

**How did German Female Filmmakers of the 1970s Combat the Narratives and Imagery  
of Women Produced by the Male-Dominated Film Industry?**

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### **Abstract**

Until the 1970s, women in German cinema existed only as a myth, ascending from male fantasy. Mirroring the dominant patriarchal ideology, the cinematic medium was permeated by images and stereotypes that degraded the female on screen to an object of erotic pleasure. In understanding the emergence of Germany's critically acclaimed feminist film culture, this theoretical research will attempt to uncover how female filmmakers of the 1970s combated the narratives and imagery of women produced by the male-dominated film industry. Two representative works, *The All-Round Reduced Personality – Redupers* (1978) by Helke Sander and *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (1978) by Margarethe von Trotta, will be reviewed using a narratological and a mis-en-scène analysis. Acknowledging that the world of film is still characterized by severe gender inequality, the paper will illuminate how these findings can be valuable for contemporary filmmaking. Ultimately, four central lessons will be identified: (1) a focus on identity, (2) allyship, (3) the disembodiment of voice; and (4) the fusion of fiction and documentary styles. The research reveals how our unconscious is shaped by the images we consume and how film can be utilized to drive forward the liberation of women in the realm of the moving image and beyond.

## Introduction

Women have long had no home in the world of German cinema. As ghostly figures, they wandered across the screens, beautiful and frail. In a cosmos of patriarchal oppression, female protagonists fulfilled their purpose by evoking visual pleasure. They served to inspire emotions within the male hero, without having any relevance on their own. Yet, in the late 1970s, together with the rise of second-wave feminism, a generation of young female directors began to search for a self-determined female voice in cinema. In the pursuit of understanding their artistic heritage, the paper strives to answer the following question: How did female filmmakers in 1970s Germany combat the narratives and imagery of women produced by the male-dominated film industry? It will take a closer look at two of the most prominent pioneer filmmakers of the New German Cinema era<sup>1</sup>, Helke Sander and Margarethe von Trotta. Sander and Trotta took a novel aesthetic stance by combating oppressive images of women in film. Their work gave rise to an entire feminist film culture that allowed women to partially surpass the controlling and eroticized gaze and establish new looking relations<sup>2</sup> (Knight, 1992, p.2). This paper aims to illuminate how exactly these achievements were possible. Which cinematic techniques serve to overcome the hyperfocus on the female body? Which narratives were spun to help women conquer their own place in feature films? After providing a thorough analysis of one film produced by each Sander and Trotta, the paper will identify the most important lessons that can be learned for contemporary filmmaking. These include, (1) a radical focus on

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<sup>1</sup> The New German Cinema comprises the period between 1962 and 1982. After World War II, the US, as one of the occupying powers, strictly regulated the West German film industry. This led to the production of cliché romances ("Heimatfilme") and apologetic war films. Unable to compete with the Hollywood enterprise, the national film industry almost collapsed. The Oberhausen Manifesto of 1962, however, fostered German cinema as a 'high' art. The New German Cinema was born and gained great popularity under a new generation of directors. Contemporary issues, meandering narratives, and an emphasis on mood rather than action are characteristic features of the New German film, as well as a quest for an anti-illusionist, anti-fascist visual language. The women's movement and liberal policies eventually offered limited opportunities for women filmmakers (Gibson, 1998, p. 466-470; Carter & Sandberg, 2020, p. 395).

<sup>2</sup> In Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" she describes the act of "looking". According to Mulvey, the female character in a movie is subjected to three gazes: the camera, the spectator, and the male character. These three entities create uneven power relations by using the female character to satisfy voyeuristic desires. Feminist filmmakers try to reverse, modify, and irritate these cinematic conventions, producing new ways of 'looking' (see Mulvey, 1975).

identity, (2) allyship, (3) the disembodiment of voice, and (4) fusing fiction and documentary filmmaking styles. Thereby, the research aspires to contribute to existing feminist film theory and the ongoing journey of women's liberation from patriarchal narratives.

### **Background**

In the early 1970s, feminist film theorists observed a particular phenomenon that ended up constituting the battleground for an ongoing debate in film: while there was a tremendous lack of female employees behind the camera, audiences were well too familiar with the image of the female body on screen. Women seemed to be invisible as the creators of cinematic art, yet overly visible as their fleshly subjects (Levitin et al., 2002, p. 53). Up until the present day the observations of 1970s feminist film theorists hold true. Gender asymmetries persist on the screen and within the industry itself. The Bechdel Test, developed by graphic novelist Alison Bechdel in 1985, is an effective primary detector for male bias in film (Scheiner-Fisher & Russell III, 2012). It consists of three simple questions: Does the film (1) have at least two named women in it, who (2) talk to each other, about (3) something besides a man? If all questions can be answered with “yes,” the movie in question is said to pass the Bechdel test. Since 1985, the Bechdel test has been applied to over 10.000 movies, with devastating results. 43% of reviewed films fail at least one of the criteria, and 11.1% pass no criteria at all (Stats and graphs - Bechdel Test Movie List, n.d.) (As of May 17th, 2024). Experiments conducted by Agarwal et al. (2015) confirmed, that in movies which fail the test, "women are in fact portrayed as less-central and less-important characters" (p.830). Their findings validate that women still seldomly appear as strong leaders and thinkers in popular cinema.

Gender bias is not only firmly cemented in our collective subconsciousness, but also ingrained in the structures of the industry (García and Tanase, 2013; Michel et al., 2011; Zizek, 1989). Although the presence of female directors, producers, and writers has increased since the 1970s (Lippert, 2006, p. 233), women remain in the penumbra of Hollywood filmmaking.

The percentage of female directors working on the top 100 films of 2023 comprises a striking 14%, female writers account for 19%, and female producers for 24% (Lauzen, 2024, p. 10). There is justified concern that "woman as woman [will remain] largely absent" (Johnston, 1973, p. 2) in the cinema, if women roles continue to be written and directed by men.

In light of the aforementioned phenomena, which remain relevant today, I wonder: How can we explain that women are allowed to be everything in film, but their authentic selves? In most movies, women are reborn in a dream that is not their own, as the seductress, the muse, the wife, the maiden, or the secret lover. They become the mystery to be solved, the victim that is to be rescued, the girl next door, or the heroine that needs to prove, that women too, can fight a dragon. Academics<sup>3</sup> have contemplated this phenomenon and estimated its origin in 'the gaze'. The gaze can be conceptualized as a way of looking at others, steered and operated by subliminal power dynamics. It can perpetuate relations of power and solidify prevailing stereotypes (Cormican & William, 2021). The influential essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' by British film theorist Laura Mulvey is the most significant account of the theory of the 'gaze'. Here, she states that "[f]ilm reflects, reveals, and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference, which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle" (1975, p.6). Mulvey suggests that the cinematic eye is so deeply permeated by the male subjectivity that it "speaks the language of patriarchy" (1975, p.6) Masculine fantasies of what woman is and what woman ought to be find a way into our own reality, solidifying a patriarchal ideology that is only able to think of women in relation to men. Thereby, Mulvey advances the theory of the gaze, specifically dissecting the 'male gaze'.

The idea of the 'male gaze' first introduced by John Berger in 1972 "has migrated beyond academe and become a commonplace in works of fiction, art exhibits, and movie reviews [...] reverberat[ing] throughout cultural conversations across disciplinary and national boundaries"

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<sup>3</sup> Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18; Kaplan, E. A. (1997). *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*. New York: Routledge; Foucault, M. (1973). *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. London: Tavistock.

(Bloom, 2017, p.1). Mulvey's theory is based in feminist interpretations of Freudian psychoanalysis. Since the Freudian psychoanalysis makes sexual difference its essential category, feminist thinking can utilize it to grasp women's discrimination in the institution of cinema (Gibson, 1998, p.119). According to Freud, the women's real absence of a penis gives rise to the subconscious scenario that the difference between the sexes is due to the female's penis having been mutilated, evoking fantasies of emasculation. Captivated by his idea, Mulvey argues that all fetishism, is therefore a phallic replacement. Because the female form embodies the male castration anxiety it obtains a traumatic presence. To neutralize the threat of castration, that the female form signifies, two strategies have been commonly applied in filmic practice. Mulvey states: "The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the [...], punishment or saving of the guilty object [...] ; or [...] turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence over-valuation, the cult of the female star)" (1975, p. 13-14). As a result, the 'male gaze' is forced upon her. Originating from the camera, the spectator, or the male character, the male gaze relegates the female on the screen to an erotic object. Precisely, "[...] the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (1975, p. 11-12). As an example, Mulvey hints towards the genre of Film Noir. Here, the camera often "freezes" on the female body, interrupting the flow of action to provide viewers with a chance for "erotic contemplation" (1975, p.11). Evidently, the eye of the camera is not 'objective' but deeply biased. By capturing what the heterosexual male desires it leads audiences to identify as such, making them possess the woman with their gaze. Therefore, the cinematic apparatus as a whole becomes an extension of the phallogentric order, affirming the marginal social status of women. It's cinematic tools and techniques are not neutral but contaminated by the prevailing ideology (Johnston, 1973, p. 36). According to Mulvey, this



culminates in women being the "bearer of meaning", never the "maker of meaning" (1975, p. 7).

Nonetheless, film harbors a unique treasure. Like a magnifying glass it can be used to analyze our subconscious beliefs, attitudes, and stereotypes and provide insight into the roots of female oppression. Female filmmakers of the 1970s have discovered this tremendous opportunity. Despite the extremely limiting social, economic, and institutional conditions that often excluded women from film production throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they have forged a path, utilizing film to expand the scope of our imagination <sup>4</sup>. For the first time in German film history, female directors began to visualize the truths of women, instead of confirming a twisted image spun by male fantasies. Helke Sander and Margarethe von Trotta are two leading figures of the New German Cinema, they stand on the shoulders of giants including Marie Luise Droop (1890–1959), Hanna Henning (1884–1925), Lotte Reiniger (1899-1981), and Eva Fritzsche (1908-1986). Expanding on their work, Sander and Trotta have set their minds to "free[ing] [woman] from her position as seductive presence or source of visual pleasure and allow[ing] her to be seen anew" (Mulvey, 1975). This led them to establish a novel narrative on screen, which we now know as feminist film. Due to their significance for the feminist film movement, they were chosen for this study.

While the most successful directors of New German Cinema are easy to recognize, including Alexander Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, or Werner Herzog, the women directors being equally part of the same generation are often disregarded (Knight, 1992). This neglect is mirrored in academic literature, leading to a severe lack of theoretical research dedicated to the

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<sup>4</sup> The paper spares a detailed description of the manifold interdependencies between the women's liberation movement, the West German student movement, and the New German Cinema Movement. Yet, two particular restrictions for women in the film industry shall be mentioned. Firstly, one must consider that the film industry was subject to political censorship. With the emergence of the Red Army Faction (RAF) in 1970, a left-wing terrorist organization, the Federal Government introduced laws, that prohibited offenses against the Constitution. Films that problematized politically, and socially sensitive issues often could not be produced (see Levitin et al., 2002, p.86). Secondly, there was a severe gender bias of funding agencies and commissioning bodies. Female filmmakers received less funding, they often wrote their own screenplays and even starred in their own films, having to prove themselves more than their male colleagues. They typically resorted to less financially demanding segments like documentary filmmaking, shorts, and television (see Knight, 1992, p. 46).

artistic processes, methods, lives and oeuvres of these women. This is especially concerning, considering that filmmakers like Sander and Troтта did not only significantly contribute to the characteristic style and volume of the New German Cinema Movement, but because their impact went far beyond, creating a consciousness for the depiction of women in film. There is a disproportionate lack of research on the works of Troтта, Sander, and their cinematic techniques. It remains largely unknown how these techniques function and why they were so effective in tackling stereotypes of women. Further, there is little research that connects the past with the present, illustrating how we can learn from avant-garde foremothers in feminist film to combat the challenges that feminism faces today.

### Research Question and Methods

With the intention of accounting for this research gap, this paper will combine methods of film analysis with a comprehensive literature review. Search engines like SmartCat, Google Scholar, and analog library stocks will be consulted to find peer-reviewed research that investigates the influence of second-wave feminism on film, cinematic techniques, as well as the specific creative processes of Sander and Troтта. Keywords such as New German Cinema, Helke Sander, Margarethe von Troтта, early feminist film theory, women in film, female filmmakers, visual pleasure, gender in film, et cetera, will provide guidance during the research process. To suit the limited scope of this project, the research considers one film by each Sander and Troтта. Both films were selected on the basis of availability. While many of Sander's works are not available to the public, *The All-Round Reduced Personality – Redupers* (1978) could be accessed through the art house streaming service Mubi. *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (1978) by Troтта was part of the DVD collection of a German library<sup>5</sup>. Both films were reviewed in multiple cycles to allow an in-depth analysis and a close entanglement between theory and image.

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<sup>5</sup> More specifically, the Stadtbibliothek Stuttgart (the public library of the city of Stuttgart).

The paper poses the following question: How did female filmmakers of 1970s Germany combat narratives and imagery of women produced by the male-dominated film industry? The research question assumes that misogyny in film is mainly communicated on two levels: the narrative and the visual. The "narrative" refers to the act of storytelling. Misogynist narratives communicate irrational or hostile beliefs about women's abilities, roles, and traits rooted in patriarchal ideology. The "imagery" refers to the visual level of film. Misogynist imagery is usually characterized by a hyperfocus on the female body and a filmic iconography that eroticizes and degrades. Both components make up what we consider the mainstream representation of women in cinema.

To sufficiently account for both aspects of the research question, I will employ two different modes of examination. A narratological analysis will shed light on the patterns and particularities of the film's storyline and narration<sup>6</sup>. It investigates aspects of plot, character construction, modalities of time (plot duration, story duration) and space (point of view, editing, locales) as well as spoken word (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012). A mis-en-scène analysis will serve to systematically decode the contents of the film frame. These include the actors' performances, settings, and costumes, as well as aspects of lighting, color, and camera movement. The mis-en-scène is a key component in film studies and indispensable for its interpretation (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012). Due to the scope of this research, auditory elements such as sound will not be considered. Components are not to be seen as separate, but as co-dependent and relational, composing a complicated web of meaning, their interplay will be examined, where relevant.

Having outlined the rationale for the methodology and clarified the research question that motivates this paper, I will now move on to the analysis that constitutes the core of this research. I will introduce Helke Sander and discuss her 1978 film *The All-Round Reduced*

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<sup>6</sup> I would like to emphasize the difference between the storyline (or narrative) and narration. The narrative describes the linear causal-temporal logic within the film. It encompasses the content of the story and the way in which events and actions are organized in time. In comparison, narration is the mechanism through which narrative events are recounted to the audience (Buckland, 2021).

*Personality – Redupers*, followed by the introduction of Margarethe von Trotta and the analysis of her drama *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages*, from the same year. Finally, I will draw out the lessons that emerge for feminist filmmaking in present times.

### **Helke Sander**

To grasp Sander's artistic oeuvre, she needs to be read as a testimony of her time. Sander's biography reveals that she is deeply connected to the very beginnings of the unfolding social movements in 1968 West Berlin, mobilizing the women's liberation movement in the realm of television and film. Her work sutures together the circulating political concerns of the late sixties with aesthetic innovations and a delicate depiction of women's fates.

Helke Sander was born in West Berlin in 1937. In 1969, she graduated from the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (DFFB)<sup>7</sup> as one of 3 women, among 35 film students (Bernstorff, n.d.). Strikingly, films made by DFFB students between 1966 and 1970 tend to document and discuss the major issues of the late sixties' uprisings<sup>8</sup> and Helke Sander marks no exception. Examining Sander's early DFFB films, one detects "a consistent focus on women's "double burden": that is, the juggling act of parenting and of housework, while also working, often in precarious labor" (Gerhardt, 2019, p.70). This thematic affinity might also stem from her personal situation, being a single mother of a small toddler from her marriage with Finnish author Markku Lahtela. In a personal report, Sander articulates her circumstances: "Being single, with a child, without financial support, and in this job, was a demanding mélange. It led me to co-found the women's movement in 1967/1968 [...] It became clear to me and others, not only that various classes existed, poor and rich, [...] not only racism, [...] but also

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<sup>7</sup> The German Film and Television Academy Berlin (DFFB) was founded in 1966 in West Berlin in response to the Oberhausen Manifesto. The Oberhausen Manifesto was signed by over 20 directors, demanding a revision of funding structures and the establishment of film schools (Gerhardt et al., 2018, p.95). 34 students were selected out of 850 applicants for the DFFB's inaugural class.

<sup>8</sup> Considering the DFFB's former central location at the Theodor-Heuss Platz in West Berlin, students inevitably witnessed crucial historic events. For instance, the demonstrations of the state visit by the Shah of Iran on June 2, 1967, during which a police officer killed nonviolent student protestor Benno Ohnesorg. This fatal incident is widely perceived as the event that ignited West Germany's "1968 student protests" (Gerhardt et al., 2019, p.69).

that a difference ran [...] through society, splitting the genders into hierarchies with different laws for each one" (own translation) (Sander, 2000, p. 146). On a formal level, it is "the subjective point of view in aligning the camera's shot intensely with the main character and the unique use of voice-over narration" (Gerhardt, 2019, p.70) that would become distinguishing properties of her more renowned movies, including *The All-Round Reduced Personality – Redupers* (1978) which will be discussed in further detail.

While studying at the DFFB, Sander engaged in vigorous political work, including the co-creation of cooperative childcare centers as well as founding the political Action Council for the Liberation of Women<sup>9</sup>. At the 23<sup>rd</sup> conference of the Socialist German Student's Union (SDS) in 1968, she publicly denounced the discrimination of women within the student movement (Levitin et al., 2002, p. 68; Carter & Sandberg, 2020, p. 397), inseparably linking her to the very first hours of the second feminist uprising.<sup>10</sup> Later on, in 1973, Sander organized the first International Women's Film Seminar in the Federal Republic, and shortly after, she founded the widely recognized film journal *Frauen und Film*. The journal aims to shed light on "the patriarchal institution of film, whether in terms of funding, production, and labor or in terms of film form, representation, and aesthetics" (Hennessy, 2018, p. 51) and is now widely recognized as the "oldest feminist journal on film" in the western world (Frieden et al., 1993, p. 2). It is important to mention that Helke Sander is one of the few explicitly feminist filmmakers of the 1970s, a time in which "the majority of the public, who at any rate felt no special sympathies for the new women's movement, was under the impression that feminism was necessarily proclamatory, rigorous and, for that matter, not especially entertaining" (Levitin et al., 2002, p. 86). It was only in the late 1970s that this mentality began to change, and financial

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<sup>9</sup> A political group that resulted from initiatives in collective childcare known as the Kinderladenbewegung (Children's Nursery Movement). The action council was primarily concerned with issues related to childcare, gendered labor, and sexual politics of the domestic sphere (see Carter & Sandberg, 2020, p. 397).

<sup>10</sup> When the SDS representative Hans-Jürgen Krahl reacted with indifference towards Sander's speech, Sigrid Rüdiger, a female member of the SDS board threw a tomato at him. The tomato toss went down in history for marking the start of the second-wave feminism movement in West Germany, encapsulating its poignant and spectacular activist character (Hertrampf, 2021).

resources for films that deal with feminist concerns became available. Julia Knight (1992) especially highlights the “[...] small workshop department at ZDF [that] played a particularly important role in enabling women filmmakers to develop their careers [...] Das kleine Fernsehspiel (The Little Television Play)” (p. 98). It was this department that commissioned Sander’s first feature length film: *The All-Round Reduced Personality – Redupers* (1978), which will be analyzed in the subsequent paragraphs.

### **The All-Round Reduced Personality - Redupers (1978)**

*The All-Round Reduced Personality – Redupers* (1978) is acclaimed as an important representative work of early women's cinema, echoing the collective experiences of women living in 1970s West Berlin. In an ironic manner, the docufiction film tells the story of press photographer Edda Chiemnyjewski (portrayed by Sander), who is a member of a female photography collective and torn between her private responsibilities as a single mother and her



career aspirations (Figure 1)<sup>11</sup>.

Edda works for small newspapers and journals, documenting local happenings. Although she often labors until late at night at the expense of her private life, her work is not financially rewarding.

*Figure 1: Edda with her daughter*

Because Edda is interested in producing more meaningful photographs, she, together with three other female photographers, applies for a photography contest. The campaign is issued by the city of Berlin. It is intended to feature the artists perspectives on their home city, Berlin, to stimulate more favorable attitudes among citizens. The women, however, present their very

<sup>11</sup> Copyright remark: All film stills from *The All-Round Reduced Personality – Redupers* (1978) are the property of Basis-Film Verleih GmbH (Berlin). All film stills from *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (1978) are the property of Bioskop Films. The images are used within the boundaries of the Dutch law, solely for the purpose of this research. Please refer to Article 15a in the unofficial translation of the Copyright act, published by the University of Amsterdam's Institute for Information Law (van Eechoud, n.d.).

own take on the project by hinting towards the dichotomies between East and West Berlin and possible opportunities for reconciliation. In billboard-sized pictures they capture various aspects of Berlin's scattered identity and experiment with placing them along the Berlin wall. They also construct a curtain installation on a viewing platform through which people in the West can gaze into East Berlin. When the investors express their dissatisfaction about the project output, the women must find that curatorial decisions are still based on the tastes and convictions of conservative, male power holders. To prevent their project from getting cancelled, Edda and her colleagues visit an art exhibition to talk to fellow artists, politicians, and press representatives. Most of them are not fond of the project, due to its openly political stance. Only the artist, whose work is displayed in the gallery, encourages Edda's plans. After the event Edda takes him to a restaurant to further discuss the billboard project. However, as he tries to force a kiss on her, it turns out, that his endorsement was never genuine but romantically motivated. In the end, the women come to find themselves in a relation of dependency and invisibility. They are challenged to stand their ground as independent female artists (Mayne, 1981).

At its core, *Redupers* tells the story of women who are expected to be everywhere, while being allowed, in their entirety, nowhere. It sheds light on the "double burden", the fate of roughly 48% of women in 1980 (Grunow, 2021). Historically speaking, women used to be relegated to the domestic sphere, taking on the responsibilities of family and household. Throughout and after the Second World War, however, there was a notable increase in the demand for female labor outside the realm of the home. Urban women suddenly faced a "double burden" taking on the role of the provider and the caregiver. This development soon morphed into a vicious cycle: the gendered division of labor at home promoted different forms of sociability among men and women, which manifested sexist notions of their proclivities and abilities (Siegelbaum, 2011). Helke Sander illuminates this dilemma in the *The All-Round Reduced Personality*, an allusion to the Marxist-Lenist utopia of the "all-round developed

socialist personality", that is intended to unfold in the dreams of the GDR government and the political left in West Germany. According to the Marxist ideal, it is possible to overcome capitalist conditions and achieve a fair society in which every individual can fully develop their mental, physical and cultural potential, while meeting their material needs (Bittighöfer, 1976). Purportedly, the conditions of socialism would yield personalities that "fully and consistently blossom" (Kuhnert, 1976, p. 15) possessing qualities such as "highest all-round education, constructiveness, harmony with society and fellow human beings, moral perfection, material wealth, and stable happiness" (Brock, 2009, p. 221). I reason that in *Redupers*, Sander contrasts this ideal with the reality of women living in the 1970s, that is characterized by the impossibility of flourishing in either the private or the professional life. Out of this permanent condition of restraint and the feeling of splitting oneself apart to satisfy the multiple demands, emerges an architecture of fragmentation that makes up the very identity of *Redupers*.

The sense of fragmentation is augmented by the film's ambivalent mode of narration. The female voice-over takes on schizophrenic features. It fluctuates between a third person narrator, "an authority that perceives events from without" (Mayne, 1981, p. 165) and a first-person narrator, offering a glimpse into Edda's thoughts and feelings. Applying a narratological analysis this phenomenon can be read as an endeavor to problematize women's quest for a voice that is no longer censored by patriarchal dogma. In her article "She Says, He Says: The Power of the Narrator in Modernist Film" film critic B. Ruby Rich concretizes: "The difficulty of saying "I" has been a central subject for many contemporary feminist authors [...]. The extent of alienation, silence, and containment has been so vast that women, accustomed to speaking for so long in the voice of a male syntax, have had to undertake a political struggle to reclaim language [...]" In *Redupers*, "[t]he lack of a hegemonic narrative voice, [...] reflects in all its shifts and contradictions, this precise struggle to name the self by finding the voice of that intangible third person" (1983, p. 43).

A closer examination reveals that the narration often makes use of irony, playfully



deconstructing the limitations women face in society. On one occasion, we observe Edda calculating her revenues and expenses. The female voice-over remarks: "She has no time to reflect on nagging questions. A question she'd like to give serious thought to is: "In what universe could a female cook possibly find time to run the state affairs?" (own translation). This alteration of a quote often attributed to Lenin, "[t]he first best cook could run a state", exposes the idealist fallacies prevailing in society.<sup>12</sup> First and foremost, the belief that woman is equal, when the acclaimed equality only exists on paper. The lived reality of women consisted of being "tasked with housework and childcaring, which prevented them from participating as equals in other forms of work or in political organizing" (Gerhardt, 2019, p. 78).

Irony is substantial to Sander's narrative style. The ironic self-reflexive commentary allows Edda to voice her concerns, hopes, and frustrations and, as Gerhard (2019) points out, to make the "private political" (p. 78). I would like to advance Gerhard's (2019) argument, proposing that Sander's narrative style creates room for the discussion of political matters without attaching a gravitas to it that could disrupt the movie's atmosphere, its subtle sadness, and tender cinematography. It imparts the movie with a poetic persistence that carries forward the questions and demands of women, without mimicking the brute force that is often found in male rhetoric. Helke Sander herself clarifies that "starting with the own experiences and exploring the political in the private, does not mean to display one's own sensitivities in blind subjectivity, but instead to give the experiences an aesthetic form" (own translation) (Hohenberger et al., 2000, p.27). With regard to narration, irony was chosen as the aesthetic vessels to contain and communicate Edda's political attitude and personal concerns.

Drawing from the narratological analysis one might argue that the narrative patterns can

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<sup>12</sup> In 1917, shortly after the Russian monarchy was overthrown, Vladimir Lenin published an article in which he stated: "[w]e know that an unskilled laborer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration" (Lenin, 1967, p.32). In his publication he promises the most oppressed groups of the tsarist regime education and better future prospects, that would allow them to replace erstwhile elites in running the state affairs. In a propaganda campaign by Bolshevik women activists Lenin's quote got altered. They presented Lenin as an advocate of women's interests, and established the "kitchen maid that participates in state governance" as a symbol of women's emancipation in the Sowjet Union (Klots , 2018).

be read as a feminist triumph itself. At no point, the spectator is allowed to question Edda's intellect, her wit, and sharpness of mind. As Wolfram Schütte writes in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* the "open questions are courageous proofs of self-awareness; [the] irony, [the] humor flags of sovereignty, as if conquered with the left hand by a woman, with wit, imagination and poetry, whose energetic richness is only fully developed when these precise fragments, these nuanced details, these snapshots of everyday life are put together into a mosaic: through the senses of the spectator" (Hohenberger et al., 2000, p. 29). I dare to propose that the film trains the spectator to detect these irrefutable qualities that object to the image of the helpless woman, the shortsighted, the dull, the naïve, the seductive. The film imagines a spectator that is capable of learning, and whose willingness in doing so determines whether the film succeeds in communicating its message. This is the activist claim that the film raises, reflecting its challenge back onto the audience, making them part of feminist struggle themselves. B. Ruby Rich arrives at a similar conclusion: "The narrator may be seen, then, as an active agent working in conjunction with the active viewer; the two become partners in the collective enterprise of fashioning a feminist voice" (Rich, 1983, p.43).

On a visual level, Edda's aspirations to transcend patriarchal heteronomy and become an "active looking subject" (Sander, 1978, p.6) is exemplified through her artistic practice as a photographer. The positive/negative of photography is reflected in the black and white aesthetic of the movie, which can be interpreted as emblematic of ideological divisions. It seems that the photographers in *Redupers* use photography to bridge the private and public spheres that women inhabit, to create a sense of rootedness, belonging and wholeness. While photography seems to be only part of the public sphere in the beginning of the movie, serving to secure the women's livelihoods, it eventually transforms into a deeply emotional and personal craft. We get introduced to Edda's work through a press commission that requires her to wait patiently to document the arrival of a train (Figure 2). She is forced into passivity, anticipating a happening that she has no personal connection with. Edda's gaze is directed by the client's demands and

her excellence is measured by external evaluation, which places her in a position of dependency and inferiority. Only when she takes part in the photography contest, does Edda for the first



*Figure 2: Edda waiting for the train*

time get the chance to present her own view and infuse her pictures with meaning. In the curtain installation that the women set up together (Figure 3), the power dynamics shift – the artists become storytellers, as it is now them who stir the gaze of the



*Figure 3: Edda (left) in front of the curtain installation*

spectator. Edda and her colleagues are surprised when the opening of the curtain does not provoke the reception they had hoped for. They are underwhelmed by the visual effect that the curtain creates. These and other experiences of failure<sup>13</sup> in Sander's movie I claim to be incremental to women's struggle for liberation, and to feminist film practice in particular. The

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spectator is accustomed to the idea of failure and encouraged to see it as something inevitable to persist in feminist debates and, perhaps, to evoke change. Sander herself declares that "[w]e must first learn to see with our own eyes and not through the

<sup>13</sup> Another moment of failure in the film is the discontent with the final photography project voiced by investors of the Berlin Senate. Here, Sander reflects upon her own experiences with funding bodies, "that seemed generally supportive of women's filmmaking, but nonetheless blocked projects deemed overly disruptive of prevailing sociosexual and aesthetic codes and norms" (Carter & Sandberg, 2020, p. 398).

poetry" (Sander, 1978, p.8).

A detailed mis-en-scène analysis reveals how Edda is represented as a woman. I will argue that cinematic techniques purposefully steer the spectator's attention towards features of her personality rather than her body. Visually, Edda encapsulates the modern, steadfast, and determined woman. Although her costuming is not unusual for the fashion of the 1970s, one might still argue that she plays with the androgynous, only wearing suits, dark coats, and short hair just like her male colleagues. Alternatively, we can see her in her working gear, a worn-out sweater, and a dark apron. The clothes neither conceal nor empathize her femininity, they simply serve to underline her strength of character and her role as a photographer. Two scenes I deem of particular interest when investigating how Sander approaches the portrayal of femininity, sexuality, and womanhood. The first one being an "anti-sex scene", a scene that replaces the typical sex-scene in movies by reversing traditional visual cues. The sequence shows Edda with her boyfriend Werner who, according to the narrator, "strayed into her house" (own translation) (Figure 4). This phrasing already communicates a certain casualness. Evidently, in *Redupers* men only have significance in their roles as hinderances, they are of marginal importance as lovers. Werner is unobtrusive, gentle, calm, and chaotic, never threatening, never hiding ulterior motives. He is an accepted companion, rather than a lover. The sequence effectively plays on our common conceptions of a "sex-scene". Instead of



Figure 4: Edda and Werner in bed

undressing, we observe Werner buttoning up Edda's shirt so that she doesn't get cold. Instead of seductive glances and love confessions, Werner and Edda read the newspaper and let their days pass in review. Neither Edda nor Werner are reduced to

their physicality. Although they are lying in bed together, in dim lighting, the camera keeps a steady focus on their faces, refraining from nudity or eroticization. When taking a closer look at the separate frames, the *mis-en-scène* analysis reveals that both characters are always positioned in equal height. Here, the visual composition aligns with the symbolic meaning, indicating that Werner and Edda's relationship is non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian. In the small cosmos of Edda's bedroom, for a moment, gender equality seems to have come true.

The second scene that I consider relevant, simply due to the sexist conceptions such scenes are usually afflicted with, features Edda in her nightgown while exercising (Figure 5). The camera shows her in a full shot, resisting any close-ups that could single out some of her body parts evoking voyeuristic pleasure. Thereby, Edda is always embedded in setting and context and cannot become the subject of an eroticized gaze. Instead, the audience is inclined to notice her strength, her determination, and her impetus as a character. This emphasis is paralleled by Edda's choices and leisure activities. Edda practices the sport Aikido that is intended to "help the disoriented find themselves" (own translation). Not just in her profession but also in her choice of sport, she is once again located in a sphere where typically men reside.



*Figure 5: Edda, exercising in the morning*

In the scene, Edda is a bystander. She is trying to pick up on the complicated movements after being able to "attend only five times in the last three months" (own translation). This is a hint to women's untapped potential. It

reflects the aforementioned paradox of women being present yet absent; Present in a domain that used to be ruled by men alone, absent in their entirety, due to the severe social, economic and cultural restraints that prevent total socialization.

*Redupers* synthesizes works and feminist efforts of multiple women, composing a total piece of work that fosters a feminist imagery. The photographs that are shown throughout the movie are original prints by female photographer Abisag Tüllmann (Berlinale, 2019), adding to the film's authenticity. In one scene particularly, Sander features the work of Yvonne Rainer, Valie Export, and Ursula Reuter-Christiansen, layering their films atop a newspaper. The montage is enriched by a voice-over reading a letter from Edda's relative. As B. Ruby Rich writes, "Sander superimposes the private words of women's letters and the unprecedented film images of women's imagination and self-definition of daily life" (1983, p.39). This technique of "visionary recombination" is profoundly political, illuminating the political dimension of other female artist's work (Rich, 1983, p.42). Opposing to Claire Johnston's claim that "the juxtaposition of disparate elements to bring about emotional reverberations, [...] invites the invasion of [the male spectator's] ideology" (Johnston, 1973, p. 37), I chose to read Sander's approach as a proclamation of female allyship. It is exemplary of the feminist rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s, which emphasizes the idea of a unified "we", in fact not "one "we" but many" (Levitin et al., 2002, p.19). This is mirrored by the plot that frequently portrays thrilling moments of female friendship that emerge from the collective task of navigating responsibilities as mothers, artists, and women.

The movie ends with a quote by female poet Christa Wolf: "Anyone who asks about a person's diary must accept the fact that more is concealed than said. It was not possible to speak about plans, clearly set forth in the diary, [...] And it wasn't possible to bring into focus through strenuous thought the stuff of life that was very near in time. Or the mistakes made in trying to do this" (own translation). The diary is emblematic of the entire film that frequently imitates the style of documentary films and includes autobiographical nuances. I suggest that Wolf's quote highlights that women have not yet established their own narrative. As the female voice explains they remain "with the feet on the ground, head in the clouds" (own translation). One can sense a deep melancholy as the underlying meaning of the movie unfolds. Despite all efforts

the female gaze remains veiled. Women are still being impaired, and thus not able to see "themselves and others, society, with their own eyes" they are still in the process of "formulat[ing] first concepts with the help of which we can begin to comprehend the nature of past feminine oppression, today's social contradictions, and our expectations for a different human future" (Sander, 1978, p.6). The Women's Liberation Movement must continue, for woman still walks through life blindly, with only a small glimmer of what she is capable of.

### **Margarethe von Trotta**

At a film screening hosted by the Goethe Institut<sup>14</sup> in Vancouver in 1996, Margarethe von Trotta was described as the most influential female director in the history of German film: "Her films give a clear emphasis to feminine aspects: The fates of women form the clear focus of her pictures – albeit the fates of women who intervene very deliberately in political activity. She is an unambiguous part of the tradition of the political film" (Levitin et al., 2002, p. 78). Indeed, Trotta has proven her proficiency in producing bold filmic investigations of the emotional, psychological, and political territories of women. Her sustained productivity as a director and appeal to the mainstream audience helped her obtain international prominence, making her a suitable choice for this paper.

Trotta was born in 1942 in Berlin. She enrolled at the Neue Münchner Schauspielschule<sup>15</sup> aspiring to become an actress and eventually venture into directing. In the years between 1968 and 1972, she starred in films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Herbert Achternbusch, and Volker Schlöndorff, advancing to be one of the best-known faces of the New German Cinema. Her marriage with Volker Schlöndorff provided her with the opportunity to co-direct "Lost Honor of Katharina Blum" (1975) and facilitated her entrance into directing - a world that mainly operates based on male allegiance. In 1978, Trotta made her debut as an

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<sup>14</sup> The Goethe-Institut is the cultural institute of the Federal Republic of Germany, supporting the promotion of the German language and culture, as well as international cultural exchange (see *Sprache. Kultur. Deutschland*, n.d.).

<sup>15</sup> The Neue Münchner Schauspielschule was founded in 1960 and is a private school for theater and film acting in Munich, Germany (Neue Münchner Schauspielschule, 2022).

independent director with *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (Levitin et al., 2002, p.85). The movie received several national awards, including the Bundesfilmpreis<sup>16</sup>. In contrast to most female directors, Trotta did not first immerse herself in documentary film, but immediately realized her projects in the form of feature films. "Her public acclaim, which none of her colleagues has achieved to a comparable degree, has justified her course" (Moeller, 1986a, p.119).

In the earlier stages of her career Trotta refused to label herself as a feminist filmmaker (Eifler, 2003, p. 448; Jaehne, 1987, p. 127; Kress et al., 2009, p. 126). It is likely that Trotta made these statements to avoid intervention in her filmmaking. As stated previously, the early 1970s were characterized by a widespread skepticism towards the feminist movement. In the film industry, there was a consensus, that women who presented themselves as feminists could not be objective about women's issues. Because of their perceived or actual allegiances to the women's movement, female filmmakers were frequently prohibited from producing films (Levitin et al., 2002, p.86). In recent times, the filmmaker has clarified: "I was a feminist, and I am a feminist. One is always scared of this word" (own translation) (Brockhues, 2015). Regardless of her expressed political stance, it is evident that Trotta demonstrates an extraordinary refinement in deconstructing female cliches and replacing them with new, complex female prototypes. Her dedication to "liberate her female protagonists from the traditional confinement and restrictions of marriage, household, and motherhood" (Eifler, 2003, p. 447) has awarded her the status of a role model and mentor within subsequent generations of directors (Levitin et al., 2002, p. 94).

### **The Second Awakening of Christa Klages (1978)**

*The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* is inspired by the real case of Margit Czenki, who committed a heist in 1971. The synopsis revolves around Christa, her lover Werner, and

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<sup>16</sup> The Bundesfilmpreis (today known as Deutscher Filmpreis) is the most prestigious award in German film. It is being awarded since 1951.



her friend Wolf, who rob a bank to secure the economic survival of a daycare center (Levitin et. al, 2002). While Wolf is captured immediately and Werner soon identified, Christa remains a suspect. Christa seeks the help of two old friends, a priest, and her former classmate Ingrid. She hopes to convince the priest to donate the stolen money to the childcare center, to avoid raising suspicion among the authorities. When he refuses, Christa and Werner, seek shelter at Ingrid's home. Ingrid is the embodiment of the traditionally ideal woman: beautiful, domestic, and obedient to her controlling husband Heinz. Out of affection for Christa, Ingrid agrees to deliver the money to the childcare center, yet without success: they refuse the money, scared of getting entangled in the crime. When Werner is shot by the police, the priest helps Christa escape to a farm in Portugal. Ingrid soon follows and, although the two women enjoy working on the farm, they are soon asked to leave. The rumors of the bank robbery and their alleged lesbian relationship have caused the community's resentment. When Christa returns to Germany, she is confronted with the futility of her actions; the childcare center is forced to move out and replaced by a sex shop. Eventually, the police capture her, and Christa has to face the bank clerk Lena, for identification. To her surprise, Lena lies without hesitation: „It's definitely not her!“, absolving Christa of all accusations. This moment marks Christa's "second awakening" and concludes the film.

In *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages*, Trotta performs the work of an emotional archeologist. She is less interested in the investigation of historical events than in the ways in which "history – be it political, social, personal, or cultural – moves characters beyond themselves in catalytic fashion, enabling them to [...] adopt new visions of themselves and their place in the world" (Ward, 1995, p.51-52). As the narratological analysis reveals, Trotta's psychological interest influences the story's structure as well as its narrative devices. According to one of the oldest dramatic structures theorized by the German playwright Gustav Freytag in 1895, stories are usually constructed around five stages: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and catastrophe/resolution (Freytag, 1895, p.114-140). The film script of *Christa*

*Klages* however, is divided into five chapters that align with Christa's internal journey: "Approach," "Friendship," "Community," "Solitude," and finally "The Second Awakening" (Ward, 1995, p.60). Thereby, aspects of internality and identity are being foregrounded in the plot. Additionally, Trotta uses the narrative device of voice-over narration to reduce the proximity between the spectator and Christa's internal world. Through Christa's internal monologue, that is made audible, the spectator gets an immediate sense of how she interprets

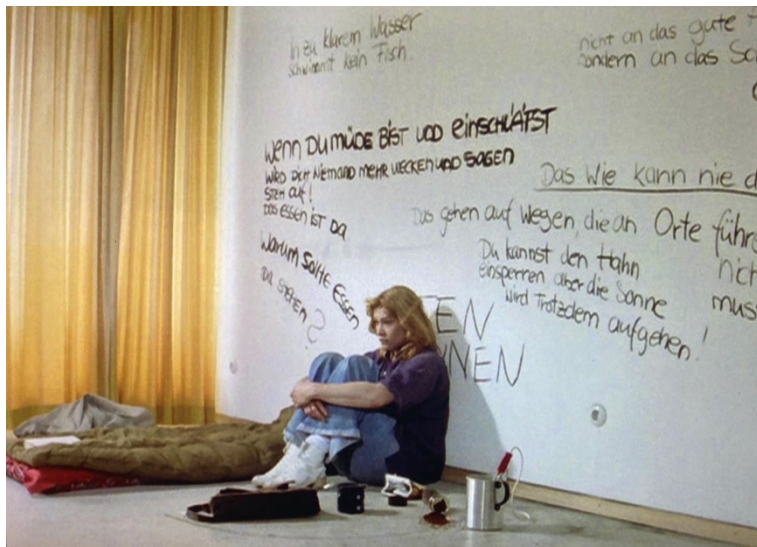


Figure 6: Christa in her period of desperation

lived experiences. Trotta empowers her protagonist to "control her own discourse, to recount her experience in her own voice, rather than have it shaped through the words of others" (Ward, 1995, p.63). The chosen vocabulary serves to underline



Figure 7: Christa sitting in her empty apartment

looking past the bodily form (p.60).

moments of "awakening", most beautifully demonstrated in the opening sequence that foreshadows Christa's period of "solitude" (Figure 6). Here, we observe Christa sitting alone in her empty apartment. As the camera closes in on her face, we hear Christa thinking: "I had to create my own prison first to realize what had happened with me." According to Ward (1995) the phrasing "with me", instead of "to me" connotes an internal development. It prompts audiences to shift their attention and curiosity towards aspects of the psyche,

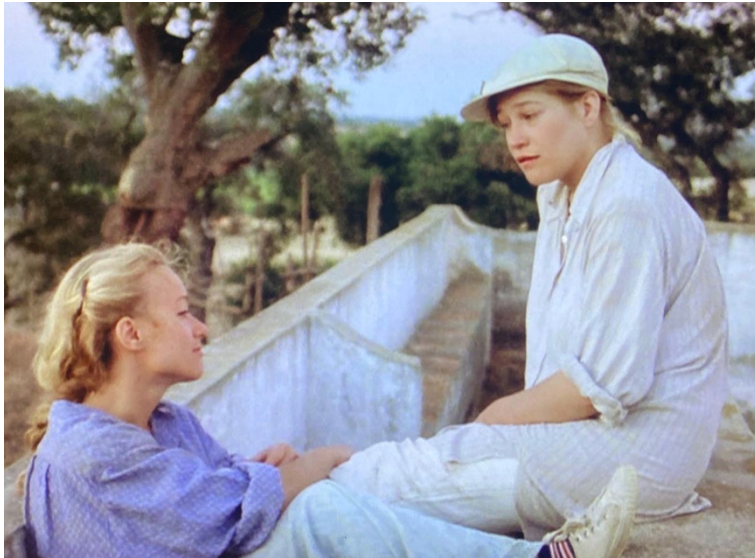
I would like to expound upon this observation, introducing the component of space. Christa is placed in a strikingly sparse, almost ascetic *mis-en-scène*. Thereby, I argue, the depth of her internal distress is juxtaposed with the dullness of the empty room. When Christa's episode of "solitude" is shown in full length at the end of the movie, the audience can observe the actions that led up to her vocalized thought. Christa has covered the walls with hopeful quotes written in charcoal (Figure 7) as if she were trying to remind herself of her own strength. Evidently, the chaos of her internal world has imposed itself on the room, ruling over the space. Not only verbally but also visually, Christa's mind has become the sovereign of the story. This is further amplified by the camera movement, zooming in on her eyes as the scene progresses. Eyes tend to be considered important indicators of emotion, and the "gates to the soul". Intense close-up shots on Christa's eyes reappear throughout the movie, besides humanizing the criminal, they serve to underpin the focus on identity.

Another particularity of Trotta's narratives is "the structural portrayal of role reversals that mirror, or double, the central female figure" (Eifler, 2003, p.446). In *Christa Klages*, female characters are described in oppositional tension in a way that "each chooses what the other chooses not to be" (Levitin et al., 2002, p. 80). Building upon suggestions by Hehr (2000), I reason that Christa and Ingrid are not only contrasted in their fierce and weak personalities but essentially embody antithetical stages on the way to emancipation. This narrative technique of juxtaposition highlights womanhood as a social construct, or, as Trotta puts it, the fact that "[women] are the product of a purposeful impact of society on them" (Raesch, 2018, p. 9). Following this argument, Christa represents the feminist ideal of the liberated woman. She is brave, warmhearted, optimistic, and refuses to engage with patriarchal concepts such as marriage, religion, and the traditional working-world. Ward (1995) suggests that Christa is constructed as a "vigilante messiah". Her name proclaims "the accusatory, yet ultimately Christ-like nature of her character" (p.51) and her noble cause elevates her to heroism. Like a saint, Christa leaves imprints on the characters she encounters. She engages other female characters

in a process of "socio-psychological consciousness-raising" (Moeller, 1986a, p.120), presenting them with the impetus to embark on their own journey of liberation. When Christa meets Ingrid, she essentially encounters her patriarchal counterpart. Ingrid is entirely trapped in oppressive patriarchal structures, exemplified by her abusive relationship with Heinz. Heinz dominates the domestic sphere, her career aspirations, and even her mind, as she frequently suffers from nightmares. He has led her to internalize the conviction that her "social position is predetermined by [her] biological structure" (Raesch, 2018, p.9). Within the polarities of Christa and Ingrid, the bank clerk Lena marks the equilibrium. Naively, she still dreams of everything Ingrid already has, "a condominium, designer furniture, and a husband with long-term job security" (Ward, 1995, p.59). Only when she "takes upon herself a detective-like reconstruction of Christa's life" (Martin, 2007, p. 5) is she able to extend her sphere of activity beyond the realms of home and work. Her empathetic lie is her first act of emancipation, it highlights the possibility of transition between Ingrid and Christa, between a patriarchal past and a feminist future.

On a visual level, the different emancipatory stages are mirrored by the character's costuming. Christa wears neutrally colored, wide-cut pants and blouses. Her hair is tied with two white bows. Thereby, her appearance expresses a subtle femininity and a sense of ease and freedom. Ingrid on the other hand, is dressed to cater to the male gaze. She represents the hyper feminine wearing soft pink colors, long skirts that accentuate her female figure, and taking meticulous care of her appearance. When she follows Christa to Portugal and physically distances herself from Hans, the color palette of her clothing changes from pink to blue (Figure 8). She gets in touch with her true self, breaking free from the toxic constraints that her marriage mandates. Lena has fully adapted to her work dress code. As she begins her quest for answers, she is only seen in long coats, emphasizing her investigative demeanor.

The narrative is coated in a specific aesthetic. As the three women change their perspectives, they move from isolation to solidarity. To strengthen the impression of female unity, Trotta choses a specific visual code. Not purely on a narrative level but also visually,



*Figure 8: Ingrid (left) and Christa (right) in Portugal*

relationships among women are being depicted "in the sense of the counterculture, of an alternative lifestyle, as quasi love relationships" (Moeller, 1986a, P.120). While a lesbian relationship between Christa and Ingrid is explicitly mentioned,



*Figure 9: Christa taking Lena hostage during the bank robbery*

Trotta uses specific cinematic techniques to create intimacy, sensuality, and erotic nuances between Christa and Lena. Right from the beginning, there are visual indications that Lena will ultimately declare her solidarity with Christa. When Lena is held hostage during the armed robbery, she gazes up to her captor showing no signs of assault, rather curiosity and intrigue (Figure 9). Besides underpinning the obvious power dynamics of the heist, I argue, that the positioning of the camera plays on melodramatic codes, used in romance movies. Lena is shot from a slightly higher angle, enhancing her doll-like features. As she searches for Christa's gaze, her lips are slightly parted, attaining a seductive appeal. Christa has secured Lena, as in a hug, with her left arm

resting on Lena's chest. Accompanied by ambient music, the audience feels as if they are watching two languishing lovers rather than a gruesome robbery. Another visual indication of intimacy can be noted when Lena discovers a picture of Christa in the newspaper. Lying in bed, she places the picture next to a photograph of herself, as if to see how they would as a couple. This sensual gesture hints towards a romantic infatuation.

Ultimately, Lena proves her alliance with women, and specifically with Christa, through her act of complicity. She has recognized how deeply the bourgeois society is permeated by patriarchal paradigms and is willing to break the law to proclaim her allyship. The shift in her consciousness is communicated visually by her confidential smile, that is only meant for Christa. Moeller (1986b) notices how in the final scene, the camera zooms in on both women, blurring out the police official between them. While his "male power" is eradicated symbolically, female power is proclaimed in unity (p.139). By editing shots of Christa's and Lena's faces directly after another, the spatial distance between them is bridged, creating the optic illusion of closeness, and thus unity. This moment initiates Christa's "second awakening", as she comes to understand that goals of monumental scope can only be achieved through conjoined efforts. The film thereby – on a narrative and visual level – suggests that emancipation is a collective process characterized by mutual learning. It expresses the power of a psychic sisterhood, in which bonds of mind are stronger than the bonds of flesh and blood. Moeller (1986a) persuades me that, "[i]n a way, then, this film and most of West German feminist filmmaking is utopian, a vision as much as political strategy for the present" (p. 121).

### **Lessons Learned: Impulses for Contemporary Filmmaking**

When looking at contemporary filmmaking, can we conclude that we have become wiser? Can we say that we have fathomed the mechanics of looking and freed women from their function as mere ornaments? To answer this question, I will shed light on the major achievements and shortcomings in film theory since the 1970s. I will conclude with four lessons

that can be derived from Helke Sander and Margarethe von Trotta, to build a future in which women can finally find home in the gleaming world of cinema.

Film theory is still in the process of accounting for significant shortcomings. The heterosexual, Eurocentric focus in feminist thought of the 1970s saturates this paper and marks its most conspicuous limitation. Recognizing that the "construction of the apparent monolithic "woman", in fact, corresponds to the white, western woman, ignoring female minorities and marginalized women" (own translation) (Lippert, 2006, p. 225) can be seen as one of the biggest achievements in recent film theory. Works by Trinh T. Minh-ha, Linda Williams, and, most prominently, bell hooks have contributed new perspectives to feminist debates by developing queer theory and adding the component of race (Lippert, 2006, p. 230). In her essay "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" (1999, p. 308) bell hooks reversed the concept of the male gaze, presenting a way in which black female spectators intervene in the conveyance of sexist and racist ideologies. The "oppositional gaze" interrogates the image on the screen, "look[ing] past race and gender for aspects of content, form, language" (hooks, 2014, p. 122). This enabled black female spectators to "critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as an object of phallogentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator" (hooks, 2014, p. 122). Having briefly outlined contemporary dynamics in film theory, I will now bridge past and present by illuminating worthwhile ways in which findings can be applied to contemporary filmmaking. I propose to get inspired by Sander's and Trotta's filmic legacy, drawing four central lessons.

In contemporary cinema, one frequently observes "a simple gender reversal of hero/heroine, activity/passivity, subject/object" (Genz, 2009, p. 152; Thornham, 2012, p. 4). To circumnavigate misogynist traditions, theatres are being flooded with women protagonists who experience revelation by discovering the masculine traits within them. Although acclaimed by the masses, this approach is a "celebration of the superficial markets of power" (Thornham, 2012, p. 3) and not a fertile ground for sustainable change. We must strive to see a future unfold

in which we can cherish woman not merely for the masculine parts she entails but for her innate self. In this light, we get to appreciate what shall be the first lesson of the German feminist cinema of the 1970s: a radical focus on identity, allowing women to exist in contradiction, complexity, and multitude. The sensitive exploration of identity that underlies the works of Sander and Trotta has been articulated in Cormican & William's 2021 book *The Tender Gaze*. Presupposing Mulvey's assumption that the female character in a movie is subjected to three gazes (viewer, camera, and male characters), the "tender gaze" tries to guide these entities to "cast a compassionate rather than a cold eye on others" (Cormican & William, 2021, p. 17). Instead of reifying or condescending, it "imbues the people and events depicted with a multidimensional complexity, decenters dominant cultural perspectives, and foregrounds anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-classist, anti-homophobic, and anti-ableist heuristics in encounters with the other" (Cormican & William, 2021, p.18)<sup>17</sup>. On a narrative level, a tender gaze is the "careful contextualization of characters as individuals with histories" (Cormican & William, 2021, p. 143). On a visual level, the camera work "invites viewers' lingering, thoughtful, and thus "tender" gaze on the gendered bodies" (Cormican & William, 2021, p. 143). The previous analysis has shown that this can be achieved by a "filmic rhythm that always remains undramatically subtle", making internal development visible (Eifler, 2003, p. 447) or intense close-ups on mimicry and eyes. In essence, a focus on identity allows the female character to take shape outside of the masculine/feminine division. Because the tender gaze is compatible with different genres, it holds the capacity to solidify stories of strong, authentic women in the mainstream visual world and enable feminist narratives to surpass their stigma of "women's cinema". While the approach of the "tender gaze" might be more straightforward in documentary film or romance, creative thinking will be required to enforce it in the bodily

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<sup>17</sup> In *Redupers*, the tender gaze expresses itself in a certain translucency. By showing Eddas thought processes and daily struggles and coping mechanisms, audiences are inclined to contemplate her interiority rather than marvel at her as a spectacle.



genres<sup>18</sup>.

The second lesson that emerges from Sander's and Trotta's oeuvre is the importance of allyship. As stated by Johnston (1973) "the development of collective work is obviously a major step forward; as a means of acquiring and sharing skills it constitutes a formidable challenge to male privilege in the film industry" (p.39). This holds true for female cooperation behind the camera and on-screen. The plot should serve to unite women instead of drawing them apart. As demonstrated by Trotta and Sander, films explore bonds of sisterly, romantic, or friendly nature and how these multiply individual strength. In some cases, women are being contrasted in their emancipatory stages, yet they never compete. Characters find themselves moving towards liberation and self-making in a collective process. In terms of cinematography, a focus on allyship is expressed mostly by the "visionary recombination" of women's art. Helke Sander lifts this idea to a new peak, drawing from unconventional sources like "women's letters and diaries, women's manuals, women's novels, medical writing, legal codes, "events" and parliamentary debates". The result is a "cross cultural montage" (Zinn, 1995, p. 24) that is both entertaining and political.

Thirdly, I wish to emphasize the disembodiment of voice as a strategy for contemporary filmmaking. Precisely, to allow the woman depicted to take on the task of narration, commenting on the action that is taking place. In traditional cinema women are often silenced or speak with a voice synchronized to the body. The silent woman is "excluded from positions of discursive power", the speaking woman is bound to the limitations of her body (Silverman, 1988, p. 164). The choice to frequently disembody Edda's and Christa's voices, allows the spectator to gain authentic insight into their thoughts and feelings, establishing a connection of empathy. More importantly, it "liberates the female subject from the interrogation about her

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<sup>18</sup> In her essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess" film Scholar Linda Williams distinguishes between three "body genres": horror, melodrama, and pornography. Through the extensive portrayal of violence, emotion, and sex, these genres are intended to trigger physical reactions among the audience (fear, sadness, and sexual arousal). They are often dismissed for being purely sensational (Williams, 1991).

place, her time and her desires which constantly resecures her" (Silverman, 1988, p. 164). Thereby, the woman on screen obtains "enunciative authority" and is empowered to transcend her place within the narrative. Going against common practice, in which the woman is the object-to-be-narrated, this technique declares her the narrating authority.

Fourth and finally, I would like to draw attention to methods of documentary filmmaking. From the moment that cinema prospered, "women[s] image has continually been stolen" (Mulvey, 1975). Directed by men, for men, films usually depicted a womanhood that nurtured alienation rather than self-discovery. This has generated mistrust towards the cinematic medium, disconnecting women audiences from the images they consume. Fortunately, nowadays, more filmmakers are dedicated to exploring women's authentic stories, their unreleased fantasies, and desires. Yet, it remains a challenge to create art that is truthful. Directors struggle to develop narratives that neither rely on a patriarchal filmic language, nor negate patriarchal oppression as part of women's collective history. To overcome this dilemma, I propose to combine fiction and documentary filmmaking styles<sup>19</sup>; precisely to imbue the fictional with the real. As mentioned previously, Trotta chose to tell the aftermath of a real incident. Simultaneously, Sander centered her work around her own biography, while also capturing local happenings and relying on traditional documentary film techniques<sup>20</sup>. By imbuing the fictional with the real and by using documentary-style methods, the narrative is anchored in some collective truth, seeking "to reach consensus with actual women for the audiences of these films" (Waldman & Walker, 1999, p. 12).

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<sup>19</sup> As a response to the resonant feminist film critique of the 1970s many feminist cinephiles began to advocate for a realist aesthetic. They naively assumed that "documentaries afford the unique opportunity to capture unmediated reality" (Hollinger, 2012, p.71). This attempt has been widely criticized. The third lesson advocates for the incorporation of real events and experiences yet acknowledges that these rely on the mediation and manipulation of the filmmaker. Because it depends on how the content is "manufactured" into meaning within the film (Johnston, 1973, p. 28) the third lesson cannot stand by itself. It must always be accompanied by other methods of feminist filmmaking.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, the depiction of elaborate conversations between the women photographers while keeping the camera in a steady position or the frequent use of panning shots. A panning shot or pan shot, is a horizontal camera movement. The camera pivots left or right while its base remains stable. In *Redupers* the panning shot is often used to establish a location and map the urban scenery (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012).

### **Limitations**

This research is subject to several limitations. In addition to the serious loss of films made by women in the earliest days of cinema, many movies from the 1970s have vanished from German libraries and archives (Levitin et al., 2002, p. 29; Carter & Sandberg, 2020, p. 393). This loss is mirrored in the discipline of film studies. The richness of this research has therefore been impacted by the limited information available and the difficulty in accessing film footage from the 1970s. Moreover, while I initially planned to include two works by each Sander and Trotta, I had to find, that an in-depth analysis within the limited word range can only succeed for two films. This causes the analysis to be less comprehensive and more focused. As previously mentioned, the feminist film practice and theory of the 1970s do not account for women of color, ethnic minorities, queer individuals, and their forms of resistance. The paper is thus restrained by the heterosexual, Eurocentric worldview of the era.

### **Conclusion**

This research has investigated how German female filmmakers of the 1970s combated the narratives and imagery of women produced by the male-dominated film industry. I have chosen Sander's docufiction film *The All-Round Reduced Personality – Redupers* (1978) and Trotta's drama *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (1978) as representative works of the New German Cinema. By means of a narratological analysis and mis-en-scène analysis, I have identified narrative and visual elements with respect to their potential for fashioning a feminist filmic language. As a result, I have proposed four central lessons for contemporary film practice, (1) a focus on identity, (2) allyship, (3) the disembodiment of voice, and (4) the fusion of fiction and documentary elements. Future research might direct its attention towards investigating the possible application of the four principles in contemporary filmmaking, how the four principles influence our perception of women, and how these changes in perception may translate to a different treatment of women in real life. It is to be concluded that,

Margarethe von Trotta and Helke Sander have succeeded in creating progressive representations of women on the screen. However, a paradigm shift in mainstream cinema remains outstanding. Visual cues that facilitate authentic reflections of women must still be carved and engraved in our visual memory.

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