

Survival and Rebellion: Recovering Ula Stöckl's Feminist Film Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Renewed attention to German feminist filmmaker Ula Stöckl, and her ongoing cinematic creativity, affords us insight into more than four decades of German Cinema. Moreover, such an analysis can assist us in recovering significant insights regarding gender in New German Cinema (both in terms of its production and its reception), and in establishing connections of feminist film's relevance in and across generations and national contexts. The current lack of consideration of Stöckl's work is characteristic of difficulties in studying women's film and is unfortunate, because Stöckl's work is consistently cutting edge and of remarkable cinematic quality; her work was characteristic for New German Cinema while also participating in the creation of German feminist film. Discussing prominent themes in her work at the intersections with German history, politics, and culture, I review Stöckl's work, with particular emphasis on two specific films, through the lens of contemporary discussions about memory and inter-generational feminist identity.

“From our mothers we could learn how to survive; but we could not learn from them how to rebel,” says German feminist filmmaker Ula Stöckl (personal communication, February 22, 2006). Producing feminist films for more than four decades, Stöckl portrays multi-generational women's life stories that critically engage issues of identity. Survival and rebellion are poignant terms naming important themes within Stöckl's cinematic work—and they are characteristic of Stöckl's life-work vis-à-vis historical developments in German cinema. Survival and rebellion also invoke ever changing feminist strategies that seek to negotiate resistance to, and imbrications in, normative relations of power in society.

In this essay, I reclaim Ula Stöckl's work as an important and provocative source for ongoing critical reflection. Too long ignored in scholarship on gender and visual culture, specifically in discussions of German feminist film, Stöckl's films continue to pose significant questions to their audience, relevant far beyond the initial German national context of their production.

The essay opens with an assessment of the elision of Stöckl's work in recent scholarly literature on women's film and then briefly outlines Stöckl's work as characteristic of the innovative momentum historically defined as “New German Cinema.” Suggesting that the appeal and critical potential of Stöckl's work exceeds the decades of the 1970s and '80s, the essay turns to exploring several important themes with particular attention to two significant films from Stöckl's extensive work. Far from an exhaustive treatment of Ula Stöckl's cinematic oeuvre, this essay begins to suggest some of the benefits of considering Stöckl's films with contemporary theoretical and critical questions in mind.

I.

Found: Forgotten Feminist Filmmaker

In a review essay on two recent biographies on well known German filmmaker Margarete von Trotta, Margret Eifler (2003) suggests that even the most famous German women filmmakers find little to no mention in standard works on German cinematic history or similar academic collections. The under-representation of women filmmakers (in the German context and elsewhere) occurs in academia and in the film industry itself.

Women filmmakers, at least the European ones, usually belong to the contingent that makes up 'Independent Cinema.' This characterizes those who script, cast, shoot, and edit their films mostly by themselves, resort to demanding topics, have the hardest time finding funding for their films, work on minimal budgets with most rights signed away, have the least promotional assistance and gain little access to distribution. (Eifler, 2003, p. 444)

Furthermore, Eifler claims, filmmakers do not carry the same weight in academic discussions as do writers—maybe because their language (technical, aesthetic, semiotic) is still less widely known or familiar than literature.

In the underrepresented enclave with which Eifler is concerned, she suggests that equally “renowned among German women directors of the New German Cinema and of approximately the same age [as Trotta] are Helke Sander Brahms, Jutta Brueckner, Ulrike Ottinger, and Ulla Stoeckl [sic], ... who have not been the subject of as much biographical attention” (p. 444). That two biographies on Trotta's work were recently published is explained just a few paragraphs later by pointing out that “with the possible exception of Brahms and Ottinger, most other women of Trotta's generation stopped making films during the late eighties [... and] have moved to the safer haven of academic media positions” (p. 444). Eifler then lists the fate of the renowned filmmakers she had earlier mentioned: “Helke Sander teaches film in Hamburg, Jutta Brueckner in Berlin, Valie Export and Jeanine Meerapfel in Cologne” (p. 444).

In this explanation, however valid it may or may not be, one omission is striking: Ula Stöckl, mentioned at the outset as one of the “equally renowned” German women filmmakers, has dropped off Eifler's radar. Neither is Stöckl mentioned in one of the moves to the “safety” of the academy nor does she appear to have made any movies since the 1980s.

Interestingly, Eifler is wrong on both counts. Ula Stöckl is alive and well, making movies and teaching in an academic position. After several academic visiting positions (including Hollins University, The Berlin Academy of Film and Television, the University of Texas at Austin, and American University) Stöckl currently is associate professor of

film at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. Several of her films, with which there are more than 20, were made in the late 1980s and 1990s and, indeed, she continues to produce films.

Perhaps the omission was merely an oversight on Eifler's part. Nevertheless, the elision of Stöckl from her otherwise carefully researched essay can serve as illustration of Eifler's argument and claims: Even some of the most influential German women filmmakers easily disappear from public radar—and even the radar of those who are interested in specifically German women's film. This is possible even as filmmakers such as Ula Stöckl continue to produce films and are publicly honored for their cinematic work in a variety of venues. In addition to serving on national and international selection committees for various film festivals, Stöckl received the “Preis der deutschen Filmkritik” (Award of German Film Critics) in 1984 and was awarded the most prestigious “Bundesfilmpreis” in 1985. In 1999 she was awarded the well-respected Konrad Wolf Film Prize by the Academy of Art in Berlin for her life time achievement.

Many of the reasons Eifler discusses as hindering proper academic assessment of the important contributions of German women filmmakers hold true also for Stöckl's work. Firstly, there are reasons that can be located in specific historical conditions at the time of the making and reception of the films. Difficulties with the shifting organization of distribution systems have presented a serious challenge to Stöckl's work from the beginning: The film *Neun Leben hat die Katze* (The Cat has Nine Lives, 1968), often identified as the first German feminist film (Richter, 2005), was scheduled to begin showing in 600 movie theatres when the distribution company went bankrupt. The changing organization of distributors' connection to movie theatres in the 1970s drastically reduced the number of mainstream outlets for many filmmakers of the emerging New German Cinema. An increasing shift to television, something Eifler discusses in terms of Trotta's attempt to artistically survive the shift in medium, posed serious challenges to all independent women filmmakers, including Ula Stöckl.

Furthermore, difficulties present themselves to academics interested in film history and invested in accounting for the significance of influential women filmmakers like Trotta or Stöckl. It remains difficult to access their work, as their films often exist only in one or two copies and

have not been converted to DVD or other more easily accessible formats. “Academic assessment and pedagogical display of women’s independent cinema are often hindered by the difficulty in obtaining prints and video reproductions and the lack of official film archives for Women’s Cinema” (Eifler, 2003, p. 444).

Thirdly, a great deal of the academic discussion of German film is occurring in contexts outside of the German speaking countries (*The German Quarterly* being a case in point). The lack of subtitled versions of Stöckl’s films presents further barriers to a broader exposure and awareness of Stöckl’s work in academic circles and in pedagogical contexts, especially in the United States.

Finally, Eifler’s review and much of contemporary academic discussion of work like that by Stöckl occurs in German departments and affiliated journals—and not in film schools, where the absence of study of innovative cinematic techniques of someone like Stöckl presents an unfortunate gap.

Considering the importance of Stöckl’s films, wider exposure and greater critical attention to her body of work seems warranted. Ula Stöckl’s work is cutting edge feminist film; from having made the “first feminist film” to the national award winning *Sleep of Reason* (1983) to the more recent *The Old Song* (1991), filmed immediately after the reunification of Germany in the East German city of Dresden. Critically engaging multi-layered women’s memory that collided in the new/old encounter of generations of women with/in German history, Stöckl creatively experiments with cinematic and narrative techniques in order to tell stories of and about women’s lives—and to tell these stories differently. Her unapologetic and critical approach has earned her the status of being one of the great German women filmmakers.¹

The lack of consideration of Stöckl’s work in all but the most fleeting side notes in most academic sources on New German Cinema is unfortunate because Stöckl’s work has been consistently innovative and of remarkable cinematic quality; her work is characteristic for the development of New German Cinema while also participating in the creation of and development of German feminist film. At the same time, the neglect of Stöckl’s work can signal some of the characteristic difficulties involved in studying New German Cinema by women in the current

scholarly literature (Linville, 1998).

Renewed attention to Ula Stöckl’s films and her ongoing cinematic creativity affords us a unique view into more than four decades of German Cinema and can assist us in recovering insights regarding the relevance of gender in New German Cinema (both in terms of its production and its reception) and in establishing scholarly connections about feminist film in and across generations and national contexts. Furthermore, in Stöckl’s work we can trace important connections of feminist themes at the intersections with German history, politics, and culture. In the remainder of this essay, I will demonstrate this critical potential by briefly discussing some prominent themes in Stöckl’s work. I argue for the value of re-viewing Ula Stöckl’s films while re-considering them through the lens of contemporary discussions about memory and inter-generational identity issues among women. To support my claims, I provide a brief analysis of two of Stöckl’s films: *Sleep of Reason* and *The Old Song*.

II.

The Old Film is Dead. We Believe in the New

New German Cinema began when a group of young independent filmmakers met in February 1962 at the *Obernhausen Short Film Festival* and stated, in what would become known as the Oberhausen Manifesto: “The old film is dead. We believe in the new” (Knight, 2004, p. 13). As a generational rebellion against “Papa’s kino” (Papa’s cinema) and the overwhelming influence of American Hollywood genre film, and as protest against the lack of funding for indigenous feature film productions, the young German filmmakers began to create distinctly German film by drawing on experimental film techniques and highly impressionistic and episodic narratives dealing with their own contemporary issues. Convinced that meaningful films could be produced with less money than was customary in Hollywood, they also adjusted their cinematic form to the radically smaller budgets of their film productions.

Some governmental support and a film subsidiary system were slowly established in support of at least some of the new film genre. Feature length films were produced that centralized issues of concern to the young German post-war generation. Protesting against the hierarchical

apprentice system of the film industry, young German filmmakers wanted to take responsibility for all aspects of filmmaking. Using the term *autorinkino* (author film), those who called themselves “young German filmmakers” viewed films as works of art closely connected to the director (who was the “author” of the film, often writing the script and directing). Author film was also a self-conscious contrast to the *Zutatenfilm* (recipe film) that consisted of stock ingredients from known genres and their predictable narratives and plots. Film schools and a newly created independent distribution system soon supported the new cinematic direction and were essential to its development.² The German government invested in creating a national film culture, (in part to counter the films produced in the communist East Germany), by providing financial support to directors and productions through the newly created *Kuratorium junger deutscher Film* (Board of Young German Film) as well as national embassies and the Goethe Institute (Corrigan, 1994; Franklin, 1983; Knight, 2004).

Characteristics of Young German Cinema were reliance on social realist forms, documentary influences, avant-garde experimentation, and a rejection of the predominant popular mass media. Filmmakers often worked closely with contemporary German literature, (for example the work of Guenther Grass), and turned to the voices of marginalized groups while raising questions about authenticity and experience, thus foregrounding a multiplicity of perspectives and subjectivities.³

One of the major achievements of New German Cinema was the creation of “Counter-Myths of German Identity” (Knight, 2004, p. 45). Focusing on contemporary social reality, the young German filmmakers explored social issues such as the life of workers and in particular the issue of *Gastarbeiter* (guestworkers) and the racial/ethnic discriminations they experienced. Often, films that focused on particular social groups were interested in a larger sense of German history and identity. The (bad) treatment of guest workers reflected on and raised an ongoing confrontation with the Fascist past. The militant activism of left political groups, (such as APO, *Ausserparlamentarische Opposition*, roughly translated *outside-parliament opposition*), and the violent retributions by the government, paired with the rise of internal German terrorist groups and the harsh response by state police forces brought politically volatile

issues to the forefront of young Germans’ consciousness and was central to the agenda of many of the influential filmmakers of New German Cinema.

Confronting German history and dealing with memory (and its repression) was important, as this generation was the one to actively begin the still ongoing work of post-Holocaust memory work in Germany. Yet, any confrontation with German history and nationalism is always also in need of considering the difference gender makes in the experience of, and telling about, the past.

Compromise Means Death

Ula Stöckl’s work can serve as a good illustration for the history of Young German Film, especially its maturing into New German Cinema and the aftermath of increasing difficulties and “decline” as a recognizable or coherent movement. Stöckl began her training as a filmmaker in 1962 at the film school in Ulm, newly founded by Alexander Kluge and Edgar Reitz, two of the founding and influential filmmakers of the Young German Cinema. As the first woman to learn and practice the concepts associated with author film, Stöckl wrote and directed her first feature length film in 1968. *Neun Leben Hat die Katze* (*The Cat Has Nine Lives*) “was produced at a time when the old West Germany had neither a women’s movement nor women’s film” (Kuheim, 2005).⁴ And yet, it has been called the first feminist film in Germany. As Sabine Hake (2002) notes,

Questions of gender and sexuality also informed Ula Stöckl’s *Neun Leben hat die Katze* (1968, *The Cat Has Nine Lives*), a contribution that, with its close attention to questions of female identity, remains the exception until the rise of feminist film-making in the mid-1970s. The same might be said about Stöckl’s collaboration with Reitz, the *Geschichten vom Kübelkind* (1969/70, *Stories of the Bucket Baby*), which consisted of twenty-three independent episodes about a rebellious young woman shown in various combinations. (pp. 148-9)

In *Geschichten vom Kübelkind* (1970), a great success at film

festivals, Stöckl continued to break new ground in terms of cinematic style and content. Uncompromising in her insistence on artistic integrity, she embodied the principles that were shared by Kluge and Reitz. The two men were to use the phrase as title for a co-produced later film: *In Gefahr und grösster Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod* (1976) (roughly translates “in extremity and great danger the middle path (compromise) brings death”).⁵ Stöckl had already translated the principle into a daringly experimental project. As Franklin notes, “[t]he world of the New German Cinema is no laughing matter. These films, however, compensate for their lack of humor with an intense sense of social justice” (Franklin, 1983, p. 39).

Stöckl's films embody this sense of social justice. Insisting on the radical potential of telling women's stories in their complexity and including tensions and conflicted sides, Stöckl's films from the beginning attempted to show women's complicated psychological, sexual, social, and political lives. *Frauenfilm* (women's film) can be seen, according to Elsaesser (1989), as “in some sense the culmination of developments inherent in the New German Cinema from its beginning” (quoted in Corrigan, 1994, p. 113). And indeed, Stöckl's cinematic work participated in new German Cinema from the beginning. When literature on German feminist film mentions Ula Stöckl's films, it treats her films as precursors, as examples of work by one of the very few women who began the task of telling women's stories differently in German film.

For example, in a chapter discussing Helke Sanders' *Redupers* as perhaps the most internationally acclaimed feminist film of the New German Cinema, Tim Corrigan (1994) writes:

[Sanders's] position within women's cinema in Germany was hardly unprepared. Before 1970 Ula Stöckl, May Spils, Dore O., and Erika Runge were all active filmmakers, even if only two (Stöckl and Spils) had made feature films. Produced out of a countercultural atmosphere attending more and more to gender-specific issues such as abortion and women within a social workplace, the early feminist films are often concerned with a kind of political consciousness raising reflected primarily in subject matter that forefronts particular social and identity crises for

women. In the 1970s and early 1980s the West German women's film movement attended increasingly, however, to a critique of the patriarchal structure of modernism and the avant-garde and applied those to the representational strategies of narrative feature films, in an attempt to engage mainstream cinema in a more productive fashion. (p. 111)

Some have dated the ‘end’ of New German Cinema with the making of the film *Deutschland in Herbst* (*Germany in Autumn*, 1978), others date it with the meeting of German filmmakers in Hamburg in September, 1979 (Franklin, 1983). On the occasion of the Hamburg film festival, German filmmakers declared, “Our strength is diversity.” This proclaimed that the focus of German filmmakers' activities was no longer protest against the establishment or the creation of German film as an independent artform uninterested in its entertainment value (as Oberhausen had done) but instead a united professionalism that focused on the consuming audience. Much more self assured and confident, the Hamburg Declaration lacked the revolutionary urge that had propelled New German Film in its initial phase. The characteristics of German Film did not change drastically and many of the influential filmmakers continue(d) to produce films, but the critical impulse had to be negotiated with complex pressures of funding, a less politically interested public, and the increasing need to appeal to an audience raised on television.

Unfortunately, many of the films that gained positive acclaim and were praised consistently at film festivals were unable to ‘make it’ in the commercial movie theatres or in mass media contexts. Filmmakers like Ula Stöckl—unwilling to compromise artistic integrity in order to secure funding—have difficulty finding commercial exposure for their films. And yet, rather than disappear into the safety of academia (as Eifler would have it) or focus on a shift into exclusively TV productions, Ula Stöckl continues to make movies and indeed remains an active producer and director.

Some of the themes that continue to make Stöckl's work interesting to German and international audiences within and beyond feminist contexts (as evident in the reception of her work in various international film festivals and the granting of national and international awards) may

have to do with themes and cinematic strategies that go beyond the scope of New German Cinema. In what follows, I describe some central themes in Stöckl's work in relation to theoretical concerns in recent feminist and cultural theory.

III. Complicating Connections Among Women/Across Generations

Stöckl's work was often "before her time." Exploring the realities of women's life experiences from a variety of perspectives, Stöckl forged a cinematic language to express this complexity. She thus characterizes "[t]he desire to put on screen those aspects of women's lives that have usually been marginalized by or excluded from mainstream cinema," which can be seen as typical in the New German Cinema films made by women (Knight, 2004, p. 84).

In Stöckl's films, women are shown in relation to each other: within and across generations, affiliations, and erotic or political alliances. Indeed, Ula Stöckl refuses an overt investment in class-based or sexual identity categories. Today she states, "Polymorphously perverse, that is how we saw sexuality back then. And everything is erotic anyway; not necessarily lived out, but explicitly or implicitly, eroticism is part of all relationships. I still believe that" (personal communication, November 7, 2005).⁶ Stöckl's films seek to invent and expand the spectrum of possible representations of women's stories in film. However, her cinematic products are not simply celebrations of women's stories, but are always complicated and even contradictory.

One example is *Der Schlaf der Vernunft (Sleep of Reason)*, winner in 1984 of the German national film award. Watching this film today, we learn about feminist critiques of politics of reproductive choice in the 1980s through the representation of consciousness raising groups and the protagonist Dea's crusade against the pill. More than a historical sketch of the early German women's movement, however, Stöckl is interested in the relationship among these women and the psychological webs that connect and separate women from each other, their communities, and ultimately their own selves. Dea, her mother and her two daughters

embody a complex intergenerational encounter of ideological differences, erotic bonds and betrayals, and individual struggles with control and psychic coherence. As Knight points out, "[the] ability to represent contemporary collective experiences through an individual protagonist was singled out as a specific strength of women's film-making in West Germany. this aspect also gave them an obvious significance beyond that of a merely national cinema 'movement'" (Knight, 2004, p. 87).

Dea is the complex protagonist of the film, and represents contemporary women's experiences; and yet, her portrayal resists and defies stereotypes. Dea's relationship to the other women in the film is intense and complex. Despite a primary identification with women's relationships and feminist issues (Dea works as an Ob/Gyn who researches the harmful effects of the pill on women's health and thus takes on the entire pharmaceutical regime in her city), Dea is shown within a complicated web of erotic tension, rivalry, and yet also intense loyalty. She is outraged that her daughters do not follow in her footsteps but rather betray the feminist cause by wanting to have an easy life devoid of principled decisions but filled with more fun and freedom, or so they see it. At the same time, Dea has a contradictory and complex relationship to her Italian mother, who embodies the traditional feminine mute but knowing presence that lacks activity on her own. In an apartment without doors between rooms, all characters are always present, and yet the mother's omnipresence is particularly notable, as she only speaks Italian (if she speaks at all) and otherwise communicates through silence and through wordless music on the piano that she plays throughout the film.

In the film clip (Figure 1), we watch an interaction between Dea and her daughter, Georgia.⁷ After Dea has been tipped off by her mother that Georgia is using the pill, Dea is outraged that her daughter would betray what she so passionately opposes (due to the pill's potential but not yet sufficiently researched health risks). The subsequent fight between mother and daughter sketches the gulf between the generations even as Dea has no reply to Georgia's question "do you know of anything better/else?" The scene begins as Dea has just blown off, and hung up on, a person on the phone who had called for her daughter, Georgia. We see Georgia insisting on her independence and explaining to her mother, Dea, that the conflicts of political feminist ideology and concrete sexual life

choices are Dea's problem, not her own, as she, Georgia, has no problem with taking the pill, with her promiscuous sex life, or with the choice to model for the pharmaceutical company run by Erdman, Dea's arch enemy. Faced with her daughter's accusations, Dea goes where so many mothers go (and to precisely the place that she despises in her own mother): the guilt-inducing invocation of (self-)sacrifice. Lamenting that she doesn't know what else to do beyond "talking until you are blue in the face" and "giving [her daughter] the last shirt off my back," Dea is faced with her daughter's rebellious response, "You can keep your last shirt." Georgia doesn't want Dea's shirt and she doesn't want her mother's life. Georgia wants her own experiences. She wants a life with some degree of freedom and she wants her mother "to get out of [her] head." Although eventually Dea lets her daughters make copies of the house key, she cannot quite let go of her deep need to control others, even as she is invested in feminism and women's liberation.

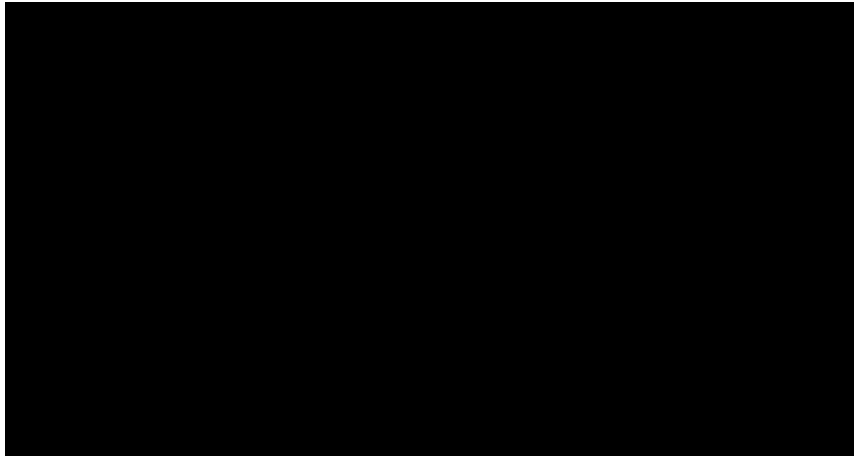


Figure 1. Film clip of Dea and Georgia

During the decades when Germans began to confront the Nazi past of (often their parents') German involvement in the Second World War, relating to authority and an individual's place within social and political institutions was a frequent backdrop to cinematic representations. In this regard, as well, Stöckl manages to position her characters uncom-

fortably between and in perpetual tension with contemporary concerns even as she draws on ancient Greek mythology to model some of her characters' psychological patterns.

In *Sleep of Reason*, Dea (whose character is fashioned after the Greek Medea) takes on the (male) pharmaceutical establishment and forcefully speaks her mind. Initially attracted to her headstrong character, the man she loves and married, Reinhard (the Jason of Euripides' play) disagrees with Dea on many issues. Unhappy with Dea's constant criticism of him, Reinhard becomes sexually intimate with Johanna, who is, in Stöckl's film, Dea's close colleague and feminist co-worker. Johanna is also the daughter of Dea's arch enemy, the owner of a pharmaceutical company, Erdman. Reinhard works for Erdman, which is another source of ongoing tension and disagreement between Dea and her husband. Erdman's company produces the pill Dea rallies against. Institutional imbrications rich with ideological investments are woven into each person's life and work and their hopes for the future.

Women's solidarity and feminist goals of shared strength shatter when, in a rather gentle scene, Johanna reveals to Dea, while standing physically close to her, that Reinhard loves her and no longer loves Dea. She completes her confession/revelation with the sentence "I have to look out for my own happiness" (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Film clip: *Reveal*

The complex strength of Dea's individual identity further shatters as she subsequently faces Reinhard in a tender and intimate but unsentimental encounter in which they talk about their love now having ended. Caught in an inevitable place of loss, Dea turns to asking "what does she (Johanna) have that I don't have?" further collapsing her believed strength of self reliance and pride by uttering the universal question of betrayed lovers projecting responsibility for the failed relationship onto their own 'lack'. Reinhard answers, "nothing".⁸ Dea then asks Reinhard if he could no longer love her because she often criticized him. When he replies "you should not have done that," Dea, unable to hear the irony, recoils momentarily, incredulous that her strength could have both appealed to and offended him. She then claims that "then you'd have stopped loving me for that reason." Reinhard replies, "That's it [i.e., exactly]" (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Film clip: *Criticize*

In another excerpt from this long scene in which Dea and Reinhard confront each other and the end of their love, Dea responds to the question if she really ever loved him by saying "you are my life." This is a contradictory stance given her fiercely independent and headstrong character otherwise. The scene ends when Dea tells Reinhard, "I have

only you"—to which he replies "No, Dea, you do not have me." (See Figure 4.) Fantasies of ownership of emotions, relationships, and, as we have seen in previous scenes, Dea's personal strength bordering on a need to control others, here vividly collide with her life's love lost and Dea being pushed away from all those she thought needed and wanted her. Despite her feminist principles and independence, Dea's sense of identity is clearly tied to being desired, needed, and wanted. Her existence is one that is defined in part by her place within others' lives. Indeed, both her daughter and now also her husband, beg her to "get out of my head/dreams." (See Figure 4.)



Figure 4. Film clip: *Reinhard-enough*

Yet, despite the force of shattered ideals and projections of "the one and only love," Dea regains her strength by uncovering and drawing on her own hatred, rage, and revenge. Much like the Greek Medea, she kills her unfaithful husband, her erotic rival, and her children; yet in Stöckl's film the murder is committed "merely" in Dea's dreams. This filmic twist makes the murders no less real to the life-changing effect they have on her life; the film ends with Dea continuing her conversation with her Italian mother (who is the nurse, the tutor, and the chorus of Euripides' play rolled into one), declaring her confidence and hopeful future in a bilingual scene that communicates through the music, the silences, and the spoken words as much as through the

symbolic imagery. (See Figure 5.)



Figure 5. Film clip: *Hate*

Previous scenes of turmoil were filmed with the actors positioned in gateways and leaning against door posts; in the end we see Dea comfortably seated in her lounge, drinking the coffee her mother brings and shares with her while reflecting on a “cure-all” and survival of traumatic events. “One has to do things oneself” and “Everything is within me” are the final words spoken in the film. (See Figure 6.)



Figure 6. Film clip: *Final Words*

Having severed her relationship to her cheating husband, erotic rival and complaining children, Dea regains a sense of calm and a (complicated) peace, even while we are left to wonder how this catharsis translates into the future of her lived relationships.

In an interview about *Sleep of Reason*, Stöckl states that she found it important to show that women are capable of rage, revenge, and hatred in ways that are not usually acknowledged.

I believe that women’s fantasies of survival, or revenge fantasies, are no different than men’s. But we are raised to learn: I am nice. I am gentle. I am really not capable of aggression, and I can really only sit there and cry when I am upset by something. ... If as a woman you want anything in this life, you have to fight like a man; if you do it by the same means is an individual decision. . . . What is radical about Dea is that she maybe understood something: if it has to be that I am getting separated, then this separation has to be final. And in life only death is final. Everything else can somehow become subject to making up. For me film is the only medium, besides literature, where you can be radical without retribution, because everyone has enough movie experience to know: this death that I am witnessing is a fictional one and not real. . . . By dreaming it, Dea really kills her husband, her children and her rival. We must have the courage to really imagine what we want. (Richter & Künzel, 1998, pp. 62-63)

Her films’ characters often engage in fantasies of revenge or represent reality through dreams, pointing to the importance Stöckl attributes to such psychic and cathartic processes of projection for women’s healthy identities and lives. Maybe similar to the ancient Greeks, Stöckl values strong and passionate emotions as sign of depth of character. And yet, her female characters are never predictable and are always multi-dimensional. Their complexity calls upon the viewer for introspection and reflection. Stöckl’s characters neither offer nor do they promise any easy answers to questions of women’s nature, psychic makeup, erotic relations, or political futures.

IV. Complicating the Perception of Memory

With her 1991 film, *Das Alte Lied* (*The Old Song*), Stöckl “finally managed to also say on a political level what [she] had been concerned with in terms of complicated psychological issues throughout many of [her] earlier films.”⁹ The film explores the many layers of memory that are embodied in one person’s life over a span of time. Set in the newly reunified Germany, in Dresden, Kati, a woman from the West, visits her old home town with her brother, son, and granddaughter. They are to meet the man she used to secretly love. “Returning home—into the past,” as the protagonists muse in the opening scene, taking the trip by ship down the river Elbe, connecting Hamburg in West Germany and Dresden in the East, is complicated business as it is shot through with desires, disappointments, and the shifting lenses that make up memory. (See Figure 7.) This scene also introduces Kati’s (and maybe everyone’s) astonishing ability to ignore and negate the ‘reality’ of change or the passage of time.



Figure 7. Film clip: *Song Arrive*

Seventy year old, Kati returns to Dresden in the early 1990s in order to meet again Alf, the man she used to secretly love but who always loved her sister Ilse. Ilse appears as specter throughout the film in various dream like incarnations, yet also has a materiality in the memories of her old lover and in her sister’s ongoing rivalry, resentment, and guilt. (Kati turned Ilse into the authorities, we learn later, and was thus responsible for Ilse’s arrest and subsequent death in a concentration camp.) And yet, Kati is strong and has assured survival for her brother and her child. (Who, we learn later, was not her child but her sister’s—the child she stole although Kati chooses to retell it as motivated by protection for the child.)

Kati’s strength and survival came at considerable cost to her integrity (or so hindsight would suggest); yet, Stöckl is not interested in judging. Her film tries to understand Kati’s ways of remembering events in ways that reshape history in a fashion that makes sense to her (and that make her feel less guilty, perhaps). In that sense, Kati is an example of all other characters (and, one suspects, for us all, in Stöckl’s view): We remember not in the past, but in the present, drawing on and integrating into the reconstruction of past events all other things that have occurred since. In that sense we do not remember the past, but we call up narrative constructions of past events deeply inflected by our current standpoint, abilities, and knowledge.¹⁰

Kati is a strong role model for her granddaughter (like so many of the “(grand)mothers,” who rebuilt Germany after the destruction of the Second World War). Sofie loves her strength and determination, and she praises her “love of truth,” even as Sofie misses some of the lies implied in Kati’s “truth telling” and as she displays the naïve appreciation of an overly confident West German feminist who talks a lot about justice and liberation, but who cannot seem to communicate with her East German counterparts who have lived through the political scenarios Sofie only knows to analyze from afar.

Remembered truths are never easy or ever quite complete as Stöckl shows us the many perspectives that are possible in one particular location or time. Women’s identities are shaped and built in interaction with these narratives and in turn inflect their re-telling. Thus Sofie sees her own political struggles reflected in the strength of survival she values

in her grandmother. Sofie chooses to see Kati's action of taking her sister's child (Sofie's father) with her as a brave survival strategy that was necessary because Ilse's social position would have never allowed her to raise the child. However valid a perspective this might be, it is striking that Sofie makes her argument not on the basis of judgment of past circumstances (complicated enough, given the multiply mediated nature of her knowledge of events and contexts). Rather, at various points, Sofie turns to a comparison with her own current life and struggles as a politically engaged woman filmmaker for explanations (to others or herself) about the circumstances or motivations of Kati's decisions. While a conceptual parallel of struggle is valid, and while there certainly are important gendered criteria of social existences in each of these three generations that can be critically analyzed, the viewer of the film likely notes that Sofie might mis-apply her contemporary insights. Kati's leaving the East and taking her sister's child with her was not motivated merely by ideological rigor (comparable to Sofie's feminist positions about media and politics), but by a desire for comfort, security, and economic opportunity. Stöckl shows in Sofie's perspective the rebellious love of truth that can at times overshoot the goal by projecting political analysis where it does not account well for the situation.

While Ula Stöckl is invested in showing the complexity of women's lives (without judgment of Kati or any of the other characters in the film, but also without any sugarcoating for the harshness of her and others' decisions), her portrayal of women is not merely about reclaiming their voices on film. As my discussion of Sofie's "celebration" of Kati's life shows, such reclaiming necessarily misses the point of historical accuracy, because it is motivated by and thus informs us about the contemporary agenda/desire in addition to, and sometimes occluding the stuff of the remembered past.

The multi-dimensional character of memory is represented in the three views of Kati, Rudolph, and Sofie in one scene. (See Figure 8.) Walking by the river, brother Rudolph (pushing the wheelchair of the disabled son) reminisces.

Rudolf: "As burning torches they ran across the meadows, back then. Hundreds threw themselves into the river Elbe. Who knows how many of them still lie there."

Sofie: "What kind of burning torches?"

Rudolf: "February 1945, the horrible bombing. The British dropped phosphor bombs and the people... burned terribly."

Kati (seemingly oblivious, or maybe uncomfortably trying to pull herself out of the memories she wants to forget, interjects with a sighed comment on the landscape and river: "Oh, children, isn't it beautiful."

Sofie: "When I am imagining that, then it isn't [beautiful] any more."



Figure 8. Film clip: *Song-burning-meinHaus*

Three generations walking along the same river, at the same time, having similar information, each see differently and indeed see different rivers; filled with rotting skeletons, littered with burning bodies, and a beautifully serene river of youthful joy (or of a present doggedly refusing to remember). There is no answer to "what is the truth here?" Perception is what matters and what literally changes matter/the material presence.

The Old Song asks about the possible relationship between people

of the East and West, and the real changes decades of a divided Germany have produced, by exploring the two lives of the granddaughters throughout the film. The Western third generation is embodied in Sofie, a filmmaker toting a video camera, who talks constantly, mostly in feminist-political platitudes, and who annoys the East German relatives-of-sorts with her know-it-all attitude. Her counter-part is Johanna, a photographer seen exploring the city with her still camera in hand; she never speaks in the film and relates to the world around her through non-moving images. These two women are as different as the media that characterize their work: The fast moving images with sound of the extrovert versus the slow black and white photography of the introvert. It seems impossible for these two women's perspectives to meet. And yet, there is one moment at the end of the film when the two women come into each others' view; when Sofie spots Johanna and vice versa, both take pictures of the other taking a picture of them. They smile at each other and connect for the first time in the film, signifying a relationship of sorts, however mediated. (See Figure 9.) This, too, is one of the important insights the film demonstrates in loving detail: perspectives on reality and the truth of our experience are accessible only in mediated form.



Figure 9: Film clip: *Song-in-view*

The instability of memory has material effects in the psyche and is inscribed in many of the scenes in *The Old Song*. Knowledge of the past in the scenes described above is not easily attained; history and life stories are remembered, retold, and forgotten in ever moving combinations of shifting lenses. Kati is not an uncomplicated woman. No women in Stöckl's films ever are. Headstrong and proud, she is also seriously misguided about her sense of ownership to pieces of the past (or to "her" house, once bought off persecuted Jews).

V.

Accounting for, but Not Accepting, Limited Possibilities

In most of her movies, Stöckl explores the influence of social and cultural forces on individual and collective women's life journeys. Rather than preach or prescribe particular paths, Stöckl refuses to subscribe to ideological doctrine, instead illustrating the internal contradictions and tensions that political and social context presents and how diverse individuals negotiate these tensions—with varying degrees of elegance, integrity, or success.

Importantly, Stöckl always has an eye on dynamics of domination, social hierarchies, and oppression. Although she foregrounds complexity and multiple perspectives, one consistent message is for the disadvantaged to fight back. Says Stöckl in an interview, "[f]or exploitation to exist you have to have two: one who does it and the other who allows it to happen. All of my films are also a call on the victims to fight back" (ZDF, 2003).¹¹

There is, then, in Stöckl's work, a complex tension as well: Embracing women's stories, she doesn't simply celebrate them. Resisting pressures for conformity, she shows the need for psychic coherence (or at least shows the processes women go through in attempts to maintain or gain psychic stability). Refusing compromise, her portrayal of human relationships is lovingly complex. There are no easy positions for identification in Stöckl's films. None of her characters are unequivocally sympathetic—and none are simply evil or unattractive. It is precisely the complexity of characters and their relationships that make Stöckl's cinematic work one demanding the audience's intellectual, as well as

emotional, involvement.

Much like others from the New German Cinema, *entertainment* was not the primary aim of the movies Ula Stöckl made/makes, even as her films are at times beautiful and thoroughly enjoyable with talented cinematography, acting, and directing. Certainly the two films discussed and excerpted in this essay offer intricate narratives that are accessible to a broad audience.

And yet, there is always more than one story told and audiences will likely be left with questions and reflections that continue to engage them. Repeated viewing reveals the many layers of possible identification/intervention/memory work that the films offer their audience; they also offer multiple disciplinary perspectives on issues such as women's identity development, women's complex experiences of love, dynamics of social and psychological control, the politics of the erotic, and complex negotiations of belonging and accountability to several generations.

Conclusion

We may date the decline or end of New German Cinema with the *Munich Declaration* (1962) or with *Germany in Autumn* (1978). As a cinematic epochal marker either might be accurate, but neither accounts for the ongoing work of filmmakers trained and influential in New German Cinema's foundational stages who are still creatively producing films.

Taking account of the trajectories developed in Stöckl's work over four decades offers the opportunity to learn about German social, cultural, and political history from the perspective of film history by paying attention to the socio-political forces that shaped filmmakers' opportunities and influenced German national film production in form and content in the latter half of the twentieth century. Reviewing Stöckl's work also allows us to gain insight into a marginal(ized) cinematic voice that consistently worked to foreground the complicated strength of women's lives—and of feminism itself—while attempting to maintain her artistic integrity in a complicated film industry.

Ula Stöckl's film career began as rebellion against "Papa's film," against the pressures of the film industry, and against the status quo; despite hurdles and setbacks, she has survived and thrived as a German feminist filmmaker for over forty years. It serves us well to pay close

attention to the many layers of analysis and complex stories told in Ula Stöckl's films; we can gain insights—and likely more good questions—about complex journeys of survival and rebellion.

Endnotes

1. There are indeed plenty of indicators that Ula Stöckl ought to surface more consistently in even cursory overviews of German film history. Consider some of the following: In 1999 a documentary was made and aired on German TV (N3; 7/10-11, 2000) that shows excerpts and interviews of conversations with five great women filmmakers. Ula Stöckl is one of them.

In a retrospective of the first 15 years of a German feminist film center, we read "It all began in January 1985 with 'Der Schlaf der Vernunft' [Sleep of Reason], Ulla Stöckl's national award winning film that portrayed the personal and cultural oppression of women in rich images" (Schnelzer, 2000, pp. 1-2, translated by the author).

In a lecture on media, Uschi Reich (2000) names the great directors at the time she began to study film in the early 1970s: "Als ich Anfang der 70er Jahre in München an der Film Hochschule anfang zu studieren, hießen die Regisseure der Zeit Schlöndorff, Reitz, Kluge, Ulla Stöckl, Margarethe von Trotta, Käckelman, Reinhard Hauff, später dann Wim Wenders, Wolfgana Peterson" (p. 3). Note that Stöckl here is named before the recently better-known Trotta in a line of filmmakers deemed to be the most significant at the time.

In an article honoring film critic Frieda Grafe, Michael Girke imagines a conversation of various famous people in order to imagine how they might explore their points of contact, conflict, and connection. Ula Stöckl is named in some very illustrious company: "Kann man sich ein Gespräch vorstellen [zwischen] Thea von Harbou, Bud Boetticher, Alice B. Toklas, Sigmund Freud, Reklamowitz Klimbinski, Quentin Tarantino, Walter Benjamin, Ida Lupino, Groucho und Karl Marx, Ulla Stöckl, Julia Kristeva... und und und..." (Girke, 2002). Although the author knows that the named persons cannot meet as they did not live at the same time, the mention of Ula Stöckl among such an illustrious group suggests that omitting her work from a list of important German women filmmakers does not serve us well.

2. Basisfilm, an independent distributor of new German films, identified the author film as essential to the survival of a national film culture. It was from the beginning an important support and sponsor of films produced within this new direction (see Knight, 2004, p. 29).

3. Distinguishing "Young German film" from "New German Cinema" is somewhat

tricky. Some would suggest that one of the distinguishing markers of New German Cinema was that the films address a clearly identified spectator and are more concerned with social issues than the earlier artfilms of the Young German Cinema (Elsaesser, 1989, p. 154). However, Ula Stöckl replied to my question in this regard by stating “Well, at some point some of the ‘young’ ones were turning 60 and so they were then called ‘new’ and no longer young” (personal conversation, 11/7/2005; translated by the author). The shift from ‘young’ to ‘new’ actually took place before most of the established filmmakers were 60 years old, but Stöckl’s (tongue in cheek) comment correctly points to a certain arbitrariness in the distinction of the two terms for the ongoing movement among a similar group of filmmakers.

4. Translation by the author.

5. The phrase is actually from the Schlesian Mystik, Friederich von Logan, who died in 1650. Kluge and Reitz encountered the phrase written on the door of a squatters’ house in the late 1970s and adapted it as expression of the necessity for political principles and integrity. Ula Stöckl seems to have shared the conviction behind this phrase from early on as she pursued her filmmaking.

6. Personal conversation, November 7, 2005; translated by author.

7. The film clips are used with permission of the filmmaker and holder of the copyright, Ula Stöckl.

8. Throughout its first part, the film introduces memories of a romantic past through scenes of tender and happy love and though conversations between Dea and her two daughters about the special erotic and sexual bond between Dea and Reinhard, Dea’s “one big love”. And yet, at the same time the loss seems inevitable, given many of the tensions also shown throughout the film, and perhaps was too long ignored by Dea.

9. Personal conversation, November 7, 2005; translated by the author.

10. See Haraway (2001) for a feminist perspective on situated knowledge that would apply to the reading of memory that I see at work in Stöckl’s film.

11. Translated by the author.

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