Through a Daughter’s Eyes: Helma Sanders-Brahms’ Germany, Pale Mother*

by Angelika Bammer

Helma Sanders-Brahms’ film *Germany, Pale Mother* (1979) begins with a silent close-up of a swastika, the slightly blurred image of a flag reflected in water. As the camera pulls back and our angle of vision widens, we are able to situate the image — and ourselves as viewers — in relation to a context: we see a pond, a boathouse with a Nazi flag; two men in a rowboat cut through the water, across the wavering reflection of the swastika. On shore we see a group of SA officers playing with a German shepherd; a young woman walking by is attacked by the dog. The men in the boat watch as she struggles to free herself; we watch her struggle through their eyes. Throughout the entire scene the representational realism of the events is underscored by the exclusive use of diegetic sound: we hear the two men in the boat talking, the SA officers shouting, and the dog barking. Only the woman remains silent. The female voice we hear on the soundtrack is not hers, but the disembodied, extradiegetic voice of the film’s narrator (the filmmaker herself), who identifies herself as the (as yet unborn) daughter of the woman we see onscreen. From the very outset, then, woman’s presence is marked by her simultaneous absence: voice without body, body without speech. While the presence of the men appears self-evident, “natural” as it were (we hear them as they speak, we see them as they act), the presence of woman is marked, different and (in a Brechtian sense) “made strange.” Either mute or invisible, she appears incomplete and fragmented, split into disembodied voice on the one hand and voiceless body on the other. There is something unsettling, disturbing about this presence-absence that compels our attention far more powerfully than the seemingly natural presence of the men. Within the narrative world of the film itself, the woman’s silence also draws attention, making a deep impression on the two men watching her from the boat. “She didn’t scream,” remarks Hans, the man who is soon (although

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not yet known to her) to become her husband, "she didn't say a word."
"A real German women," answers Ulrich, the up and coming Nazi party functionary, "a real German woman."

Questions raised by this opening scene are central to Germany, Paleo Mother: What is a "real German woman"? What does being a "real German woman" have to do with being, or remaining, silent? What does this silence mean? What will be heard when it is broken? In the tradition of German cinema — new as well as old — women have, for the most part, been seen through men's eyes. Literally and figuratively, the gaze directed at them has been male. In this context German women filmmakers have been asking what it would be like, what it would mean, to see differently, to see women — and everything, for that matter — through a woman's eyes. Filmmakers like Helma Sanders-Brahms, Helke Sander, Margarethe von Trolle, Jutta Brückner, Ulrike Ottinger, Elfi Mikesch — and others (even) less known because (even) less able to find the necessary financial support and access to distribution networks — are attempting to do just that. The figure of the German woman — silent, enigmatic, seen only from a distance and from the point of view of men — with which Germany, Paleo Mother begins, is thus at the heart of what can be seen as the production of a new women's cinema in West Germany today. Beginning with the question, "Who is she, this 'real German woman,' and what is her story?" this New (German) Women's Cinema suggests that as women's stories are told — by women themselves and in their own words — their telling, and our listening, will affect our understanding of (German) history, the history they lived through and, in the process, took part in shaping.

However, as Sanders-Brahms implies through her skillful manipulation of a film language which plays on the tension between presence (what we see and hear on image and sound tracks respectively) and absence (what remains unheard, unseen), allowing meanings to be constructed out of the interplay between the two, these stories cannot simply be told. Or rather, one might say, they cannot be told simply. The true picture of women (German or otherwise) will not emerge out of the shadows of history because we are now willing to peer into them any more than her true story will now be heard just because we are willing to listen. History, like the swastika reflected in water and projected as an image on the screen, takes shape in the images recorded, transmitted and received within specific cultural contexts at specific historical moments. How we see those images — and the version of history they construct — depends not only on the particular form of their representation, but also on where we stand in relation to the events portrayed and the point of view of their telling.
In this respect the opening shot of _Germany, Pale Mother_ depicts, paradigmatically, our relationship to history. The image of the swastika situates us, spectators of the film, in relation to a specific (and specifically German) past — the events of German history during the years of Nazi rule. Yet this same image immediately problematized our relationship to that very history. For just as we do not see the swastika directly, but rather in form of cinematic image (an image of an image — a reflection — at that), our relationship to the past is also always indirect. As this opening shot suggests, our access to what we call “history” can never be immediate; it is always mediated by the forms of its re-presentation. Only when history is narrativized, i.e., presented to us as story,¹ and our understanding of “what happened” is shaped by the narrative through which the events are made to cohere, do our positions — as readers/listeners/spectators — become temporarily fixed. Thus it is only as story that history appears coherent, its causality and telos apparently self-evident. This ideological function of narrative and cinematic representation is laid bare and thematized in _Germany, Pale Mother_. For this film is the history of a story, a story about history, a reflection on the relationship between history and its telling.

From the outset, through the careful construction of the very first shot, _Germany, Pale Mother_ makes us aware of the multiple and shifting perspectives from which the (hi)story it speaks of can be seen. Alternatively distancing and then again drawing us in, it reminds us that on the scene of historical events — as in the movie theatre — we are always, at one and the same time, participants and observers, projecting ourselves into the scripts that have already been written even as we are conscious of the ways in which we are necessarily also separate, and distanced, from them. It is thus that _Germany, Pale Mother_, already in its opening scene, not only identifies the primary subject of the New German Women’s Cinema — the “real German woman” — but also, paradigmatically, illustrates a way of seeing that is particularly appropriate to this subject: multifaceted, its shifting perspectives self-consciously partial, marked by obliqueness and indirectness.

Sanders-Brahms prefaces her film with a poem written by Bertolt Brecht in exile in 1933, the year in which Hitler’s National Socialist Party seized power in the German Reichstag. In this poem Brecht describes the recent history of Germany as a story of fratricide in which the weaker brother has been ruthlessly slain by the stronger ones. In

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¹ In German the words for “history” and “story” are the same ("Geschichte"). Unfortunately, my intended wordplay here comes through only indirectly in the English “hi/story.”
her house, now a house of murderers (ein Mörderhaus), Germany, the "pale mother," sits silently; the blame for the murderous acts of her sons has become her shame in the eyes of the world. Germany, Pale Mother is an attempt to break this silence, to speak, finally, of what happened. In this film, however, it is not the mother who speaks but her daughter who speaks for and to her. On the literal level of historical documentation and personal autobiography, Sanders-Brahms is telling the story of her own mother and of herself as a child born (in 1940) into Nazi Germany. At the same time, this film, as its title already indicates, asks to be read not just literally, but on a symbolic, allegorical level as well. For Germany, Pale Mother also tells the story of Germany during the years of Nazi rule and its collapse and the first years of post-Nazi, post-war reconstruction. "I tell the story of my parents," writes the filmmaker, "because . . . this (hi)story is at once an individual and a collective one." This deliberately subjective stance — the attempt to understand German history through and in terms of a personal (hi)story — was the most visible focus of critical attention in the initial public reception of Germany, Pale Mother. While in feminist circles the film was, for the most part, praised for its attempt to show that the "political" is always also "personal," and vice-versa, in the mainstream press it was, not unpredictably, chastized for precisely this attempt. The film fails, as one reviewer put it, "because the director does not stick to her specific topic, the internal transformation of a woman." "If it were a purely personal film," wrote another, "one could not refuse it one's sympathy. What makes it problematic is that the director does not limit herself to personal memories." Either the emotional power of its depiction of the subjectivity of history was acknowledged and it was then criticized for not limiting itself to this "purely personal" focus, or its "subjectivism" was attacked as too limited, too "lightweight" for such a weighty historical subject.

In the political controversy over Germany, Pale Mother my own position is ambivalent. For I conclude that the bold and insistent subjectivity of Germany, Pale Mother is an important and challenging re-vision of history through a woman's eyes, while at the same time its very partiality makes it politically quite problematic. In the following analysis I will attempt to show how and why.

2. Helma Sanders-Brahms, Deutschland, bleiche Mutter. Film-Erzählung (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1980), p. 11. All translations from the German are my own.

3. Both the first review (by Jutta Freund in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung) and the second review (by Peter Hasenberg in film-dienst) appeared shortly after the film was released in West Germany. However, I have not been able to locate precise dates for either of these reviews, copies of which were sent to me by the Goethe House in Chicago.
The issues addressed by this film, and raised again by its critics as well as its advocates, are vital to the development of a theory and a practice of feminist cinema. Yet to see it only in relation to a still rather vaguely conceptualized, transnational body of “women’s films,” or to discuss it only in terms of current concepts of feminist film theory, is to ignore the crucial way in which it is very much a product of specific national origins. For Germany, Pale Mother is not just a “women’s film” or a feminist film; it is also a German film, a product of current West German cultural and political history. This history, and its resultant cultural production, has been marked by the struggle of a new generation of German artists — writers, painters, poets and filmmakers — to find words and images with which to understand and articulate their experience as Germans, an experience passed on to them by the generation of their parents whom denial and shame had, for the most part, rendered silent. Vergangenheitsbewältigung (coming-to-terms-with-the-past, i.e., the Nazi past) was the historical imperative for Germans after Hitler, individually and collectively. For the women of Sanders-Brahms’ generation — women whose historical consciousness was formed in the radical movements of the 1960s and the activism which gave rise to the new German women’s movements — this meant trying to understand their particular relationship to history not just as Germans, but as women, as daughters of their mothers. Germany, Pale Mother is an example of the attempt.4

Vergangenheitsbewältigung has been a central, if not dominant, theme in the films of the New German Cinema. Indeed, one could argue that the national anxiety over the Nazi past, and the corrosive effects of this past both on German society and consciousness in the present and on the possible shape of its future, informs even those films in which it does not become thematically explicit on the level of narrative content. Yet despite the repeated insistence that the past had to be dealt with, the concrete process of doing so has, in fact, been severely hampered by the very limited perspective from which this past has actually been looked at. For, as is evident from the list of names most commonly associated with the New German Cinema (Fassbinder, Herzog, Schöndorff, Wenders, Syberberg), men and their perspectives — perspectives based on their experience and interests — are once again dominant. In the body of films that are generally regarded as representative of the New German Cinema, German history has thus, for the most part,

4. Another film which uses a similar autobiographical mother/daughter narrative framework to reflect on a period of German history (in this case, the Cold War and “Economic Miracle” years of the 1950s) is Jutta Brückner’s Hungerjahre (Years of Hunger, 1980).
been seen through the eyes of men. From this perspective women (as in the films by Herzog, Wenders and Syberberg, for instance) are, if not entirely absent, marginal at best. If they are moved to the center (as in films like Fassbinder’s *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, to which *Germany, Pale Mother* is often compared), it is often merely to functionalize them into allegorical figures; Maria Braun, for example, is seen less as a person than as the persona of post-war Germany.

Sanders-Brahms presents her film as a critique of an alternative to the representations of women prevailing in the male-dominated (German) film industry. She begins by acknowledging her inheritance of a cultural tradition in which woman has been made the carrier of ideological meaning even when politically her importance has been denied; Victory, Justice and Patria appear in the figure of woman even when actual women have been disenfranchised as citizens. With the title of her film and the prefatory Brecht poem, Sanders-Brahms clearly places herself within this cultural tradition. She too uses woman as an allegorical figure. Then, however, by shifting her attention to the concrete particulars of everyday experience, she 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. Thus, while it uses the discourse of allegory, *Germany, Pale Mother* implies a critique of that discourse as inevitably mystifying, as one that blinds us to the specificity of history as it was lived. And it is precisely this specificity — history as it was lived — that Sanders-Brahms wants us to see. Therefore, in *Germany, Pale Mother* she attempts to make women visible without once again reifying them as symbolic objects. Lene, the mother, her daughter, Anna, and Lene’s sister, Hanne, are persons whose lives have meanings that cannot be compressed into symbols. At the same time, by enlarging the figure of woman allegorically, Sanders-Brahms pays tribute to women as a group, to their role in shaping the events that have become our history. Speaking for themselves, but also as part of a larger whole, the women in this film thus stand for the thousands of women whose individual lives, actions and experiences collectively tell part of the story of this period of German history.

The contention that “history as traditionally recorded and interpreted by historians has been, in fact, the history of the activities of men ordered by male values”¹⁵ — “Men’s History,” as Gerda Lerner has renamed it — is by now a commonplace of many feminist historians.

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In light of this premise, to (re)construct the shape of what Lerner, by analogy, calls "Women's History," to answer the question "what would history be like if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they define?" would call for a radical paradigm shift. Germany, Pale Mother attempts to undertake such a shift. In its depiction of the experience of war from the perspective of those who stay behind — namely the women and the children — Germany, Pale Mother illustrates the unsettling consequences of such an inversion of perspective. With the removal of the men to the battle fronts, many of the gender-specific restrictions that had normally been imposed on women to ensure the smooth functioning of a male-dominated and sex-segregated society inevitably broke down. The work had to be done; thus, in the absence of men, it was up to the women to do it. Now able, indeed encouraged, to move into areas of the public sphere which had previously been reserved for men, women, in large numbers, entered the work force and soon discovered the power and autonomy attendant upon the ability to earn money. At the same time, freed of male domination in the private sphere of relationships and the family, they were able to shape their lives more fully in accordance with the rhythm of their own needs and desires. Thus, as Sanders-Brahms shows in this film, the war, as seen through the eyes of her mother, was different from the one her soldier-father knew.

Certainly Germany, Pale Mother does not glorify, rationalize or make apologies for war. There are no heroes in this film, either on or behind the battle lines. Indeed, in the haunting and moving portrayal of her own father — Lene's husband, Hans — Sanders-Brahms shows the relentless and terrible destructiveness of war. A kind and gentle young man when he is sent off to be a soldier by the young bride he has barely had time to know, Hans returns years later, aged and hardened and broken in spirit, to a marriage that had died while he was forced to live by killing. However, Germany, Pale Mother does not present itself as an anti-war film in the traditional sense either. While it acknowledges that war, in its destruction of lives and resources, affects all of us — women and men, young and old — it also maintains that it does not affect all of us alike. In fact, it argues that, particularly in as highly industrialized, technologized and sex-stratified a society as was Germany at the time of World War II, the actual effects of war on women are on the whole quite different than the effects of the same war on men. In certain ways, it suggests, war can even have a liberating effect on women.

This suggestion, already thematized in an earlier film by Edgar Reitz (Die Reise nach Wien, 1974), is not new. Moreover, there is ample historical material to be found in its support. In the United States during World War II, for example, the effects of the wartime economy on
women’s lives were such that, as the historian William Chafe describes it, “in the eyes of many observers, women’s experience during the war years amounted to a revolution.” This “revolution” was reflected in the films of this era. Playing, and catering, to an increasingly (at times predominantly) female audience, the films made during the 1940s — subsequently often dubbed the era of “women’s films” for this reason — both responded to, and themselves took part in shaping the changes in women’s opportunities and consciousness. In American films of this decade, women were portrayed, by and large, as feisty and tough, strong and competent, able — and generally, willing — to make it on their own. They often lived quite comfortably (and often, in fact, quite happily) “alone,” i.e., without the men. Indeed, women like Mildred Pierce or the fabled Rosie the Riveter, and probably countless women these fictionalized images spoke to and for, on the whole did just fine — until the men returned. For when the men came back from the war, the women were sent back to the kitchens; their jobs were returned to the men to whom, it was decreed, they rightfully belonged. Thus, as a character in a short story by Linda Marie, published in Judy Grahn’s True to Life Adventure Stories, put it bluntly and in a nutshell, “We’d all be a lot better off not to mention happier if we had wars to send men to. They’d be off our asses then.”

To an extent, Germany, Pale Mother seems to agree, although it puts it less crassly. Nevertheless, this film clearly evokes an image of what Linda Marie describes as “the good ol’ days, when women gathered together, lived together, prayed together and stayed together because the men were off to war.” While Hans is off at war Lene and Anna, seemingly unbound by external obligations, live in a state of wild, anarchic freedom. Although they live in a war zone — their house is destroyed in a bomb attack, their possessions lost in the rubble — they

7. In “Woman’s Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir” [in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., Women in Film Noir (London: British Film Institute, 1980)], Sylvia Harvey discusses the shifts in American women’s social and economic position during the World War II and immediate post-war years in relation to the conventions of film noir. Arguing that “the depiction of women in these films, by a complex and circuitous network of mediation, reflects such social changes as the increasing entry of women into the labor market” (p. 23), Harvey concludes that “the strange and compelling absence of ‘normal’ family relations in these films . . . hints at important shifts in the position of women in American society” at this time (p. 25).
experience their lives as strangely carefree and happy. As the daughter’s narrative voice remembers, “We flew like witches over the rooftops . . . Lene and I. I and Lene. In the midst of war.”

Obviously the position of women in the German economy during World War II was in many ways quite different from that of their American counterparts. Not only was a considerable share of the domestic labor performed by foreign workers forcibly imported from German-occupied territories (notably Poland), and later by prisoners in concentration camps and war camps, but the official Nazi policy on motherhood, with its insistence that women’s sphere was reproduction, not production, also served to keep German women (“Aryan” women, that is) out of the labor force. Nevertheless, even in Nazi Germany the war effort called on more and more women to occupy positions which had previously been held almost exclusively by men: large numbers of women worked in public administration, agriculture and the war industry; by the end of the war not only hospitals, but the postal and train systems as well were being all but run by women. In an essay on her experience “on the homefront” in Germany during the war, a woman describes the resultant feeling of strength and independence she and many other women experienced during this time: “Women stood on their own two feet. We could, indeed had to, be more and more independent, resourceful. These war years, which for many meant such hardship and sacrifice . . . for me, I hardly dare to say it, they meant a rich, yes happy time.” Had she been asked to describe the past, Lene, in Germany, Pale Mother, might have said the same.

However, her “freedom” ends abruptly when the war is over and the

10. Sanders-Brahms, p. 112.
12. The increasing need for additional laborers did, of course, make it necessary to enlist even “Aryan” German women in the war effort. Thus, from 1938 on a mandatory “Work Service” (“Arbeitsdienst”) was implemented, requiring that all unmarried girls and women between 14 and 25 give a year (augmented to a year and a half by 1941) of unpaid labor in service to the fatherland.
men return. For with them, the old order of the Wohnstuben ("hearth and home") was returned as well. It was then that the other war — the war at home — began: "This is when the war inside began, when on the outside there was peace." And, as Sanders-Brahms portrays it in Germany, Pale Mother, this was the war that women, the generation of her mother, lost. Moreover, their postwar readjustment, unlike that of the returning soldiers, was not talked about in public. Literature and films that dealt with the human toll of postwar "normalization" focused on the traumas experienced by the men. The traumas of the women, once again, were kept silent. Thus, as Hans and the now "reformed" former Nazi Ulrich are buoyed up by the rising tide of the German Wirtschaftswunder ("Economic Miracle"), Lene begins to go under in a world in which she finds herself reduced to a mere secondary function — wife at the side of her husband, mother taking care of her child.

Germany, Pale Mother describes the relationship between a woman (Lene) and her daughter (Anna). The mother-daughter relationship — its effects on female identity formation and, by extension, on women's perception of social relations — has been a focus of much attention in recent feminist psychoanalytic theory. Yet, in contrast to psychoanalytic theorists like Luce Irigaray or Nancy Chodorow, who describe this relationship almost as if it existed in a purely intra-psychic realm more or less unaffected by the concrete materialities of a particular time and place, Sanders-Brahms locates it within clearly marked historical and socio-cultural coordinates. By focusing on the nexus between "personal" lives and "political" events, she refuses to separate the story of Lene, Anna and Hans from the historical contexts within which this story was actually lived and subsequently told. As a result, she demonstrates how the traditional psychoanalytic focus on interpersonal relationships can — indeed must — be radically historicized. How, this film asks, have relationships — between women and men, wives and husbands, children and parents, daughters and mothers — been shaped by the particulars of their moment in history? And how, in turn, have they inscribed the dynamics of their own structures on the shape of that history?

In Germany, Pale Mother the relationship between mother and daughter becomes a paradigm for women's relationship to history. History appears in form of the stories told by mothers to their daughters, and later retold by the daughters as they remember what they have learned. "My mother. From you I have learned to speak. Mother tongue."

15. Sanders-Brahms, p. 112.
Certainly this female-centered paradigm radically inverts the familiar father-son model which informs traditional readings of history. Yet it is not unproblematic either. For as compelling, and as necessary, as such revisions of history are, to the extent that they do not acknowledge their own partiality they become themselves distortions in much the same way as the established versions of history they set themselves against. My critique of Germany, Pale Mother thus centers precisely around this issue. For in this film Sanders-Brahms seems to suggest that women are virtually outside history, as if history were literally "histoire" in which women had no part. This suggestion, implicit in the narrative paradigm of Germany, Pale Mother, raises a number of rather serious questions: What are the ideological implications of this mother-daughter paradigm? How does it add to our understanding of German history, and the history of German fascism in particular? Is it useful as a tool for understanding more about the relationship of women to that history, their implication in and responsibility for the actions and events that have given Germans collectively — the mothers as well as the fathers, their daughters as well as their sons — the legacy of shame which this film sets before us as a historical given?

On a representational level Germany, Pale Mother reinforces the thematic focus on the inseparable, almost symbiotic bond between mother and daughter. Sanders-Brahms thus portrays what Luce Irigaray has described as a union in which "the one does not stir without the other."

In Germany, Pale Mother the closeness of this bond is underscored by the almost constant visual connection between mother and daughter. Lene and Anna are most frequently seen together; in the shots and scenes in which they are not together, they appear alone, vulnerable, even (as in the scene of Lene's rape) endangered. In the rape scene the framing powerfully highlights the fact of their intimate sameness: both their faces are framed in matching shots, the one seen from the point of view of the other. At the same time, the use of cross-cutting (from a close-up of Lene's face to a parallel close-up of Anna's, watching the rape of her mother) reinforces the ominous sense that, though they are separate and even when they are separated, their fates, in the end, are inseparable. This lesson, that the lives of mother and daughter are conjoined, fated to be the same, is further underscored by the film's narrational structure: a daughter (the filmmaker) is telling the story of her mother (the film's protagonist); the mother is the "you" whom the

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narrating "I" is addressing. And finally, as if to show that the cycle perpetually continues, Lene’s small daughter Anna is played by Sanders-Brahms’ own daughter, Anna Sanders.

What effect does the form in which relationships are cast in Germany, Pale Mother have on its viewers, particularly its female viewers? An answer to this question must be framed in terms of our relationship as spectators to film in general, and to this film in particular. As spectators our relationship to a film is shaped by two different, and often conflicting, impulses. On the one hand, we are compelled toward an abandonment of self through a narcissistic identification with the images provided by the film. On the other hand we derive pleasure from the experience of autonomy which lies in identifying ourselves, not as the personae projected on the screen, but in relation to them. In Germany, Pale Mother Sanders-Brahms skillfully manipulates cinematic conventions to create a film which keeps a firm hold on our attention by constantly controlling, changing, and adjusting the tension between these two impulses.

At times we are almost completely engulfed by the intense emotional impact of highly charged primal scenes — Angst-filled visions of birth, rape, mutilation and death. Lene is first seen as she is being assaulted by jeering men and a vicious dog; she gives birth to her first child surrounded by the bombs and sirens of an air-raid attack; later all her teeth are pulled in a stupid and futile attempt to cure her of a sudden, disfiguring facial paralysis; in the final scene of the film, she locks herself in the bathroom and, turning up the gas, blows out the pilot light in the bathwater heater. As we watch all this closely, often in close-up, the affective charge of such scenes is such that we are drawn into their emotional vortex, virtually unconscious of anything but the sheer terror they evoke. At other times, however, the film invites an altogether different response. Through such devices as the insertion of documentary footage, abrupt shifts in temporal order and duration (flashbacks, ellipses, compression as well as expansion of narrated time), and, above all, the use of a constantly intruding, commenting, self-reflective voice-over, the flow of the narrative is repeatedly, and often unexpectedly, disrupted. As we are thus made conscious of the film as a series of formal strategies, we also become aware of our own position as spectators — not participants in the events, but merely observers of them. As our immersion in the events is disrupted through various distancing devices, it becomes possible for us to (re)establish an active and critical (self)consciousness.

In effect, however, the potential of this critical consciousness, which might have been mobilized by the film’s formal devices, is undone by the thematic foregrounding of highly emotionalized scenes of a woman’s
privatized trauma. Pushed one minute toward emotion, while the next we are urged to reflect, we are left dazed, in a state of emotional exhaustion. *Germany, Pale Mother* thus reveals its own unresolved ambivalence toward the subject matter it is dealing with: torn between its impulse to free us of pre-given (male-defined?) ways of seeing the relationship between women, war and history, and the conflicting impulse to impose upon us another (female-centered?) way of seeing and thinking about these things. The question we are left with is, how new and, above all, how alternative, is its way of seeing actually?

This question takes us back to the representation of women in *Germany, Pale Mother* and the possible effect of this representation on a woman viewer. Despite the deconstructive movement of some of the film's formal devices, its narrational structure — a daughter reflecting on her own telling of her mother's story — is essentially circular, a closed, almost claustrophobic, circuit. Moreover, positing as it does the ultimate sameness of women's experience (like mother, like daughter), *Germany, Pale Mother* implicitly includes all women in this symbiotic union. As female spectators we are thus positioned toward the mother/daughter diad in a way that causes us too be swallowed up in it. Finally, as if this enforced immersion in a universalized state of female being were not enough, the film insists on linking the identity, and thus destiny, of woman to images of death, destruction and annihilation. The effect, at least on this woman viewer, is a frightening feeling of entrapment. It is woman's fate, we are shown in the example of Lene, to be raped, assaulted and tortured, to give birth in pain and live without hope. Her survival is at the cost of agreeing to be a victim. And the mother is the daughter's teacher in the lessons of victimization. Embracing her when she appears most pitiful and helpless and turning away from her when she demonstrates strength and independence, Lene teaches her daughter the terrible double bind of femininity: because you are helpless, you are bound to be a victim; only as long as you act helpless will you be loved and protected.

Lene and Anna create and inhabit a private world of their own. Thus their relationship has a doubly utopian dimension. To begin with, it constitutes a space — a more or less entirely female space — for which there is no place within the dominant cultural parameters. Furthermore, it is utopian in its promise of the possibility of a union — separate beings joined as one — which appears as an almost archetypal symbol of unattainable longing in a culture which defines individuation as separation from the other rather than a state of interconnectedness with others.17 Yet, as Sanders-Brahms suggests in *Germany, Pale*  

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17. For an in-depth analysis of these concepts and their consequences see Carol
Mother, and as feminist writers like Adrienne Rich and Irigaray describe it in their reflections on motherhood, for women this state of simultaneous separateness and oneness is not merely a utopian fantasy, but (at least potentially) actual primal experience. For it is grounded in the bodily knowledge experienced in motherhood that we can be (and indeed, all once were) both a separate self and an inseparable part of an Other: "You/I, exchanging selves endlessly and each staying herself... Of the two of us, who was the one, who was the other?"\(^\text{18}\)

This impossibility of separation, however, results in a profound relational ambivalence. For the bond to the (m)other embodies the perhaps ultimate utopian dream of shelter and refuge from both a frightening world and the fearful aloneness of human existence; it is the idealized vision of a permanent, eternally blissful, pre-oedipal state. Yet it also evokes the terror of engulfment, of being imprisoned in the intimacy of the (m)other whose enveloping presence leaves no room for the self to exist independently. The relationship with the mother is thus the site of deepest contradiction; our consequent reaction to her is marked by the most intense ambivalence. The relationship between Lene and Anna, in *Germany, Pale Mother*, is emblematic of this ambivalence. To Lene, Anna is a companion; attentive to her needs, sensitive to her moods, she is a constant and comforting presence. Yet this very presence is also a burden which Lene, the mother, is not free to cast off, but forced to bear with her wherever she goes. In numerous scenes Anna is literally the burden weighing Lene down — held in her arms, slung on her back, or hanging on her neck. To Anna, Lene represents shelter, comfort, the promise of safety. But she is also the at times frightening and enigmatic Other from whose adult world the child will always be shut out.

When Lene finally realizes that her enmeshment in relationships — with her daughter, her husband, to a world whose social codes dictate who she should be and how she should live — has resulted in her physical and spiritual paralysis, she tries to break out of their stifling enclosure. Seeking to recover the self she has by now all but lost, she finds it only in the negative space of withdrawal, of refusing all connection. In the climactic scene with which the film ends, Lene attempts to enact the final ritual of separation. Yet her desire to achieve separation cannot overcome the powerful force of her connectedness. Thus what begins as a defiant and affirmative decision to choose the solitude of death ends merely as a helpless and desperately futile gesture. For she,

\(^{18}\) *Irigaray, pp. 61 and 65.*
the mother, cannot break out of the bonds that tie her to the child by whom she is still too much needed and whom she herself too much needs. As the final scene of the film suggests, even in her absence she is made powerfully present by this need. Lene, for once, has chosen to be by herself, to face her self, alone and unencumbered. She has withdrawn from her daughter, Anna, who is left standing outside the locked bathroom door behind which her mother is preparing her suicide; she had withdrawn from us, from our relentless gaze as spectators, into the offscreen space on the other side of the door. Yet even though Lene is physically absent, inaccessible to our gaze or to her daughter’s cries, her invisible and silent presence completely suffuses this scene. Her absence, in the end, is simply not allowed. Our attention, like that of Anna, is fixed on the bathroom door, insisting that she still be there on the other side, refusing to believe that she might not return to restore to us the comfort and reassurance of her presence. Therefore, as we wait with Anna, helplessly begging her mother to “please come out, please, please . . .”, we see (and, on a primal level, once again experience) the terrifying power of the mother from whom the daughter/child is always separate, yet never completely able to separate.

In a film in which the relationship between mother and daughter stands paradigmatically for the relationship of women to history, the way in which this relationship is represented becomes particularly significant. It is thus not the paradigm itself, but the specific form of its representation in Germany, Pale Mother that I find problematic and disturbing. For the inseparability of mother and daughter, which effectively denies each of them autonomy, also, by implication, denies both of them responsibility: those who refuse to claim their autonomy as historical subjects also cannot own their responsibility as agents of history. This denial of women’s autonomy, and, by implication, the refusal to acknowledge the fact of their responsibility, has serious consequences, especially in the context of current discussions of the role of women under fascism, of women’s participation in the construction of a fascist state. Moreover, in a film such as this about women and daily life in Nazi Germany, the question of historical responsibility is, of necessity, a central one. Germany Pale Mother raises this question at the very outset. Who carries responsibility: Lene, the mother, who lived through the period represented here? Anna/Helma, the daughter, who inherited her parents’ legacy? Both of them? Neither? The question is further complicated by the fact that this is a film made by a woman who defines herself as both daughter and mother (“I am the daughter of my mother and the mother of my daughter”) i.e., as one

whose identity is informed by the recognition of connectedness between the generations.

Helma Sanders-Brahms’ answer to the question of responsibility is an ambiguous one. On the one hand, she posits the need for a people to assume collective responsibility for their history: “Hitler in many films . . . . The films and commemorations are devoted to the protagonists. And once again those who made the protagonists possible are forgotten.” 20 For the consequences of the past she too, then, is responsible. Yet for the actual events of the past, she implies Lene’s innocence and clearly affirms her own: “For that which happened before I was born, I carry no blame,” declares the authorial voice-over at the very beginning of the film. 21 Who, then, we might ask, does carry it? Who is responsible for history? Is it the daughter who, at the moment of her birth, “fell onto the battlefield” of destruction created by the generation of her parents? No, answers the film, as a mere child she could know nothing; she is in-no-cent (one who is “not harmed, not touched” by things) in the most basic sense of the word. But, as Germany, Pale Mother sets out to demonstrate, the mother is not really to blame either. For the history of Nazism and World War II — history as it has traditionally been recorded — is not the mother’s story. Both implicated and exculpated, Lene and Anna thus traverse the battlefield of history without essentially being touched by it. In the extreme ambiguity of Sanders-Brahms’ stance, the question of responsibility thus loses its historical meaning. And finally, as the parabolic structure of the narrative virtually lifts the story of Lene and Anna out of history altogether into a mythic, fairytale-like realm beyond the normal coordinates of time and space, the experience of a woman and her daughter during World War II in Hitler’s Germany is even further depoliticized.

The suggestion that “Women’s History” is somehow separate from “Men’s History,” that women, in their separateness, are thus outside the bounds of what we think of as simply “history,” is most clearly articulated in a scene whose centrality, both in terms of narrative chronology and actual duration, marks it as a key moment in the meaning structure of the film: the Märchen scene. It is in this scene, structured around Lene’s almost uninterrupted narration of a story from the Grimm Brothers’ collection of German Märchen, that the reactionary potential of Sanders-Brahms’ revision of history is most disturbingly evident. It is in this scene also that the use of an allegorical

21. Sanders-Brahms, p. 112.
frame in a film which sets out to deconstruct the ideological structure of allegory becomes particularly problematic. For instead of sustaining a critique of the politics of mythical discourse, Sanders-Brahms ends up reconstituting woman as a once again mythical, and thus mystified, figure.

Lene tells Anna the story of “The Robber Bridegroom.” As she speaks in a steady narrative flow, an increasingly unbearable tension is constructed between the calm, almost impassive tone of her narration and what we and Anna experience in the course of the story-telling. As they walk through woods and underbrush, they come across the body of a dead soldier, left to rot in the spot where he fell; they bed down in the crumbling remains of what appears to have been a crematorium; Lene is raped by two American G.I.’s while Anna looks on, mutely, yet with an eerie impassivity that seems to echo the tone of Lene’s suddenly and violently interrupted story-telling. Their attention focused on the story which Lene recites, almost word for word as it appears in the familiar Grimm version, they are oblivious — although obviously not impervious — to what goes on around them.

The story which Lene tells Anna, and above all the way her telling of it is portrayed, can itself be read as a parable about women’s relationship to history. Like the hapless and innocent maiden in the story, who suddenly finds herself imprisoned in a robbers’ den, Lene and Anna are also “imprisoned” in a world that is dangerous and evil. They may be (and, in fact, invariably are) affected by this evil; as is illustrated both by the story Lene tells her young daughter, Anna, and by Lene’s own story as told us by her now adult daughter (Sanders-Brahms) in this film, it can harm and even destroy them. Yet it is not theirs; the evil in the world is not of their doing. Therefore, like the maiden in the fairy-tale who, by dint of a clever ruse, manages to escape the clutches of her would-be murderers, Lene and Anna can, at best, hope to come away unharmed; they are powerless to prevent what they did not have the power to cause. Rather than being in history and of it, they seem merely to be passing through, wandering through a time and space at

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22. Although the building in which Anna and Lene find shelter could also be an abandoned factory and not necessarily a crematorium, the cues suggesting that it is, in fact, the latter, are certainly powerfully suggestive. To begin with, it is at the word “ashes” (as Lene tells of the girl in the story strewing ashes to mark her path through the woods) that the camera, following Lene’s gaze, slowly pans up the very tall chimney of the building. Then, it is while they are in, and around, this building that Lene tells the story of the death of innocent victims in a notorious “murderer’s house” (the repeated reference to “Mörderhaus” eerily echoing the Brechtian vision of Germany as a pale mother in a “Mörderhaus” with which the film had begun).
once deeply familiar and utterly foreign to them. Appropriately, therefore, throughout the entire Märchen scene the coordinates of Lene’s and Anna’s reality are deliberately left unmarked. (Historical) time and (geographical) space have become irrelevant categories of measurement. For Lene and Anna are, as it were, living in a world of their own.

In fact, so absorbed are they in their own world, in the fantastic events of the Märchen, that they seem barely conscious of the events in the “real” world around them. Whether they are actually blind to the realities around them, or whether they can only live with what they are powerless to change by choosing (or pretending) to ignore it, is deliberately left ambiguous. Indeed, as an incident early on in the film suggests, Lene knows and understands quite well what is happening. As her sister impulsively moves to assist a Jewish woman who is being beaten up by Nazis on the street in front of their house, Lene swiftly pulls Hanne away from the window and silently closes the blinds. Nevertheless, in the end it makes little difference whether she is choosing to close her eyes or is truly blind to what is going on around her. The fact is, she does not see and, in not seeing, allows what is happening to continue, unchallenged and unchecked. Lene ignores the atmosphere of horror, the gas chambers and ovens, in the building where she and her child find shelter. In much the same way she had earlier ignored the anti-Semitic violence of the Kristallnacht pogrom, seemingly oblivious to the danger in which she puts both herself and the elderly Jewish shop owner when she insists on being let into the vandalized and barricaded shop to buy some silk thread for the new blouse she is embroidering. While these scenes seem intended to plead Lene’s essential innocence (she is guiltless because she is ignorant), I think that, instead, they beg the essential questions of guilt and responsibility.

Women are, at one and the same time, part of and separate from, the institutionalized structures of (men’s) history, (men’s) culture, and (men’s) power. In her “Theses on the History of Women’s Writing” Sigrid Weigel, German feminist theorist and literary historian, thus concludes that in order to grasp this bewildering simultaneity of inclusion and exclusion, participation and refusal, sameness and difference, we must acquire a “cross-eyed gaze” (“schielender Blick”), one that would enable us to see in two directions at once. I propose that such a

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cross-eyed gaze is the best — indeed, the only — way to look at Germany, *Pale Mother*. For such a gaze will enable us to see the importance of this film’s contribution to feminist revisions of history from the perspective of women’s experience. It will also enable us to see the danger of this perspective if it remains monocural, blind to the fact that as women we cannot claim allegiance only to an as yet only imaginary nation of women. For we are, inescapably, also part of the collective people of our nation, our culture, our race and our class. And as such, I contend, we are always — at least in that part — responsible for the consequences of their/our actions.

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