

# **Mothering Daughters: Subjectivity and History in the Work of Helma Sanders- Brahms'**

## ***Germany Pale Mother (1979-80)***

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Helma Sanders-Brahms', *Germany Pale Mother*(*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*) was released in 1979 to a less than enthusiastic response.<sup>1</sup> The film was criticised for its choice of subject matter and for its presentation of German women as victimised and masochistic. It was claimed as well that Sanders-Brahms had failed to «historicize the events in the lives of the main characters»<sup>2</sup> and that while the film drew on familiar symbols and chronological references, these were no more than a director's sleight of hand behind which Sanders- Brahms had decontextualized the experiences of her characters placing them outside history. Most commentators, in fact, have shared Eric Santner's assessment that the film passed up the opportunity to undertake a «sustained emotional confrontation with the Nazi past.»<sup>3</sup>

This paper argues that it is not satisfactory to analyse *Germany Pale Mother* only in terms of its relation to «the unassimilated German past.»<sup>4</sup> Rather it is more useful to locate the film at the conjunction of several discourses. These include the feminist discourses which are part of the movement of «New Subjectivity», a form of analysis and practice that has been strongly influenced by French and American deconstructionist theory. Within women's creative work in Germany, New Subjectivity has fostered a flowering of autobiographical writing much of which is presented in a consciously self-referential style and is often focussed on the role of mother-daughter relations in the formation of female identity. These feminist discourses provide frameworks of meaning which elucidate the critical events in *Germany Pale Mother* and the sequence in which they are presented.

Sanders-Brahms' film, ostensibly, tracks the experiences of Lene, a young German woman, whose life is framed by the large events of German history between 1933 when the Nazis took over, through the Second World War and until 1949 and the division of Germany into two states. Lene's story is narrated by the adult voice-over of her daughter Anna. Lene's husband, Hans, courts and marries Lene in the early years of Nazism and their daughter is conceived while Hans is home on leave from the Polish front. After their house is reduced to rubble in an allied bombing raid Lene and Anna travel through the country in search of new quarters. At the end of the war, and with a rather battered Hans returned from the eastern front, he, Lene, and Anna attempt unsuccessfully to re-constitute themselves as a family and re-integrate into post-war German society .

The film is presented in three parts. The first deals with Lene's early marriage and the birth of Anna and the last chronicles the strain within the family with Hans' homecoming and the aftermath of the war. These sections are joined by a long fantasy-like episode in which Lene and Anna travel across Germany -as Anna's voice-over tells us, «like witches across the rooftops»- free spirits severed from the restrictive ties of household, husband and daily chores by the war. While they travel Lene endlessly recounts the Grimms' fairy story of the Miller's daughter betrothed by her father to a murderer and who with the aid of an old woman and her own quick wits manages to escape a certain death.

At its simplest level, this might be the story of any young family in Germany in the thirties and forties. Indeed Sanders Brahms presents the film with those deceptively accessible visual qualities which are the hallmark of the German women film makers who served their apprenticeships in German television.<sup>5</sup> The immediate impact of *Germany Pale Mother*, however, is powerful and its after memory triggers complex emotions. The film employs the codes of fantasy and fairy tale, while cutting in authentic documentary pieces and with the technique of narration which uses the voice-over of the grown up daughter Anna directly addressing the viewer. While apparently chronicling the daily experiences of Lene and her family, the film raises disturbing questions about the gendered nature of war and indirectly offers a version of feminist epistemology which emphasises the pre-oedipal in the development of female identity .

Anton Kaes reminds us that film is «never an autonomous artefact» but must be understood always «in relation to the dominant discourses of its time».<sup>6</sup> As accurate as it may be, Kaes' injunction is not always so easily put into practice. Film is the most «open» of all texts and offers an almost unlimited potential for revisiting and reinterpretation. As a consequence, the dominant discourses into which any film may be fitted are fluid and often indeterminate. As well, the meanings which many films embody are elusive and do not easily lend themselves to being captured and tagged. It is also true that complex films draw on a variety of epistemological frameworks which in turn may be in a continuous state of formation. It is the very fluidity of meaning of fine films that supports their multiple re readings, each of which offers the viewer the potential pleasure of a new discovery .

The frameworks of meaning in which films function therefore are constantly changing. The impetus for these shifts may come from a number of sources. Often the appearance of new works by the same director, or by another, will alter the landscape in which the meaning of the original film has been understood. Similarly the development of new paradigms in critical theory may reformat the way in which a film is viewed. As well, the perceptions of the film's audiences may change in response to historical events, to a change in taste, or simply to the passage of time.

In light of all this, and keeping in mind its difficulty , let us attempt to apply Kaes' advice. If carried out successfully this approach will provide a deeper understanding of *Germany Pale Mother* because different discourses highlight different elements of the film and shed new light on the sequencing of the narrative.

There are two broad frameworks of meaning in which the film may be situated and with what one might call sub categories of meaning within each. The first relates to what Charles Maier has called the struggle «to master the German past.»<sup>7</sup> This refers to the efforts of the last two decades to confront the part that German citizens played in the operation of the Nazi state and the Holocaust in particular. The place of women within the Nazi state constitutes a subset of meanings within this field. The second set of discourses which pertain to the film is that associated with feminist genre of New Subjectivity and within it, in turn, are those associated with the elaboration of a paradigm explaining the gendered experience of war .

The decade of the seventies was the critical period in the development of both categories. By the end of the sixties German post war reconstruction was completed. In addition, by then, German citizens who had reached adulthood under the Nazis were entering old age and their children were at the stage of life of having children of their own and wanting to reconnect with their parents' past. The 1970s as well brought the full impact of the Women's Movement with a new consciousness of female culture and the need to find a new symbolic language with which to speak about women's experience. A powerful impetus for the latter was provided by deconstructionist critical theory which raised new questions about self identity and the relationship between author and reader. All of this was manifested in a strong interest in female autobiography and what has been called «confessional writing».<sup>8</sup> A sub-strand of this development was a heightened interest in oral testimony and the relationship between individual female experience and history at large. A number of feminists took this further to apply their data towards rethinking conceptions of war and the gendered meanings of wartime experience.

Let us look at the first of these discourses. The German «mastering of the past» has taken several forms. Among historians it was manifested in a bitter debate -the *Historikertriet*- which was led off by Jurgen Habermas in 1986 in his attack on the revisionist tendencies of three leading conservative German historians.<sup>9</sup> These spilt over into robust arguments about the significance of Andreas Hillgruber's claims that German soldiers on the eastern front were as much victims as perpetrators of violence. In popular history a great many oral histories and personal recollections of life in Germany in the thirties and forties appeared. Many of these have been produced under the rubric of *Altsgeschichte* -«the history of every day life»- a rather ambiguous term in which the lines between conformity and resistance are often indistinct.

German film, too, in the last decades has played an important part in assimilating «the unassimilated past».<sup>10</sup> The self conscious attempts by a generation of post war «orphaned» filmmakers to confront the experiences of a generation of Nazi fathers prompted much of the early work of the school of New German cinema in the 1960s.<sup>11</sup> Since the 1970s, according to Kaes, «the mission» of German

filmmakers has been to present German history in such a form that «the atrocities of the Hitler period» can be fitted into «a tolerable master narrative».<sup>12</sup>

Arguments about the place of German women and the significance for women of Nazi gender policies constitute a subcategory within the overall endeavour. The question of gender and Nazism recently if anything has become more urgent. Tina Grossman has observed that at the very time that «the (male) historians' *Historikerstreit* has calmed down» German feminist historians have begun «to wage their own version of the battle over what constitutes a useable past».<sup>13</sup> On one side are gathered those historians who support Gisela Bock's claims that German women were victims (*Opfer*) of the Nazi state. Ranged opposite them are those around Claudia Koonz who argues that German women were as equally complicit (*Taeter*) in Nazi horrors as were their menfolk.<sup>14</sup>

This debate is unlikely to go away in the immediate future as it has been refuelled by the appearance of Helke Sander's film *BerFreier und Befreite/ Liberators Take Liberties* (1992). Using archival footage and hundreds of interviews with victims, perpetrators and eye witnesses, Sanders has documented the mass rape of German women by allied soldiers, particularly Russians, at the end of the war. Premiered at the Berlin Festival in 1992 the film has been shown on German television and ran for more than a year in German movie theatres.<sup>15</sup>

At issue in interpretations of the German past is the behaviour of ordinary Germans confronted with Nazi racial policies and the question of whether they participated willingly or not in the operation of the vast administrative machinery required to carry out the Holocaust. In *Germany Pale Mother* there are several incidents which are perhaps relevant. In the early part of the film when Lene's sister Hanne sees their Jewish neighbour's daughter being assaulted by Nazi hoodlums, Lene draws her sister away from the window and back into to their girlish conversation about boyfriends. In the structure of the film the mistreatment of the Jewish girl is not as important as the discussion that Hanne's Nazi boyfriend has broken off their relationship in favour of a girl he met at the Nuremburg rally and that Lene foresees her marriage to Hans -«not the Nazi but the other one»- whom she has met at a party dance.

In the other incident which deals with the mistreatment of Jews by Nazis Lene goes to the haberdashery in search of a special red thread for the blouse she is embroidering to wear when Hans is on leave from Poland. It is apparent that the store's owners were Jewish and that it has been ransacked by Nazis. Lene, however, is oblivious to all this and knocks on the neighbour's window in order to go into the store and find the thread she wants. As the sequence of events takes place Anna's adult voice-over comments that Lene «did not want it», referring to the attacks on Jews, but did not stop it either. The voice-over then states that she, the adult Anna, considers herself lucky not to be born then. This scene raises a central question in the relationship between Anna and Lene and whether the daughter must take responsibility for the behaviour of her mother in the generation before. This meaning is elucidated particularly in light of the feminist discourse discussed below.

The scenes that depict Hans in combat are also pertinent, perhaps, to issues raised in the *Historikerstreit*. In the first Hans is with what may be an *einsatzgruppen* gunning down Polish peasant women. In the other he is part of an execution squad in France. In each case Hans is horrified to see that one of his victims resembles Lene. In the Polish incident Hans becomes very upset and while the other men berate him for his «blubbling» they too are distraught and point out that what they are doing is not easy for them either. It is possible to fit these incidents into a Hillgruberian vision of German soldiers on the eastern front whereby they were as much victims of the war as willing perpetrators of violence. Certainly, Sanders Brahms' depiction of Hans is of someone who has been victimised by the system. He is not a member of the Nazi party, he did not wish to go to war, and at each return from the front he is more and more worn down. In the last third of the film set in post war Germany Hans is embittered and often violent towards Lene and Anna but one knows his frustration at being passed over for promotion while others, despite their Nazi past, surge forward in post war careers. And yet, this is a minor theme within the film. Hans' experiences are only significant at the places where they cut across the narrative of the mother and daughter.

The central elements of feminist debates about violence towards women and the gendered policies of the Nazi state, as Gisela Bock argues, revolve around Nazi violence towards women. Certainly in *Germany Pale Mother* Lene is raped at the end of the war and in front of Anna however the

perpetrators are American soldiers not Nazis and the incident is presented in a highly stylised way and at its end Lene explains to Anna that it represents the spoils of the victors. This seemed to me to place the incident much more squarely in a feminist discourse about the gendered nature of all wars, and the distinct experience of men and women in them, rather than in terms of a particular experience of women under Nazism.

This brings us to the second broad category of discourse into which *Germany Pale Mother* fits which is that which relates to the development of a «feminine aesthetic». It is predicated on an assumption that women experience the world in a way that is distinctly different from men's experience of it. While not specifically restricted to Germany this set of discourses has had a particular resonance in a German form of the «New Subjectivity». Feminist deconstructionist theory, as well, has been very influential in German women's writing in which the author's own subjectivity is highlighted.<sup>16</sup> This often works in the form of a double structure identified by Jean Starobinski *ashistoire / discours*. The former, *histoire*, refers to the process of «narrated events of the past» while *discours* describes the «present-time act of narration between author and reader.» These two separate functions are carried out simultaneously whereby as the events of the past are laid out the author speaks directly to the reader (or the viewer) about the significance of these events and their particular meaning for the author's own experience.<sup>17</sup>

The struggle to apply the principles of new critical theory in writing practice has encouraged the use of fantasy in German women's literary works, and by extension in film as well. Sara Lennox has argued that German feminist literary theorists have been searching for new forms in which to express a female subjectivity which will disrupt the existing symbolic order. Unable to break out of a male-based aesthetic structure and language new German women's writing has frequently turned to the use of fantasy.<sup>18</sup>

In general, autobiography has been the overwhelming new form of creative works produced by German women in the last two decades. Within them there has been an almost obsessive focussing on the subject's experience, as a daughter, of her mothering and an articulation of mother-daughter relations. As Maria-Regina Kecht has pointed out this is the critical place in a young woman's development in which «mothers transmit patterns of inferiority and submission» and lay down the young woman's «psycho-social destiny.»<sup>19</sup>

This particular obsession in German women's creative production can be tracked back to the writings on psychoanalysis of feminists like Nancy Chodorow and Jane Flax. They point out the difficulties that female children have in separating from their mothers and forming separate identities. Unlike the male oedipal crisis in which the boy's relations with his mother are ruptured and he experiences the new boundaries of his ego firmly delineated, girls remain much more ambiguously bound to their mothers even after having passed the «Oedipal crisis». Daughters experience their mothers as extensions of themselves and typically have difficulty in their own individuation. Mothers experience a similar dependence in which the boundaries between maternal and filial ego are blurred. To varying degrees the pre-Oedipal mother-daughter bond carries over into adult life.

A subset of this feminist discourse is represented in the ideas of Annemarie Troger whose work on the war memories of Germans grew out of large oral history project in the working class neighbourhoods of Berlin and Hanover in 1978-80.<sup>20</sup> In it interviewees found that women had happy memories of life under Nazism and of participating in Nazi activities. From this Troger has gone on to formulate a much broader thesis about the ways in which men and women recall their experiences of wartime. She argues that there are two discourses on war. The «official-political one» espoused by governments and bureaucracies is about winners and losers and the memories of male veterans tend to replicate its form. A contrasting «peace-movement discourse» which perceives war as a destructive machine in which everyone is a loser, tends to be the form in which women recall their war time experiences.<sup>21</sup>

This feminist discourse elucidates *Germany Pale Mother* and opens up the film to a richer and deeper meaning. In particular, a focus which gives primacy to Lene and Anna's relationship highlights different events of the film and brings the central section of the film into great importance. Sometimes referred to as «a bridge», the central section is much more than a link between the first and third parts of the narrative. It runs for almost thirty minutes during which Lene with Anna on her back cross the

country, full of life and liberated. Mother and daughter are inseparable in a pre-Oedipal-like fantasy.<sup>22</sup> Anna is the object of Lene's total attention. As mentioned above, as they go Lene narrates the story of the Miller's daughter who has been betrothed by her father and against her will to a robber. An old woman warns the young girl that she has «entered the house of a murderer» and with the old woman's help she hides and sees the bandits kill and eat a young virgin. The bride hides behind a barrel and catches the finger of the murdered girl. With it as proof she returns to her father and shows him the evilness of the man to whom he has betrothed his daughter.

Bruno Bettelheim has argued that fairy tales represent the distillation of universal cultural fears, both in the articulation of these fears through their telling and in the resolution of them that the story offers.<sup>23</sup> The tale of the miller's daughter comprises strong elements of fears that relate to the pain of Oedipal separation and the strain of formation of an autonomous adult identity. In the fairy tale the young girl is unwillingly forced to leave her family (and the maternal care it affords) by her father who has forced her to marry a man she does not want. In the narrative that Lene tells Anna the young girl is helped by an older woman (a mother substitute) and using her own female intelligence is able finally to outwit her bridegroom and return to her own family and presumably resume her pre-adult identity. The retelling of the tale over and over re-inforces the message.

Similarly within the narrative of the film Hans is excluded from the oedipal relationship which has sustained mother and daughter during his absence at the war. During his two precious days leave in Berlin he can only watch disconsolately the self-absorption of mother and daughter together. When Hans attempts to disrupt this relationship by making love to Lene, the child screams so much that Lene picks her up and places Anna between herself and Hans, so that the child has effectively displaced Hans and reclaimed Lene's full attention. Anna's voice-over comments dryly that she did not know what to do with this father and wanted only to be loved by Lene. In a powerful image the child lies in her mother's arms, with back turned to her father, sucking a finger and gazing adoringly into her mother's face.

At the end of the war the bond between mother and daughter is ruptured by Hans' return. The abrupt end of the Oedipal interlude is painful for Anna as not only does she lose her mother's undivided attention but her father, frustrated by his lack of success in post war society, often treats Anna violently. Lene's suffering, however, is even greater and in a highly symbolic incident which takes place around the time when Germany is divided into two states she suffers from Bells Palsy which leaves her face, like Germany, divided in two parts from the paralysis on one side. In a particularly horrific scene, perhaps an allegorical reference to post war Germany controlled by America and her allies who have forced German disarmament, a doctor, on the pretext that this will prevent the paralysis spreading further, and watched by Hans, pulls out Lene's teeth. The only way that Lene can escape the despair of her situation is by suicide, the ultimate severance of the relationships between parent and child and husband and wife.

The last scenes of the film graphically show Lene locked in the bathroom, gas tap on, while Anna outside the door begs her mother not to leave her alone in the world. Eventually Lene responds to Anna's pleas and re-emerges as the adult Anna's voice explains that although Lene has not left it is often hard to determine where she is. We are left knowing that the mother-daughter bond has survived but it has been achieved only at the cost of great damage to both women's lives.

The final scene in *Germany Pale Mother* links the film to its beginning in which Bertold Brecht's daughter recites her father's poem from which the film derives its name. Written in 1933 it laments the situation of Germany, the pale mother, besmirched by her children. The voice and the images it evokes are connected allegorically with the latter images in which Lene and her daughter experience both the false liberation and the subsequent damage which wars may bring to women caught in the universal conundrum of the experience of their simultaneous identities as mothers and daughters.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES:

(1) See the discussion of these reviews in MUNZBERG, Olav. «Schaudern vor der 'bleichen Mutter'», *Medium* (July 1980): 34-37.

(2) SEITER, Ellen E. «Women's history, women's melodrama: *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*», *German Quarterly*, Vol. 59 (Fall 1986): 574.

- (3) Eric Santner sees recent German film undertaking the «work of mourning» in order for German society to deal with its past. *Stranded Objects, Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1990. See his criticism of *Germany Pale Mother*, pp.155-156.
- (4) The term comes from RENTSCHLER, Eric. *West German Film in the Course of Time*. New York, 1984, p. 13.
- (5) See KNIGHT, Julia. *Women and the New German Cinema*. New York: Verso, 1992, pp.12-13.
- (6) KAES. *From Hitler to Heimat*, p. xi.
- (7) See MAIER, Charles. *The Unmasterable Past. History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*. New York: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- (8) See DEHLER, Kathleen. «The need to tell all: A comparison of historical and modern feminist ‘confessional writing’», in BROWN, Cheryl L. & OLSON, Karen (eds.) *Feminist Criticism: Essays on Theory, Poetry and Prose*. London: Scarecrow Press, 1978, pp. 339- 352.
- (9) They were: Ernst Nolte who argued that the Holocaust was just one of twentieth century generic genocide; Andreas Hillgruber who claimed that German troops in the east were trying to fend of the «barbarism» of the Bolsheviks and Michael Sturmer, adviser to Conservative Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who called for historians to begin to provide a more patriotic version of the German past. Among a huge number of writings on the topic, see special issue of *New German Critique*, 44 (1988) on the *Historikerstreit*.
- (10) The term comes from RENTSCHLER, Eric. *West German Film in the Course of Time*. New York, 1984, p. 13.
- (11) See SCHNEIDER, Michael. «Fathers and sons, retrospectively: The damaged relationship between two generations.» *New German Critique*, and Thomas Elsaesser’s discussion of «the Fatherless Society» in *New German Cinema: A History*, Rutgers Press, 1989, chapter 8, pp. 235ff.
- (12) GROSSMANN, Tina. «Feminist debates about women and National Socialism», *Gender & History*, 3 (Autumn 1991): 351.
- (13) The debate began over Gisela Bock’s criticisms of Claudia Koonz’s *Mothers in the Fatherland*. Grossman in «Feminist debates» succinctly sets out the case for each side. An entire conference in Wuerzburg in 1990 was devoted to this matter. See the contributions in GRAVENHORST, Lerke & TATSCHMURAT, Carmen (eds.) *TochterFragen. NS-Frauen Geschichte*. Freiburg i. Br.: Kore, Verlag Traute Hensch, 1990.
- (14) See *October 72* (Spring 1995) devoted to discussions of Helke Sander’s film.
- (15) For a broad survey of the writings in this genre see FRIEDEN, Sandra. *Autobiography: Self Into Form. German-Language Autobiographical Writings of the 1970s. Forschungen Zur Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte*. Band 2, Frankfurt: Verlag Peter Lang, 1983.
- (16) See Frieden’s discussion, p 23. Christa Woolf’s *A Model Childhood and In Search of Christa T* are familiar examples of the working of this double structure.
- (17) LENNOX, Sara. «Trends in literary theory: The female aesthetic and German women’s writing». *German Quarterly*, 54 (1981): 63-75.
- (18) KECHT, Maria-Regina. «In the name of obedience, reason and fear: Mother- daughter relations in W.A. Mitgutsch and E. Jelinek», *German Quarterly*, 62, 3 (1989): 358.
- (19) It was carried out by the Institute for Comparative Research in Fascism, at the Free University of Berlin.
- (20) TROGER, «German women’s memories,» p. 286.
- (21) See BAMMER, Angelika. «Through a daughter’s eyes: Helma Sanders-Brahms’ Germany, Pale Mother», *New German Critique*, Vol 37 (1985): 91-109; KAPLAN, E. Anna, «The search for their motherland in Sanders-Brahms’ Germany, Pale Mother (1980), in RENTSCHLER, Eric (ed.) *German Film and Literature: Adaptations and Transformation*. Methuen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1986, pp. 289-
- (22) BETTELHEIM, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy tales*. London: Penguin Books, 1982.

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