The Mother-Daughter Plot in History: Helma Sanders-Brahms's Germany, Pale Mother

Susan E. Linville

A reconstruction of events in Germany from the years 1939 to 1955, Helma Sanders-Brahms's autobiographical film Germany, Pale Mother (Deutschland, bleiche Mutter, 1979) stands in an oblique relationship to history as it is usually conceived and narrated in cinema. The film is Sanders-Brahms's attempt to rework the past and to come to terms with the impact of historical events on her family and on her identity as a daughter, a German, and a filmmaker. Because the film emphasizes private experience and privileges the mother-daughter dyad as it does, however, critics have claimed that Germany, Pale Mother actually evades history rather than acknowledging accountability for it. Some argue that the film does represent history, but history as virtually a thing apart from women's lives and responsibilities. For these critics, an essentializing, ahistorical perspective on women's experience mars the film, much as ahistoricism purportedly undermines feminist psychoanalytic theories that privilege pre-Oedipal bonding, theories that Germany, Pale Mother is said to endorse. Angelika Bammer asserts: "In this film Sanders-Brahms seems to suggest that women are virtually outside history, as if history were literally 'his-story' in which women had no part."¹ Eric Santner complains that the film identifies the mother as a "victim of history" rather than one of its "players,"² a bifurcation

² Eric Santner, Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1990) 155. Subsequent references will be provided parenthetically in the text.
that disallows the possibility that she might be both. Studies on the film often note a discursive friction between various feminist conceptual frameworks, on the one hand, and theoretical models for coming to terms with German guilt and responsibility for the Nazi past on the other.\(^3\)

My aims here are, first, to explore the basis of this tension between the discourses of feminism and those of mourning the German past, and second, to argue for a reading of the film — and more broadly, an understanding of Trauerarbeit — based on Kaja Silverman’s feminist revision of Freud’s theory of the negative Oedipus complex. Silverman’s feminist framework expressly eschews ahistoricism and essentialism in delineating the political implications of desire within the mother-daughter dyad.\(^4\) Similarly, I will maintain, Germany, Pale Mother does not conceptualize this dyad in isolation from public events or from the symbolic order; rather, the film’s concern is to show intersections between cinematic and psychic apparatuses and to reveal how the daughter’s libidinal investment in the mother becomes the ground for political resistance and feminist activism — including the making of the film.\(^5\)

Silverman’s model has great value in illuminating the position of the mother in culture, in elegiac patterns, and in the process of the daughter’s empowerment. As Marianne Hirsch has documented, the general

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5. Although dealing with the past through exploration of familial dynamics has been labeled a more modest undertaking than dealing with “figures like Adolf Eichmann or Pope Pius XII” (Kaes 140), working through the politics of the personal may well be the greater — rather than the lesser — challenge. It is, moreover, a project well suited to the structuring mechanisms of cinema. At the same time, there is an important distinction to be drawn between the feminist concept of the personal as always already political (e.g., recognition of the inherently political nature of intrafamilial power dynamics and of the psyche’s structuration through familial acculturation), and the sorts of fusion between art and politics or art and everyday life sought by avantgarde movements such as dada and surrealist or the Beats. McCormick’s apparent conflating of feminist and romantic-individualist or avantgarde positions in his analysis of the personal-political nexus is one of the weaker aspects of his *Politics of the Self*. See McCormick 43-49.
cultural problem of mother-blame is a vexed one, even for feminists. The difficulties increase in the case of *Germany, Pale Mother*. For if feminist analysis often reflects resentment over the mother's powerlessness, how much more difficult is the problem of seeing and representing the mother when her powerlessness includes her failure actively to resist fascism, as is the case with the mother represented in Sanders-Brahms's film. What Silverman's model does is to expose the fundamental cultural problem of the mother's devaluation that is the inheritance of the positive Oedipus complex. While Freud saw this devaluing as necessary to the child's primary processes of mourning and individuation, it relegates the mother to a position of passivity and powerlessness, and ultimately, to maternal self-erasure. The devaluation of the mother has important implications for psychoanalytic approaches aimed at understanding the Germans' mourning of the past, insofar as that grieving is seen to replay the primal scenes of the constitution of the self.

Santner's approach illustrates problems that arise when the gendered nature of elegiac experiences gets short shrift and when, concurrently, nationalist typologies are overgeneralized. Santner draws on traditional Freudian ideas about melancholia, as Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich applied them to study of the Germans in the fifties and early sixties, and he shares their conclusion that an inability to mourn and a pathological narcissism characterized the Germans of this era. Yet in Santner's view, the pathology not only reaches back into the decades before the war, but also extends into ensuing decades, up to the present, apparently unchanged. In effect, Santner sees the inability to mourn as an essential trait of "the German people," just as Siegfried Kracauer so many years ago identified sociopsychic causalities of fascism with essentialized traits of Germans. Thus, Santner virtually reifies the idea of the incapacity to grieve and transforms it into a

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7. The Mitscherlichs' foreword to the 1975 American edition of their work reflects qualified optimism about change: "Still, there is no ignoring the fact that some radical effort to confront the issues of guilt arising from the events of the 'Third Reich' has taken place" (*The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*, trans. Beverly R. Placzek [New York: Grove s, 1975] xx). At the same time, it is worth noting that Ken Burns's documentary on the American Civil War (*The Civil War*, 1990) affords a powerful reminder of the inevitably protracted nature of a nation's coming-to-terms with horrific chapters in its history.
constitutive trait no longer governed by the processes of subjectivity; rather, for him, this incapacity seems to exist as an entity that is, for all intents and purposes, independent from its human construction. By treating this failing as something virtually internal to the processes of German history — before, during and four decades after Hitler — Santner describes a closed loop.8

While Santner does go beyond the Mitscherlich model to raise questions about how elegiac patterns might be gendered, his interrogation unfortunately leads only to a very brief dispute with feminist views that privilege pre-Oedipal mother-daughter bonds and place “female mourning within the closure of the Imaginary rather than at the site of its chastening” (170). What Santner himself underscores are similarities between male and female patterns of melancholy and mourning (170-71), and to the extent that he considers the daughter’s attachment to the mother at all, he in effect subsumes it under the generally destructive narcissistic cathexis between Germans and Hitler. His omissions of women are all the more conspicuous owing to his discursive debts to feminism. In his assertion that a regressive “‘respecularization’ of identity,” created by a “utopian exchange of gazes,” defeats Germans’ Trauerarbeit, he uses feminist encoding but avoids the question of women’s subjectivity (6).

Like the Mitscherlichs, who consistently choose to “take the case of the boy” (or man) as representative,9 Santner underestimates the asymmetries in male and female identity formation. Moreover, in transposing the Mitscherlichs’ theory into Lacanian terms, he loses their emphasis on the paternalistic absolutism of the ego ideal with which many Germans under Hitler identified. Santner asserts: “In Lacanian terms, the Jews were assigned the role of the ones who intrude into and disrupt the Imaginary, akin to evil fathers who brutally uproot the children from their native matrix and maroon them in the cold and abstract space of the Symbolic” (5). Consequently, Santner deprives the Mitscherlichs’ theory of some of its potential to expose the role of patriarchal authoritarianism in perpetuating familial and psychic dysfunction.

8. In an interview, Peter Burnette asks Sanders-Brahms about her choice to depict her parents as representative Germans in Germany, Pale Mother, and if she had not let them off too easily. Her reply is relevant here: “Germans are not born fascists. . . . The Germans are not a special nation, a monster nation compared to all other nations” (Film Quarterly 44 [1990-91]: 37).
Santer's choice of the myth of Apollo and Daphne to illustrate a positive homeopathic elegiac paradigm is indicative of the kind of serious oversights produced by assuming that masculinist models can be viable androgynous ones. In Santer's words, their story is one "in which the object of desire is transformed into the laurel tree from which the god then cuts and fashions a wreath . . . a legacy that will help him to master his loss" (22-23). Santer never raises questions about Daphne's loss — or Apollo's culpability — perhaps because she is "object" rather than "subject," and because she is metamorphosed, through the agency of her father, out of humanity and into nature or organic matrix — a fate she evidently preferred over rape. To introduce questions about Daphne's victimization, however, is to expose the bias in supposedly gender-neutral paradigms. The male subject in this myth achieves autonomy by sharply defining the edges that separate self from other, and he can, presumably, escape melancholia. The female object is granted no future and no justice, only utter self-negation. Not surprisingly, Santer's approach affords few insights into what is at stake in the mother-daughter dyad of Germany, Pale Mother.

In contrast to both Santer and the Mitscherlichs, Silverman examines the distinctive qualities of female melancholy in some detail. Unlike Freud, but like Nancy Chodorow, Silverman eschews the view of the separation and autonomy of the male identification process as normative. As Silverman explains, it is Freud's "'Mourning and Melancholia' [that] provides a chillingly accurate account of a condition which may be pathological for the male subject, but which represents the norm for the female subject — that condition of melancholia which blights her relations with both herself and her culture" (155). Silverman draws on Luce Irigaray to develop her argument, particularly the following assertion from Speculum: "In point of fact, if all the implications of Freud's discourse were followed through, after the little girl discovers her own castration and that of her mother — her 'object,' the narcissistic representation of all her instincts — she would have no recourse other than melancholia" (155). In melancholia the subject transforms object-loss into ego-loss, rather than withdrawing libidinal attachment from the lost object and displacing it onto a new object. As Silverman explains, when the subject is the daughter and

the lost object is the mother whom the young girl loves and with whom she identifies, the cure for the young girl’s melancholia cannot be devaluation of the lost object, the procedure Freud identified as the cure for melancholia. Rather devaluation of the object “would seem to be exactly what causes female melancholia” (158).

Consequently, Silverman views the narcissism of the daughter and her love for her mother as potential sources of resistance to the patriarchal order, the phallus; the daughter’s desire for the mother, unaccompanied by identification with the father, constitutes the negative Oedipus complex, and her identification with the mother entails perception of the mother as active (151). Silverman further contends: “Feminism can’t really manage without the negativity, which is an indispensable weapon not only against the name, meaning, and law of the father, but against the female subject’s unconscious investment in those things” (125). Silverman goes on to argue for the “feminization” of the male as part of feminism’s libidinal struggle against the phallus (154); her position, I will maintain, is congruent with Sanders-Brahms’s film (though not with the paradigms of the Mitscherlichs or of Santner, nor with Kracauer before them).11 Also consistent with the film is Silverman’s insistence upon the crucial role of the daughter’s negative Oedipus complex as a site of resistance to dominant ideology. To be sure, the film has been criticized for the nature of its libidinal investment, for supposedly employing a “narrative structure – a daughter reflecting on her own telling of her mother’s story — [that] is essentially circular, a closed, almost claustrophobic, circuit.”12 Yet this kind of reflection, and the healthy narcissism that prompts it, are what enable the daughter’s political activism. Without retrospection of this type, neither familial nor nationalistic patriarchal orders can be subverted, and the film underscores the interconnection of these spheres.

_Germany, Pale Mother_ is divided into three parts, all accompanied by Sanders-Brahms’s voice-over. The first comprises the courtship of

11. For example, the Mitscherlichs emphasize “effeminate,” mother-dependent male personality traits in the case histories they present to typify the inability to mourn (36-37) and to illustrate the principle that “the weaker our ego, the more unquestioningly it has to accept the distortion of reality offered by collective opinion and determined by our own inner development” (41). They never consider the prospect that eliminating the familial roots of dysfunction would require subverting patriarchy per se. Yet the solution to the problems they detail cannot derive from a system that fortifies the son’s ego at women’s expense and that thereby precludes, because it has no model for, healthy feminization.

“Anna”/Helma’s parents Lene (Eva Mattes) and Hans (Hans Jacobi), their marriage, and the initial impact of the war, which brings Hans’s militarization/masculinization. In sum, the first segment covers the time before Anna/Helma’s birth. Caught up in each other, the parents emerge as ordinary, lower-middle-class Germans. They do not want the war, and they do nothing to prevent the war or to help its Jewish victims. Hans’s refusal to become a Nazi party member results in his being one of the first men called up to fight. Other people, rather falsely, assure Lene that he, like the weeds, will survive — “Unkraut vergeht nicht” (Weeds don’t perish). In a real sense, his goodness, kindness, and gentleness are casualties of war.

The film’s central section sets forth Anna/Helma’s birth during an air raid and the blossoming of the mother-daughter dyad during the father’s absence. Once their apartment building is destroyed by bombs, Lene and Anna wander happily through urban and rural settings, their dyad somewhat disrupted only once during a brief but important few days that they spend with Hans at the deserted Berlin apartment of a wealthy uncle, an unsavory Prussian-bureaucrat type, who works in the Air Ministry. The final segment of Germany, Pale Mother reveals the time when “the war moved inside,” as the voice-over explains, that is, the “postwar” years. Hans is now dehumanized, callous to suffering, mean-spirited to Lene and Anna, and bent on success within the hierarchy of his workplace. Hungry for genuine intimacy, Lene struggles to resist Hans’s authoritarianism, then lapses into illness, despair, and even abuse of Anna. Anna’s identification with her mother and love for her lead to Anna’s own suffering and trauma as she witnesses then forestalls Lene’s suicide attempt at the film’s end.

It is above all the second segment of the film that sets into motion the film’s development of negative Oedipal patterns. In this section, Lene is active and strong, once freed of limiting domestic spaces, and her active role fits the child’s perception of the mother prior to the devaluation of the mother brought by the positive Oedipal complex. Lene speaks, sings, and narrates. We hear her voice throughout this portion far more than in the first or last, and Lene’s speaking part here reinforces the narrator’s assertion, made near the beginning of the film, that Lene is Anna’s first language teacher, teaching her her “mother tongue.” In these ways, the film opposes a pre-Oedipal, prelinguistic conceptual framework, just as it opposes other cinematic and theoretical paradigms that deny female verbal authority. Moreover, in
the film’s middle section Lene and Anna are heimatlos, vagabonds, “flying witches,” in the words of the voice-over, uprooted and nomadic in ways that conflict with Nazi ideals of the German people — especially of “model” German mothers and children. The film’s aesthetic, which counterpoints chilling documentary footage, fairy-tale narration, and melodrama, is also at odds both with the sentimental, idealist, essentializing realism of the Nazi aesthetic and with the kind of subject position it constructed. Keeping mother and daughter close together in the frame, this central portion of the film underscores the idea that the war is liberating for no one, but that freedom from the law of the father is.

In Anna’s eyes, the Hans who spends a short leave with her and her mother at the Berlin apartment is “only a troublesome rival,” to quote Freud’s description of the child’s experience of the father at this developmental stage.13 The voice-over asks, “What am I to do with a father?” and states, “I was jealous of him and he of me.” In the Berlin apartment, Lene sings and dances with Anna, telling Hans, “The worse it gets, the more I sing. Not so much for the child as for me.” Her words affirm the importance of the mother’s own happiness within the film’s mother-daughter dyad.

Conversely, Hans’s words and the mise-en-scène now align him with the military order and Nazi ideology. Feeling excluded, his ego hurt, he stands alone by an empty fireplace over which hangs a group portrait of Hitler, Goebbels, and Goering, a portrait with which Uncle Bertrand has also been visually aligned. Wagner’s bust rests on the mantle. Hans proclaims to Lene, who is offscreen, that the men will fight to the death, and he echoes the Nazi rhetoric that his party-member friend Ulrich uses earlier in the film: “Victory or destruction, that is worthy of the German people.” Offscreen to the right, Lene replies that she wants to live and that the rich relatives who own the apartment have fled Berlin because they already know that the war is lost. Hans leaves, and the family reunion ends with little Anna triumphantly repeating “Weg! Weg!” (Gone! Gone!) of Hans. The toy bear that she keeps with her virtually from this point on is congruent with Freud’s perception that “the little girl’s preference for dolls is probably evidence of the exclusiveness of her attachment to the mother, with complete neglect of her father object.”14

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During the last section of the film, Anna’s primary activity in her father’s presence is to practice writing, her only work in which he takes any interest and an exercise whose importance the film, for different reasons, also stresses. The first scene to introduce this pattern begins with a shot of Anna filling a sheet of lined writing paper with row upon row of neatly formed i’s. At this point the voice-over states, “The war started inside while outside there was peace.” Hans commands, “Write neatly.” “She must write neatly,” he tells Lene, who counters by telling Hans to leave Anna in peace. The film depicts Hans’s paternal surveillance of Anna’s inscription into the symbolic order — Anna’s “taking dictation” from her drillmaster father.

Throughout the scene, Anna, Lene, and Hans each appear in separate frames, an arrangement reflecting not only the individuation but also the isolation and disconnectedness that this paternalistic inscription entails. Because this scene follows another one that functions to suggest that neither Hans nor Ulrich is “de-Nazified,” its political implications are all the more pointed. In that previous scene, Ulrich refers to himself, with palpable sarcasm, as “de-Nazified.” He also puts Anna up to calling Hans a “Waldheini” — a weirdo. Hans angrily beats her for calling him a name, and Ulrich does nothing to defend her for carrying out his wish. The camera then lingers on her as she weeps and stands alone in the frame save for the rubble in the background.

The first scene to show Anna writing under her father’s surveillance also resonates with an earlier one depicting a younger, more innocent Hans’s “literal” military inscription. In the earlier scene the film expressly aligns the phallus/language with the devaluation of women. The men in Hans’s unit are all being issued condoms; Hans refuses any, explaining, “I love my wife.” His words are met with peals of laughter. The men then play a prank on Hans by spelling out L-O-V-E (L-I-E-B-E) in condoms on his bunk. More laughter. In this way the film economically exposes the cultural given by which manhood is achieved through devaluation of the love (object) that is no longer available, just as it is achieved by manipulation of language as a prophylactic against the loss that language simultaneously spells out.15

The second scene to show Anna writing at her desk comes as Hans

15. Even the film’s first scene shows Lene’s harassment by German officers and Hans’s and Ulrich’s acceptance of it. In that scene Hans makes no protest, let alone any attempt to intervene to defend Lene from the soldiers, despite his expressed desire to marry her. Instead of speaking up for her, he praises her silence.
leaves to take Lene to the doctor to treat what seems to be a sudden facial paralysis. Lene’s illness is in fact foreshadowed as early as the sequence in the Berlin apartment, where Lene tells Hans that what they have been through will show in their faces. It is there that we first see the facial twitch that later escalates into disfigurement. The implication, here and elsewhere in the film, is that Lene closes things off, covers them over, in order to survive: she closes the window coverings when her Jewish neighbor Rachel is being taken away on Kristallnacht, Lene’s unemotional response prompting her sister’s criticism, “You can be so hard.” In a similar gesture Lene covers the windows and turns her back on the world when her paralysis persists later in the film, and she covers the disfigured side of her face with a black veil. Sanders-Brahms explains that she “tried to accuse [her] parents of having shut the blinds, and of trying to get away from what was happening.” Lene’s resulting hysterical paralysis provides the context for Anna’s second writing scene.

Before Hans and Lene leave their apartment to get help for Lene, Hans commands, “Don’t move until we get back.” Without moving, Anna looks at her reflection in a mirror from across the room, then proceeds repeatedly to write, “Heini und Lene weinen” (Heini and Lene weep), completely filling a page. Anna’s increasing isolation and alienation from her parents’ world, coupled with surveying her reflection in the mirror, fit Lacan’s account of the mirror stage in some of its details. Yet Anna’s visual self-recognition occurs not prior to entry into the symbolic order, that is, not in the Lacanian sequence, but as a self-identification that is always already conjoined with organized cultural representations, such as the film itself. As my colleague Eberhard Grem has pointed out, Hans and Lene are also the German counterparts to Dick and Jane in American primers. Anna’s substitution of “Heini” for “Hans” in the name that she couples with “Lene” marks a small but significant point of resistance, a displacement of the name of the father, and recalls the “Waldheini” name-calling scene. (I will return to the significance of

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17. The man who diagnoses Lene’s condition says she must have her teeth extracted to halt the spread of the paralysis, and with Hans’s consent but over Lene’s protests, the doctor proceeds to pull all her teeth — an obviously pointless procedure that we witness in grueling detail. The ordeal underscores how mercilessly the male hierarchy strips Lene of her autonomy in body and spirit during the postwar years. The episode also recalls an earlier scene in which Uncle Bertrand sanctimoniously commands a famished, homeless Lene to eat slowly — “chew one chew for every tooth in your mouth” — as if he were admonishing a negligent child.
the name Heini.) Moreover, Anna’s sentence about weeping suggests the sensitive child’s awareness of her parents’ need to mourn — something we have not seen them do — and her own awareness on some level of the failings in the restored heterosexual family contract that is supposedly the foundation of culture and of happiness.

The last of the three writing scenes is also part of the final scene of the film. The words that Anna writes are: “Onkel Asch und Tante Peter . . . vierzehn Kinder. Ihre kinder heissen Ingo und An[na]” (Uncle Asch and Aunt Peter . . . fourteen children. Their children are named Ingo and An[na]). Her writing now constructs a family paradigm, but destabilizes gender identities and associates the uncle with an image of death — fittingly, in view of her despicable uncle Bertrand’s amoral opportunism. The sentences reflect Anna’s disturbance over the state of her own family. Indeed, in this same scene her parents fight again; the profoundly melancholic Lene renounces life, and Hans walks out. But since the sentences also suggest linguistic disruption and resistance to the traditional family, they can also be said to “prefigure” a facet of the film’s own Kinoschreiben (to translate Agnes Varda’s term cinéma vérité); that is, the construction of the film can be seen in retrospect as an outgrowth of the child’s writerly subversion of the patriarchal family romance. This is another idea to which I will return.

There is a further way in which the film’s last scene plays out the negative Oedipus complex and undermines the usual operations of the phallogocentric symbolic order. Both powerful and painful, it comes at the very end, when Lene locks herself in the bathroom and attempts suicide by using gas from the water heater. Unable to see or hear Lene, Anna pounds on the door repeatedly, begging her mother to open the door, to come out, the camera lingering on the back of Anna’s head in a close shot that strengthens viewer identification with her.18 Lene finally does come out, and the voice-over explains, “It took a long time for Lene to open the door. Sometimes I think she is still behind that door, and I’m standing in front of it, and she’ll never come out, and I have to be grown up and alone. But she is still there, Lene is still there.”

The scene operates in direct contrast to mainstream cinema’s attempt to foster the illusion of wholeness of the male viewing subject.

18. A translation time lag in the English subtitles gives the mistaken impression that Anna replies “Me neither,” to Lene’s statement, “I don’t want to live any more.” (It is Hans who says, “Me neither.”) Anna, however, never expresses the wish to join Lene in death. The English subtitles contain some appalling miscues and translation errors.
by projecting his lack onto the female object. In fact, this scene creates a direct confrontation with the experience of the mother’s being cut off from the self, the castration that, as Silverman explains, precedes any perception of female genital lack. The scene fits exactly the scenario that Silverman identifies as intrinsic to cinema, if one rarely thematized so directly: “Cinema . . . revives the primordial desire for the object only to disappoint that desire, to reactivate the original trauma of its disappearance. Since the loss of the object always entails the loss of what was once part of the subject, it is — in the strictest sense of that word — a castration” (9). The parallel dyadic relationships between mother and daughter, cinematic image and viewer, are crucial to this film’s impact, especially in its address to female viewers. The end of the illusions of the presence of the mother and the movie — *Germany, Pale Mother* as Lene and as film — intersect: both movie and mother are there and not there to the daughter who is/must be grown up and separate now — though not, in this case, necessarily alone. Put succinctly, the pain of the ending heightens the way cinema mimics the object’s absence within the Oedipal narrative. While some scholars have chosen to emphasize the element of Lene’s martyrdom in this scene — and our sense of her pain is extreme — to see only that is to reduce the ending’s range of meanings. The voice-over’s repeated “Lene is still there,” and the poignancy of the lingering image of Lene are immediately followed by the filmmaker’s dedication of the film “to Lene and to Anna,” the name of Sanders-Brahms’s own daughter as well as the name the filmmaker gives herself in the film. This three-generational community of women (a triangulation central to the negative Oedipus complex) suggests a way in which the film fortifies the female subject against her intensely felt loss without creating a demeaned and devalued

19. Thomas Elsaesser reads the film’s ending with a different emphasis but also seems to analyze the conclusion in a Lacanian context and recognizes the interplay between psychic and cinematic apparatuses: “*Germany, Pale Mother*, in spite of its title, refrains from using the woman as a metaphor and allegorical figure in the way Fassbinder’s *Maria Braun*, for instance, can call herself ‘the Mata Hari of the Economic Miracle.’ Where Maria Braun comes to symbolise the complex relations of substitution and exchange around which Fassbinder has constructed his story, Leni’s ravaged face and body remain on the screen well after the film has exhausted its narrative — refusing to release the spectator into meaning” [*New German Cinema: A History* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1989] 270].

Also relevant is Kracauer’s general observation: “Films conform most rigorously to our dreams when the camera seems as if it has just now extricated [its objects] from the womb of physical existence and as if the umbilical cord between image and actuality [had] not yet been severed” [*Theory of Film* [London: Oxford UP, 1960] 164].
Other or a demeaned and devalued self. In more than one sense, the filmmaker’s speaking voice preserves her mother’s life. Moreover, the film contains many images of the abject — Lene’s vomit, Anna’s excrement, the blood of birth, a corpse that Anna insists on seeing — as if to deny their status as utterly other, the means for determining the boundaries of the self. The film’s presentation of Lene’s abject misery in the end is countered by Anna’s and by the film’s desire for the mother, to reproduce the mother. Thus Lene is saved from the requirement that the mother assume the status of the abject in the child’s identity formation. To rephrase Freud, it is also true that the child is mother to the woman, that is, the child at the end of the film is mother to the woman whose film we see, whose memories we share, and whose voice-over we hear from the first scene on. The voice and images tell us both directly and indirectly what has become of Anna, the daughter, the (not unproblematized) filmmaker, her subversive desires and her writerly subversions.

At this point, I want to turn to an analysis of the various forms of Kinoschreiben that shape and politicize the film from its outset, undermining the illusion of a transparent cinematic fiction. These subversions include the reversal, dismantling, and critique of a range of gendered cinematic, literary, and cultural codes. No less important, they include challenges to established notions of what constitutes German history and how one, as a daughter, comes to terms with it.

Germany, Pale Mother’s opening scene uses images and voice-over to introduce the man and woman who will become the daughter’s parents. The rippling reflection of a large swastika-emblazoned flag initially fills the screen; economically and reflexively, it defines time and place. Then a rowboat containing the father-to-be and his Nazi friend glides through the flag’s reflected image. The voice-over describes the men, and they “come on” to and discuss Lene, who is seen walking alone along the lakeside. She remains silent as she is harassed by Nazi soldiers. The scene ends with a close-up — the film’s first — of Lene’s face, as the voice-over meditates on Lene’s silence and her “mother tongue.” The film’s tide reappears, reinforcing the equation between film matrix and mother. The counterposing of the mature daughter’s disembodied voice with the silent, bodily presence of the young Lene as mother-to-be effectively places these women in what Hollywood figures as desiring male and desired female positions respectively. Conversely, the men occupy naturalized space as they watch and discuss Lene from their rowboat. As Silverman explains, in order to fortify the male subject, “Hollywood pits
the disembodied male voice against the synchronized female voice” (39), an intermeshing of the psychic and cinematic apparatuses that this scene effectively reverses and upends.

The opening scene’s threat to customary cinematic codes merits further elaboration. As Silverman explains:

To permit a female character to be seen without being heard would be to activate the hermeneutic and cultural codes which define woman as “enigma,” inaccessible to definitive male interpretation. To allow her to be heard without being seen would be even more dangerous, since it would disrupt the specular regime upon which dominant cinema reifies; it would put her beyond the reach of the male gaze (which stands in here for the cultural “camera”) and release her voice from the signifying obligations which that gaze enforces. (164)

What the film proceeds to give us — again, contrary to classic cinema — is a deconstruction of the terms according to which the “enigmatic” Lene might ordinarily be defined, her enigma “solved.” The scene also disrupts the cinematic illusion and the essentialist perspective that that illusion subtends. Here and throughout the film, it is the daughter’s voice-over, her intrusion as filmmaker/author, that is the film’s most persistent anti-illusionist, anti-suturing device.\(^\text{20}\) In addition, the (in itself unusual) idea of Germany as motherland is evoked then deconstructed. As Bammer explains,

Sanders-Brahms acknowledges the inheritance of a cultural tradition in which woman has been made the carrier of ideological meaning even when politically her importance has been denied. . . . By shifting her attention to the concrete particulars of everyday experience, [Sanders-Brahms] begins to dismantle the allegorical structures. By revealing the specifics which the symbols at once refer to and, in so doing, hide from view, she exposes the symbols as ultimately hollow, meaningless in themselves.\(^\text{21}\)

\(^{20}\) In another sense, the film’s use of female voice-over resonates with Silverman’s view that “the maternal voice is . . . what first ruptures plenitude and introduces difference,” and is also, in cinematic terms, the “first voice-over and voice-off — as the generator of sounds that proceed from beyond the child’s range of vision, or that precede its ability to see” (86). Anna/Helma’s voice, then, suggests an acoustic mother/daughter synthesis.

\(^{21}\) Bammer 96. To be sure, in addition to praising the film’s deconstructive approach and offering a brilliant analysis of its opening, Bammer also criticizes the film
To rephrase: the film creates a dialogic interplay between the abstracting discourse of allegory and the discourse of melodrama, with its emphasis on human connection within the private world of particular people. At the same time, the tensions between allegory and melodrama serve to suggest the mutual impact of the public and private political spheres. That is to say, while the film deconstructs the simple allegorical equation of Germany as mother (or Germany as woman), it stresses the idea of close parallels between state and familial patriarchal structures, both fascist and (so-called) peaceful democratic ones.  

for, in her view, representing Lene as a woman who refuses to claim her autonomy as a historical subject and who fails to teach her daughter strength and independence (103-05). Partly, the critique is based on Bammer’s misidentification of one of the film’s characters as a Jewish shop owner whom Bammer believes Lene endangers as she tries to buy embroidery thread. The Nazis, however, have already taken the shop owner and family away when Lene takes the thread. Though Bammer is right that the film shows Lene to be more concerned with decorating a blouse than with the fate of a Jewish family, the film also exposes Lene’s folly in thus believing that her domestic sphere is separate from the larger political scene: she wears her newly embroidered blouse when Hans returns on leave, only to have this, in her view, strangely aggressive man rip the embroidery apart as he roughly undresses her. In this way and others, the film shows Lene as a product of a culture that too exclusively has taught women of her class self-abdication and silence. Similarly, she is not presented in the latter portions of the film as an idealized, protofeminist mother who actively encourages her daughter’s independence; instead, she emerges as the product of a culture that continues dangerously to delimit women’s sphere.

22. Some readings have tried to push the film’s allegorical dimensions too far, seeing, for example, a representation of divided Germany in Lene’s half-covered face in the last portion of the film (E. Ann Kaplan, “The Search for the Mother/Land in Sanders-Brahms’s Germany, Pale Mother,” German Film and Literature: Adaptations and Transformations, ed. Eric Rentschler. [New York: Methuen, 1986] 302), or seeing the aerial footage edited together with Lene’s rape as a figure for the allies’ “rape” of Germany (Ellen E. Seiter, “Women’s History, Women’s Melodrama: Deutschland, bleiche Mutter,” German Quarterly 59 [1986]: 580); or for Germany’s “rape” by Hitler (Barbara Hyams, “Is the Apolitical Woman at Peace?: A Reading of the Fairy Tale in Germany, Pale Mother,” Wide Angle 10.4 [1988]: 46). These totalizing analogies between Lene and Germany miss the mark and stem, ironically, from a reductive sense of the range of viable cinematic tropes. In seeking to weed out retrograde, masculinist discourse in films with feminist aims, critics sometimes end up articulating a smaller and smaller range of possibilities for feminism rather than seeing how retrograde modes, such as allegory and melodrama, when recontextualized, deconstructed, and made to serve new ends, can themselves be problematized, politicized, and critiqued in the process.

For an excellent analysis of Sanders-Brahms’s subversive use of melodrama and a defense of the film against Seiter’s charge that melodrama depoliticizes Germany, Pale Mother, see McCormick 193-98, who emphasizes the way Brechtian distanciation technique counterpoints melodrama and spectator immersion in narrative. For an important discussion of the connection between the mother-daughter dyad and the empathic, multiply cathected spectator positioning within melodrama, see Linda Williams, “Something
Moreover, the *Kinoschreiben* constitutes Lene’s identity heterogeneously and heteronomously — in terms of class, as a product of memory, in the context of discourses of allegory, fairy tale, melodrama, and documentary footage, and in illusionistic space placed in anti-illusionistic contexts. The film shows Lene to be active as an independent mother, passive where she lacks the personal power and public sanction to speak out on her own behalf or, in the case of Rachel whom she sees being taken away by men in the night, on behalf of her Jewish neighbor. In the film’s first scene, Hans and Ulrich say of Lene that she is the dark one, the “non-Aryan,” the fat one, and because she suffers silently, Ulrich the Nazi calls her a “real German woman,” a category the film problematizes.

Sanders-Brahms’s use of triple casting works to deconstruct the allegory further. In addition to playing Lene, Eva Mattes plays a Polish peasant woman and a French woman partisan, both of whom Hans helps shoot to death, despite his recognition that the women are Lene look-alikes. (In the first case, the woman’s death is painful for him; in the second, we get no reaction shot, the implication being that Hans, too, now suppresses any reaction.) These killings are both horrible in themselves and ominous foreshadowings of Hans and Lene’s estrangement. In addition, the film’s linking of women’s experiences across national boundaries through triple casting brings to mind Virginia Woolf’s position in *Three Guineas* that a woman/outsider’s claim to citizenship is with the whole world, not a particular country: “‘For,’ the outsider will say, ‘in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.’”23 Though Sanders-Brahms’s perspectives do not relativize Nazi atrocities, when Lene describes her rape by American GIs as “the conquerer’s right,” the film does remind us that this bias crime is one of the perennial, dreadful givens of women’s wartime experiences.

The film’s reflections on allegory — and perhaps the inclusion of the name “Heini” in young Anna’s writing — also bring to mind the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine and his critical perspectives on nationalist abstractions. Living in Paris as a political exile, Heine wrote “Nachgedanken” (“Nighthoughts,” 1843), a beautifully crafted elegiac

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meditation on the land and the mother he left behind. The poem’s key contrast is between Germany as Fatherland and the speaker’s mother. The former is a “robust land” (kerngesundes Land) and an “undying” (ewigen) abstract entity, for which the speaker of the poem feels no longing as a thing in itself. His mother, conversely, is real, loving, aging, perishable — a woman for whom he longs just as he longs for others in Germany who suffer or who have died. Sanders-Brahms’s evocation of Heine is a gesture that suggests their shared critiques of the Fatherland as an abstraction that wrongfully demands human sacrifices. Clearly Sanders-Brahms’s conceptualization of this problem locates it temporally as extending beyond the years of the Third Reich.24

Not only does the film dismantle the allegorical conception of the mother/father/land, but it also makes frequent use of anti-illusionist, reflexive techniques to undermine the essentialist conception of character that realism is said to imply. As I have explained, the film begins with a close shot of a large swastika-emblazoned flag reflected in water, a reminder of our indirect access to profilmic and historical events. The dance scene in which we first see Hans and Lene together also begins with a flag, in this case with a close-up of part of a large, insect-dotted Nazi flag. The camera tilts to reveal that the entire flag is infested. The film then cuts to a shot of two unsavory looking officers, one of whom bites into a long, phallic wurst. As in the works of Georg Grosz, the shot makes normal activities look disgusting. The flag forms the backdrop against which couples dance; the nonsynchronous music consists of deep, ominous chords from a piano. The voice-over describes the courtship of Lene and Hans that begins here as “happy, perfectly normal, only it happened at this time, in this country.” Brechtian distanciation results from the extreme disjunction between “normal, happy” and what we see or the music we hear. A scene that immediately follows the couple’s wedding continues to disrupt the illusionism of realist codes. Speaking of their wedding, Lene tells Hans, “It’s like a film,’ Frau Meierholt said.” The couple sit in front of a three-way mirror, their triple reflection suggesting a filmstrip, while the voice-over says, “I cannot imagine your skin touching, I am between you. I never married. I unlearned that from you.”

The daughter’s film also reflects (upon) the paucity of literary

24. See Kaplan (290-91) and Kaes (147) for alternative readings of Heine’s poem and its relationship to Germany, Pale Mother.
models that can be used to illuminate the mother-daughter dyad or that envision this dyad as a psychological resource for speech and political action. For example, in the film’s prologue, a daughter (Hanna Hiob) recites her father’s (Bertolt Brecht’s) poem “Germany,” as the text of the poem is shown on the screen. Allegorizing Germany as a Motherland despoiled by fascism, Brecht’s lyric establishes a framework in which brother murders brother to the mother’s shame. Sanders-Brahms’s film both interrogates the allegory and reconceptualizes the family drama in such a way as to indicate an inevitable slippage or failure in transmission of authorial power from Brecht’s literary model to the film. While Brecht’s poem is an important, privileged resource for reworking the past, and while Brecht is a model for creating an aesthetic marked by periodic distanciation, his work is also an inadequate paradigm for women’s authorship and spectator-positioning.25

A Grimm’s fairy tale, “The Robber Bridegroom,” that Lene tells her daughter during the central section of the film, also emerges as an important yet unsatisfactory literary antecedent. It is the story of a young woman betrothed to a man whom she goes to visit in the woods. Upon arriving at his house, she is warned by birds and by an old woman that she is in a murderer’s house. Following the old woman’s advice, she hides and witnesses the robber and his cohorts murder a girl by serving her poison wine. The men then cut off the murdered girl’s finger in order to obtain a gold ring. The parallels to Lene and Anna’s situation are unmistakable, for during Lene’s narration, mother and daughter stop in an abandoned factory suggesting a crematorium at the end of the war — one of several strong pieces of visual evidence that Germany itself is a house of death camps, a murderer’s house.

There is more to the fairy tale. The young woman returns home. When the Robber Bridegroom appears in order to claim her as his bride, she tells the story of what she has seen, though claiming it for a dream, until finally she produces the finger from the body of the robber’s victim, and the robber is taken away and punished. Anna/ Helma too becomes a narrator, her narrative being the whole film, and she too presents evidence of what has been cut off, cast away or forgotten. In this way she takes responsibility not for events over which she had no control, but for history and its telling. Yet while the fairy tale

25. For a further discussion of the distanciation techniques in Germany, Pale Mother, see McCormick 196-203.
renders the mother absent, foregrounding instead the father/daughter and daughter/bridegroom relationships, the film in effect retrieves the mother and makes her a narrating model. It also problematizes her silence and her speech, as we have seen.26

Not unexpectedly, Hans gives voice to the literary model included in the film that is most alien to Sanders-Brahms’s Kinoschreiben as he performs a drunken recital of Faust’s “Easter Morning” speech during a scene of empty, joyless merry-making near the film’s end. An Adenauer radio speech promoting European humanistic ideals counterpoints the lines from Goethe’s play. The striving individual Faustian man whose mission for self-fulfillment legitimizes the destruction of women’s lives — Gretchen and her mother — and the repression of memories of their suffering, can hardly serve as anything but a negative example by this point in the film. The idea of a regenerated Germany, implied by the “Easter Morning” and Adenauer speeches, emerges in a context of scathing irony.

As these examples illustrate, the culture’s major literary paradigms have little to say about the mother-daughter dyad at all, let alone in a politically empowering context. The film appropriates canonical texts for purposes of both assimilation and critique. Because these mainstream models, like traditional Freudian ones, never make for an easy match with women’s experiences, the film involves the spectator in a process of questioning to determine where emulation ends and critique begins. Reworking the past, as Germany, Pale Mother reveals, is not a labor with identical contours for women and men. Relative to Santner’s paradigm of Apollo and Daphne discussed at the outset, the film’s reinscription of history and loss is an undertaking involving different processes of recuperation and representation. Sanders-Brahms’s endeavor necessitates greater emphasis both on sustaining connection between self and m/other (or lost object) and on acknowledging differences within each discursively constituted identity. Thus “German women” becomes a category less obscured by the established norm, “the German people”; thus, the idea that German women were either “victims” or “players” gives way to the recognition that they were, in

26. Moreover, in contrast to the female erotic spectacle that, as Laura Mulvey has argued, defines the usual terms by which women’s presence intrudes on narrative forward progress (Visual and Other Pleasures [Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989] 19-20), the Robber Bridegroom story within the film’s story creates disruption through a woman’s enunciation — that is, a woman’s narration en abîme.
varying ways, both — as in the film’s opening scene, where Nazi soldiers harass Lene and in the later scene, where Lene coldly draws the curtains as officers take Rachel away.

The film, then, does not display a symptomatic repetition compulsion as some have claimed: it does not act out the compulsion to repeat or reproduce a single, regressive identity (the pattern Santer attributes both to the film and to Germans generally); nor does it simply repeat retrograde formulations of an abstraction of woman through melodramatic or allegorical encoding, or through a perception of woman defined in essentialized, ahistorical terms (as some feminist critics have argued). Indeed, because the film expressly avoids elevating separation as an unqualified value — whether it be separation from the screen image, from the abject mother, from Jewish victims, or from all other relationships with the world — Germany, Pale Mother avoids complicity with a masculinist model of identity formation and acculturation. In this way, the film subverts the (re)production of melancholia and advances to a new critical level in mourning the past.

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