabilize the “culturally sanctioned hierarchy, which grants the reader control over the text” (Ockenfuss 74). While Jelinek’s characters, including sometimes her narrator, do not always achieve stability and control through language, Jelinek emerges as an author who careful crafts a realm of linguistic and narratological ambiguity that entraps, de-familiarizes, and confuses her readers. Not only are Jelinek’s readers forced to confront the foundational myths of pornography and melodrama (i.e. that pleasure is the same as pain and that women delight in their own objectification through
violence), but they are also forced to confront the foundational fantasies of literature (i.e. that the text is something under our control, something that we as readers can fully understand, master, use, and move on from).

**Conclusion**

Jelinek’s narrative strategies, along with the character development and plot of this novel, are complicated, confusing, and ambiguous primarily because they are so changeable and flexible. Just as the reader gets settled into one mode or one way of understanding this text, something in the language, character development, or the plot shifts and they have to start establishing a new framework for comprehending this novel all over again. The full nature of Jelinek’s critique then only becomes apparent when one examines Gerti’s maternal as well as sexual relationships. Jelinek engages with the excessive and overwhelming aspects of both pornography and melodrama in order to confront the ways in which both discourses do a disservice to women. Pornography’s insistence on the importance of masculine desire and its fulfillment, and melodrama’s emphasis on suffering and the denial of female desire are both mirrored and critiqued in *Lust* for the ways in which they prevent women from being able to exist for themselves and determine their own destinies. Both of these discourses do their own kind of violence to any effort on the part of women to establish themselves as active participants in their own lives. The combination of pornography and melodrama builds a trap from which it seems nearly impossible for female subjectivity to emerge unscathed and intact.

Chien argues that Jelinek sees in gender inequity the reason why “die Manner immer die Täter und die Frauen immer die Opfer sind” (Chien 73). Vis provides the counter argument that in Jelinek’s work “So werden Männer nicht nur in ihrer Rolle als Täter, sondern sich als Opfer gezeigt; Frauen werden ebenso als Täter dargestellt, wie sie Opfer sind” (Vis 38). In this chapter
I have shown that Vis’s argument is the more accurate characterization of Jelinek’s novel *Lust*. Although Gerti, Hermann, and Michael are presented to the reader primarily as types, rather than individualized characters with unique inner lives, Jelinek’s novel resists categorizing these characters, and specifically Gerti, as complete and total victims or perpetrators. Through her relationship with her son, in contrast to her relationships with Hermann and Michael, the reader sees Gerti as both a victim and a perpetrator of violence. This is significant because in doing so, Jelinek proves that she has a much more nuanced understanding of gendered categories than it might initially appear. According to Ockenfuss “*Lust* attempts to establish a pleasure not predicated on the reader’s ability to control, to assume the place of the penetrating (paternal) phallus” (82). In addition to avoiding putting her readers in a powerful, masculinized, controlling relationship with her text, I argue that Jelinek also refuses to place her characters in a position of complete helplessness in which they can only engage in the behaviors stereotypically associated with the gendered roles that they are fated to play. Ultimately, the most fascinating aspect of Jelinek’s novel is the way in which she sets us up to think that the world is both exactly the way that we expect it to be and yet, at the same time, not at all what we thought it was. Acknowledging these contradictions and establishing a more nuanced picture of gender difference is, I argue, what works of feminist violence like Jelinek’s ultimately and productively force their readers to do. By simultaneously building up and breaking down her reader’s assumptions on the levels of plot, character, language, and narration, Jelinek forces her readers to question the degree to which they are also complicit in the gendered violence that infects even the most intimate familial relationships. In the next chapter I will examine two sisters who are objectified, not by each other, but by a state apparatus that imprisons them and tries to keep them from establishing solidarity with one another.
CHAPTER 3: ANTIGONE’S SON: PERSONAL STRUGGLE AND HISTORICAL GRIEVING IN DIE BLEIERNE ZEIT

In Sophocles’s play, Antigone, written around 441 BCE, Antigone and Ismene are the two daughters/sisters of Oedipus and his wife/mother Jocasta. The two sons born to this incestuous pair, Eteocles and Polynices, have just died in battle, fighting each other for the throne of Thebes. The new ruler, Creon, chooses to give Eteocles an honorable burial, but mandates that the body of the eldest son who attacked the city with a foreign army, Polynices, should be cast out of the city to be eaten by the birds. Antigone buries her brother against Creon’s command, arguing that while she can replace a husband or a child, her brother is irreplaceable. She tries to get Ismene to join her in her defiance, but Ismene refuses in an attempt to halt the family’s cycle of loss, angering Antigone. When the deed is done, Ismene tries to join her sister in taking responsibility for these actions, but Antigone refuses to accept this gesture of solidarity. In the end, Antigone admits publicly to her crime and, much to her sister’s dismay, pays the ultimate cost for her actions when she is buried alive inside of a cave. Antigone’s death sets off a chain reaction of suicides. Haemon, Creon’s son and Antigone’s fiancé, kills himself over the loss of Antigone. Following this news, Creon’s wife, Eurydice, also commits suicide. At the end of the play, Creon is left to mourn the loss of his family, a sacrifice he has made in an effort to achieve political stability in Thebes.

The story of Antigone has attracted the interest of philosophers and theorists for many years. Goethe, Hegel, Heidegger, Lacan, Derrida, Irigaray, and Butler, just to name some of the more prominent examples, have all contended with this story and its implications for politics,
kinship, subjectivity, and gender. From Hegel’s argument that Antigone serves as a representative for the morality of the family in contrast to Creon’s civic-minded policy making (Hegel 336-338), to Butler’s contention that Antigone engages in a defiant speech act that usurps the language of the state from which she is excluded (Butler Antigone 82), this text is most frequently read as a struggle between Antigone and Creon. When one considers Antigone from this perspective, the effect is to reduce this story to a battle between one woman and the state, between the personal concerns of Antigone and the broader concerns of the government as represented by Creon. In this chapter, however, I want to join scholars such as Stefani Engelstein in asking: What about Ismene? What can we learn by examining the relationship between sisters? (Engelstein 39) By creating a triangle of relations to power, and by considering the sisters as two (separate, but related and intertwined) engagements with this tension between the particular and the universal, our reading of the discussion generated by Antigone and its many adaptations becomes much richer.

German director Margarethe von Trotta is just one of the many artists to find inspiration in this mythological story. In her 1981 film Die bleierne Zeit, von Trotta’s third film as a solo director, she recreates the dynamic of two sisters who make complex and sometimes opposing choices with regards to their relationship to state power and familial ethics. In this film, set in West Germany during the “Red Decade” of 1967-1977, Juliane, the sister who most resembles Ismene, is a journalist for a feminist magazine, while Marianne, the Antigone sister, is a left-wing militant. Based loosely on the lives of Gudrun Ensslin (1940-1977), a first-generation member of the left-wing militant organization known as the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF), and

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46Von Trotta began her career as an actress before teaming up with her then husband, Volker Schlöndorff, on several projects, most notably Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum (The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum, 1975). Starting in 1978 she began writing and directing films on her own, no longer content to remain in her husband’s shadow.
Christiane Ensslin (1939-), her journalist sister, the film examines the relationship between these siblings, each of whom represents a different strategy for enacting social change, one violent and the other more passive. When her militant defiance catches up with her, Marianne is sent to prison. The majority of the film consists of Juliane’s visits to her sister and their debates over the various choices they have made in their personal and political lives. These reflections are often accompanied by flashbacks to their childhood and teenage years in which the audience learns about how these women developed into the activists that they are in the present. Eventually Marianne, like Gudrun, dies in prison. The death is declared a suicide by the authorities, but Juliane devotes herself to uncovering the truth by collecting evidence that points to the fact that her sister was, in fact, murdered by the state. In the end, Juliane is blocked from publishing the results of her investigation into Marianne’s death due to lack of public interest. Instead she adopts Marianne’s young son, Jan, and agrees to tell him the story of his mother.

At first this plot may not seem to have much in common with the Antigone story beyond the incorporation of a sister who dies as a result of her defiance of the state. However, when speaking about Die bleierne Zeit in an interview from 2009 von Trotta remarks that:

For me it was never only a story about terrorism, but in a way about Antigone and Ismene. I always think about these two women, and of course Antigone is the rebellious one, while Ismene is always…weaker. But with my two characters it isn’t so clear. Earlier the one seemed strong and the other docile, but all of a sudden it changes. [...] So Juliane gets back her old identity by burying her sister in her own way, dealing with her death as she chooses. (von Trotta “A Conversation” 169)

While von Trotta’s comments do a poor job of glossing the complex relationship between Antigone and Ismene that already exists in Sophocles’s text, her claim that her film and Antigone both advocate for the development of individualized grief practices is worth taking seriously. According to von Trotta, Antigone should be able to mourn her brother as she chooses,

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47For a more attentive reading of this relationship see, for example, Stefani Engelstein’s “Sibling Logic; or, Antigone Again” (2011) or Bonnie Honig’s “Antigone’s Laments, Creon's Grief” (2009).
just as Julianne endeavors to mourn for her sister by uncovering the truth about her death. In this way, von Trotta follows the direction of Bonnie Honig’s essay about the relationship between Antigone and mourning practices in ancient Athens. In the essay, Honig describes Antigone as a representative of older Homeric mourning practices that sought to focus on “the unique, irreplaceable lost life,” as opposed to more democratic practices that sought to refocus mourning toward “that life’s honorable dedication to the good of the polis” (Honig, 14, 11). In other words, Antigone represents an older, and in some ways elitist or self-indulgent model of grieving for the individual, whereas Creon wants to structure grief and memory in service of the state and the collective process of sacrificing family members for the greater good of the polis. If von Trotta’s film reflects this branch of scholarship on Antigone, the question becomes: What exactly are von Trotta’s sisters mourning? How does this film negotiate between the sisters’ specific familial past and their efforts to critique the power structure of the state?

In order to answer these questions, it is important to situate Die bleierne Zeit within the context of the period of West German film history known as the New German Cinema. Beginning with the Oberhausen Manifesto in February 1962 and lasting into the 1980s, the stated goals of the New German Cinema were to generate a new form of film that was free from the “brancheüblichen Konventionen” and “Bevormundung durch Interessengruppen” that these filmmakers identified in Nazi and early postwar cinema (“Oberhausener”). Including such recognizable directors as R.W. Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff, Alexander Kluge, and Wim Wenders, the New German Cinema wanted to create a German national cinema that was realist, artistically ambitious, and socially critical. These efforts were often framed with provocative language such as the statement in the Oberhausen Manifesto that "Der alte Film ist tot. Wir glauben an den neuen" (“Oberhausener”). This critique generated numerous films that were
interested in engaging with the Nazi past and uncovering the continuation of fascist ideologies and practices in contemporary Germany. Consider Fassbinder’s *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (1979), Kluge’s *Die Patriotin* (1979), or Helma Sanders-Brahms’s *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* (1980), as a few prominent examples that engage directly with this violent history. In my reading of *Die bleierne Zeit*, I will highlight the ways in which this film also engages in memory work, and in acts of processing and grieving over the past, while simultaneously contending with West Germany’s violent present.

Scholars writing about *Die bleierne Zeit* have commonly discussed this film in one of two frameworks. The first is as an example of director Margarethe von Trotta’s early solo directorial work in which it is analyzed alongside such films as *Das zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages* (*The Second Awakening of Christina Kluges*, 1978), *Schwestern oder die Balance des Glücks* (*Sisters or the Balance of Happiness*, 1979), *Heller Wahn* (*Sheer Madness*, 1983), and occasionally *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986). Oftentimes, such discussions consider the interpersonal relationships between women that are highlighted by this group of films and provide feminist readings of von Trotta’s early directorial work. When not framed in this way, *Die bleierne Zeit* is contrasted with other representations of the RAF within New German Cinema including such films as R.W. Fassbinder’s *Die dritte Generation* (*The Third Generation*, 1979) and *Deutschland im Herbst* (*Germany in Autumn*, 1978). These readings often describe the film as a reactionary engagement with the politics of the German New Left and the student movement in West

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48 For more on Sanders-Brahms and her film see the final chapter of this dissertation.

49 The film is contextualized in this way by numerous critics including Janice Mouton, Martin Donougho, H-B. Moeller, Ellen Seiter, and Eva Kuttenberg.

50 See most notably the work of Eric Kligerman, Julian Preece, Julian Reidy, Ewout van der Knaap, and Stefanie Hofer. This early wave of films about the RAF is also sometimes contrasted with a later wave of terrorist films including Volker Schlöndorff’s *Die Stille nach dem Schuss* (*The Legend of Rita*, 2000) and Berlin School director Christian Petzold’s *Die innere Sicherheit* (*The State I am In*, 2000). However, of more interest to me is the way in which von Trotta’s film fits in with other contemporaneous films.
Germany, a position that contrasts this film with the supposedly more radical films of von Trotta’s male contemporaries. Based on these two different frameworks there is a tension between readings of this film as politically progressive, as in the feminist readings, and politically reactionary, as in the readings of this film in relationship to the German New Left. Von Trotta’s personal history as an active protester both for general leftist causes and for feminist causes specifically, including the fight against Germany’s anti-abortion law §218, would suggest progressive intentions (Hehr 12, 18). Nevertheless, the centrality of the perspective of the less-radical Juliane and the necessary death of the militant sister Marianne in this film also rightly leads viewers to question von Trotta’s commitment to aggressive, progressive politics.  

In my analysis, I want to build off of this tension in order to put pressure on the implicit understanding that *Die bleierne Zeit* must either be a good feminist/leftist film or a bad one. Instead, I want to better understand how and why the film simultaneously opens itself up to both progressive and reactionary readings in the first place. By examining *Die bleierne Zeit* in conjunction with scholarly readings of *Antigone*, I demonstrate that rather than presenting a duality of “good” versus “bad” politics, von Trotta’s film encourages viewers to understand the ways in which the progressive and the reactionary are related. Instead of picking sides, as many of her critics want her to do, von Trotta forces her viewers towards a middle ground, a place that while not necessarily clear or satisfying, is a more accurate and realistic representation of how social change and critique takes place. As human beings we are more than just political actors and yet our actions sometimes have a symbolic value that is greater than ourselves. *Die bleierne Zeit* reminds us that both of these conditions must and do exist in harmony. In this way, von Trotta both lives up to the calls for critique and realism within New German Cinema, while also

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51For more detailed accounts of how this film can be read as reactionary see the particularly unflattering assessments of von Trotta’s work by James Skidmore and Charlotte Delorme.
addressing concerns about the relationship between individual struggles and societal grieving that can be traced back to the story of Antigone.

The oft cited, although difficult to prove, statistic is that approximately 60% of the people involved in acts of left-wing terrorism in West Germany during the 1970s were women (Colvin 86). The fact that a sizable number of women played a role in counter-violence movements links any discussion of this militancy to feminist theory and politics. Of particular significance to my discussion of the RAF as represented in Die bleierne Zeit is the uneasy relationship between motherhood and militancy. Two of the most prominent members of the RAF, Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin, were mothers, thereby provoking widespread judgment and anxiety about their decisions to abandon their children in order to become terrorists. Julian Preece articulates this troubling and fascinating dynamic as follows: “Wie kann man, um der Revolution und dadurch angeblich der Menschheit deinen zu können, alle persönliche Bindungen hinter sich lassen und die eigenen Kinder […] nicht mehr sehen?” (“Die Terroristin” 380). This sacrifice of the personal for the political, of one’s own children for the children of the Third World, is something that must be accounted for and explained in any representation of these women and their actions. Additionally, as Ellen E. Seiter points out, the treatment of figures like Ensslin and Meinhof by the German government and their representation in the media is inherently a feminist issue, “For it was precisely because they were women engaging in violence, and because they had rejected the roles of wife and mother, that they were subject to the greatest moral outrage” (Seiter “The Political” 46). How does one come to terms with and try to understand the mother who gives up her own children to take up arms against the state? Die bleierne Zeit confronts this

52 The most direct representation of this connection is the explicitly feminist group Rote Zora, a militant organization that planted bombs in government buildings and department stores. For more information on Rote Zora and the connection between movements towards counter-violence and the New Women’s Movement in West Germany see the work of Katharina Karcher.
question directly through its focus on two female protagonists, both of whom are reluctant mothers caught up in political battles that make mothering challenging, if not impossible. By engaging with the question of how to be a good mother alongside the question of how to be a responsible citizen, *Die bleierne Zeit* allows us to imagine the story of Antigone as it might be, or might have been, if Antigone had a child. In doing so, the film presents its viewers with a model for cooperative mothering and memory work, in which both unique personal histories and larger collective histories mutually reinforce one another, rather than standing in opposition.

Instead of seeing these sisters as opposites, Marianne and Juliane should be seen as two sides of the same coin, as one collaborative representation of how social change could happen. By engaging with the past through flashback sequences, von Trotta advocates for reading the two sisters together, as a unified team, rather than as representatives of two different political strategies between which we must select only one. By closely examining the relationship between the sisters, I will highlight alternative ways of thinking about identity and subjectivity, not as something that the individual has, but as something that is developed through close relationships with others, specifically one’s sister. By modeling an Antigone story in which Ismene/Juliane goes on to raise Antigone/Marianne’s child, educating him in a manner befitting her legacy, *Die bleierne Zeit* demonstrates the need for both violently critical and soothingly reactionary readings of the past. It is only when the progressive and the reactionary, the individual and the civic, the personal and the political are combined that we can ever learn how to live together, and even more importantly, learn how to live with the violence we have collectively committed.
The Fascist Past

One of the charges frequently levied against Die bleierne Zeit is that, through its focus on the two sisters and their specific family life, it personalizes these terrorist acts too much. Thomas Elsaesser formulates this critique when he writes that, “if political terrorism in action and rhetoric is ostensibly about macro-politics — imperialism, capitalism, the nuclear threat, the revolution— von Trotta’s strategy is to transform this into micro-politics (crèche, land commune, genetics; giving a child a home)” (New German Cinema 177). In my analysis, however, I uncover a deep commitment on the part of von Trotta to the macro-politics of history. Elsaesser is right that left-wing militancy can be explored on either of these two levels, the macro or the micro, but he is wrong to critique von Trotta for allowing one to dominate over the other. Instead, I argue that von Trotta places them side-by-side, revealing the ways in which these two discursive levels are entangled and often nearly impossible to distinguish.

Eric Kligerman observes that Die bleierne Zeit looks at the history of the RAF “through an Antigone-like narrative of mourning and melancholia, whereby a female heroine occupies the center of a collision between contemporary scenes of political violence and the recollections of National Socialist (NS) crimes” (13-14). Bringing the past into the present is certainly an important part of how von Trotta views her role as a filmmaker. For instance, in an interview for a special issue of the journal Salmagundi von Trotta articulated one of the central questions in her filmmaking as the following: “How does a person act when subjected to historical and social events and conditions over which she has no influence?” (von Trotta “A Conversation” 118). This insight frames the question of agency as central. Are we in control of our own destiny or are we irrevocably shaped by our personal and political histories in a process over which we have no influence? Struggling with questions like these is nothing new in terms of the fraught
relationship to history shared by the directors of the New German Cinema, who in the aftermath of World War II, were forced to face the atrocities of the Holocaust and attempted to capture the complicated process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung in their films. This conflict is also central to Antigone, for example, when Tina Chanter calls upon a repressed memory of slavery in order to explain Antigone’s desperation to give her brother a proper burial and therefore save him from the fate of becoming like a slave. As a part of her argument, Chanter channels the work of Page DuBois to contend that “we engage in various strategies of avoidance and deflection in order to purify our own past” (Chanter 21). Die bleierne Zeit resists this temptation through the use of documentary footage. By engaging with documentary material, von Trotta’s film brings the need to reconcile the violence of the past into the present, thereby demonstrating the continued diligence necessary to avoid repeating fascist mistakes.

The history of the RAF becomes a useful way of engaging with the Nazi past because of the popular explanation/justification for leftist activism as a direct response to Nazism. It is fairly common, for instance, to describe the actions of the '68er generation, at least in part, as a reaction by young people either against or on behalf of their Nazi parents. Just as in the Oberhausen Manifesto, the goal is to do away once and for all with fascism and to build a new Germany. While it is true that left-wing terrorism can be framed as a response to Nazism, Jamie Trnka reminds us that what is often missing in filmic representations of the RAF is the public’s very real fear of both terrorists and the state (Trnka 8). By focusing her narrative around Juliane’s experiences as a leftist activist coming to terms with her sister’s violent extremism, von Trotta makes sure that both of these fears are present in her film: the fear of an abusive state reverting to fascist ways and the fear of a movement for justice that has gotten out of control and through which lives are being threatened and lost. Von Trotta’s film represents both the
reactionary view of fearing politically radical practices and the progressive fear generated by state violence that might compel someone into militant counter-violence.

Unsurprisingly, the most important historical event that the sisters are forced to contend with is the Holocaust. In *Die bleierne Zeit* this engagement is mediated through another film, *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*), Alain Resnais’s 1955 short documentary about the Nazi concentration camps. This film marks a landmark moment in terms of the filmic representation of the Holocaust and was widely shown in German schools during the time that von Trotta depicts. In addition, it is a film that pushes the boundaries of documentary filmmaking by combining footage of the concentration camp sites from 1955 with earlier footage from the liberation of the camps. The film places the horrors of the past alongside their erasure in the present in order to visually motivate the now clichéd charge to “never forget.” Stylistically then, Resnais’s film becomes an important citation for von Trotta’s film, which also seeks to combine the past and the present in order to understand how we move into the future. 53

It is crucial to note that the Holocaust is referenced in von Trotta’s film primarily in educational settings. Adults seek to carefully mediate the ways in which young people are exposed to this material and it is they who dictate how and when the Holocaust is discussed. At the beginning of a Holocaust-related flashback sequence, Marianne stands at the front of the

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53 This is not to say that the choice of Resnais’s film as an intertext should and has not also been viewed critically. For example, *Night and Fog* has been attacked because of the fact that it “evades the singularity of the Jewish victims” (Kligerman 30) by failing to single out the particularity of the genocide against the Jews. However, in a film about the RAF this failure actually makes the documentary an even more fitting intertext because the RAF was also accused of erasing the specificity of Jewish victimhood. For instance, Kligerman and others have highlighted a latent anti-Semitism within the German New Left during this period by citing their vehement support of Palestine and their appropriation of Holocaust victimhood. These critics condemn the way that, “the RAF configured themselves as victims of state violence analogous to victims of Nazi death camps” (Kligerman 12). In other words, there is a danger that by evoking the memory of the Holocaust as an explanation for terrorist actions, the terrorists are placed too readily in the position of the victims at the expense of the actual victims of Nazi genocide. In addition to this appropriation of victimhood, the charge has also been made, most notably in Jillian Becker’s book *Hitler’s Children*, that the behavior of the RAF often comes to resemble that of their fascist parents. In *Die bleierne Zeit*, von Trotta is aware of these potential pitfalls, and she ultimately overcomes them through her careful framing of the scene in which the sisters view Resnais’s film.
classroom and dutifully recites Rainer Marie Rilke’s poem “Herbsttag.” The teacher then asks the class to interpret the poem together. Juliane defiantly critiques this choice of material, calling the poem “kitschig” and expressing a desire to read Bertolt Brecht or Paul Celan instead. Specifically, she is interested in two poems that engage directly with the Nazi past: “Ballade von der Judenmure Marie Sanders” and “Todesfuge.” Instead of encouraging and embracing this literary engagement with Nazism as a necessary replacement of Rilke’s more canonical poem, the teacher kicks Juliane out of class for expressing this opinion. While this action may be understandable to any teacher who has had a student who likes to draw the class off topic, it is also symbolic of a failure on the part of the German school system and the adults who oversee it, to adequately address Nazism and to give young students the tools they need to engage deeply and meaningfully with the atrocities committed by their parents’ generation.

Juliane may be right about her school’s failure to provide her with a proper, historically rooted education, but the film also makes it clear that Juliane is just a rebellious teenager, who says these things in part to get a rise out of the adults around her. Juliane comes off as immature and foolish when, immediately after she is kicked out of class, she lights a cigarette in the hallway, trying to remain cool and unaffected by the classroom incident. She is eventually forced to duck behind a column to hide her “rebellious” smoking from a group of passing teachers, a comical undermining of her defiance of convention. This smoking scene opens up another way of reading what happens in the classroom. In addition to a critique of the German school system, this scene also reflects on Juliane’s personal journey to cope with the oppressive institutions she confronts both at school and at home. The critics Susan Linville and Kent Casper argue that the presence of the Holocaust in von Trotta’s films “raises questions as to whether von Trotta’s concern is with a repressed past or with a contemporary repression of the melancholic self” (7).
Before *Night and Fog* is even shown, it is clear that in *Die bleierne Zeit* it is a mixture of both. By pointing out how the school fails to teach them about the past, Juliane is also working through her personal efforts to overcome her own feelings of oppression, which may or may not be the result of teenage angst, rather than any politically motivated trauma. Juliane’s progressive critique of her education is justified, but the reactionary reading that she is just an immature teenager who glorifies “fighting the man” is equally true. The personal and political are intermixed such that one cannot be pulled apart from the other, but this does not mean that the political is in any way overshadowed or cheapened.

When the sisters do engage with images of Nazi atrocities they literally find the viewing process difficult to stomach. After the classroom scene, the film cuts to a group of young people shot from behind watching *Night and Fog*. The camera alternates between shots of the students from behind, shots of them from the front, and shots of Marianne and Juliane’s father, the pastor, who stands by the projector screening this film. The viewer gets multiple perspectives of this film screening as the camera alternates between the position of the father, the position of the students, and the position of the film itself. The father watches the students carefully as they watch the film, and viewers are given a sense of what he sees as he observes them. This view from the perspective of the older generation is particularly important because in one frame the viewer watches images of the atrocities perpetrated by the older generation as well as the children who must now come to terms with those same atrocities. Together we all watch piles of emaciated bodies being bulldozed into mass graves, we hear Paul Celan’s dubbed German translation of the voiceover narration and we listen to Hanns Eisler’s unsettling score. Kligerman argues that *Die bleierne Zeit* alternates “rhythmically between modes of memory work and justice and stage[s] a collision both between two periods of political violence (NS and RAF) and
between two modes of filmic representation (documentary and fiction)” (28). The collision created by this film within a film becomes even more pronounced as the scene goes on and Resnais’s film begins to take over. Eventually Night and Fog takes over the screen, eliminating our view of the observers entirely. The film and the terrible history it presents is so powerful that it temporarily displaces the fictional audience and filmic frame that von Trotta has constructed for it. The cuts back and forth between film and audience may never truly enable us to forget that we are watching these characters watching this film, but it is clear that nobody in the diegetic or non-diegetic audiences is able to ignore the graphic documentary images embedded within Die bleierne Zeit.

Just in case there was any doubt about how difficult watching this film and consuming this history is for the two sisters, Die bleierne Zeit makes it abundantly clear that in the process of digesting violent history, sometimes things are, both literally and figuratively, difficult to keep down. As Celan’s voiceover asks the audience, “Wer also ist Schuld?” the film cuts to the sisters as Marianne looks nervously over to Juliane before leaving the screening room. Night and Fog takes up the full screen again for a few seconds before von Trotta’s film cuts to the sisters in the bathroom. Juliane comes out of a stall wiping her mouth, indicating that she has just thrown up. Both sisters look physically sick as a result of the images that they have been forced to view. Susan Linville describes how, “the girls vomit, as if expelling the “embodied” guilt the film implicated within them” (453). Even though they are not directly responsible for the atrocities depicted on the screen, the sisters are deeply troubled by this violent past, a response that manifests itself physically. According to Elizabeth Wilson in her influential essay “Gut Feminism,” this reference to vomiting can also be considered an act of thought on the part of the two girls. As she writes: “The vicissitudes of ingestion and vomiting are complex thinking
enacted organically” (Wilson 82) and during moments of stress and emotion “any radical distinction between stomach and mood, between vomiting and rage is artificial” (Wilson 84). In other words, not only Marianne and Juliane’s minds, but their bodies are engaging in the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that this film within a film invokes. Unlike the adults around them, these girls prove their moral superiority by engaging in the difficult (and often messy) process, of corporeal thinking and trauma processing. Just as in the case of Antigone’s death, which can be read as a physical manifestation of her personal grief, the sisters’ grief over the collective German past is translated into physical symptoms. The sisters in *Die bleierne Zeit* take the grieving process that Creon tries to evoke and express it on the physical level at which Antigone manifests her personal grief. They are able to grieve because they demonstrate the appropriate level of guilt for past atrocities in which they, themselves, did not take part.

It is easy to be skeptical, as Kligerman is, about the use of film images to generate an appropriate response to the Holocaust. After all, “to watch the film, or for that matter to recite “Todesfuge” is not equivalent to knowing, understanding, or remembering the genocide of the Jews of Europe” (Kligerman 31). However, it is clear from the various perspectives we get of this film audience that the focus in *Die bleierne Zeit* is on illustrating the impact of these historical events on various groups of people, rather than the events themselves. Even Kligerman, in the end, is forced to admit that, “Night and Fog ruptures the frame with which *Leaden Times* would contain it: the question of Schuld is posed anew each time the film is viewed, transforming justice into something unheimlich” (Kligerman 36). It is the question “Wer ist Schuld?” that drives the sisters out of the screening room and into the bathroom. This is the question that will continue to haunt them into adulthood where they both take different approaches towards trying to achieve some semblance of justice in the face of all of this guilt.
However, this justice will always be somehow uncomfortable or inadequate in part because of the mediated form in which it must come. When there is no such thing as real justice, compensation can only be representational, just as the images in a film are always mediated and can never really capture the full weight of history.

Von Trotta’s film is one of parallels between the past and the present; the sequence in which the sisters watch *Night and Fog* is no exception. The sisters’ viewing of images related to Nazi horrors as children is mirrored in another flashback sequence in which Marianne and Juliane watch footage of the atrocities committed in Vietnam. The sequence begins by creating a link between Juliane’s journalistic work and the documentary footage. The camera cuts directly from Juliane writing on her typewriter to a scene in which the two adult sisters view these grisly images. The sounds of Juliane’s typewriter continue in the background for the duration of the scene. Michel Chion argues of music in film that, “sound can provide unity through nondiegetic music: because this music is independent of the notion of real time and space it can cast the images into a homogenizing bath or current” (AV 47). While it is not music, this is precisely the way that these typewriter sounds function in this sequence. The sounds of the typewriter create a link between Juliane’s work and Marianne’s emotional responses, reminding the viewer of the value of both kinds of engagements with violence and injustice. Once again, the sisters are unified in their response to inhumane violence.

This scene is framed similarly to the scene in which the sisters watch *Night and Fog*. Marianne and Juliane are initially shot from the front in order to establish their position as audience members in the crowded room where the screening takes place. Then the camera cuts to a shot from behind the sisters’ heads so that the viewer can also see what they are watching. We again get multiple perspectives on this viewing experience, and the viewer of von Trotta’s film
also has the opportunity to engage with and be moved by these images of badly burned homes, women, and children. Marianne is the only person present in the audience to speak and therefore, to have an immediate response to the images shown on the screen. The camera returns to the front of the two women as Marianne turns to her sister and says, “Ich werde mich nie damit abfinden, daß man nichts dagegen tut.” This phrasing is significant because it frames inaction as an untenable position. For Marianne there is no middle ground. After seeing these images it is impossible in Marianne’s mind for a person not to want to do something. However, the film immediately works to subtly undermine Marianne’s determination to take action on behalf of the suffering people she has just seen. In a jarring cut, the viewer is suddenly once again in Juliane’s office watching her type. We never see the actions that Marianne takes on behalf of these injured people. Rather it is Juliane, trying to write a sympathetic article about her sister, who gets the final word, so to speak. Marianne is not wrong for wanting to do something to help the people she sees on the screen, but her efforts potentially come to nothing unless explained by her sister. As we saw with the scene in which the two sisters watch Night and Fog, this moment is marked as one in which seeing violent images triggers responses from both sisters. However, in order for Marianne’s response to be legitimized, and therefore to become productively and politically legible, Juliane must write about it. She must use the print media, characterized here as less emotional and more rational than film, to justify and explain her sister’s actions in relation to the suffering of the people in Vietnam and other war-torn countries. For every Marianne or Gudrun or Antigone there needs to be a Juliane or Ismene or Ulrike. It is clear that whether one speaks about the Holocaust past or the contemporaneous victimization of the Vietnamese, it is necessary for viewers to be emotionally affected by these horrible images, while at the same time

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54For a theoretical account of the tense relationship between critical thought and politically legitimate/effective action see Judith Butler’s essay “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” (2000).
processing them and coming to terms with them through some kind of rational means. Past violence will always make its mark on the present, no matter how individualized one’s response to these events may be.

**Incarceration**

In addition to considering the relevance of the Nazi past for a political engagement with Germany’s present, *Die bleierne Zeit* also tackles issues of state surveillance and incarceration that are contemporaneous to when this film was made. Vivian Sobchack takes great care in describing the various ways in which we can experience our bodies as both comforting and entrapping when she writes that:

Our bodies, then, can be experienced as home, as house, and as prison. As “home” it is the objectivated place that intimately grounds us in a felicitous condition of enablement, that provides our original and initial opening on and access to the world, and that gives dimension and sense and value to our lives through its motility and sense and gravity. As “house” it is the place in which we live in a variable relationship and degree of hermeneutic objectification, that we decorate and display for the edification of both ourselves and others, that confounds us with problems and expense but allows us still a certain familiarity, a place to hang our hats, to let it all hang out. And as “prison-house” it is the reified and alien place that grounds us in negativity and denies us access to the world in an infelicitous condition of constraint and discipline, that locks us up in a room everyone else regards as ours but that we understand as really belonging to “others.” (184)

As women, both Marianne and Juliane experience their bodies as simultaneously home, house, and prison. In my analysis of the theme of incarceration in von Trotta’s film, I want to think carefully about the relationship that Sobchack draws between the home, the house, and the prison in order to better understand this film’s insistence that not only can the home be a prison (in the traditional feminist, Betty Friedan sense), but that prison can also be homey or intimate. As Chanter argues of Antigone, I will show how Marianne and Juliane come to represent the “excluded but facilitating other” in their relationship to one another (Chanter 20). Although, they argue and are drawn into conflict, Marianne and Juliane also enable each other to engage in the
process of critical reflection necessary to push back against state control. In *Die bleierne Zeit* these conflicting dimensions of the intimate prison and the entrapping home exist and are exacerbated by the specific political situation in late 20\textsuperscript{th} century West Germany, thereby connecting the realities of female bodies with the realities of the surveillance state.

Von Trotta herself knows first-hand about the experience of visiting prisoners who are suffering from conditions like solitary confinement and hunger strikes. As a member of the *Rote Hilfe*, von Trotta worked to abolish the practice of solitary confinement and regularly visited prisoners at Crailsheim prison in Baden-Württemberg (Hehr 12). Therefore, it is no surprise that these prison sequences form some of the most powerful material in *Die bleierne Zeit*, giving the sisters the opportunity to reminisce, argue, and even physically fight through their personal and political differences. Ultimately, the sisters realize that they are both on the same side despite the fact that they are initially set up (by the guards and the camera) as opposites. The tightly framed and necessarily condensed atmosphere of the prison provides a compact space in which, as Charity Scribner has argued, von Trotta is able to “direct the viewer’s gaze onto the thresholds between public spaces and internal enclosures” (Scribner 20). The prison is where the sisters are at their most intimate and their most confrontational. It is the only space in which they can have personal conversations and yet, those conversations are always public and monitored by the state. After Juliane emerges from this intense environment, she accepts the ways in which her sister has shaped her subjectivity. Shared subjectivity and collaboration between different perspectives is necessary in order to undermine the state control that the prison represents.

Even when they are not yet in prison, *Die bleierne Zeit* gives its viewers the visual impression that both of the sisters are already behind bars. When Juliane first meets up with Marianne at a museum their encounter sets the stage for their interactions inside the prison walls.
The supposed division between the sisters is already questioned and undermined even as it is being set up in this early scene. For example, as Juliane walks to meet her sister, the camera shoots her walking from behind the bars of a fence. This imagery of Juliane behind bars not only foreshadows her sister’s eventual imprisonment, but also suggests that Juliane experiences her life in general as a kind of confinement. It is important to remember that although reference is made to the violent acts of terror that Marianne commits, none of these actions are ever depicted on screen. We only see her as a victim of the state, on the run from the authorities or in prison. As viewers, we only have access to the consequences of her militant political action. The fact that we are not given the opportunity to either sensationalize or be revolted by Marianne’s violent actions, speaks volumes in terms of von Trotta’s ambiguous stance towards Marianne and her political engagements. Neither sister, even when they are both out of prison, is immune from the oppressive forces of the state and society, forces that they feel even more acutely because of their status as women. Neither sister has ever been, or ever truly will be, free.

Von Trotta’s emphasis on the sisters’ shared imprisonment continues into the first time that Juliane visits her sister in prison. Judith Butler argues that “the state is not a simple unity, and its parts and operations are not always coordinated with one another” (“Kinship” 27), however, within the prison system, coordinated efforts for surveillance and repression are allowed to flourish to the point where even visitors to this space are not immune to them. During this sequence Juliane is treated like a prisoner despite the fact that Marianne is the one locked up. Particularly in Marianne’s absence, it is easy to get the visual impression that it is actually Juliane who is in jail. For instance, as the cab pulls up to the prison, a camera shot of Juliane’s face is framed by the rearview mirror of the cab. Rather than roaming free against the landscape, she is trapped, visually confined to a small space. After she enters the prison this visual
entrapment continues as the camera remains on the other side of the bars as she walks into the prison behind a female guard, again creating the illusion that she is behind bars. Her bag is searched and she undergoes an extensive pat down during which she is forced to unzip her pants and lift up her shirt, revealing her breasts. At first she refuses to comply, but she eventually agrees to go along with all that is asked of her, clearly demeaned by the invasive measures taken to ensure that she is not smuggling contraband into the prison. Marianne adds insult to injury when she refuses to meet with Juliane, despite all that she has gone through to see her.

Marianne’s imprisonment has placed Juliane under intense scrutiny and has taken away a great deal of Juliane’s freedom, which was limited to begin with. Despite the fact that one sister is in jail and the other is technically free, their experiences mirror one another, suggesting that the conditions under which they are both forced to live are more similar than they initially appear. The sisters always share the same fate.

Chanter argues that, “Antigone is precisely that which cannot be thought, that which cannot be sublated, but she is also that upon which, nevertheless, the system depends” (26). In this sense, both of the sisters in Die bleierne Zeit are Antigones in relationship to the state, as indicated by the divisive and yet unifying shot selection that characterizes the interactions between the sisters in prison. When Marianne and Julianne finally do meet in prison, the framing of the shots emphasizes the broader political debates inherent in the sisters’ arguments. For example, in the second prison scene, the sisters are both initially contained within door frames. The camera starts with a shot from Juliane’s eye level in which a female guard steps aside to reveal Marianne standing in the doorway at the other end of the visiting room. Each sister is encased within a border in this establishing shot. This is reminiscent of Scribner’s description of how windows work in this film when she writes that these gateways to the outside of an enclosed
space remind “the viewer of the control systems that define both the public sphere and much of urban life” (Scribner 104). This positioning aligns the sisters with each other as prisoners and sets them up as mirror images of one another. They compliment each other, rather than standing in opposition. Contrastingly, the real enemy is the guard who sits in the middle room ready to observe their visit. It is clear from the beginning that this visit is not and never will be private. The sisters move towards one another and hug, finally appearing together in the frame, but with their bodies still enclosed, not by the door, but by the panes of a window behind them. Even together, it is difficult for them to shake off these restrictive frames.

The camera work in these prison sequences, through its tight and deliberate framing, demonstrates how these prison conversations destabilize and reestablish the identities of both Juliane and Marianne. Once seated at the table, the sisters are shot in profile, the male guard over Juliane’s shoulder and the female one over Marianne’s. This framing of the sisters in profile, each with a guard over her shoulder will appear multiple times throughout the prison sequences and establishes a kind of status quo. This foundational shot is significant in large part because of the visibility of the prison guards, which Linville describes as a “voyeuristic audience” that “forms part of the surveillance apparatus that operates outside the prison walls as well as within, an apparatus that makes the film’s viewers conscious of their own spectatorial positions, just as the films within the film do” (454). As we watch the sisters being watched, we are made aware of the lack of privacy both in this conversation and inherent in our own act of viewing this film. The camera often positions the viewer in the role of one of the guards, however, they are also consistently made aware that they are intentionally being positioned in this way. In this sense, we as viewers are implicated in a larger political debate about state surveillance that is bigger than us and ultimately bigger than the sisters as well.
As time passes, the sisters slowly begin to use tiny acts of solidarity to subvert the system and break through the frames established by the camera. By the next time that Juliane comes to visit her, the toll of prison and her hunger strike has exhausted and weakened Marianne. Starting again with an establishing profile shot, the camera transitions quickly to crosscutting, close up shots of the two sisters. They are in separate frames and yet joined by virtue of the camera’s rapid back and forth shots between them as they talk. Juliane is not just another representative of the state and the status quo, she is not cowardly or weak as Ismene is sometimes misinterpreted to be. In contrast to the guards, she for the most part, refuses to participate in the abuse of her sister. At the end of this visit the sisters break out of their separate frames and into the frame together, hugging and exchanging sweaters as a sign of solidarity, unity, and as a means for Marianne to pass Juliane a note asking her to seek help for the imprisoned militants. The solidarity between Marianne and Juliane continues to grow during their next visit. Juliane subverts the efforts of the guards to exercise complete power over Marianne. She puts perfume on a handkerchief as a present for Marianne, and they kiss cheeks when Juliane enters the room. The guards have closed in on them now, sitting around the table with the sisters as they speak. This anxiety on the part of the guards reflects the sisters’ increased unity. As in many of their previous conversations, Marianne criticizes Juliane for selling out and not living up to her lofty ideals, but this time, instead of just verbally defending herself, Juliane takes action to prove her sister wrong. When a guard tries to confiscate the scented handkerchief from Marianne, Juliane defiantly throws it on the ground. As the guard tries to pocket it, Juliane insists that she give the handkerchief back to her. The camera cuts to a close-up shot of Juliane’s face as she smiles at Marianne, clearly proud of her own little act of defiance. Unlike during her initial prison visit when she begrudgingly consented to the invasive search, Juliane is learning to stand up to figures
of authority when they start to abuse their power. The relationship between the sisters has opened up space for both rational and emotional defiance of authority, for progressive and more reactionary political positions.

However, this competitive collaboration is far from peaceful. Though they face the guards in solidarity, like Antigone and Ismene, they also find plenty about which to disagree. Through these arguments, the film establishes this sisterly bond as realistic, rather than idyllic, as fraught with productive conflict, rather than utopian. Although the specter of violent actions of historical proportions looms large throughout the entire film, one of the few instances of physical violence directly displayed on camera occurs during a rather contentious prison visit after Juliane has published an article about Marianne. When Marianne does not appreciate Juliane’s efforts to soften her public image, Juliane argues that it is impossible to escape one’s personal history saying that, “Ich glaube außerdem nicht, daß wir uns aus unserer persönlichen Geschichte befreien können.” Marianne defiantly replies that she, herself, is evidence to the contrary.

Engelstein writes that Antigone’s flaw is her inability to “recognize her ultimate belonging to the living community” (Engelstein 50). In contrast to Engelstein’s Antigone, Marianne refuses to admit that she is anything outside of the political community she has joined. She insists that her personal background has no bearing on her politics. In this scene, the film itself, like the criticism of it, articulates a concern about representations of the RAF becoming too personalized, thereby avoiding real political discussions. Marianne wants to exist as a purely political figure. She wants her personal history to be irrelevant. However, Julianne insists that this is impossible, while simultaneously realizing through the time she spends with Marianne in prison, that her emphasis on the personal inevitably has broader political implications. Martin Donougho has argued that “Von Trotta is fascinated with the fragility of selfhood, how it is often defined at the
expense of other selves, how it sometimes becomes destructive, of others as well as itself” (149). This scene is evidence of this fragile selfhood in von Trotta’s work -- fragile because it cannot develop independently of others. Marianne wants to believe that she can establish a political self independent of her personal history, and Juliane wants to believe that one’s personal history can explain everything about one’s political self. The film makes it clear that neither sister is correct in her assumption.

Instead, because of their fragile conceptions of selfhood, conflict and even violence erupts. In order to fight back against her sister, Juliane makes the rather inflammatory remark that if born earlier Marianne would have just as easily joined the Nazi youth organization, Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM). As Juliane levels this charge of historically contingent morality against Marianne, the camera zooms in on the older sister so that only her face is visible in the shot. Just as she snatches Marianne’s moral high ground away, an arm breaks into the frame that Juliane now dominates, as Marianne slaps her sister for suggesting that she would just as easily have been a Nazi. Engelstein argues that, “while Antigone insists uncompromisingly on the universality of her principle of action, Ismene recognizes the differentials that create particularity” (47). This question of generalizability versus particularity, of Marianne’s aggressive actions as historically contingent or psychologically inherent, is dramatic enough to lead to violence in Die bleierne Zeit, as both sisters want to be right about not just what they are doing, but why.

This film also adds a third party into this debate, namely the state, which is happy to let its citizens attack each other over these distinctions. Rather than causing alarm, this slap amuses the female guard who is shown smirking immediately after Juliane is hit by this visually disembodied arm. By condoning this violence the guard becomes complicit in it. H-B Moeller
argues that in this film, private acts of violence are juxtaposed with political ones (Moeller 136). In other words, Moeller suggests that this slap is meant to be read alongside the depictions of the corpses in the concentration camps and the burned bodies in Vietnam as a personal act of violence, meant to be compared with those political ones. It is meaningful that the invocation of the past, of a possible past in which Marianne would have just as easily been a Nazi, is what drives her to take this violent action. Despite all of her claims about fighting for justice based on the past violence of the state, Marianne violently resists digging up the past when it potentially implicates her. Honig describes Antigone’s behavior as “admirable but also self-indulgent and incapable of considering things from the other’s point of view” (25). In this scene, this is precisely the picture of Marianne that the viewer receives. She is both in the right and the wrong when she hits Juliane. Based on the way she and her sister are scrutinized, Marianne is certainly justified in her frustration and anger at the system. However, Juliane is also right to point out that there is something disingenuous about Marianne’s uncompromising radicalism. She claims to be saving the world, but she is also running away from her responsibilities as a wife and mother. Since both explanations for Marianne’s turn to violence are in play here, her position is morally ambiguous. Furthermore, when Juliane makes this charge against Marianne, she is making it against all of the young people of her generation who are so deeply convinced that they would have acted differently than their parents during the Nazi era. Even though Juliane may be wrong that the past dictates everything about the present, she also sees that there is a latent violence in Germany and that the only way to fight against it is to first admit that one cannot escape the past.

The final interaction between the two sisters before Marianne’s “suicide” occurs after Marianne has been relocated to a higher security prison. In this scene the solidarity between the sisters reaches its visual height. As Juliane narrates the details of her meeting with Marianne’s
lawyer via voiceover, the viewer is struck by the fact that Juliane has found a way to speak to them that evades the scrutiny of the guards. The state apparatus that is designed to monitor the sisters and control their speech has been circumvented through the sound technology of the film itself. In the meeting room the two sisters initially look silently at each other until the camera zooms in closer as Marianne extends her hand toward the glass as if to take Julianne’s hand in hers. This scene is shot over Julianne’s head from above, giving the viewer the guard’s eye view of the situation. Though initially in solidarity with Juliane through her voiceover, the viewer is shortly thereafter placed back in the position of the guards, the position of an intruder into the now even more intimate relationship between the sisters. The shared subjectivity between Marianne and Julianne is a bond that the audience of the film cannot fully access. It is both deeply personal and strikingly public.

Although the camera remains on Juliane’s side of the glass for the duration of the visit, the sisters find ways of connecting, and ultimately melding their images into one. Initially, Julianne seems more distraught by the new meeting conditions than her sister, who urges her to remain calm. The camera cuts to a profile shot of Julianne with a female guard in the frame as she describes how she dreamt of setting Marianne free: “Ich hab’ geträumt, daß ich dich befreie. Ich hab’ monatelang alles vorbereitet, und als ich zu dir kam, wolltest du nicht mitkommen.” Julianne throws caution to the wind and openly defies the authority of the guards by expressing her desire to free her sister from captivity. Despite the fact that Marianne, in both the dream and in reality, reacts indifferently to Julianne’s efforts to liberate her, it is clear from her slight smile that she appreciates her sister’s empathetic desire to rescue her. The camera cuts to a close-up of Marianne’s face, but it is seen through the glass, just as Julianne sees her, her face distorted by the
Slowly Julianne’s face also comes into view within the glass, superimposing itself on top of Marianne’s. As Kaplan describes:

The combined face stares silently at the camera and back at Juliane, signaling that the two have temporarily found a space beyond the public political discourses that hitherto divided them. The wordless, purely visual linking suggests a mystical bonding transcending the patriarchal symbolic, now seen as inadequate for embodying the sisters’ new way of relating. (Kaplan 266)

Something has happened in the relationship between the two sisters. They no longer see each other as opposites or as competition. Instead they are united against a common enemy, the state that divides them. The sisters have found a way, at least temporarily, to relate to one another and to use their differences to complement each other. This moment may be short lived, but its effects are lasting, leading to Marianne’s death and completely upending Juliane’s life. The faces of the two sisters eventually shift off of one another, Marianne’s real and Juliane’s just a reflection. As Juliane complains about not being able to see Marianne’s face, the microphone system fails and Marianne is dragged away, leaving behind the reflection of Juliane’s face in the glass all by herself. Hofer argues that, “Von Trotta employs her camera as a vehicle for addressing women’s issues and developing a film aesthetic that eliminated binary divisions between private and political, personal and public” (38). As the combined faces of the sisters give way to Juliane’s face alone, it does not imply the victory of her perspective over her sister’s, but is rather an indication that Juliane will now be tasked with living out the promise of that combined individual previously reflected in the glass. As Engelstein argues of Ismene, Juliane is tasked to articulate “the intense particularity of love and the acceptance of difference in love” as she now lives out this “joint subjectivity” created through her bond with her sister (Engelstein 45). Juliane has shown that her love for her sister as an individual overcomes all things, including a state apparatus that would try to separate them. Any division that previously existed
between the sisters is gone as Juliane comes to embrace the deep bond that she shares with Marianne.

Juliane’s subsequent dedication to finding out the truth about her sister’s death makes it evident beyond all doubt that Juliane has integrated her sister into her conception of herself. As Hofer puts it, “Juliane is able to reconstruct her identity — not by seeing herself in direct opposition to her sister — but by reevaluating and incorporating Marianne’s role into her own life” (46). Juliane tries to put herself in her sister’s position, going through her things, trying on a noose, and eventually sewing together a human-sized model of Marianne to see if the noose will hold. When it becomes clear through these experiments that Marianne’s death was no suicide (a suggestion with a very strong political connotation for a film made just four years after the supposed suicides of the Stammheim prisoners including Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin), Juliane wants to share her discovery with the world. For those who argue that von Trotta is not supportive enough of the militant sister in her film, this depiction of the “suicides” as unequivocally murders by the government is hardly a neutral or reactionary position. Unfortunately though, the male journalist that Juliane calls blocks her story, calling it yesterday’s news. As Butler writes, “the appeal to the state is at once an appeal to the fantasy already institutionalized by the state” (“Kinship” 28). Juliane’s story is not legible to the reporter because it does not fit into the state-sponsored narrative he is obligated to construct about militant resistance like Marianne’s, nor does it fit into a capitalist economic narrative in which he must sell papers that people want to read. Despite the fact that the sisters have unified, change on the broader level of society will take much longer, if it is possible at all.\(^5\) While she is unable to

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\(^5\)This is one of the major ambiguities about von Trotta’s film. It seems that she advocates for social change and believes that this collaborative model of sisterhood is the only way such change could happen, but leaves the question pessimistically open about whether or not social change is truly possible, or even desirable.
seek justice in the forum of the newspaper, Juliane’s work is successful in bringing justice to 
Marianne in the eyes of the viewers of this film, further indicating a sympathetic characterization 
of Marianne and an unflattering picture of the state apparatus, even as this film still adamantly 
refuses to advocate for counter-violence as a political strategy.

Flashbacks as Feminist Violence

While von Trotta’s film may not advocate for physical violence in the name of politics, it 
definitely engages in feminist violence in terms of how it presents the story of these sisters. 
Teresa de Lauretis argues that, “the filmic representation of non-congruent temporal registers 
[…works] with and against narrative” (Alice 96). By incorporating flashback sequences into her 
film, von Trotta engages in a process of deconstructing narrative time. It is through flashback 
sequences and their discontinuity with what the viewer encounters in the film’s present that von 
Trotta’s film aggressively challenges her audience’s preconceived notions about the people 
behind militant and radical politics. The flashback sequences are each staged as a diversion, 
triggered by the appearance of some sign that leads Juliane into her memories (a cup of cocoa, 
the windows in the prison courtyard, a mother and child by the train tracks, etc.). In these 
flashback sequences the roles of the sisters are reversed in that Juliane is the aggressive and 
openly rebellious sister, while Marianne works within the system of power to get what she 
wants. This presentation of the two sisters in the flashback sequences unsettles the narrative 
being told about them in the present, in which Juliane is the more passive journalist and 
Marianne the passionate militant. Furthermore, it challenges readings of the Antigone story, such 
as Irigaray’s, that would seek to characterize Ismene as feminine in her “weakness, her fear, her 
submissive obedience” as compared to Antigone’s masculine civil disobedience and public 
action (Irigaray Speculum 217). Die bleierne Zeit reminds us that we never know what kind of
personal past or history may influence present political action or inaction. In doing so, it launches a feminist assault on the relationship between narrative progress and cause and effect over time, as well as the development of an autonomous subjectivity that resists cooperation and outside influence.

In contrast to the other flashbacks, which appear to be only Juliane’s memory, the first flashback sequence in the film is triggered in the minds of both sisters simultaneously. Because of this, it is a particularly good example of how the sisters appear unified in the flashbacks. During their meeting in the museum Marianne and Julianne see the skin that has formed on the top of their cups of cocoa, causing them to laugh and the camera to cut to two similar white cups whose contents sit, waiting to be consumed. The sisters, now young girls, are back in the family dining room waiting to eat while their father prays. Although they are very small, it is clear that they share a special bond since they keep looking up at each other over their folded hands, as if about to burst into the laughter. Despite the brevity of this first flashback, it establishes the kind of childhood experienced by the sisters during the so called “leaden times” referenced in the title of the film. The Klein sisters experience a childhood dominated by male figures (whether their father or God), one that requires covert subversion. As Hofer points out, already in the first flashback, this film establishes a link between the family and larger, more public, patriarchal institutions saying that, “these fantasies broaden the familial setting to a societal portrait by linking patriarchal authority to the Protestant ethic with its emphasis on guilt and suffering as well as the examination of conscience” (Hofer 49). The girls are united on a personal level against their father and against social institutions on a political level because those institutions also invade their home. Whether in the form of their father’s religious devotion or as embodied
by the image of Jesus that dominates the stairwell of their house, the sisters find solidarity against oppression through their bond with one another.

Once the sisters become teenagers, these collaborative subversions of authority begin to take on a more obvious political nature. Seiter has argued that von Trotta’s film is itself politically problematic because in the flashbacks “radical politics are reduced to rebellion against the authoritarian father, and all such actions are equated, regardless of political position (“The Political” 44). In my analysis I show how this reactionary reading is one, but not the only, way of reading the role of the flashback sequences in Die bleierne Zeit. In the longest flashback sequence of the film, the sisters, now teenagers, display personalities and political views that at first seem antagonistic to one another, but which, over time, are shown to be interrelated and mutually dependent. In other words, Antigone/the rebellious sister needs Ismene/the obedient sister and vice versa in order for their actions to have the same effect and meaning on both the personal and the political levels. At the beginning of the scene, (contrary to their appearances in the film’s present) Juliane, not Marianne, establishes herself as the Antigone figure. She lies on her bed reading Sartre in the foreground of the shot, while Marianne dutifully practices cello in the background, initially out of focus. The camera pans toward Marianne and eventually concentrates on her as she plays. As the shot comes into focus it becomes apparent that the Marianne we are seeing is actually just her image in a mirror. Instead of behind Juliane, Marianne is actually beside her, a positioning that mirrors the viewer’s initial impression that Juliane is the more important, more sympathetic character, only to have that impression revealed as an illusion. We think that the two sisters are opposed to each other, but really they are side-by-side. Once their positioning as equals has been established, the sisters have a discussion about life after death in which Marianne wants to believe in something because not believing would
make everything “sinnlos.” Juliane scoffs at her sister’s naiveté and puts on a jazz record as if to further emphasize her rebellious and counter-cultural position. Marianne expresses the desire to be useful (“gebraucht werden”), a desire that Juliane skeptically calls “freiwillige Knechtschaft.” In their conversation, the sisters offer complementary positions of optimism and pessimism, belief and skepticism, which engage indirectly with the political debates of the day about conformity and revolution. Engelstein argues of Antigone that the play sets up “siblinghood as a paradigm for the overdetermined embedding of the subject in the networked world, marking the insufficiency of theories of identification based on a linguistics of substitution” (Engelstein 41).

In their flashback conversations Marianne and Juliane reveal the ways in which they too build their own subjectivities out of a network of relations and interactions. The adult sisters are not mere substitutes for their teenage selves. Furthermore, those selves are in a state of constant self-reflection in relationship to each other. The sisters fail to be substitutes for their past selves and yet they are also not fully interchangeable with one another. Therefore, they can be seen as sharing collaborative, multi-faceted subject positions.

This unity of the sisters’ goals and their combination of social strategies is on full display in a subsequent scene at the school dance where Juliane ends up making a political statement at the prompting of her sister. The camera sets the scene by showing us a variety of images of the students, including Marianne, dancing with each other’s parents, including Frau Klein. Juliane watches from a table by herself. The camera suggests a comparison between Marianne and her passive mother, and Juliane and her authoritarian father. However, instead of opposing these positions, the film reveals them as allied when, after Marianne whispers in her ear, Juliane gets up and brazenly dances a waltz by herself. Her actions clear the dance floor as the crowd watches her in nervous disbelief while she smiles smugly, pleased with herself for her rejection of
convention. Juliane makes a statement against the strict, gender-based family structures that were represented in the earlier dancing sequence. Even more importantly, she does so based on a deal she strikes with Marianne. A hint of a smile is seen on Frau Klein’s face when the camera cuts to her and Marianne admits to an inquiring young man that the dancing was part of a bet with her sister about who would get an opportunity to travel to America. Therefore, despite their lack of explicit involvement in these actions, Frau Klein and Marianne are supportive and even encouraging of Juliane’s rebelliousness in a way that is both slightly juvenile and deeply political. The scene at the dance reveals that for the sisters “Each is who she is because of her connection with her sister. Each is enabled, because of her involvement in the shared space of the relationship, to expand the definition of who she is” (Mouton 43). Juliane can participate vicariously in a more emotional and optimistic perspective through her sister, while Marianne can enjoy and help instigate Juliane’s fight against the system. Therefore, even though their positions in this model seem to be reversed as adults, this reversal is less dramatic because of the interdependency between these positions as revealed in the flashback sequences. It is impossible to have one without the other, to have Antigone without Ismene. Therefore, any dichotomy between them is a false one.

This aggressive breakdown of autonomous categories that remain stable over time, and the notion of an independent subjectivity, carries over into the film’s present through an engagement with gender dynamics within the militant terrorist movement. At first, Marianne seems convinced that the terrorist fight is one that unites men and women behind a common cause, and therefore encourages greater equality and a more equitable division of labor between men and women. In one of the few instances of voiceover narration in the film, Marianne narrates a letter to her sister about her experience training for revolutionary violence in Lebanon.
As we see images of Marianne riding in a jeep across a desert landscape, surrounded by curious and excited children, Marianne describes the gender equity she sees among those taking part in the revolution. She describes women training for and taking on combat roles, while men help with housework, doing chores like making beds. There is an interesting dissonance in this sequence between the images of Marianne and the feelings of equity she describes in her voiceover. Going shopping and interacting with children is reminiscent of the traditional gender roles and the family life that Marianne has supposedly left behind in Germany when she abandons her husband and son. Although she feels that she has gotten past this traditional life, we as viewers are asked to be more skeptical about how far (or not) Marianne has come. Has she really been able to overcome the confining gender roles that she seeks to escape if she has simply traded her own son for this flock of Lebanese children? Maybe. Once again the film is ambiguous on this point, deliberately confronting its viewers with contradictions.

In addition to revealing a unity between the sisters and an uncomfortable gender politics, the flashback sequences in Die bleierne Zeit attack the narrative of the sisters as opposites through the use of non-diegetic music. Chion writes that, “Out of time and out of space, music communicates with all times and all spaces of a film, even as it leaves them to their separate and distinct existences” (AV 81). Music then can override the visual narratives on the screen, forming connections between disparate filmic scenes and connecting the action on the screen to other events and contexts outside of the realm of the film itself. A good example of this occurs in the final flashback sequence of the film, which actually becomes more of a dream sequence due to its unrealistic coloring and dramatic shot angles. This scene represents the moment at which Juliane decides that she must pursue justice for Marianne at all costs. During her panic attack
following the viewing of her sister’s dead body, Handel’s “Lucrezia Cantate” begins to play as Juliane struggles to make sense of how her sister ended up committing suicide. At this point, it is relevant to note that throughout the film non-diegetic music is usually associated with a flashback or the lead up to a flashback sequence. Otherwise, the majority of the sound in the film is natural, synched, and locatable as emanating from a physical body or machine. This choice in terms of the score highlights the way in which these flashback sequences are in part constructed by the present. With this non-diegetic music, these scenes draw attention to themselves as intentional and created, just like the film itself. The flashbacks are constructed representations of things that were once real in their materiality. However, the camera’s mediation of them collapses the distinction between past and present. Linville and Casper write of the film Heller Wahn, something that is equally applicable to Die bleierne Zeit, when they say that, “Trotta’s ambiguous flashback structures are reminders that pursuit of the truth is always pursuit in retrospect, insight through hindsight, a reconstructed vision that is inevitably part illusion” (Linville and Casper 3). This use of non-diegetic music highlights the flashback sequences as inevitably linked, and therefore partially colored by their relevance to the present.

Speaking about death as the last taboo in cinema (i.e. showing real death on screen) Sobchack writes that the corpse “is a significant bodily sign of the body that no longer has the iconic power to intentionally signify itself as lived” (236). It generates sympathy and horror “as a symbolic object bereft of subjectivity and responsiveness that stands for a condition that we cannot existentially know and yet to which we must succumb” (Sobchack 236). Marianne’s

56Lucretia is another classical figure with great relevance to the plot of this film. After being raped by the son of an Etruscan king, Lucretia committed suicide. Her death sparked a rebellion that turned Rome from a monarchy into a republic. Although Marianne’s death clearly does not have this kind of dramatic political effect, it has a similar personal effect on Juliane. The RAF would likely have been comfortable with martyrdom as a means for achieving political justice. For instance, Scribner very convincingly argues that by committing suicide in prison the RAF leaders “used their bodies to delimit a discursive “outside” to prison law,” a law that claimed to have complete jurisdiction over everything (Scribner 114).
death and the viewing of her corpse triggers both sympathy and horror in Julianne. In her eyes Marianne has become, as Chanter describes of Antigone, “hallowed and yet she is the deject of the system” (Chanter 26). Seeing her sister’s dead body as both revered, due to their deep connection, and yet cast off by the system is the final straw that sends Juliane off on a quest for justice that combines her political interests with her sister’s. Julianne’s journalistic skills combine with Marianne’s rebellious streak to create a new Julianne, determined to work for justice, no matter the cost. Julianne’s physical collapse after seeing her sister’s dead body triggers a final dream sequence in which the threat of the father features prominently. Unlike the other flashback sequences, the lighting in this scene is unnatural, with a bright red light muting out the other colors and making it clear that these images are part flashback, part dream sequence. The young sisters help to lace each other’s bodices, much as Marianne first described in a memory she shares with Julianne in prison. However, unlike in Marianne’s memory, there is no joy in this recollection. The girls turn to face a pulpit and we are shown a close-up shot of the young Julianne’s face as she looks nervously upwards. This cuts to a shot of the Jesus painting that hangs above the stairs in the sisters’ childhood home. The camera pans down the painting to Jesus’s bleeding feet before cutting back to the two young sisters, now shot from behind. In an extremely low angle shot, their father appears in the pulpit, giving a silent sermon while the operatic music continues to play over him. Julianne’s nervous face gazes upwards as the father is shown one final time, bathed in red light and gesticulating wildly, eyes full of anger. In a confrontation with the oppression of her father, Julianne has her Lucretia moment, the moment in which she cannot allow the status quo to continue after the sacrifice of a female body has taken place. Honig describes the potentially dramatic affects of public grief when she writes that “loud lament can make citizens not only admire those who gave their sons to the city but also, even at the same
time, wonder at the wisdom of sacrificing the city’s sons to war” (23). By seeking public recognition for Marianne’s untimely death, especially in defiance of the fear that her father, the church, or the state would put into her, Juliane cements her unity with her sister. By wanting to make her grief loud, she endeavors to engage the public in a process of collective critical thinking and mourning. Unfortunately though, unlike Antigone, Juliane is not able to make her voice heard publicly and has to settle for influencing change on the level of her own family.

**Collaborative Motherhood and Memory Work**

The rupture of Juliane’s faith in governmental institutions and the justice system occurs in tandem with a gradual loss of faith in traditional, vertical family and kinship structures. In other words, instead of turning to her parents for an understanding of kinship and the family, Juliane turns laterally towards her sister and by extension her sister’s son Jan. As in the story of Antigone and Ismene, the efforts at universalization engaged in by the state lead to a breakdown of traditional notions of the nuclear family and all of its implications in terms of gender and power. Some critics, including Ann Kaplan, have argued that, “the film posits the family as the only structure in capitalism able to provide security and identity,” and that in the end, Juliane replaces her father as head of the household and “master of the discourse” (Kaplan 267). Through an analysis of Juliane’s deteriorating relationship with Wolfgang and her evolving relationship with Marianne’s son Jan, I aim to prove that this is not the case. Juliane neither conforms to a traditionally passive feminine role nor does she assume a masculine, authoritarian position within the family. Instead, she builds a different kind of family structure, a productively

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57 It is worth noting that Antigone herself represents a rather complicated kinship structure in that she and her father/brother have the same mother. As Butler reminds us, “Antigone represents not kinship in its ideal form but its deformation and displacement” (Butler *Antigone* 24). Antigone, just like Juliane, needs to get creative and break away from traditional models when thinking about how to construct an identity out of some notion of family.
queer family structure\(^5\) that explores different possibilities for horizontal kinship and for educating future generations. Instead of looking at motherhood as a burden that interferes with her career, Juliane comes to see collaborative motherhood and education, with and through the example of her sister, as the most effective way to prepare the next generation to confront violent pasts that are both personal and political.

Before I get to Jan, however, I want to briefly consider Wolfgang and why Juliane’s opportunity to have a “normal” family is doomed to failure. It is clear throughout most of the film that the close relationship between the sisters is one of the factors that keeps Juliane and Wolfgang from establishing a lasting and loving heterosexual romantic partnership. At times Juliane and Wolfgang appear to have a supportive and stable relationship. He encourages her in her career, cheers her up when she is feeling low, and even helps around the house by cooking and cleaning. However, the small cracks visible at the beginning of the film continue to grow as the plot progresses. Even early on, Juliane seems unsettled in her relationship with Wolfgang, despite the fact that they have been together for years. For example, she describes having multiple dreams about him cheating on her with other women, including her sister. Wolfgang tries to be supportive, encouraging Juliane to write a letter to her sister in prison when Marianne refuses to see her, but he quickly grows tired of playing second fiddle to Marianne in Juliane’s life and affections. Despite his attempts to be helpful, Wolfgang would ultimately prefer to have a less career-driven, more domestic partner. For example, during one of their fights about Marianne he brings up Jan, arguing that it would be a good idea for Juliane to take better care of him. While he has a healthy respect for Juliane’s work, Wolfgang’s behavior suggests that he desires a partner who will give him a more traditional family life including marriage and a baby.

\(^5\)Queer in the sense that it is multi-valent and combines multiple perspectives, not queer in the sense of encompassing same-sex desire.
Eventually Wolfgang reaches his breaking point in terms of this “Leben mit Leichen” and he walks out on Juliane for good. In response to her suggestion that they take a break, Wolfgang grows violent, and in the only other scene of direct, non-historical, physical violence in the film, bats Juliane around and calls her a “Monstrum.” Despite his liberal politics, Wolfgang still desires a traditional family life, one that Juliane is ultimately unable to give him. She becomes monstrous to him because of the way she pursues a life against the grain, in which sisterhood is held above all other familial ties. Like Antigone, she gives up her romantic partner in order to honor a sibling bond. In this way, von Trotta asks the question: what would it mean if Antigone lost her life in an effort to honor the legacy of a dead Ismene, rather than a dead Polyneices? The answer that is given in *Die bleierne Zeit* is that an entirely new kinship structure would take shape, one that is built out of the ruins of failed heterosexual romances (you will remember that Marianne also gives up a male partner in order to pursue her life as a terrorist). Butler argues that Antigone does not provide us with a model for something other than heterosexuality, even though Antigone “does seem to deinstitute heterosexuality” by refusing to be a wife and mother (Butler *Antigone’s* 76). In *Die bleierne Zeit*, Juliane takes this a step further by imagining a collaborative and politically symbolic method of child rearing in which refusing to be a wife does not discount motherhood. That being said, she also does not get all the way to Butler’s imagined dismantling of heterosexuality because the child that she raises is still related to her through blood. Once again, the film’s position is both radical and reactionary.

This film never allows its audience to be deluded that this sisterly family structure is easy to establish or maintain. If the goal is ultimately “two subjectivities constituted in a relationship of mutuality and independence” (Mouton 44), then von Trotta’s characters are in an admittedly precarious situation. Particularly in light of Marianne’s death, the open question remains how
both sisters can exist together and more specifically, how they can both be narrators and tell their own stories (Mouton 44). Marianne’s death potentially makes this ideal of two related subjectivities impossible in von Trotta’s film. This reactionary reading in which Marianne needs to be killed off in order for Juliane to live has some merit. After all, those are the most basic facts of the plot of the film. However, as Engelstein argues of the story of Antigone, it is possible for the subject to be “embedded in a network of partial others, whose subjectivities are nonetheless partially, though differently, shared” (Engelstein 40). This kind of dynamic, in which Juliane takes on pieces of Marianne’s subjectivity, is one way in which Die bleierne Zeit gets around this problem. The other way is through Marianne’s son, Jan. One of the innovations of my reading of Die bleierne Zeit is to emphasize the significance of the beginning and ending of this film, in which Jan’s story and his search for a stable home is the most pressing concern. Honig describes Antigone as not wanting to live in a regime where “past lives may be forgotten if future ones take their place” (Honig 16). However, in Die bleierne Zeit, past lives must be remembered at the same time as future ones are generated. By examining sections of the film surrounding Jan and the debate over who is best equipped to raise him, I will interrogate Preece’s assumption that RAF films “invest ‘hope’ for the future in child characters modeled on Felix Ensslin” (Preece “Reinscribing” 219), thinking critically about what kind of future Jan represents and what it means for Juliane to take him in at the end of the film and agree to tell him his mother’s story.

When the film begins, Jan’s mother, Marianne, has already abandoned him, and his father is about to do the same. The first time we see Jan is as Werner is driving him to Juliane’s apartment in order to give him away. A close-up of the photo of Marianne, which Jan will later tear up, cuts to a car driving along a country road. Ominous music plays in the background as we see a close-up of Jan looking backwards, watching the past, the road that the car is leaving
behind. Jan’s backward-looking position is symbolic of the way that his mother’s past finds ways of making itself felt in his life. The past is a major concern for Jan throughout the film. For example, Julian Reidy argues that Jan must try to understand the past “um überhaupt eine Chance auf irgendeine Art von Normalität zu haben” (175). Just like the generation before him, Jan has to come to terms with both his past and the past of his country in order to find the stable home that he searches for throughout the film. As Honig reminds us, the process of mourning is always self-serving in that “those who go on and on when mourning others may as well be mourning themselves; it is all about them” (21). In order to find himself, Jan must come to terms with his personal and collective past, he must properly mourn for his mother as Juliane has learned to do. He must mourn her as an individual and as part of a collective history.

Before he can get there, Jan undergoes considerable suffering. Each of the adult characters at the beginning of the film has a different reason why they cannot take responsibility for Jan. For his father Werner, a big part of the issue is his sense that his own masculinity has been injured by Marianne’s choice to abandon him with their son. When Juliane scolds Werner for not taking care of his child, he describes how he does not want to be a “Kindermädchen” and sarcastically comments that Karl, Marianne’s new boyfriend, is most likely better in bed. Werner’s diatribe concludes with a series of misogynist insults as he calls Marianne “eine Hure […] wie alle andere Fotzen.” Werner’s behavior indicates that he feels emasculated by Marianne after she abandons him and Jan. Werner so strongly objects to taking on the responsibility for his son in the aftermath of Marianne’s desertion that he drives into the forest and kills himself. His suicide is followed by a cut to the hospital nursery at which Juliane’s friend Sabine works as a nurse. This linking between Werner’s suicide and a room full of newborn babies further emphasizes the paternal responsibility that Werner avoids through the choice to take his own life.
This is not to say that the film makes the alternative, i.e. caring for children, seem all that much more appealing or noble. Sabine, as the only other named female character besides the two sisters, provides a more mainstream female perspective to balance out the radical politics of the Klein sisters. As a nurse, Sabine’s manner with the newborns is far more scientific than motherly, as she listens to a baby’s heart and holds it out away from her body as it wails uncontrollably. Sabine’s seeming discomfort around newborns makes it surprising when she announces to Juliane that she, herself, is pregnant. Unlike Juliane, who recognizes her own discomfort around children, Sabine willfully tries to ignore the real responsibilities associated with childcare. For example, when Juliane asks her how the baby will affect her work she nonchalantly replies, “das schaff’ ich schon,” without providing a more specific childcare plan. In her conversation with Sabine, Juliane is clearly conflicted about giving up Jan. Sabine, whose haphazard decision to have children is never condemned, judges both Julianne and Marianne for their lack of motherliness, providing an example of some of the judgments frequently issued against actual terrorists Meinhof and Ensslin.59 While judging Julianne and Marianne for abandoning Jan through Sabine’s hypocrisy, this film also offers up a subtle critique of women who do not critically reflect on their fitness for motherhood or their reasons for taking on the responsibility of caring for a child. Motherhood should be taken on with the same earnestness as any political crusade. Even though Jan suffers as a result of Juliane’s hesitation to take him in, ultimately, when she does decide to care for him, she is ready to commit herself fully to the job.

59Scientists found it extremely odd that so many women participated in the militancy of the RAF and numerous theories were postulated to explain this phenomenon. Most theories ranged from the absurd to the ridiculous. For example, the Baader-Meinhof-Report of 1972 suggested, but could not fully endorse, the idea that the birth control pill had taken the risk out of sex, thereby leading women to seek risk elsewhere (Colvin 86-87). Other studies suggested that lesbianism was the culprit and tried to promote the idea that Meinhof and Ensslin were “gleichgeschlechtlich veranlagt” though both had male partners and children (Colvin 90). The strong desire to study Meinhof’s brain, both while she was alive and after her death, also proves a profound scientific interest in understanding why women specifically became militant (Colvin 84).
At the beginning of the film, Jan has no place in Juliane’s world or her work. In the opening scenes of the film, Juliane establishes herself as a hard working activist with absolutely no interest in raising a child, a position for which she receives no support from the state or from her friends. One of the few images we get of Juliane at work shows her speaking at a rally protesting against §218, West Germany’s law prohibiting abortion. Although the crowd is sparse, the women in attendance nod along to Juliane’s speech in agreement and it is clear that Juliane cares deeply about this cause, canvassing in the streets until a downpour makes it necessary to seek shelter. Jan, on the other hand, is out of place in this activist environment. In one scene, we see him playing in the dark hallway of Juliane’s workplace. As she leaves, he pitifully pushes his toy car after her, before crawling down the hall to retrieve it. The massive stacks of magazines and papers that line the hallway, and the dark shadows they cast, make it ominously clear that this is no place for a small child. For better or for worse, the world of Juliane’s feminist magazine excludes Jan, relegating him literally to the shadows and the background of her life.

With Werner, Sabine, and Juliane all excluded as potential parents for Jan, attention briefly turns to his biological mother, Marianne. During the meeting at the museum, however, Marianne’s attitude towards children is revealed, and it become clear that she too is not cut out for motherhood, at least not on her own. After hearing about Werner’s suicide, Marianne callously responds that, “er war schon immer todessüchtig.” Despite her lack of concern for the father of her child, she does get upset when the conversation turns to Jan and his welfare, proving that, despite appearances, she is invested in what becomes of him. Marianne begs Juliane to take Jan in, but Juliane refuses arguing that “meine Mutterpflichten hab’ ich als Kind abgeleistet. An euch Kleinen,” and that Marianne has no right “mir das Leben aufzuzwingen, das du nicht mehr führen willst.” After these sound arguments from Juliane, Marianne articulates the
urgency of her political cause and how she was sure that “ein Kind würde Werner helfen,”
making it clear that she too sees her current work as incompatible with childcare. In an interview, von Trotta describes how “The child in a way becomes a token of exchange between the women, a way of, you know, transacting the change in their roles and their relationship to each other” (von Trotta “A Conversation” 162). Both women try to push the responsibility for caring for Jan off onto the other as a way of measuring whose work is more important (it is implied that the one who has time to care for the child must be doing the least important work). This figuring of the child as a mode of exchange, as a line on the political battleground, must come to an end in order for Jan to find a loving home.

Eventually, Juliane comes to realize that motherhood is not incompatible with politics. Since nobody is initially prepared to take him in, Jan is sent to live with a foster family. He eventually reappears after Juliane has finally uncovered evidence of the true nature of Marianne’s death, placing his story as a coda to the plot of this film. Juliane and Sabine arrive at the hospital to find Jan recovering from burns he acquired as a result of an attack on the small cave that he built for himself in the woods. It is later implied that he was attacked because someone discovered the identity of his birth mother. The camera pans over to him in his recovery bed, and Jan’s injuries are extensive, reminiscent of the children from the footage of the atrocities in Vietnam. Many critics argue that Jan becomes a stand-in for the victims of the Holocaust and Vietnam, and in this scene it is easy to see why.60 This rather reductive equating of various present and historical victims is certainly a reactionary move on the part of the film. In this way, Kaplan argues, “taking in Jan, then symbolizes Juliane’s shouldering of the cause of innocent victims that had so motivated Marianne’s terrorism” (268). Ironically, taking in her own

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60See for example the work of H-B. Moeller, Julian Reidy, and Stefanie Hofer.
nephew becomes symbolically like taking in the oppressed children that Marianne claimed to be fighting for when she ran away from her family. Through his burns, Jan takes on symbolic resonance bigger than himself and allows Juliane to combine family with social justice work. Taking in Jan is symbolic on a personal and political level, thereby making Juliane’s work compatible with childcare. Juliane’s acquiescence to the role of motherhood is now politically acceptable because of its broader significance. Instead of a model of motherhood founded in blood relationships only, Juliane’s new understanding of her role as a mother mirrors Chanter’s description of the way in which Antigone, in burying her brother, transforms what was merely a blood relationship into a “conscious relationship” entered into with political as well as familial goals (Chanter 28). By developing a new understanding of motherhood that flies in the face of traditional notions of the mother-child bond, this film continues to walk an ambiguous line between progressive and reactionary readings.

Nevertheless, taking in Jan is no easy task because Juliane will have to prepare him to accept his mother and her past into his life. When she picks him up from the hospital, Jan’s quiet moroseness stands in stark contrast to the other children in the yard who run around and play. Clearly Jan has been deeply affected by all that he has been through, staring sullenly out of the window at Juliane’s apartment and refusing to talk or help her as she takes off his jacket and his shoes. Jan will ultimately need to be reoriented with respect to the past, specifically his mother’s past, if he is ever to live a happy life in the present. By caring for Jan, who is now a symbol for the memory of the atrocities of both the Nazi and the terrorist past, “Juliane takes responsibility for the past and, simultaneously, for the future, carrying out her generation’s impetus that historical injustice should not be forgotten to prevent its recurrence” (Hofer 50). Just as Jan will
not forget the fire that wounded him, in caring for Jan, Juliane will not forget her sister’s legacy, nor the violent historical events that led to Marianne’s militancy.

Jan’s desire to know about his mother’s past reaches a breaking point when he takes her picture off of the wall, rips it up, and throws it in the trash. Juliane sits typing at her desk as the camera pans to a profile shot of Jan pulling down his mother’s photo from the cork board to which Juliane has it pinned. As he begins to rip it up, the sound draws Juliane’s attention and the camera cuts to her looking up from her typewriter. Jan continues to rip up the photo, looking defiantly at Juliane as he crosses the room in front of her. It is clear that the two of them are now locked in a conflict over the memory of Marianne, one that will either end with her extermination for good or with the continuance of her memory. Jan throws all of the pieces in the trash and the camera cuts back to Juliane, face resting on her hands, thinking about how to respond to Jan’s behavior. Linville writes convincingly that despite Jan’s efforts to reject his mother by tearing up her photograph, this gesture is also one that unites mother and son. She argues that, “the conflicting evidence [surrounding Marianne’s death] is also crucial for Jan, whose gesture of discarding the photograph of his mother ironically unites him with her in the belief that “[y]ou can shed your past,” a belief that she thought she proved” (Linville 451). Jan tries to get rid of his past by tearing up the photograph, however, Juliane knows that this is never fully possible and so she recognizes the necessity of helping Jan to confront his mother’s history.

Ultimately, instead of tearing up the past, it is as Hofer argues that, “Juliane dedicates herself to integrating the past into the present — a position she encourages Jan to take when dealing with his own history” (Hofer 46). Juliane teaches Jan the one lesson that she has to teach, namely that the past will always intrude upon the present, and so the only responsible thing to do is to confront it rather than trying to escape it. This is the lesson that she unsuccessfully tried to
teach Marianne. However, in this final scene, it is also a lesson that has been altered as a result of Juliane’s interactions with her sister in prison. Juliane’s goal in her instruction of Jan is the same lesson that Engelstein suggests we should take away from a reading of Antigone, namely that we should be “breaking cycles of repetition without relinquishing particular passion” (Engelstein 51). Jan should not become like his mother, nor should he completely erase her memory. As the tension of the scene escalates, Jan comes out of the bathroom and stares directly at Juliane, who informs him “du hast Unrecht, Jan. Deine Mutter war eine außergewöhnliche Frau.” Juliane’s choice of adjective here is intentionally ambiguous. She does not want to heroize Marianne, but she still wants to present her sympathetically. From her time with Marianne in prison, Juliane has learned to be more compromising and fair in her judgments of others. In response, Jan shakes his head, as if saying that he does not believe this characterization of his mother. At first the camera cuts back and forth between Juliane and Jan as they speak, but eventually it lingers on Juliane when she agrees to tell Jan about his mother. It is clear that she now will assume responsibility for Jan’s proper education. When Juliane agrees to tell the story, Jan inquires, “Alles?” Juliane, who now knows better, responds: “Was ich über sie weiß, das ist sicher nicht alles.” Instead of insisting that because she knows about Marianne’s personal struggles she knows everything about her, as she did when she wrote her article about Marianne, Juliane proves her growth when she acknowledges that her own knowledge of Marianne can only ever be partial. Juliane realizes that neither she nor her sister has/had all of the answers. They are both partially constructed by and indebted to each other. Even though she is telling this story to Jan by herself, she recognizes that her storytelling must be collaborative in order to be complete. She alone is not fully up to the task, just like one strategy or another is not the only effective way to work for social justice. The close-ups of Juliane and Jan get a little tighter, increasing the intimacy of mother-figure and boy,
as Jan urges her to “Fang an.” The final shot of the film is a close up of Juliane’s face as she presumably prepares to tell Marianne’s story. In this battle between Juliane and Jan, Juliane has emerged victorious, but her victory is ultimately in Jan’s best interest. She will paint the picture of Marianne that she chooses, not the one that Jan has been feed by others and the media. Renate Hehr argues that at the end of the film Juliane’s commitment to raising Jan should not be seen as the adoption of a traditional female role, but rather as “an intentional act of taking responsibility for the future” by making sure that the past is remembered (30). If the journalist that she calls with Marianne’s story will not listen, perhaps Marianne’s son will. My reading of Die bleierne Zeit definitely accords with Hehr’s assessment. Juliane’s motherly behavior towards Jan proves to be an integral part of her political project, rather than a distraction from it. Instead of running away from motherhood to pursue politics, Juliane recognizes that motherhood can be an essential part of political action. Juliane’s willingness to take on the responsibility of passing her personal and political history to the next generation is what allows her to successfully live out her commitment to her sister. At the same time, Juliane refuses, as Honig describes of Antigone, to “silence the grief that in our politics we yet do so much to generate” (Honig 31). Hearing his mother’s story cannot erase Jan’s pain, but it can help him to better understand the interplay between his own political and personal commitments moving forward.

Conclusion

In her scathing critique of Die bleierne Zeit in the feminist film journal Frauen und Film, Charlotte Delorme writes that, “Denn ein Film, der tatsächlich ist, was Die bleierne Zeit behauptet zu sein, der hätte keine Unterstützung, keinen Verleih, kein Kino bekommen. Nun weiß man, warum dieser Film dies alles hat” (55). In other words, Delorme claims that the complex and progressive political positions that Die bleierne Zeit tries to represent would not be
palatable for a mainstream audience. Therefore, the film’s success is an indicator that its political message falls flat. I agree with Delorme that there are moments in this film that reinforce traditional, patriarchal systems of power by presenting women as weak, unstable, and ineffectual, especially in the political sphere. Contrary to Delorme, I also think that this film achieves a lot in terms of forcing its audience to confront and question the ability, or lack thereof, for women to be political actors and to take up arms against the state. This political engagement takes many forms, including the unexpected form of motherhood, thereby making it less visible, if not for films like von Trotta’s.

Von Trotta’s film demonstrates that left-wing militants are asking the impossible when they demand a complete separation from the past. Yet this film is also unwilling to discount the validity of their claims that social justice comes at a pace that is far too slow. Die bleierne Zeit brings the past into the present and the personal into the political without letting one completely dominate the other. Building off of the representation of the Holocaust in documentary footage, this film demonstrates the failure of the German school system to adequately address the Nazi past. In addition, von Trotta’s film provides a window into the abuses that are perpetuated by a prison system that still endorses solitary confinement. She challenges historical narratives of cause and effect through contradictory flashbacks. Finally, she models for her viewers an alternative family structure that opens up space for new ways of forming identity based on deeply felt sisterhood rather than the vertical kinship structures of the patriarchal household. Throughout all of these moves the film deals with the tension between “maintaining a critical perspective” and “making a politically legible claim” that Butler so accurately describes in her essay “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” (20). Both Juliane and the film as a whole
struggle to remain both critical and legible as they navigate these discourses of kinship and memory, always approaching, but never fully achieving, this balance.

Linville calls *Die bleierne Zeit* a film of “engaged undecidability” (449). This is a very apt description of what I have drawn out of von Trotta’s film. In this film, von Trotta forces her viewers to engage with the indeterminability, the undecidability, and the ambiguity of any political action as a result of the complex interplay between the personal, the political, and the historical. *Die bleierne Zeit* demonstrates that this dynamic is particularly complicated when women engage in acts of terrorist violence because of the ambiguous ways in which women’s lives are pulled in many directions by their work, their partners, and their children. Ultimately though, what makes von Trotta’s film so special is the fact that despite the ways in which her characters may at first appear to speak for certain groups, to stand for something larger than themselves, it is also true that, “the women in von Trotta’s films are so various that any attempt to glean a message about how women should live is bound to founder […]. Her women do not speak for us so much as they speak for themselves” (Szalai 224). Despite their, at times, symbolic status, Marianne and Juliane still manage to remain realistic as characters with independent lives of their own. In this way, von Trotta gives us characters who are rich in both personal and political history.

A large part of the complexity of the characters in *Die bleierne Zeit* comes from von Trotta’s insistence on a female subjectivity that is shared by her two protagonists. Like Antigone and Ismene, they initially appear to represent two opposing political discourses, one progressive and one reactionary. However, by reversing and complicating the roles of the sisters through flashbacks, and by highlighting all of the burdens and responsibilities that they share in the present, von Trotta’s film unifies the sisters in a shared political project and a collaborative
motherhood. Through their experience of violence at the hands of the state and through their willingness to aggressively hold their sisterly bond together, Marianne and Juliane forge a new model of shared female subjectivity. As in the case of Antigone and Ismene, this new subjectivity takes into account identities that are both civic/generalizable and deeply individual. In order for the sisters to truly address the issues of past and contemporary violence and injustice in their society, they must establish a cooperative unity between them that allows them to guide the next generation towards a more complete understanding of these events, one that their parents never provided for them.

Not only is this next generation a primary concern in *Die bleierne Zeit*, but the relevance of this film and the historical context it invokes continues into the present. Although the RAF officially disbanded in 1998 after a 1992 ceasefire, it has recently been reported by *Der Spiegel* that a group of former RAF members are responsible for robbing a series of supermarkets in northern Germany.\(^6\) The spirit of enacting political change through any means necessary, including violence, is clearly being kept alive on the fringes of German society, thereby placing films like *Die bleierne Zeit* in a position to continue to teach us about the complex histories of these counter-violence movements and the individuals who make them up. Butler writes that when engaging with the state it is desirable to become universalized because one is treated well when one vacates “the lonely particularity of the nonratified relation” to the state (“Kinship” 23). Antigone and Ismene, if we take Honig at her word, are the poster children for fighting back against this kind of universalizing relationship to the state. Antigone forcefully maintains the uniqueness of her brother, while Ismene upholds the individuality of her sister. Both of the

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\(^6\)The first of these articles appeared on May 27, 2016 and was accompanied by a history of the RAF link, which connects the reader with a series of *Spiegel* articles about left-wing terrorism in Germany. See: http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/raf-ermittlungen-gegen-trio-klette-staub-und-garweg-ausgeweitet-a-1094485.html
sisters in *Die bleierne Zeit* struggle with this same dynamic of the universal versus the particular, and both of them realize in the end that they cannot have one without the other. The collective and the personal always meld together, so when we talk about one, we are inevitably talking about the other as well. This is the lesson that *Die bleierne Zeit* attempts to teach its audience, an audience facing fear and uncertainty in the midst of decades of state violence and counter-violence that in many ways has continued unabated into the present. In the final chapter of my dissertation I will consider the fear and uncertainty that comes not from violence perpetrated by the state, but from acts of aggression committed within one’s own home.
CHAPTER 4: OF MOTHERS AND MELODRAMA: IDENTIFYING WITH SELF-SACRIFICE IN MARTHA AND DEUTSCHLAND, BLEICHE MUTTER

At the beginning of her monograph, *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Teresa de Lauretis asks, “What happens […] when woman serves as the looking glass held up to women? Or further, with another metaphor, when women look into Perseus’ shield while Medusa is being slain?” (6-7). De Lauretis asks us to question how women are supposed to view the violent oppression of other women. When we see this oppression, our own oppression, mirrored on the screen, how do we react? This question is particularly central to the genre of melodrama because of what Linda Williams calls the “mixed messages — of joy in pain, of pleasure in sacrifice” that characterize the so-called “woman’s film” (“Something Else” 2). One of the scholarly problems associated with melodramatic film then is how to understand the position of female spectators who are asked to identify with protagonists undergoing extreme suffering and willingly sacrificing everything for their husbands and children. How do we prevent women from engaging in so much self-sacrificing behavior that they lose their own sense of self? In this chapter I will examine how this problem is addressed in two films from the New German Cinema of the 1960s-1980s. By looking at melodramatic tropes and the brutality of domestic violence in R.W. Fassbinder's *Martha* (1974) and Helma Sanders-Brahms's *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* (*Germany, Pale Mother*, 1980), I will show how New German Cinema critiques and rehabilitates the genre of melodrama in the service of progressive, liberal (and even feminist) politics. Fassbinder, famous for playing around with the genre conventions of melodrama, sets up the stakes of this problem of sympathetic identification in
*Martha* by creating a scenario in which completely buying into a melodramatic worldview leaves women unable to break free from their position as victims of abuse. Subsequently, Sanders-Brahms historicizes the melodrama of the family, suggesting that acts of female storytelling have the potential to connect women’s voices to their bodies, thereby linking mothers and daughters through cooperative female subjectivity. De Lauretis suggests that in trying to subvert discourses that place women in the role of meaningless objects “woman cannot transform the codes; she can only transgress them, make trouble, provoke, pervert, turn the representation into a trap” (*Alice* 35). Both of these films allow their audiences to see the inner workings of a melodramatic trap that leads women to identify with, and take pleasure in, their own suffering and oppression. My goal in this chapter is to highlight some of the ways in which Fassbinder and Sanders-Brahms also make trouble for the melodramatic discourses that lock their protagonists in cycles of domestic violence and ultimately, self-harm.

When I speak about melodrama in this context, I refer specifically to the filmic conventions and plots of films, such as those of the famous German director of 1950s American movie melodramas Douglas Sirk. Most relevant to this discussion is the figure of the self-sacrificing woman, who suffers greatly and gives up everything for her family, thereby achieving domestic peace. The exaggerated emotionality of female protagonists, driven hysterical in their efforts to find and keep love, this is the most important feature of melodrama as it plays out and is critically examined in *Martha* and *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*. These female characters, locked in life or death battles with their own desires, are the figures that scholars such as Williams worry so much about in terms of their role as objects of the audience’s identification.
Also relevant for my discussion of these two films is the relationship between melodrama and the classical form of tragedy. Peter Brooks writes that:

Melodrama does not simply represent a “fall” from tragedy, but a response to the loss of the tragic vision. It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern.

In Brooks’s case, this world in which societal foundations are being questioned refers to the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789. I argue that this description is equally applicable to the period after World War II, in which the filmmakers of the New German Cinema were trying to confront the Nazi era and the ways in which West German society still retained fascist tendencies. The processes of denazification and Vergangenheitsbewältigung were designed to keep questions of ethics and atonement on the mind of the public. The directors of the New German Cinema contributed to that mission by advocating for a critical engagement with the past and the present in their films.

In her book on early postwar film, Dismantling the Dream Factory, Hester Baer outlines a trajectory in postwar German film that trends away from fascist realism toward abstraction in the early postwar years, and then back to realism again with the New German Cinema. She describes how even though abstraction sought to “purge nature, the body, and all things female,” the female experience was also a “key facet in the quest to find a new film language and delegitimate cinema” in the midst of a postwar crisis of masculinity (Baer 134, 144). In other words, gender was seen as both a part of the problem and the solution when it came to confronting fascism through film. By bringing films by one of the most notable male directors from New German Cinema into dialogue with one of the most prominent female directors I want

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62 Since I engage with both melodrama and mythology throughout this dissertation, the project as a whole is in many ways a reflection on this interplay between tragedy and melodrama and the different, but related, ways in which these two forms seek to solidify truth and establish gendered social roles.
to engage with this narrative about the relationship between gender and postwar cinema. *Martha* and *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* are both examples of how New German Cinema continued to use female experience as a means of addressing broader social and political debates about representation and memory beyond the early postwar years. Both filmmakers use women/the female to address larger issues of guilt and latent fascist violence, so the question becomes to what extent each of them is also able to create female characters who resist the pitfalls of melodramatic identification with female suffering.

The gender divide within New German Cinema was and continues to be an issue of debate. Significantly, the Oberhausen Manifesto of 1962, the document that represented the shift from the so-called reactionary “Papas Kino” of the early postwar period to the politically engaged New German Cinema, bears no female signatures. Numerous scholars, perhaps most significantly Julia Knight and Hester Baer, have pointed out the difficulties faced by female directors to feel included in this movement for a cinema that was both technically innovative, realist, and socially critical. This is also evident in scholarship on these filmmakers. For example, in Thomas Elsaesser’s definitive work on these filmmakers, *New German Cinema: A History* (1989), he separates the female directors out into the subgroup of *Frauenfilm*, which he includes under the heading “Minority Views.” There is certainly value in looking at the films of female directors such as Margarethe von Trotta, Ula Stöckl, Helma Sanders-Brahms, and Helke Sander together and in relationship to feminist concerns and within the landscape of explicitly feminist film. However, in my own work I have purposefully chosen to look at *Martha* and *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* together in order to emphasize the ways in which films of the New German Cinema, no matter what the gender identity of their directors, recognize and employ women and
(so-called) women’s issues as an important location for social critique.$^{63}$ Instead of developing tragic characters distanced from us by their inescapable fatal flaws or an audience that purges itself of emotion through catharsis, melodrama, in the context of these two films, forces us to confront the choices that we have made and to sit with the negative emotions that those choices may generate including anger, fear, and shame.

There is no way out of these feelings and, what is more, these emotions have the ability to define us. In her 2003 essay collection *Touching Feeling*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes that by “interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity” (36).$^{64}$ When artistic representation generates emotions, there is always the potential that the audience will be changed by their experience of those feelings. This is what makes the threat of identification with the suffering female protagonist of melodrama such a contentious issue for both de Lauretis and Williams. However, shame (and I would argue other negative emotions) forms identity not through sympathetic identification, but through the very dismantling of this process. As Sedgwick argues of shame, our identity can be shaped just as much by abuse and violence as by solidarity and sympathy:

One of the strangest features of shame, but perhaps also the one that offers the most conceptual leverage for political projects, is the way bad treatment of someone else, bad treatment by someone else, someone else’s embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell, or strange behavior, seemingly having nothing to do with me, can so readily flood me – assuming I’m a shame-prone person – with this sensation whose very suffusiveness

$^{63}$This comparative element is not present in the other chapters of this dissertation because it is not a central part of my argument. In most cases, the project is best served by examining the work of feminist authors and filmmakers on their own. The chapters on literature are not as indebted to a specific literary movement, making the revitalization of the position of women within artistic movements unnecessary in that context. Such a project is, however, relevant in the film section of my dissertation because it engages to some extent with New German Cinema as a movement.

$^{64}$Coincidentally, Sedgwick attaches the emotion of shame to the works of Henry James in this chapter of her book. The English author is also one of the primary examples used by Peter Brooks to set up his definition of melodrama, making James an interesting point of overlap within the discourses of melodrama and affect theory. Protagonists such as Isabel Archer from *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and Daisy Miller from the 1878 novella of the same name certainly do bear a great deal of resemblance to many of the female characters I discuss in this dissertation in terms of their struggle to be independent and their uncertainty about the virtues of suffering for love.
seems to delineate my precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way imaginable. (Sedgwick 36-37)

The female protagonists in *Martha* and *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* are treated poorly by their spouses and by extension, their society. The shame and confusion that they feel as a result of this treatment serves to isolate them from their friends and/or their children, while their identity becomes less and less something of their own choosing and more and more dictated by physical manifestations of negative emotions that they cannot escape or repress. In this way, they push back against any pressure placed on the audience for sympathetic identification. Instead, these films force the audience to share in these negative emotions and critique melodramatic discourses.

It is in this environment in which negative emotions form the identity of melodramatic female protagonists that motherhood takes on additional significance. Much ink has been spilled about the tense and complicated relationship between mothers and daughters, particularly in the field of feminist psychoanalysis by thinkers including Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. In most cases, the uneasiness of this relationship is linked back to an inability of mother and daughter to avoid competing with each other for resources (in many instances the father’s love) and thereby to live both as distinct individuals, but also in solidarity with one another. The protagonist in *Martha*, while not a mother herself, is a would-be mother whose difficult relationship with her own emotionally unstable mother is used as an explanation for why she should not have children. In *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* the daughter attempts to recover her mother’s story through filmmaking and storytelling. The daughter and would-be-mother at the center of these films are faced with mothers whose negative emotional example they ultimately cannot escape. As a result, we see the daughters absorbing their mothers into themselves in a process that is difficult

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65 For one of the best and most vivid accounts of this dynamic see Irigaray’s essay “And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other” (1981).
and aggressive. In both films the identity of the daughter becomes inextricable from the identity of the mother, and everyone suffers as a result of this consumption and the conflation of these identities. The feminist nature of the violence in these films is always subtle and takes place almost exclusively on the level of form.

The corrective that Fassbinder and Sanders-Brahms provide to the filmic language of melodrama and its emphasis on self-sacrifice is one that involves storytelling and self-reflection. De Lauretis reminds us that, “what is called reproduction — as women well know — is never simply natural or simply technical, never spontaneous, automatic, without labor, without pain, without desire, without the engagement of subjectivity” (Alice 55). Motherhood is fraught with obstacles and unforeseen challenges, often involving the disillusion of the self in the act of reproduction, so it is not all that surprising that there is a compulsion in German postwar cinema to tell stories about women as a means of thinking about the lost soul, the compromised morals, of the nation. As we see in Sanders-Brahms’s film in particular, the stakes of this unmasking of women’s experiences are especially high in a context in which the suffering and mass rape of German women during World War II was being purposefully omitted from public and historical narratives. Women in late 20th century Germany, like many victims of domestic violence and like many Germans more generally, found limited venues for communicating their suffering in public and for dealing with negative emotions such as guilt and shame. The film critic Michel Chion argues that the filmic medium itself always undermines efforts at wholeness because cinema forces a split between body and voice; “the voice and the image can only appear as cut apart, they cannot console their reunion in a forever lost mythic unity” (Chion Voice 151). In

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66This is not to say that women were only victims and never perpetrators of violence during the Nazi period. Female collaboration and perpetration within the Nazi regime has been well documented, most recently by Wendy Lower in her excellent book *Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (2013). However, during the late 20th century, stories of gendered victimization were difficult to tell for political reasons, leaving women unable to publicly process their multi-faceted wartime experiences.
my analysis of Fassbinder’s *Martha* and Sanders-Brahms’s *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* I will show how both works use the disconnect between sound and image, that is implicit in the medium of film itself, to challenge the melodramatic assertion that women always take pleasure in their suffering, particularly when they face abuse in the domestic sphere. Furthermore, by comparing these two seemingly unrelated films, I reflect on the ways in which the films of New German Cinema employ female protagonists, defined by their experience of negative emotions, to engage with broader worries about history, guilt, and the dangers of identifying too readily with self-sacrifice.

**MARTHA**

R.W. Fassbinder’s made-for-TV movie *Martha* was broadcast on ARD (a consortium of regional public broadcasters in Germany) on May 28, 1974. Based on a short story by Cornell Woolrich, *Martha* tells the tale of Martha Saloman née Heyer, a thirty-something librarian, who, after her father dies in Rome while walking up the Spanish Steps, returns to her hometown of Konstanz and agrees to marry Helmut Saloman, a civil engineer. Although Martha tries to have a happy married life, Helmut’s behavior towards her grows increasingly violent and controlling as he quits her job for her, aggressively bites her neck, disconnects the phone, and even kills the cat that Martha adopts. In addition to gaslighting her with regards to his favorite food, Helmut also adamantly refuses Martha’s request to have a child, citing his fear that the baby will turn out like Martha’s own emotionally unstable mother. These and Helmut’s many other abuses culminate when Martha, in a fit of terror after Helmut discovers that she has left the house without his permission, runs away and gets into a car accident thinking that Helmut is chasing her. In the accident, Martha kills her colleague at the library, Herr Kaiser, and paralyzes herself. Her
paranoid actions leave her completely and utterly at Helmut’s mercy. There is no happy ending here, just the continued and repeated shattering of romantic dreams and melodramatic illusions. Filmed at around the same time as one of Fassbinder’s most famous films about romantic unions that defy societal conventions, *Angst Essen Seele auf* (*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, 1974), *Martha* also takes aim at illusions of domestic bliss. Just like *Angst Essen Seele auf*, *Martha* represents a complex engagement with the work of the famous German director Douglas Sirk. In fact, Martha makes a direct reference to the director, and thereby her envelopment in melodramatic discourses, when, after her father’s death, she gives her address to the official at the German embassy as “21 Douglas Sirk Strasse.” Martha lives on the street of melodramatic dreams, of emotional sacrifices that eventually pay dividends by producing happy endings. However, she soon discovers that actual marriage is more like a horror film, her husband and the camera vampyrically sucking out her sanity in a manner that is reminiscent of the psychologically unstable husband-wife relationships in classic films such as George Cukor’s *Gaslight* (1944) or Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940). Fassbinder is not subtle in making these connections. After they are married, Martha and Helmut do not move back into the house on Douglas Sirk street, but instead live in a large and lavishly decorated home in which a murder was committed. Martha becomes agitated when Helmut informs her that they are moving into this house, and in a scene shot through the tree branches, the camera watches from within the plants as Martha and Helmut get out of the car and enter their new home. Martha willingly steps into her own personal horror story from which she ultimately cannot escape. In my reading of this film, I seek to expand on Mary Hennessy’s understanding of *Martha* as a film that

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67 The plot of *Angst Essen Seele auf* is loosely based on the Douglass Sirk films *Imitation of Life* (1959) and *All That Heaven Allows* (1955).

68 The angle of this shot is reminiscent of the opening of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940), another classic movie in which a death hangs over the house and threatens the happiness of a new wife.
critiques “the female complaint and the patriarchy even as it revels in the narrative, aesthetic, and affective tropes associated with women’s culture” (Hennessy 69). While I agree with Hennessy’s description, I want to further highlight how Martha’s behavior is learned from her mother, and therefore reflects on mother-daughter relations as well as male-female ones. Despite efforts on her part to overcome the legacy of her parents, Martha’s abuse leads her to become her own mother, the picture of melodramatic self-sacrificing femininity.

**Martha’s Parents**

Although Martha never has the opportunity to become a mother herself, motherhood plays an important role in her inability to fight back against Helmut’s abuses. By incorporating the example set by her own parents into her life, Martha becomes unable to be anything other than the melodramatic female subject. In other words, she takes on the position of the female audience member, who suffers because of her identification with her own distant father and dramatic, self-sacrificing mother. Martha’s positioning as the quintessential female melodramatic subject is initially invoked through the ways in which she interacts with bodies, especially her own body as it reveals affective responses to her abuse in increasingly dramatic ways. Martha’s discomfort with bodies is evident from the film’s first scene in which she angrily sends away a man who has been sent to her room after he slowly starts undressing in front of her. The camera’s interest in his actions, as indicated by a close-up shot of him pulling down the zipper of his pants, is contrasted with Martha’s forceful commands for him to leave. Later, when the hotel manager inquires if she appreciated her visitor, she adamantly denies having winked at the man in question, saying that it is not in her nature to wink. Martha is made uncomfortable by the

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69 It should also be noted that the man in question is played by Fassbinder’s lover and one of the stars of *Angst Essen Seele auf*, the Moroccan actor El Hedi ben Salem, and so race is also almost certainly a factor in Martha’s reaction here. Her delayed response suggests a tentative, perhaps exoticizing interest in seeing what lies under his pants. However, she quickly dismisses this desire in favor of other concerns, most likely social taboos.
insinuation that her body may reveal or produce signs to others of desires that she does not want to admit to having. Martha is curious about the relationship between the physical and the mental, between desire and the body; however, she has been taught by her parents to repress this interest. For example, she learns to take Valium to control the expression of anxiety from her mother, and her father resists physical touch at all costs (including potentially the ultimate cost when he refuses to take Martha’s arm while walking up the Spanish Steps).

Even before Helmut’s abuses begin, Martha reveals a talent for playing the victim. Shortly before he dies, Martha’s father makes an incestuous insinuation when she offers him her arm, remarking with disgust that, “Immer willst du mich berühren, Martha.” His comments introduce Martha as someone with taboo desires that must be repressed. In fact, the last thing that he ever says to her is “Lass mich bitte los, Martha,” an ironic suggestion that it is he who needs to escape from her perverse grasp, rather than she from his strict, paternal control. Martha’s perversity is further reinforced when, after her father’s death, she gets emotional only when she realizes that her purse has been stolen as a crowd gathers around her father’s body. As she weeps uncontrollably over her lost purse, her father’s corpse sits in the foreground of the shot, reminding the viewer of the loss of human life that preceded Martha’s loss of her bag. In a moment that has hints of the darkly comedic, Martha does not choose the seemingly more appropriate object for her grief. She looks the part of the grieving daughter, but this appearance is undermined when we hear her call out for her purse, rather than for her father, before sinking to the ground. The disjunction between what we see and what we hear reveals that there is something odd about Martha’s emotional expressions as they manifest themselves through her body. However, this is not a perversion due to a taboo sexuality as hinted by her father. Rather, it is Martha’s complete investment in and unyieldingly conformity to traditional notions of
melodramatic femininity (finding a husband, getting married, and doing whatever she can to please said husband), which leads to her suffering. Her uncomfortable relationship with her father is a practice run for the abuses of her future marriage.

As much as Martha wants to escape the repression represented by her father, she also seeks to avoid becoming the hysterical woman that her mother embodies after her father’s death. Martha’s mental health is set up as a topic of concern early on in the film when we see her take a Valium in her Italian hotel room before going down to meet her father. This is something that Helmut exploits in his abuse of Martha by playing up her mother’s fits of hysteria, suicide attempts, and heavy drinking, as examples of what will happen to Martha as she gets older. Helmut is not wrong to notice that the relationship between Martha and her mother is full of deeply rooted tension, for instance, Martha’s mother feels that Martha is somehow responsible for her father’s death because of her ability to attract all of his energy and attention. Even after his death, the two women are locked in a competition for the father’s affection, fighting over how best to honor his memory. After her husband dies, Martha’s mother proceeds to get drunk, deface his picture, and attempts suicide twice. Martha, initially distressed by this erratic behavior, uses her mother’s outbursts as an excuse to turn down a marriage proposal from her boss, but ultimately it is her mother who drives her into Helmut’s clutches. As Ruth Perlmutter argues, in Fassbinder’s world “masochism and being a woman are primary conditions of life” (79). Despite their own insistence on their differences, Martha and her mother operate in similarly exaggerated emotional registers, suggesting that Martha’s behavior is learned from her mother. Melodramatic emotional expression is a curse that is passed down from mother to daughter.
Helmut is successful in trapping Martha because he exploits this difficult and antagonistic relationship between mother and daughter. Immediately after Martha tells her that she is going to marry Helmut, her mother attempts suicide by taking a bottle of sleeping pills. Martha’s response is to pitifully call out “Mama” in an extreme close-up shot. Despite Martha’s initial anxiety about her mother’s condition, Helmut prevents her from calling the doctor and then attacks her throat in a poor excuse for a passionate embrace. Martha attempts to fight free in the background of the shot, as her mother’s unconscious body lies in the foreground, reminding the viewer of the one thing Martha is trying not to become. After he fails to physically overpower her, Helmut eventually does call the doctor and chides Martha for thinking that he would let her mother die. Furthermore, in an early instance of psychological abuse, he suggests that killing her mother was actually Martha’s idea and desire all along, something that her expression of shock and concern contradicts. Nevertheless, Martha comes to believe Helmut and his interpretation of the events, in part because her mother’s example has taught her to see the world through the heightened emotionality of melodramatic glasses.

Early on in her marriage Martha throws out her own Valium, suggesting that she is dedicated to not becoming her mother, and that she is determined to seize this new life in which she can supposedly express her emotions freely. However, her plans quickly go downhill. For example, when she tries to become a mother herself, pleading with Helmut for a child to keep her company, Helmut’s excuse for why they cannot get pregnant is that he does not want to risk bringing a “Wasserkopf” like Martha’s mother into the world. Because of the legacy of her mother, Martha’s ability to give birth to a healthy child is questioned and further used to humiliate and control her. By reinforcing her potential to exhibit hysterical behavior, Helmut purposefully brings this behavior out in Martha, continuing to isolate her both from others and
ultimately, from herself. Martha has taken in the example of her mother and father and cannot overcome this dynamic in her own marriage. By highlighting this tension between generations, Fassbinder indirectly addresses his own generation’s efforts to deal with and overcome the Nazi past. The problems of the parent generation live on in their children. Furthermore, Martha’s status as a would-be-mother who cannot escape her role as child/daughter carries over into her attempts to use her body as a tool for emotional manipulation.

**Affective Displays**

According to Peter Brooks “the desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode” (4). Although Brooks means this in the context of the desire to “utter the unspeakable” (Brooks 4), in its transfer from literature to film this often manifests itself in the body’s ability to dramatically perform emotion. Martha is a nearly perfect example of this dynamic of total expression because her body portrays and reveals so much emotion over the course of the film, that she ultimately loses control over herself. Brooks wants to argue that as melodramatic emotions are given “a full acting out, a full representation before our eyes” they invoke the “joy of a full emotional indulgence” (Brooks 41). Martha demonstrates that joy is not the only possible feeling that physical explosions of emotion can generate. Playing off of stereotypes about female hysteria, Fassbinder’s film objectifies Martha and her body’s capacity for what Hennessy terms “artificially high emotional outbursts” (73), thereby invoking the negative emotions of shame and fear, rather than joy or catharsis. Fassbinder and the actress who

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70I am not always a fan of biographical readings of the films of the New German Cinema because they tend to overemphasize an understanding of these films as auteur cinema. However, there is something to be said for the fact that much of the criticism used in this chapter and appropriate to my discussion of melodrama is earlier Fassbinder criticism from the 1980s and 1990s in which Fassbinder’s biography and his tendency towards personal excess was of central importance to the act of interpreting his films. For instance, as Jane Shattuc writes, Fassbinder himself can be seen as “the other of West Germany” and a “caricature of excess” in his own right (Shattuc 57).
plays Martha, Margit Carstensen, use affective displays to expose the flawed melodramatic logic that suffering will somehow lead to happiness.\(^7\)

If Martha’s father forces her to repress physical manifestations of emotion, Helmut encourages them to the point where Martha loses control of her body. It is easy to wonder why Martha marries Helmut at all because he is cruel to her even before their marriage. However, the scene at the carnival where Helmut tells Martha that he is going to marry her demonstrates how he represents the opposite of the physical repression advocated by Martha’s father. At the carnival Martha initially objects to riding the roller coaster, saying that it will make her sick, but Helmut insists. Rather than be left alone, she follows him onto the ride. As the car starts to move her fear grows along with his smile. The camera provides the viewer with shots both from the vantage point of the couple, as the roller coaster twists and turns above the carnival, as well as shots from in front of the car so that they can see both characters’ faces as they ride. In one of the few instances in which his face betrays any emotion at all, Helmut delights in the mechanical violence and jolting of the roller coaster as it whips them around and the lights rush by. Meanwhile, the whole proceeding makes Martha sick with fear as her face grows pale and her eyes grow wide in terror. As she predicts, Martha gets off the ride and immediately vomits, bending off-screen in order to spare the viewer the physical evidence of her inability to digest this roller coaster experience. Witnessing her willingness to make herself physically sick for his pleasure, Helmut takes this opportunity to tell Martha that he would like to marry her. Importantly, his offer is not phrased as a question and Martha’s response is not “yes,” but “thank you.” Through her obedient behavior by going on the roller coaster, even though she knew it

\(^7\)As with many of the actors to appear frequently in Fassbinder films, Margit Carstensen had a complex relationship with Fassbinder himself and acting decisions often involved a back and forth between actor and director. Carstensen describes her acting in *Martha* as “ein Spiel” between her and Fassbinder in which they both are trying to generate a character who is “wahrhaftig” so that it is possible “so eine Frau denunzieren zu können” (“Frauen bei Fassbinder” 94). I argue that this unsympathetic application of realism is characteristic of the film as whole.
would make her sick, Martha has earned the privilege of being Helmut’s wife. Helmut is a sadist who takes great pleasure in Martha’s discomfort, and therefore he is unable to interpret Martha’s affective performances in the way that she intends. In his liner notes for the American DVD release, film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum sarcastically notes that this is “a match made in heaven between a masochist and a sadist” (Rosenbaum n. pag.). Not only is it clear that this is no heaven for Martha, but it may also be a kind of melodramatic hell. In melodrama, Brooks writes, “what counts is less reading through the signs than finding the right signs in relation to others, making the correct gestures, recognizing the important emblems” (53). This process is doomed to fail between Martha and Helmut because he is completely incapable of reading her signs in a melodramatic way. For the resident of Douglas Sirk street, this progression of suffering to marriage is perfectly logical, yet the extremes of this depiction and its utter failure when faced with Helmut’s sadism shocks the viewer into recognizing the flaws of the melodramatic illusion that emotional (and physical) pain is the price one has to pay for eventual happiness.

As Helmut’s abuses pile up, Martha inhabits and has control of her body less and less as her affective performances grow even more extreme. Helmut’s sadistic pleasure in Martha’s pain continues after their marriage. For example, after Helmut insists that she not use sunscreen, Martha gets a nasty sunburn that covers her body from head to toe. The shot of Martha lying on the bed, red and burned is uncomfortable to say the least. Although she initially remains fairly quiet, only whimpering at Helmut’s touch, the viewer can just imagine the pain that she must be feeling. The camera cuts to a close-up shot of Helmut dragging his fingers across her red stomach, making the viewer cringe as his hands draw white lines across her bright red skin. The crosscutting of Helmut’s face, pleased by the pain he is generating, and Martha’s face, eyes closed and in pain, reinforces the sadistic cruelty of this moment. Eventually, Martha’s screams
are stifled by Helmut’s mouth as his climbs on top of her to rape her. The camera pans away to
the view from the balcony of their hotel room, preventing the viewer from having to witness any
more of Martha’s suffering. This scene, more than any other, supports Elsaesser’s claim that
“Fassbinder’s greatest achievement [with this film] is to have made a horror film in broad
daylight and on sun-drenched terraces” (Fassbinder 280). By panning away from this scene of
sexual violence to the beauty of the ocean, Fassbinder reinforces the perversity of this
combination of beautiful setting and horrible abuse. We see enough to realize that something in
Martha’s script has gone horribly wrong. Instead of happiness for her suffering, or pleasure in it,
Martha only gets more suffering, making her even more desperate to bring her envisioned
melodramatic plotline to fruition.

In her desperation to hold on to or recapture this melodramatic plotline, Martha
continually makes a show of her suffering. Over time, she adapts these performances to mirror
the layering of abuses that Helmut inflicts on her. As she does so, the camera often adopts
Helmut’s perspective as the sadistic viewer of these emotional outbursts, lingering on Martha’s
pained expressions. Brooks argues that in melodrama “our analytic attention to signs is elicited
by their very obviousness and exaggeration” (53). In Fassbinder’s film, Martha’s affective
displays catch the attention of the camera, and therefore us as viewers of the film, encouraging us
to analyze them and seek meaning within them, unlike Helmut who is unable to see them for
what they are. What we learn about Martha’s affective displays through the attention drawn to
them in Fassbinder’s film is that Martha’s pain ultimately turns her into her body. Martha is her
body because both Helmut and the camera remove her voice. Martha’s open display of emotions
is not joyful or freeing, but traps her within her body and limits her ability to communicate with
language. In one such scene, just after Helmut has presumably roughed her up and/or raped her
in the bedroom Martha appears, face tear-stained and make-up smeared, wearing just a slip and hiding behind a plant. As she weeps into the wall, Helmut comes up behind her and makes excuses about how he cannot control his desire for her. His response apparently consoles Martha as she kisses his hand while he caresses her shoulder. More important than Helmut’s ability to smooth over his abuses is the time that the audience is given to view Martha’s pained expression. She freezes for several seconds, remaining uncomfortably static, sobbing with her eyes closed and her head flung back in agony. As she poses in her pain, the camera zooms in on her, drawing us into her suffering, almost as if we, like Helmut, are supposed to take sadistic pleasure from her display. Fitting into what Perlmutter has termed “Fassbinder’s guerilla manipulations of melodramatic and masochistic structure” including “prolonged gazes” (Perlmutter 80), this camera technique and its emphasis on our position as viewers is what makes Martha’s affects performative. We, as the viewer, are never allowed to be unaware that there is always a spectator to everything that Martha does, including ourselves. Her actions are never truly her own, because they are always performed for someone else’s benefit.

This is evident in this scene in which the camera lingers on Martha’s pained expression, but also earlier in the film when Martha is objectified not only by the camera, but also by her family and friends. At the wedding ceremony of one of Martha’s friends, the camera hastily zooms in to catch every detail of Martha’s shocked expression when Helmut enters the room. The force of not just the camera’s gaze, but the gaze of the wedding guests is heavily emphasized when, as Helmut confronts Martha about their past encounter in Rome, we view the interaction in a medium-wide shot from the other end of the table. This enables the viewer to watch all of the guests as they turn and focus their attention on Martha. This objectifying confrontation in which she becomes the object of the gaze of everyone at the table upsets her so much that she
gets up and runs away. By watching Martha become the object of the gaze of the characters on screen, the viewer has the opportunity to reflect on their own process of viewing and to consider the pressure that the objectifying gaze puts on its object to perform. In this way, Fassbinder’s film works to undermine the audience’s ability to engage in problematically uncritical identification with the characters on screen. We are always led to reflect on our own act of viewing.

As a result of the pressure of her continued objectification, Martha loses the ability to communicate about the nature of Helmut’s abuses, and her emotional displays continue to increase in their intensity. Arriving home to find Helmut there and realizing that he knows that she has left the house against his will, Martha shrieks in terror, lifting her hand up to her face, practically swallowing her fist. The camera again zooms in quickly to capture the full impact of her dramatic expression, even before the viewer has any idea what has prompted it. Martha is rendered practically speechless as her husband stands on the stairs looking down at her with a measured unemotional expression. Martha, on the other hand, completely loses it, claiming that “er will mich umbringen,” before fumbling with the locked door and screaming again as Helmut comes back down the stairs to see what is wrong. Before he can reach her, she takes off running.

The camera watches her from behind as she trips (it is difficult to run in a tight dress) and gets back up, bothering a group of cows as she continues to make her escape from a man who is not even chasing her. The camera watches her run erratically through a contrastingly static frame as she persists in this paranoid act of fleeing. By the end of the film, Martha reaches a point where she is unable to use any rationality at all in terms of how her body expresses emotion. She has been completely consumed by the affective displays of suffering that she believes will bring her
a melodramatic success story, thereby begging the question whether or not she even has an identity outside of these affects anymore.

**Sound, Music, and the Melodramatic**

This disconnect between what is seen and heard in *Martha* is the strongest indication that Martha’s melodramatic identity is under attack in Fassbinder’s film. While the camera may mirror Helmut’s objectifying gaze, the music and sounds in the film mirror Martha’s progression into madness as they move from classical music to screams and screeches. Chion describes screaming as something that in film is reserved almost exclusively for women. It “gushes forth” and represents a kind of black hole or female orgasm (Chion *Voice* 76-77). He contrasts this with the male shout, which is structuring in contrast to the “bestial female scream.” (Chion *Voice* 86). Screams, then, are about losing control and losing one’s identity. As Brooks points out, they are also a characteristic of melodrama in that the cry marks “a kind of fault or gap in the code, the space that marks its inadequacies to convey a full freight of emotional meaning” (67). In this way, Martha’s crying and screaming overextends the boundaries of melodramatic representation. It pushes beyond the total emotional expression that is a hallmark of melodrama, and points to something beyond even that which the melodramatic mode can express, drawing attention to its inadequacy. When she is not crying, Martha can often be found screaming, particularly at moments in which Helmut attempts to engage her in acts of physical passion. The first time that Helmut and Martha make physical contact is in the garden during the wedding reception. Helmut strokes her arm before telling her she is too skinny to be beautiful and that he imagines that her skin will have a bad stench. (With lines like that, it is hardly surprising that Helmut is still single!) Helmut is able to draw the negative emotions out of Martha that Sedgwick describes as identity forming. He proceeds to demonstrate his attraction by attacking Martha’s neck with his
mouth, something that might read visually as passionate, but which is quickly followed up by the sound of a scream (presumably issued by Martha), indicating that the attentions are unwelcome. As Jane Shattuc argues, “the presentation of feminine sexuality is so stylized that one is forced to remove oneself from the visual pleasure” (45). Martha’s first scream is designed to make sure that the audience is aware that she is resisting this physical interaction. While the visual may be misleading, the auditory expression of pain is not.72

The logic of Chion’s unflattering and patronizing suggestion that female screams are associated with the bestial is confirmed by Fassbinder’s film when the only other creature to cry out in this way is the cat that Martha tries to adopt. Its screeching as Helmut holds it by the nape of its neck is reminiscent of the suffering that he inflicts on Martha. Later, when he presumably kills the cat, the sounds of Martha’s grief mirror that of the cat’s wails. After the death of the cat, Martha is inconsolable. Her grief leads Helmut to grab her and start kissing her, again indicating his sadistic pleasure in seeing her upset. Contrary to its intended effect of revealing her suffering to incite sympathy, Martha’s screams incite Helmut to acts of cruelty as he takes pleasure in being the cause of the cat’s loss of life and his wife’s loss of personhood. By the time we arrive at Martha’s final scream, before she runs away from the house, it is clear that the female scream indicates a loss of control that is ultimately ineffectual in terms of altering the conditions of her captivity.

Brooks writes that the emotional drama of melodrama “needs the desemanticized language of music, its evocation of the “ineffable,” its tones and registers” (14). While music can be employed in film to provide this kind of super-semantic emotional register (think for instance

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72Notably, at this time in the West German context, Martha’s verbal resistance would not be enough to legally demonstrate that she is being sexually assaulted in these scenes. Up until July 2016 one could not press charges for sexual assault or rape in Germany unless the accuser not just verbally, but physically resisted their attacker. In my opinion, Martha’s limp body, but forceful screaming, is a subtle critique of this legal situation.
of the music that generates tension and anticipation in the genre of horror), Fassbinder uses music quite differently, as a means not of working with, but of undermining the melodramatic plot. In this way, the disconnection between image and voice, inherent in the medium of film itself, enacts a kind of feminist violence on the viewers of Fassbinder’s film. By facing this disconnect, they are forced to confront the problematically gendered melodramatic assumption that suffering, and identifying with suffering, is inherently good. Just as Martha’s body eventually betrays her and acts in ways that appear to be awkward, exaggerated, and outside of her control, the sound techniques used by Fassbinder in this film establish tensions between what is seen and what is heard, that generate a productive and critical discomfort and uncertainty in the viewer.

Fassbinder uses non-diegetic music to highlight moments in which Martha’s story could take a different turn, but fails to do so. There is one repeated example of non-diegetic music in the film, which otherwise is mixed in a mostly realistic way. The first time this music plays is when Martha and Helmut enter their new house for the first time. After they unceremoniously cross the threshold, slow violin music begins to play in the background as Helmut turns on the lights, revealing the lavish but somewhat dark and oppressive furniture. This unveiling of the rather lush and elaborate domestic space is reminiscent of the melodramatic films of Douglas Sirk (for instance, think of the way that Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson) turns the old barn into a splendid living space in *All That Heaven Allows*). However, Fassbinder is quick to begin breaking down this melodramatic allusion when the close-up of Martha’s face, as she surveys her new home, is paired with a shot of a statue of the Virgin Mary weeping. In this scene, the soft emotional music and the images of domesticity initially work with one another to invoke melodramatic tropes, but quickly the images stray from the music that accompanies them,
undermining that music with an image of suffering and devotion at the end of the scene. Thomas Erffmeyer connects this to the oversignification of melodrama writing that “Fassbinder’s compositions demonstrate a high incidence of meaning-laden domestic objects” (40). The Virgin Mary’s suffering may have a positive connotation within a religious context, but her presence also unsettles this domestic scene with its depiction of great suffering and sadness. The dual implications of this object, in combination with the dramatic music, makes this scene so heavy with meaning that it starts to exceed itself.

This excessiveness continues when the same violin music is heard again after Helmut returns from running away for a few days to give Martha time to ponder her failings. After a fight with Helmut about her lack of desire to adopt his hobbies and interests, Martha makes the choice to acquiesce to his wishes. When Helmut returns, everything is back to the way he wants it, the correct music is on the turntable and his dutiful wife reads passages from the engineering book that he gave her. Domestic peace has been reinstated at the expense of Martha’s individual preferences and tastes. They sit back to back as she recites facts and figures from the text while Helmut drinks tea. The camera circles around them, entrapping them in this moment of Helmut’s contentment. The music underscores the sense of uncomfortable calm, now that Helmut has gotten his way. In his pleasure Helmut eventually goes in for another one of his characteristic passionate neck-biting attacks, which Martha tries to resist. The melodramatic, peaceful tone of the music is shattered by the images of sexual violence on the screen.

73The diegetic music in the film is also symbolically significant. Martha’s initial music of choice is Lucia di Lammermoor, Donizetti’s opera about a woman tricked into a loveless marriage who eventually kills her husband in an effort to be with her lover. This telling choice, which suggests a possible plan for getting out of her abusive situation with Helmut, is (unsurprisingly) met by strong opposition. In a rare moment of visible anger Helmut denounces the record as “Schleim” and insists that Martha listen to music of his own choosing, namely the church music of the Franco-Flemish composer Orlando di Lasso. Helmut wants her to stay within the ordered space of patriarchal domination as represented by the hierarchies of the church and, quite frankly, Helmut’s job as a civil engineer.
Eventually Helmut’s violence is too much for even the music to handle. The violin music cuts out abruptly when Helmut asks Martha to never leave the house again as a token of her love for him, the ultimate unromantic gesture. Once again the peaceful harmony between non-diegetic music and images of domestic tranquility is shattered when what happens on screen becomes too violent and uncomfortable to tolerate this melodramatic score. By drawing attention to moments where, in a conventional melodrama, happiness would be achieved, this music opens up possibilities for conditions to be otherwise. However, the realities of Helmut’s controlling behavior and Martha’s adaptation to her abuse consistently shuts down such possibilities.

**Paralysis**

In their analysis of the language used in contemporary American police reports on domestic violence calls, Daniela Gloor and Hanna Meier write that, “concerning the relationship the reader is encouraged to conclude that the partners cannot influence its development. The relationship acts on its own, and both partners are equally affected by its deterioration” (76). The issue with this kind of fatalistic rhetoric is that it makes it seem like the violence being perpetrated was inevitable; that there was nothing that could have been done to prevent it. Furthermore, this perspective keeps us from seeing domestic violence as a societal problem. In other words, when we do too much to make domestic violence seem like the inevitable trajectory of the relationship between two individuals, we fail to take into account the larger societal norms that create the conditions for this kind of violent behavior, subsequently justifying it. Fortunately, Fassbinder resists this in his own work by repeatedly drawing our attention to the inadequacy of melodramatic narratives about female suffering that leads to domestic happiness. The more Martha tries to reveal her suffering to Helmut, the more she cries and screams, the more he abuses her because of the pleasure he takes in witnessing her pain. Unfortunately, Fassbinder
does not go further than revealing the inner workings of the narratives in which Martha is trapped. Instead of searching for ways to free her, Fassbinder’s film problematically concludes (and leads his audience to conclude) that Martha’s relationship with Helmut is a paralyzing one, which offers no way out.

From the very first time that she encounters Helmut, his presence literally stops Martha in her tracks. The scene of their first encounter in Rome is like a scene of love at first sight gone horribly wrong. The world seems to stop for the two of them, but not in a way that is comforting or romantic from the perspective of the viewer. Helmut strides out of the West German consulate, stops and crosses his arms disapprovingly as Martha emerges from a taxi. As she walks in his direction, Helmut enters her frame from the foreground. The two stop and turn to face each other as the camera circles around them in a dizzying 360-degree tracking shot. It is unclear at times whether they are spinning or the camera is spinning, but either way, the effect on the viewer is such that the world comes to a brief stop. Momentarily, all sense of orientation is lost. Hennessy draws attention to the romantic tropes invoked by the scene when she describes how “Martha and Helmut have been mutually – and irreversibly – transfixed by one another” (68). After this moment in which spinning camera movement ironically produces stagnation, Helmut enters the taxi that Martha has just vacated, and the camera cuts back to a teary-eyed Martha peering back at the taxi through the bars on the embassy gate. In a manner that is now unsettlingly reminiscent of the police briefings criticized for their fatalistic tendencies by Gloor and Meier, the trajectory of Martha’s life has been altered forever after her disorienting first encounter with Helmut.

The paralyzing effect of her relationship with Helmut becomes even more pronounced when it is contrasted with Martha’s interactions with her male colleague, Herr Kaiser. Instead of
circling around one another and creating an enclosing barrier, the first interaction between Martha and Kaiser is linear. She follows directly behind him as they walk through the bookshelves at the library. She introduces him to a rhyme about a mouse and they recite it together, continuing to walk in a straight line, with Martha now taking the lead and walking backwards so that she can see Kaiser’s face. Martha and Kaiser have a pleasant collegiality, which they use to lead each other forward. Unfortunately though, they are interrupted when Helmut arrives. It is at this moment that Martha declares that Helmut is “der Mann, den ich heiraten werde,” a declaration made particularly strange by the fact that another potential romantic partner has just presented himself in the person of Herr Kaiser. Martha’s decision to attach herself to Helmut (and the paralyzing conditions of her relationship with him), rather than opting for a partnership with Kaiser is a seemingly inexplicable choice. The logic of this decision only becomes clear when one considers Martha’s unwavering commitment to melodramatic self-sacrifice. She truly believes that suffering is the only way to achieve happiness.

This is not to say that Martha accepts her suffering immediately or is always comfortable in the position of the victim. Particularly in the early days of her marriage, Martha at times resists Helmut’s imposition of restrictions on her actions. For instance, the first time that he goes away on business Martha considers lighting a cigarette in the house even though Helmut asked her to smoke only on the verandah. However, when she catches herself in the large mirror that dominates the living room, she decides against it and heads outside. Even in Helmut’s absence, the mirror provides self-inflicted oversight through which Martha is watched and her actions judged.\footnote{This notion of Martha being policed from within quite obviously connects back to Foucault’s understanding of the penopticon and his insistence that bodies are (politically) useful only insofar as they are both productive and subjigated.} Though she occasionally attempts to resist, the fear of losing Helmut and the dream he represents is always enough to drive Martha back into submission. In another example, as
Martha tries to fight back against Helmut’s choice of music and reading material, he leaves the house without a word. His leaving sends Martha into a frenzy in which she puts on the music he picked out and reads the engineering book that he gave her in a desperate attempt to perform her obedience. The social scientists Sarah Wendt and Lana Zannettino describe the abuse of the feminine as one of the structures that supports domestic violence, saying that for women “wanting to do femininity well […] contributes to] their enduring domestic violence for long periods of time, and to their reluctance to name their experiences as domestic violence” (217). In other words, it is discourses about motherhood and femininity that truly entrap women. While there is some choice here, women are also forced into these subject positions through a social cost that is out of their control (Wendt and Zannettino 218). Martha cannot live with the consequences of not appearing to be a good and dutiful wife, and therefore she is always distanced from herself.

In the end, Martha’s mental paralysis manifests itself in her physical paralysis. By the time she arrives at the library to see Kaiser after running away from Helmut, Martha’s ability to speak coherently has almost completely disappeared. When she tries to tell Kaiser what has happened, she yells out her words, gasping for breath as she stands, eyes closed and back against the doorframe. Hearing footsteps on the stairs and thinking that it is Helmut, she lets out yet another bloodcurdling scream. Kaiser slaps her across the face in an effort to regain some control over the emotional monster that she has become. Though this act of physical violence is enough to silence her for the moment, it fails to have any lasting, calming effect. Once they are in the car, Martha promptly becomes hysterical yet again. Looking back at the car driving behind them, Martha gets increasingly anxious, thinking that the driver is Helmut. The camera makes a number of quick cuts, showing the viewer this scene from numerous angles and building the
tension of the action just as it builds in Martha’s mind. The camera adopts her frantic perspective and builds on the illusion that she is being chased. However, this tension is suddenly cut when the man in the car turns out not to be Helmut at all. Martha, along with the viewers of the film, has been duped and the consequences are grave for all.

Martha’s physical paralysis does little, if anything, to change her circumstances. She is no closer to achieving domestic happiness than she ever was. She is just engaged in an even more extreme act of suffering. The camera gives us yet another close-up of Martha’s crying face when Helmut comes to visit her in the hospital. Martha cannot communicate about her abuse, therefore her only hope is the viewer, who ultimately can also do nothing but sit back and watch as Martha is wheeled away by Helmut, her face stony and expressionless, maybe for the first time in the film. As the elevator door closes, even the viewer is cut off from Martha and her suffering. No one has the power to help Martha anymore. She is now truly alone with Helmut and trapped, once and for all, in this hellacious marriage. The melodramatic violin music plays in the background as the credits roll. Unlike Perlmutter’s characterization of Fassbinder films in which “victims and victimizers are often interchangeable, leaving characters confused and disoriented” (Perlmutter 86), these characters know exactly what their role is from the start to the finish of this film. Not only that, but the audience knows it too. As modeled by her mother, Martha has gotten the melodramatic suffering for which she wished, but instead of liberating, Fassbinder reveals it to be a nightmare -- a nightmare that is, partially at least, of her own making.

DEUTSCHLAND, BLEICHE MUTTER

Through acts of self-harm, Martha subsumes her mother into her identity by adopting her mother’s dramatic and emotional behavior. In Deutschland, bleiche Mutter, mother and daughter represent two different aspects of the woman, her body and her voice, that must be (re)joined if
she is to speak as an independent subject. Helma Sanders-Brahms’s film attempts to offer us ways of capturing female experiences without uncritically replicating melodramatic discourses that women nearly kill themselves trying to live up to. However, it is also clear that finding spaces for women to tell their own stories is complicated and always (in some ways problematically) collaborative. Narrated via voiceover by Sanders-Brahms herself playing the role of the (now adult) daughter Anna, Deutschland, bleiche Mutter tells the story of Lene, a young woman struggling to cope with the challenges of life in war-torn Germany during the 1930s and 1940s. Sanders-Brahms makes it clear that this story is based on the experiences of her own mother, and she therefore approaches her war story from a deeply personal perspective. By taking this approach, she enters into dialogues about the gendered nature of wartime experience and its destructive effects on traditional family structures. The plot begins with the courtship and marriage of Lene and her husband Hans, which Sanders-Brahms presents as an idealistic romance gone wrong. Shortly thereafter, Hans is conscripted to fight in World War II, leaving Lene and their daughter Anna to fend for themselves during the Allied bombings. Despite their struggles to survive and Lene’s rape by American soldiers, mother and daughter grow close during these wartime years. When Hans eventually comes back from the war, his presence forces the family to return to the order of the patriarchal household, a change that proves too much for Lene to bear. After the public war is over, a private war within the household begins, leading to Lene’s emotional and physical deterioration. This process culminates in Lene’s facial paralysis, the violent removal of her teeth, and her attempted suicide. As Lene suffers, she takes her pain out on her daughter, abusing her both physically and emotionally. Despite these abuses, it is the perspective of the daughter, Anna/Sanders-Brahms, that seeks to redeem the life of the mother and, even more importantly, the mother’s story.
Deutschland, bleiche Mutter confronts the guilt associated with Nazi atrocities more directly than Fassbinder’s Martha, thereby reinforcing the ways cinema during this period uses female bodies and female experiences to come to terms with a violent past. Recovering the mother’s story is of crucial importance, but the melodramatic mode that the self-sacrificing mother introduces is ultimately not conducive to this recovery. Since recovering the mother’s body must necessarily happen through the daughter’s voice in Deutschland, bleiche Mutter, neither mother nor daughter is ever truly able to be whole. Through voiceover techniques and various framing intertexts, including a fairy tale story, Sanders-Brahms’s film makes the story of her mother visible, albeit only in a form that is mediated through her perspective, the perspective of the daughter. De Lauretis writes that, “the project of feminist cinema, therefore, is not so much ‘to make visible the invisible,’ as the saying goes, or to destroy vision altogether, as to construct another (object of) vision and the conditions of visibility for a different social subject” (Alice 67-68). This is an apt description of what, I argue, makes Sanders-Brahms’s film a feminist intervention into the filmic discourse about domestic violence begun in Martha. Sanders-Brahms recognizes her inability to ever truly know and bring her mother’s experiences to life, but that does not prevent her from making the effort to do so. In attempting to tell her mother’s story, she fashions a role for herself as storyteller that names the conditions under which women’s stories might be told in the future. While Martha is perpetually trapped within melodramatic discourses as modeled by her mother, Lene’s story, as told by Anna, encourages the viewer to both identify with and critically challenge attempts to present Germans (and especially German women) as suffering victims. This model enables even more critical engagement with the past and with the discourses of melodrama on the part of the audience.

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75This is not to say that Fassbinder is always so subtle in his engagement with the Nazi past. See, for example, Die Ehe der Maria Braun (The Marriage of Maria Braun, 1979).
However, by collapsing the mother into her daughter, this film fails to truly liberate either, instead developing a multi-faceted, trans-generational model for female subjectivity.

Voiceover

In her work on the relationship between physical bodies and the screen, Vivian Sobchack characterizes the cinematic subject as inherently unstable saying that:

The very mobility of its vision structures the cinematic subject, both film and spectator, as always in the act of displacing itself in time, space, and the world; thus, despite its existence as materially embodied and synoptically centered (on the screen or as the spectator’s lived body), it is always eluding its own (as well as our) containment. (Sobchack 150)

This description of the bodies that we see on screen as always both physically grounded and yet ghostly in the way that they move through the lighted frame, becomes even more complicated when sound is considered in conjunction with the moving image. Particularly in the case of voiceover and/or acousmatic sound, there is a kind of doubling of the displacement that Sobchack identifies. Not only are the actions performed by the body always eluding the frame of the screen, but the filmed voice eludes the confines of the body. Instead of a system in which voices emit from bodies, viewers are presented with the illusion that voices exist independently and create acoustic landscapes all their own. For example, Chion argues that acousmatic sound “provokes one to separate oneself from causes or effects in favor of consciously attending to sonic textures, masses, and velocities” (AV 32). Instead of the sound being generated only as an effect created by a specific being or object, in film it is free to create its own auditory meaning. While the viewer usually gets some sense of the character of the speaker performing a voiceover, unlike the soundscapes Chion describes, they do not have access to them physically, and therefore they exist in the realm of storytelling alone, rather than as the object of the story. The voiceover subject is, therefore, one that escapes objectification, much like the medium of film
itself allows for sound to elude the confines of a cause and effect relationship to the images on the screen.

In *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* the voiceover narrator, voiced by Sanders-Brahms herself, plays a crucial role in shaping the contours of the visual space of this film. The narrator, who is meant to be an adult version of Anna, the young daughter in the film, has the power to shape this story both for herself and for the future. At no point does the film claim to be something other than mediated through Anna’s perspective and in this way, her mother’s story has already been consumed by her and colored by her relationship to the events described in the film. This emphasis on daughters interpreting for their parents is clear from the very first moments of the film in which we hear Bertolt Brecht’s daughter, Hanne Hiob, reading his 1933 poem, from which the title of the film derives. As we hear the daughter read, the words of the father appear in white on a black screen. Through her voice, the daughter must present and translate the words of her father to us, the filmic audience. In a deliberately similar gesture, Sanders-Brahms then begins the primary filmic narrative with her own voiceover. She too will examine her parents, and especially her mother, from the perspective of hindsight. As she describes her parents’ first meeting she claims that, “An dem was geschah bevor ich geboren war, trifft mich keine Schuld.” However, it is clear from the first time she speaks that this film is really more about Sanders-Brahms’s guilt and her own process of self-reflection than it ever is about Lene or Hans. Channeling Kaja Silverman, Baer writes that the “disembodied voice is a signifier of phallic, abstract power, of epistemological authority in the production of discourse” (Baer 267). In a gender role reversal, this is the kind of power that the voiceover narrator wields over this film. It is actually Anna’s guilt and her memory of both strength and powerlessness that
drives the film and the images that we see on the screen, thereby undermining any efforts to fully and authentically recapture the mother’s story.

While Martha is marked from the beginning by her physicality and expressiveness, Lene is praised early on for her emotional neutrality. In what Anna/Sanders-Brahms describes as her origin story, we see Hans rowing a boat with his friend. The two men start to call out to Lene as she walks along the bank, trying to get her attention, but she ignores their unprompted advances. Eventually, this objectification comes to a head when a group of Nazis join in the “fun” by sending their dog to attack Lene, who fights off the animal by swinging her bag at it. Hans is impressed that “she hat nicht geschrien” during the attack and his friend labels Lene “a true German woman” for her stoicism. Lene begins her story then as the anti-Martha, a woman lauded for her ability to remain calm and unfazed in the midst of aggression and cruelty. She suffers in silence, initially resisting the performativity that makes Martha’s affects so dramatic. The different historical stakes of the two films are abundantly clear through this difference. Lene is not trying to follow some melodramatic script, but trying to survive in wartime. Fassbinder’s domestic disaster is tempered by Sanders-Brahms’s direct engagement with the interplay between the domestic and the national. That being said, Lene cannot remain unmoved forever and her daughter’s narration and direction of the camera serves to undermine any attempt to do so on her part. Lene, while not the storyteller herself, must be seen as playing an important role in the collaborative act of female storytelling outlined in this film. If Anna/Sanders-Brahms is the voice, Lene is the equally important body, both of which need to be present for female storytelling to take place.

In one of the most important moments of voiceover narration in the film, Sanders-Brahms announces, “Meine Mutter, ich habe schweigen gelernt, sagtest du. Von dir habe ich sprechen
gelernt, Muttersprache.” Over the course of the film, the viewer is guided through the process of developing a female voice within a history that initially seems utterly masculine. This process comes too late for Lene, who from the beginning of the film is caught up in the position of the physical object of storytelling and fairy tales. But, it is not too late for us as viewers, or for Sanders-Brahms herself as the voiceover narrator. The mother according to Chion is the original acousmêtre (Chion Voice 27). For the newborn child “her voice originates in all points of space, while her form enters and leaves the visual field” (Chion Voice 61). The mother’s voice subverts the seeming separation between the bodies of mother and child as represented by the cutting of the umbilical cord (Chion Voice 61-62). Even when bodies are divided, voices can still unify. The combination of Lene’s filmed body and Sanders-Brahms’s voice emphasizes the power of storytelling to reconnect us to our bodies, even ones that we think we have lost. Angelika Bammer describes this moment as one in which, “woman’s presence is marked by her simultaneous absence: voice without body, body without speech” (91). Bammer’s observation points to the way in which the voiceover narration in this film complicates the identities of Lene and the narrator within the context of the film. Sanders-Brahms’s voice comes in and out of the film, making her presence known, only to seemingly disappear again. This story is both removed from Sanders-Brahms, so she can comment on it from a critical distance, yet it is also intimately connected to her. In this way, she models for us as viewers how to both identify with and achieve critical distance from the characters portrayed on the screen.

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76 Lene is often described in fairy tale terms. For instance, Hans’s friend makes reference to the fact that she is the one brunette of seven sisters who have hair that is “blonde wie Gold.” In addition, she pricks her finger on a needle after entering her house for the first time and even narrates a fairy tale story in the middle of the film.

77 Chion defines the acousmêtre as a non-visualized being who speaks and is often omniscient or omnipotent. This privileged position does not excuse the acousmêtre from ever appearing in the visual field, although in the case of Sanders-Brahms’s film, the presence of child-Anna would make an appearance by the narrator impossible if the realist aesthetic of the film were to be maintained.
Usually we think of the present as haunted by the past, but Chion reverses this understanding in terms of voiceover narration describing how “the character’s voice separates from the body and returns as an acousmêtre to haunt the past-tense images conjured by his words. The voice speaks from a point where time is suspended” (Voice 49). The suspended time of the voiceover and its ability to influence the images on the screen is most apparent in the scene after their wedding when Lene and Hans arrive at their new home for the first time. In an awkward moment, Lene walks over the threshold herself because Hans forgets to carry her. She playfully examines the various features of the home (the drapes, the silverware, the telephone), pricking her finger on a needle sticking out of the drapes. The camera keeps both husband and wife in the frame together, even as it pans up and down between their faces and their feet. They are locked together in the frame, even if the panning camera suggests that their bodies exceed the ability of the camera to capture them. The narrator intercedes to explain this awkwardness and an important casting choice when she describes how, in her mind, her father is always as old as he was when he came back from the war. This explains why the significantly older actor Ernst Jacobi (1933-) was cast to play Hans, while Eva Mattes (1954-), a younger actress who also appeared in four of Fassbinder’s films, was cast as Lene. The audience’s attention is drawn yet again to the fact that what we are seeing is mediated by the mind of the daughter down to every detail, including the age of the actors. Voiceover operates as what Chion calls textual speech in that it acts on the images on the screen creating a visual scene that is no longer autonomous. This control makes textual speech “inseparable from an archaic power: the pure and original pleasure of transforming the world through language, and of ruling over one’s creation by naming it” (Chion AV 173). Even though Chion attributes this power to the male voiceover narrator only, in this film we encounter a female voiceover narrator who aggressively usurps this power. The
casting choices for the roles of Lene and Hans are indicative of Sanders-Brahms’s desire to give her narrator, and by extension herself, this kind of narrative-generating and controlling power over the filmic space.

This tight control is maintained and enhanced when Lene and Hans enter the bedroom. The verticality of the camera movement as it pans up and down these figures is further reinforced when Lene’s reflection is caught in a triptych mirror, creating a column-like effect as three images of Lene move together in the three panes of glass. As the couple sits down on the bed, the mirror image consumes the screen and the viewer is presented with images of the couple as both together and separate. They sit together in the middle panel of the mirror, while in the smaller outside panels, one of the pair is cut out of the frame to give the impression that they are alone. From the earliest moments of their marriage, the pair is unified and divided, together and apart, just as they are in their daughter’s mind. The camera cuts to a close up shot of Lene’s face as Hans begins to slowly remove her hairpins before undoing the buttons on the back of her dress. The voiceover narration again intercedes to explain the fumbling and awkwardness of this moment, describing how Sanders-Brahms/Anna cannot imagine “eurer Umarmung, wie deine an deine Haut sich berührt.” It is also significant to note that linguistically the voiceover narration is set up as a conversation between the daughter and her parents, particularly her mother. She is not speaking to us, but to them, as if explaining the filmic choices she is making to her parents, asking for their forgiveness for how she is telling their story. By choosing to address her parents rather than the audience, Sanders-Brahms tries to generate an intimacy within this act of narration that excludes her audience to some degree. However, this does not mean, as Chion argues, that her voiceover fails to be “the voice the spectator internalizes as his or her own and the voice that takes total possession of the diegetic space” (Chion AV 79-80). By addressing her
mother, Sanders-Brahms also reinforces that fact that it is not Lene who is speaking. All of the images of Lene and Hans are undermined and determined by the voice of the daughter that plays over them. Because of the controlling nature of the voiceover, Lene’s voice is never really returned to her. By usurping this masculine role of narrative control, Sanders-Brahms can never completely be successful in a feminist project of uncovering authentic female voices beyond her own. Despite her best efforts, she never escapes a masculine understanding of control and domination, never fully achieves a feminine aesthetic that operates outside of male subjectivity. In a process that mimics the uneasy way in which melodramatic identification leads women to identify with their own suffering, Lene’s daughter re-inflicts her mother’s trauma and guilt on herself through the act of narrating this film. In her efforts to stand in solidarity with her mother, she may, in fact, isolate herself from her even more.

**Mother and Child Divided**

This family melodrama continues to play itself out within the plot of the film as the relationship between Lene and her daughter changes from one that is close and mutually beneficial, to one that is distanced and cruel. In this way Lene comes to represent even more pronouncedly the body on which female trauma is inscribed, while her daughter represents the subjective voice used to tell about this same trauma. In her writing about abused wife Charlotte Fedders’s memoir, Cathy Colton writes:

> She has become victim and perpetrator of the verbal and physical violence in her marriage. She violently inscribes upon her body internalized messages, from both her husband and the culture at large. She not only has become persuaded by her husband and culture to believe these messages, but has herself become the persuader and the text upon which those messages are inscribed (131-132).\(^7\)

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\(^7\)The well-documented case of Charlotte Fedders’s abuse at the hands of her husband, prominent DC lawyer John Fedders, captured the attention of the American news media in the late 1980s, slightly after these two films were made. It serves as an example from a different context in which male and female stories of marital strife compete for prominence and public attention.
According to Colton, as a result of her abuse, Fedders becomes speaker, audience, and text all in one. This condensation of the violent cycle of abuse into the body of the victim is on dramatic display in the final half of Sanders-Brahms’s film when the marks of the return to patriarchal order manifest themselves on Lene’s body.

The roots of this physical manifestation of grief, guilt, and abuse on and through Lene’s body begins when she takes her frustrations about breastfeeding out on Anna. During a furlough, Hans comments on the fact that Lene is still breastfeeding her daughter, remarking that, “sie frisst dich auf.” Lene agrees with Hans that motherhood is taking a toll on her. She describes how Anna “nimmt meine Kraft, she nimmt zu, ich nehme ab.” Even more importantly, Lene connects these feelings to her feelings of guilt about what is going on around her, describing how Anna is too young to remember, but that eventually one will see “auf unser Gesicht alles was wir mitgemacht haben.” Lene is beginning to recognize the guilt that all Germans will face for the atrocities committed during World War II, and she hopes that her child will be exempt from this guilt. Even though Anna will eventually witness Lene’s trauma, Lene does not yet realize that this is the case. Instead she assumes, incorrectly as the voiceover to this film indicates, that her child will remain unmarked by these experiences of wartime and domestic violence. Lene is, however, prophetic in terms of the physical marks that will be inscribed on her own face in the aftermath of the war. Anna/Sanders-Brahms is clear about this when she describes how rebuilding Germany was like rebuilding a trap for women: “die Steine die wir klopfen, die würden zu Häuser gesetzt die noch schlimmer waren als vorher.” Hans comes back with violent tendencies, and the violence of war transitions into the domestic sphere. Once Hans returns, Lene

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79 Lene’s specific guilt can be traced back to two prior scenes in the film, one in which she and her sister refuse to help a Jewish neighbor who is being dragged away (and likely sexually assaulted) and another in which Lene roots through a boarded up Jewish store in order to get the thread she needs to finish the embroidery on her blouse.
and Anna appear in the same frame together much less frequently than before, visually highlighting the wedge that Hans’s presence drives between mother and daughter.

Just as Helmut’s abuses pull Martha’s body and voice apart, so too does Hans pull Lene and Anna, mother and daughter, female body and female voice, away from one another. This division is inscribed on Lene’s body when she awakens to find that half of her face is paralyzed. She is shown in a close-up shot examining the damage as Hans arrives home in the background, announcing that he has just gotten a job. The news of his triumph is delivered simultaneously with the revelation of her disfigurement. Lene initially covers up her face, but she eventually reveals her condition to Hans. He immediately takes her to the dentist, putting on her coat for her and practically dragging her out of the door against her will. The camera’s close attention to Lene’s disfigured face continues in the dentist’s chair as we watch him poke around in her mouth. As the dentist describes his course of treatment, which involves pulling out all of Lene’s teeth, the camera pans up to him as Lene begins to protest this dramatic course of action. She will have no say in this decision. Instead, the dentist turns to Hans and has a conversation with him about the consequences of not acting. The camera pans over to Hans as he confers with the dentist and gives the go ahead for Lene’s teeth to be pulled. The dentist’s hands are shown in close-up as he prepares for the extraction, and the audience watches him inject Lene’s mouth with an anesthetic before he begins to pull out all of her teeth. The camera follows the doctor’s hands as he works, pulling the teeth out one by one, only briefly cutting to Hans’s expressions of bemused interest and anxiety as the dentist works. The camera then cuts to a close-up shot of Lene, crying and expelling excess blood from her mouth, making this depiction of the extraction of Lene’s teeth graphic enough to rival any of the bloody corpses shown in the documentary wartime footage interspersed throughout *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*. Lene’s war has begun and
it will be fought on a far different front from the one previously inhabited by her husband. Just as Anna/Sanders-Brahms absorbs her mother’s story and makes it her own, Lene’s body absorbs all of the guilt and frustration of family and civic life in the immediate postwar period. However, one body can only take so much before it begins to break down.

Despite her resistance to emotional displays earlier in the film, Lene reaches a point where she too has an emotional breakdown that comes close to the scale of one of Martha’s affective displays. Lene makes a big show of covering the paralyzed half of her face with various scarves and other pieces of cloth. As her abuse is inscribed on her body, Lene becomes more and more emotive and performative, almost as if she has chosen to give up and to embrace the marks of trauma that attach themselves to her. Unlike Martha, these displays are not designed to draw in her husband, but rather, it seems, to drive him away. One night Lene awakens and suddenly begins emptying out all of the drawers in the bedroom she shares with Hans. The camera pans down to focus on the array of textiles, clothing, and silverware that is falling to the floor. Lene weeps and dramatically declares that, “Ich will es nicht mehr” and “Ich brauche Liebe” as the camera returns to focus on her face. She clings to Hans and, in a display of emotion that would make Martha proud, refuses to let go of him as she weeps. Her body goes limp and she falls to the floor. Despite her best efforts to avoid it, she, like Martha, has become all body and emotionality in this moment. Anna tries to comfort her as Hans leaves the apartment, but ultimately, even Lene’s relationship with her daughter is ruined by her facial paralysis and its implications of guilt and suffering.

After her teeth are extracted Lene starts to aggressively distance herself from her daughter. For example, in the scene that directly follows Lene’s trip to the dentist, she sits in bed, crying and covering her face with a cloth, drinking alcohol out of the side of her face that still
can move. Anna, despite her young age, has managed to prepare her mother a bowl of hot broth. As the child carefully serves it to her, Lene eyes her suspiciously. The camera cuts between both of their faces, but they never appear together in the same frame, as they often did before Hans’s return. After Anna insists that her mother must eat, we see Lene lift the cup of soup. The camera cuts to Anna and from the bottom of the frame Lene’s hand appears, throwing the hot broth in Anna’s face, burning her, and causing her to cry out in pain. The abused Lene has now become the abuser of her daughter. The camera pauses on the image of Anna covering her eyes as the hot broth drips down her face, emphasizing this moment and the shift that has occurred. Much like the close-ups of Martha’s pained expressions, the camera lingers, soaking in this moment in which the victim of violence has become its perpetrator as well. Interestingly, the voiceover narrator refrains from commenting on this scene, even though it is a major turning point in terms of her relationship with her mother. In this moment, at least, the images are allowed to speak for themselves and the narrator refrains from commenting on this shift, in which the child violently begins to realize that remaining one with her mother is no longer an option. This memory is met with silence because it is too painful for commentary. Brooks writes about the importance of children in the melodramatic mode arguing that, “children, as living representations of innocence and purity, serve as catalysts for virtuous or vicious actions” (Brooks 34). This scene is profound evidence that the innocent actions of children can elicit vicious actions in those forced to exist under the imposed suffering of melodramatic discourses. By the end of the film, however, we will also have evidence for the potential of children to serve, as a catalyst for (at the very least) good intentions and a tenuous sense of female solidarity.
Storytelling and Recovery

The use of storytelling as a model for resistance and solidarity is not a new innovation on the part of Sanders-Brahms’s film. In fact, *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* takes full advantage of this long history of storytelling as a means of resistance through its use of a fairy tale intertext, namely the Grimm brothers’ tale of the *Räuberbräutigam* (*The Robber Bridegroom*). Sanders-Brahms’s filmmaking frequently involves a layering of discourses that mix with and interrupt one another.80 This aesthetic of intertextual intrusion plays such a crucial role in the *Räuberbräutigam* sequence of *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* because even though it draws on a genre known for its generalizing, melodramatic themes and universal morals, the intrusion of gruesome historical details, including Lene’s rape, into this sequence keeps the characters and the viewer from getting caught up in the fantasy of the tale. Sanders-Brahms’s film, thereby resists a purely melodramatic interpretation of this mother-daughter narrative at the same time that it invites it. In the face of the violence that ruins the relationships between husband and wife, and father and daughter, Sanders-Brahms emphasizes the importance of the bond of shared trauma and cooperative agency between women. The lines of communication between mother and daughter are at their strongest when Anna listens intently to Lene as she recites the fairy tale and they traverse the German countryside. Her storytelling is repeatedly interrupted by various symbols of the presence of the war around them, culminating in a scene in which two American soldiers approach and rape Lene while her daughter stands by. Immediately after suffering this trauma Lene seems relatively unaffected by the experience, passing it off to her daughter as one of the inevitable consequences of war and continuing the fairy tale right where she had left off. As we have seen, however, after her husband’s return, Lene’s trauma becomes inscribed on her

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80 See for example the citation of Heinrich von Kleist’s *Penthesilea* (1808) in *Flügeln und Fesseln* (1984) or her engagement with the work and life of Else Lasker-Schüller in *Mein Herz-niemandem!* (1997).
body. While the viewer watches Lene telling this story, so it is not exactly voiceover, this sequence is a twelve-minute stretch of film in which Lene’s voice is the only voice that the viewer hears. It is the closest thing that the audience gets to Lene taking over the narration of the film and as such is worthy of our detailed attention. Since the voiceover narrator is so powerful, Lene is only able to speak through allegory. However, the film’s self-reflexive engagement with the process of storytelling itself provides a model for beginning to generate space for women outside of oppressive discourses, including melodramatic ones in which female suffering is a dangerous point of uncritical identification for female witnesses.

The fairy tale story itself sets up a situation in which women experience, witness, and tell stories about traumatic encounters. In the story, a young woman bears witness to a horrible murder and then speaks out against the criminals in order to keep this abuse from happening to others. The girl’s father promises her hand in marriage to a man who appears to be rich. Before the wedding, the bridegroom invites her to his house in the woods, but when she arrives, the birds, and eventually an old woman, warn her that she is in a murderer’s house. The old woman helps her to hide behind a barrel. While hidden, she witnesses her bridegroom and his colleagues drugging another young woman with wine, violently tearing off her clothes, and cutting her up in preparation to eat her. During this process, one of the murdered girl’s fingers falls into the lap of the young bride, who is able to escape with the old woman after the robbers fall asleep. Later, on the day of her wedding, the guests are invited to tell stories. When it is the bride-to-be’s turn, she tells them about her trip to her bridegroom’s house in the woods, justifying her storytelling by assuring her audience that it was only a dream until, at the very end, she reveals the finger of the murdered girl, thereby proving the truth of her story and prompting the wedding guests to chase down the bridegroom. Like the story of Lene and her daughter, this is a story about cooperation
between multiple generations of women and the use of storytelling as a mechanism of defense, agency, and justice in the face of violence perpetrated by men. It is also a story about the sacrifice of one woman that is witnessed by another in order to save her. In this way, it is a cipher for how we should interpret the film as a whole. Of this fairy tale story, Julia Knight writes that, “As it serves no narrative function within the film, Lene’s telling of it implies that she sees it as an allegory for the way she perceives her own experience” (125). I agree that this is true, but I would also add that this story importantly marks the way that Sanders-Brahms/Anna and Lene have to collaborate in order to collectively create a female subject that has both body and voice.

In the film’s presentation of the fairy tale, Sanders-Brahms is careful to avoid allowing both the viewer and the characters in the film to become distracted by their own desire to get caught up in the melodramatic fairy tale story, frequently forcing them to confront the horrors of the specific historical context in which these scenes take place. Lene and Anna move slowly (often stumbling) through a number of fairly wide shots, only to have the camera pan away from them at the end of each shot, diverting the audience’s attention to details of this landscape related to the destruction of the war. For example, in the first such shot, the remains of a tank and other war machinery are highlighted. These scenes are also often underscored by the playing of unsettling minor chords on the piano, a musical interruption of any possible idyllic or nostalgic feelings invoked by the fairy tale. This music becomes even more significant when it is eventually linked to a man playing the piano at the end of a sequence of documentary footage from the bombings of Berlin shown right before the soldiers rape Lene. Although Lene, as the young bride, assures us that, “Mein Schatz, das träumte mir nur,” this documentary footage depicts just the opposite, the harsh reality of the devastation of war. This intermixing of Sanders-
Brahms’s footage and the documentary footage emphasizes the contrast between fiction and reality, and links this story to a specific historical moment at the end of World War II. The film even makes a fairly explicit reference to the Holocaust when, immediately after Lene describes how the bridegroom placed ashes along the path to guide his bride to his house, the camera pans up to the top of a giant smokestack, thereby giving a historical context and meaning to the reference to a “murderer’s house” within the text of the tale. Lene’s story and the story that she tells can never be fully extracted and abstracted out of the historical context in which this film takes place. The violence of the past always intrudes on the present, a fact that is literally and aggressively displayed in Sanders-Brahms’s film. Anna and Lene themselves are also forced to engage directly with the historical context surrounding them. For instance, when mother and daughter come across the decaying body of a dead soldier, Anna insists on pausing to observe the scene despite her mother’s efforts to shield her from it. It is clear from these details that this sequence is not a depiction of two women detached from reality and lost in a fairy tale world. As Richard McCormick articulates, “the spectator is not allowed to participate in the joy shared by the mother and daughter – which is idyllic only in the memory of the child, in any case – without being confronted with the visual evidence of how ghastly a world it was that she remembers so selectively” (199). Instead, the camera tells a different story, one in which the historical reality of World War II is never allowed to escape the notice of either the audience or the characters in the film, one in which we all are aggressively implicated in the act of witnessing advocated by the fairy tale.

Over the course of the film (and after her rape) it becomes increasingly impossible for Lene to escape her circumstances as she eventually succumbs physically and emotionally to the burden of the trauma of her wartime experiences. However, Sanders-Brahms tries to solve the
problem of the mother’s loss of agency by placing the emphasis on the daughter’s perception of
and relationship to her mother. As in the Räuberbräutigam, it is the witness, not the victim of the
trauma, who is tasked with telling the story, and the function of the audience, like that of the
wedding guests, is to hear the story and possibly take action for justice, although the film is
ambiguous about what form this response should take. This film, like the finger the bride
produces at the end of her story, is the evidence needed to validate the story of the mother and
restore her to a position of agency, where some part of her story can be heard alongside the
wartime stories of men. However, the telling of that story necessitates the death of the mother
herself, just as the first young woman must die in order for the bride to relate the story of her
death.

Lene’s first comment to her daughter after being raped reinforces the semi-didactic nature
of the scene and her effort to transfer this story to her daughter: “Das ist das Recht des Siegers
[sic], kleines Mädchen. Die nehmen die Sachen und die Frauen.” Both through this comment and
the fairy tale that frames this rape, Lene teaches her daughter about the trauma of being a
woman, particularly in the war-torn world that surrounds them. It is a melodramatic lesson about
the acceptance of suffering, much like the one that Martha’s mother imparts to her. It is also a
lesson that is both personal and intimately tied to the historical context in which Lene and Anna
find themselves. For example, one encounters many similar experiences in memoirs written by
other women about World War II. In her memoir A Woman in Amber, Latvian-born Agate
Nesaule describes her uneasy response to her mother’s attempt to talk about rape, asserting:
“‘Rape’ is an unsayable word in mixed company; […] I hope my mother does not say it out loud,
I hope she does not tell anything. It sounds as if she is making light of the suffering of the men,
which is very real. […] I am embarrassed for her, I must defend the men against her” (Nesaule
Nesaule, like Sanders-Brahms, is faced with the burden of being a witness to sexual violence, an act of witnessing that Nesaule, in this moment, is not willing to engage in because of its placement in direct opposition to the wartime trauma experienced by men. Not only is there a generational divide about who gets to speak about wartime trauma, but there is also a gender divide.

One way Deutschland, bleiche Mutter attempts, but fails, to correct this prohibition on female speech, and to recover the mother’s voice through the daughter, is by placing Lene’s storytelling in an unnatural relationship to time. The audience only hears the fairy tale told one time from start to finish, so their auditory experience of the story is logical and linear. In contrast, the visual experience of the story has a completely different time structure. Each separate shot appears to be in a different location (a forest, a field, an abandoned factory), giving the audience visual clues which indicate that the story is told either over the course of several days, or repeated every day until Lene and Anna make it back to Berlin. Therefore, the audience experiences the story as both a logical progression, much like the linear narrative of traditional history, and also as a non-linear, circular, or universal experience of the repeated victimization of women. By refusing to stick to a clear or chronological time structure in this sequence, Sanders-Brahms makes the feminist dynamic of her film clear as she works to “disrupt conventionalized patterns of viewing […] and destroy the structure and coherence of the classic realist film” (Kaes 159). Sanders-Brahms wants to have it both ways. She wants to produce a film that is realist and disruptive to reality, one in which we identify with and critically examine the characters. This manipulation of time, however, also reinforces the fact that this film is focalized through the daughter. As she thinks back and remembers this time with her mother, she associates it with the fairy tale. Therefore, it is as if viewers of the film are watching the daughter’s memory, in which
she maps the fairy tale onto different scenes from the past as opposed to a moment in real time in which a mother sits down to tell her child a story. This distinction is critical because it further emphasizes the way this film focuses the viewer’s attention on the daughter as witness.

Wendt and Zannettino suggest that, “Mothering may be the only source of women’s identity and power in domestic violence contexts” (52). When Lene is raped by two American soldiers as her daughter watches, it is an extreme instance of this dynamic in which Lene’s responsibility for the education of her child supersedes all else. After offering her a drink (like the robbers in the story), two American soldiers pull Lene out of the frame as she calls out her daughter’s name, drawing Anna’s attention to what is to come. The focus of the camera remains stationary on a close-up of Anna’s face for the duration of the rape. The child looks on intently, and perhaps with some confusion, at this violence, which the viewers hear, but do not see. Anna is the only one who actually perceives this event visually. Therefore, the scene is not as much about Lene getting raped as it is about what is getting passed on to her child through the act of witnessing this rape. This framing reflects the way Sanders-Brahms herself experienced the mass rape of German women in the aftermath of World War II. In an interview she admits that, “Lene, as far as I know, was not raped, but she was terribly afraid she might be. As a child I once watched a rape and thought that it could have happened to Lene” (as quoted in Kaes 145). The child’s quiet contemplation immediately following the rape, picking at her lip as her mother finishes the fairy tale, draws attention to the way this experience (at least initially) has changed her more than her mother. Up until this point, these moments of introspection were provided primarily through voiceover, and therefore through the daughter’s disembodied voice. In this central sequence of sexual violence, however, Sanders-Brahms reverses this organization, placing the mother in the position of the heard and the daughter in the position of the
seen/seeing. According to the logic of the film and the fairy tale, one must bear witness to trauma in order to speak about it, so from this moment on, telling this story is something that only the daughter has the unique and requisite perspective to accomplish. In addition, as an audience we are reminded that we are now in the position of witnesses as well. The fairy tale becomes an allegory for the rest of the film in that by watching this film we bear witness to Sanders-Brahms’s guilt and trauma as she thinks back on her mother’s experiences. It is now our responsibility to pass along that story.

There is a temptation among scholars, most notably Ellen E. Seiter, to suggest that this sequence uses the fairy tale along with a variety of other melodramatic codes to represent an overall/ahistorical violence against women, thereby turning the rape of Lene into a metaphor for the suffering of women at the hands of men throughout history and, even more problematically, a metaphor for the “rape” of Germany by the Allies (Seiter “Women’s History” 580). According to Seiter, “feminist filmmakers must discard such representations if the mother is to be released from her position of endless victimization and eternal silence” (“Women’s History” 580). In her reading, the goal that this film fails to achieve is Lene’s release from the violent patriarchal system that tries to silence her story. I argue that the film itself points out why these goals do not accurately reflect the problem. What Seiter fails to recognize, but the fairy tale suggests, is that the bride’s escape from patriarchal marriage is not as important as her ability to bear witness to the other girl who was torn apart, a girl whose body was sacrificed in order to enable the act of storytelling itself. If Lene is the girl who gets torn apart and her daughter Anna is the witness, then Sanders-Brahms and, by extension, we as audience members, are like the old woman, who is also crucial to the tale. Like the old woman, the audience enables the witness not to speak to the victim, but to be in the position to speak to others. Even though it requires uncomfortable
sacrifices, it is only through this chain that there is some hope of escaping the strong melodramatic codes that seek to keep women in the position of victims. By drawing attention to the necessity of this sacrifice Deutschland, bleiche Mutter, while not successfully recovering the mother in both body and voice, points out the mother-shaped hole that is exposed through this act of storytelling.

In the end, it is the father who truly and completely abandons the mother, while the daughter remains as loyal to her as possible. In the final sequence of the film Hans gives up on helping his wife and leaves for what appears to be a final time. Afterwards Lene goes into the bathroom and turns on the gas. Anna watches from the doorframe and the camera assumes the angle of her perspective as Lene shuts the door on her. Williams argues of the film Stella Dallas (1937) that “embroiled in a relationship that is so close, mother and daughter nevertheless seem destined to lose one another through this very closeness” (Williams “Something Else” 3). This description maps fairly neatly onto the relationship between Anna and Lene that plays out in this final scene. The camera moves to the side and we watch Anna in profile as she pounds on the door, desperately pleading with her mother to come out. Her cries are more pitiful and sad than insistent, and the scene is heart-wrenching to watch. Anna pounds on the door for over two minutes of filmic time (which feels even longer to those watching the film), and eventually the profile shot transitions into a shot from behind the girl as she eventually sinks to the ground in front of the door before beating her head against it. When Lene does eventually open the door, as happens so often in these films, the image the audience sees and what they hear are in tension. Even though viewers see Lene return from behind the bathroom door, Sanders-Brahms informs us in her voiceover that, “Manchmal denke ich, sie ist immer noch dahinter. Und ich bin immer noch davor und sie kommt niemals mehr heraus zu mir. Und ich muss erwachsen sein und allein.
Aber sie ist immer noch da. Lene ist immer noch da.” Seiter argues that Lene’s eventual emergence from the bathroom indicates a failure in that, “her sole, self-directed action in the film” is thwarted (Seiter 571). However, there is more going on here than Lene’s affirmation of the role of the self-sacrificing mother. The final shot of the film is a close up of Lene’s disfigured face as she looks around the apartment before the camera pans down to her hands as she strokes her daughter’s hair. Anna’s face is buried into her mother’s body as if seeking to reenter the womb. The child takes in her mother’s disfigured body, and mother and daughter become one again. Even though the sacrifice of the mother is still required, at least part of the feminist goal to recapture female stories is achieved. At the very end of the film we are reminded by a text on the screen that, “Diese Geschichte ist einerseits für Lene und andererseits für Anna” and yet, it is only the daughter who is truly provided space for cathartic self-expression in this film. Despite her best intentions, she has consumed her mother’s story and made it all about her own process of self-reflection.

CONCLUSION

Both Martha and Deutschland, bleiche Mutter present us with protagonists who are paralyzed in one way or another by the scenarios of domestic violence in which they find themselves. This causes them to exhibit aggressive behaviors, which they direct both toward themselves and anyone who would seek to help them, including their own children. In this way, these women contribute to the repetition of cycles of domestic violence from which there might ultimately be no escape. Certainly Fassbinder’s film suggests that there is no way out of this cycle of violence. Sanders-Brahms is slightly more optimistic in terms of the model for female solidarity and storytelling that she builds up in her film, but ultimately this storytelling model
also fails to liberate the female subject in both body and voice, so a choice is made in favor of
the voice of the daughter over the body of the mother.

This tension between mothers and daughters is an integral part of the melodramatic
excess that both of these films critique. The daughters, Martha and Sanders-Brahms/Anna, do not
want to become their mothers and yet they adopt similar practices of suffering and self-sacrifice.
This identification seems unavoidable for the characters and so it is up to the audiences of these
films to do better, to be better witnesses to trauma. In the same way that being a victim of
domestic violence destroys Martha and Lene’s sense of self, so too does melodrama attempt to
destroy its audience’s sense of self by compelling them to identify with excessive self-sacrifice.
While not particularly optimistic or explicitly feminist in and of themselves, I argue that what
these two films do when read together is present us with the scope of the problem that women
face, not just in situations of domestic violence, but in terms of their efforts to become complete
subjects with unified voices and bodies. The violent process of holding themselves together is
both difficult and necessary. Williams agrees with Sanders-Brahms that the way out of this bind
is potentially through some kind of relationality, some form of heterogeneity or collaboration.
Citing Kristeva she argues that, “the mother is possessed of an internal heterogeneity beyond her
control” (Williams “Something Else” 11), a heterogeneity that can also be applied to us as
viewers of melodramatic films like these in which sacrificial maternal behavior is on display.
These films make us all female spectators by Williams’s definition in that they force us to
“identify with contradiction itself” (Williams “Something Else” 17). Martha and Lene are both
victims and perpetrators of their own abuse, a position that is certainly contradictory and
definitely uncomfortable for us as viewers. The key is to take the discomfort generated through
the act of watching these films and apply it to our own acts of subversive storytelling, like the
bride in the fairy tale. Maybe then we will be able to somehow speak our way out of oppression and violence, but only if we can also find a way to bring our bodies along too and collaborate with our mothers rather than becoming them or consuming them.
CONCLUSION

Lass mich! Nein, ich leide keine Gewalt! / Fasse mich nicht so mörderisch an! / Sonst hab ich dir ja alles zulieb getan. -- Margarete, Faust I, lines 4576-4578

There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship’s, smooths and contains the rocker. It’s an inside kind – wrapped tight like skin. -- Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, pg. 289

In conclusion, I would like to gesture at ways in which the imaginary of feminist violence built up by the works in this dissertation fits into a broader scheme of representations of violent mothers in other temporal and national contexts. Are there other models for female storytelling and capturing female experiences that do not require violence to bring them together? My impression is that examples of such non-violent resistance are few and far between. Even when the murder of a child is deeply regretted and lamented by its perpetrator, as in the case of Gretchen in Goethe’s *Faust I* (1829), the act of murdering one’s own child is still identified as a means of engaging with the impossibly wide reach of masculine power. As Gretchen waits to be punished for her crimes, she transfers her act of gruesome violence back onto Faust, linking her aggressive behavior to his misuse of her. In order to maintain her feminine virtue, she both accepts responsibility for this crime and pays for it with her life, while at the same time pointing to Faust as the real culprit. Perhaps her love only turns murderous because the object of that love is a violent man. Gretchen melodramatically sacrifices herself and her child for Faust. Therefore, systemic violence ultimately wins the day in Goethe’s text. Just as for all of the female protagonists in my dissertation, there is no way out for Gretchen in terms of an ability to remain female and to perpetrate violence as an act of liberation. However, looking at Gretchen’s
example also reflects progress in terms of our ability to understand women as both victims and perpetrators of violence. The examples of feminist filmic and literary works I examine in this project take a much more critical stance towards the oppressive discourses and institutions that try to turn us all into Gretchen's and Marthas, forced to take responsibility for actions we did not fully choose. While Gretchen can only ever be a victim, these characters are both victims and perpetrators. The female characters I examine are still partially caught in Gretchen’s trap, but they also are in a position to more effectively expose its mechanisms, attuning their audience more acutely to the entrapment of women in their bodies and in language.

My dissertation engages with many figures who find themselves in impossible situations like Gretchen’s. While this is not inherently surprising, what is exceptional about each of these characters is their Medea-like efforts to use violence to overcome their situation. Beginning with adaptations of the Medea story by Christa Wolf and Dea Loher, I investigate how retelling Medea provides an opportunity for female authors to attack the process of mythmaking and storytelling itself. At a time in which the legacy of the DDR was being established, Medea becomes a critical interlocutor for thinking about strategies for incorporating multiple voices into discussions about history and narration. Using multiple narrative perspectives, Elfriede Jelinek’s engagement with child-murder in the novel Lust focuses on revealing the oppressive forces of both pornography and melodrama. In doing so, she uncovers the violence that is deeply rooted in even our most intimate relationships and imagines what it would be like for mothers to refuse to let their children become independent. As I move into film, I encounter a greater spectrum of violent acts ranging from the politically motivated to the domestic. The combination of reactionary and progressive politics in Die bleierne Zeit highlights the ambiguous moral standing of German left-wing counter-violence movements. By bringing these two political approaches
into conversation with one another, this film imagines a model for collective and collaborative mothering in which the political and the motherly are inextricable from one another. Finally, I turn to *Martha* and *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* in order to consider the problem of gendered identification with melodramatic self-sacrifice. Instead of being paralyzed like the protagonists of these films, the audience is encouraged to confront this self-destroying suffering through acts of witnessing.

By bringing these works of literature and film together, I demonstrate the importance of female voices and bodies in the process of engaging with past and contemporary violence in late 20th century Germany. It is difficult for women to establish themselves as individual subjects because of the ways in which discourses about state violence and structural violence objectify them. In the context of a postwar Germany in which the atrocities of the Holocaust and the counter-violence of the German New Left loom large, the stakes of this debate are particularly high. As a result of these conditions, the texts that I examine seek to imagine a different model for female subjectivity, one in which instead of asserting oneself as an individual, power is established through a process of shared subjectivity and collaboration. This new female subjectivity is established through a process of feminist violence, an imaginary of counter-violence in the service of feminist aims. Feminist violence resists narratives of emancipation and liberation, instead drawing on the discourses of mythology and melodrama to model ways in which women seek to forcefully hold themselves together by pulling others into their identities. Feminist violence serves as an important middle-ground between feminist theories of language and feminist theories of materialism by both drawing on and breaking down stereotypes about what it means to exhibit motherly behavior. By looking at these filmic and literary works as acts of feminist counter-violence, both the female voice and the female body come into focus, thereby
building on tensions and divisions from earlier works of German feminist art. What makes these texts unique, however, is their insistence that if the right kind and form of violence is applied, women can establish themselves as collaborative female subjects.

Within this complex of concerns surrounding female subjectivity, race is one piece of the identity puzzle that is notably absent. Due to its role as a crucial aspect of the classical Medea story, one might expect race to make a prominent appearance in at least some of these texts. However, while not ignored in all German adaptations of *Medea* (see for example Hans Henny Jahnn’s 1926 version of the play), race fails to have a major role in the late 20th century feminist adaptations of the Medea story I have highlighted. This failure to represent the racial elements of Medea’s position as an outsider is even more striking when compared with similar stories of child-murder in the American context. One of the most-famous instances of this brutal act in American literature, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), was also published during the time period I examine in this dissertation. In her novel, Morrison directly addresses the issues of race implied in Euripides’s play by relocating this story to the immediate aftermath of the American Civil War. After killing her daughter in an attempt to prevent her from having to re-enter the conditions of slavery from which the family has just recently escaped, Sethe and everyone around her is haunted by her daughter’s memory. This memory is eventually embodied in the character of Beloved, who shows up out of nowhere on the family’s doorstep. At the end of her text, in which the process of grieving is also central, Morrison describes a loneliness that violently swaddles the person embraced by it. Like in the texts I have examined, the aggressive act of holding in, of forcing back together, is of central importance to Morrison. It seems that outsiders of all kinds attempt to use the consolidating power of feminist violence to fight to remain alive in both voice and body. By holding in that which tries to escape from us, we just
might be able to feel more secure in our own skin. Although a proper and complete discussion of race lies beyond the scope of this dissertation, it would be interesting and important to compare how this identity category also differs from gender in terms of its relationship to violence. For example, Morrison’s contention that our negative emotions of loneliness, hurt, and sadness, fail to rock like a ship has a particular connotation within her story’s context at the official end of slavery in the United States. What does it mean to be rocked in a way that does not invoke the Middle Passage and the brutality of slavery? While clearly there is potential for healing in these negative emotions, *Beloved* also presents us with an act of child-murder that haunts and disrupts. While we may be able to harness negative emotions to hold ourselves together, some actions are so unacceptable, so beyond the pale, that they force us to sit up and take notice of the horrible conditions that lead to them.

My dissertation has shown that it is not enough for us to merely take notice of the social conditions that drive women to commit violent actions. To end the argument there would position women, once again, as the inevitable victims of a system that is rigged against them. This position of victimization is one that both Morrison and the authors in my dissertation confront in order to imagine ways for conditions to be otherwise. As a part of this process the group of late 20th century German feminist texts I have analyzed develops an understanding of feminist violence that functions on the level of theme and on the level of aesthetic form. By representing aggression on both of these levels, they force us to acknowledge the oppressive force of discourses, especially mythology and melodrama. These representations of counter-violence manifest themselves as consolidations of different identities into uneasy solidarity. In fact, this notion of feminist violence (of counter-violence that consolidates, rather than breaking apart) may be an even more effective aesthetic and political tool than violence that seeks to break
out and assert the freedom of a single individual. How this group dynamic may work and play out in different contexts and with different identity categories still remains to be seen, nevertheless I am certain that it is necessary to investigate violence’s many forms, especially those forms that challenge our understanding of ourselves and others. The instruments of violence are not counter-productive to progressive and radical social politics in and of themselves. As these filmic and literary works demonstrate, the political valence of violence depends greatly on how it is used and to what ends. Since violence is all around us, we must continue using literature and film to imagine productive ways to harness it, ways that draw us together, rather than apart.
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