

Between Adolescence and Motherhood: The Representation of Young Single Motherhood in Relation to Work and Sex in Contemporary German Film

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This article will analyse the representation of young single motherhood in the German films *Lucy* by Henner Winckler (2006) and *Breaking Horizons* by Pola Schirin Beck (2012). Based on E. Ann Kaplan's book *Motherhood and Representation* (Kaplan, 1992), in which she analyses American mainstream film and media from the early twentieth century up to the 1980s, the mother's representation in the German films will be studied in relation to work and sexuality. Kaplan mentions six maternal discourses that evolved from the 1980s onwards in American media, including the categories of the self-fulfilled mother, the abusive mother, the woman-who-refuses-to-mother, the absent mother, the working mother as well as the lesbian mother. The German discourse of non-traditional motherhood, however, deviates from this and is in need of a different categorisation. This article will account a German filmic national context that is missing in the US-centric analysis of Kaplan and maternal film scholarship in general. It will, therefore, analyse the representation of young single motherhood in German film as an addition to Kaplan's originally American maternal categorisation.

Especially, the films of the Berlin School – a filmic movement that addresses social issues in Germany without revealing alternatives to the current state – intend to create space for a non-judgemental observation of these non-traditional mothers. In an era of shifting gender roles and the acknowledgement of women having the choice not to mother, the young single mother in German society still struggles because of a rigid definition of traditional gender roles and an idealised image of motherhood. The young single mother acts outside of what Orna Donath calls a 'cultural-temporal heteronormative logic' (Donath, 2015, 203) which locates motherhood within a heterosexual relationship and follows a conventional pattern of life, leading from school leaving to marriage and motherhood. The young single mother deviates from this norm, finding herself striving for an ideal she can hardly reach. In *Lucy* and *Breaking*

Horizons,¹ this struggle is particularly clear when mothers attempt to combine motherhood with work and sex. This article will focus on how the filmic text communicates the cultural climate of young single motherhood in Germany through its narrative, camera work and mise-en-scène.

It will show that, even though the films of the Berlin School open up a critique of contemporary social conditions and offer to identify with the issues of a young single mother, they still fail to represent young single motherhood in combination with both work and an active sex life. Therefore, a rather conservative understanding of the non-traditional mother persists. Rather than offer a direct criticism on political or social issues, the films of the Berlin School communicate the social climate of contemporary Germany. Their criticism is indirect and needs to be interpreted by the audience. A distant camera and minimal background music are some of the tools used to invite the audience to create their own emotions instead of being prompted to certain feelings by subconscious processes as an effect of threatening or romantic music (cf. Abel, 2008). Therefore, even though the films of the Berlin School offer an alternative mode of representation that invites the audience to reflect current conditions in comparison to the mainstream films Kaplan describes that rather construct images of ideal motherhood, the ideological norms of ideal Western motherhood are still inscribed in the Berlin School films.

Henner Winckler's second feature film *Lucy* (2006) depicts the life of Maggy (Kim Schnitzer), an eighteen-year-old mother, and her baby daughter Lucy (Polly Hauschild). The two of them are living in an apartment with Maggy's mother Eva (Feo Aladag), until Maggy decides to move in with her new boyfriend Gordon (Gordon Schmidt). There she will be confronted with a quasi-nuclear family life, while she spends her day caring for Lucy and waiting for Gordon to come home from work. However, Gordon and Maggy split by the end of the film leaving her in search of a new

¹ The Berlin School is defined rather broadly and it is susceptible to debate whether both films, *Lucy* and *Breaking Horizons*, can be defined as Berlin School movies. However, in this article, both will be seen as part of the movement due to their use of a distant camera, minimal background music, and the positioning of the protagonists within liminal spaces. Both films offer the audience space to reflect and to experience social realities outside of the mainstream maternal representations.

home and facing the decision of whether she should move back in with her mother Eva.

Breaking Horizons by Pola Schirin Beck portrays the life of Lara (Aylin Tezel), a 25-year-old woman whose life is aimless. She unenthusiastically studies architecture to please her parents while spending her free time drinking or clubbing with her best friend Nora (Henrike von Kuik). Getting pregnant by a barkeeper (Kai Michael Müller) during one of these nights gives Lara's life direction. She decides to keep the baby but loses the child during the sixth month of her pregnancy due to complications. Because of her infantile self-perception as well as the negative reaction of her parents when Lara tells them about her pregnancy, *Breaking Horizons* offers a valuable representation of young single motherhood.

This article shows that both films detach the work sphere from motherhood through plot and framing, following a traditional ideal in Germany of the stay-at-home mother who sacrifices herself for the maternal duty. In *Lucy*, Maggy briefly mentions her desire to join the workforce to have something in her life she can enjoy besides motherhood. In the scene, Maggy is placed on the right side of the screen standing behind Lucy's stroller and in front of a large window that allows the audience a view into the hair salon her friend (Ganeshi Becks) works in. The glass window, however, separates Maggy visually from the work space. Furthermore, the frame of the window bisects the mise-en-scène, placing Maggy and her friend, who pursues an apprenticeship as a hairdresser, on opposite sides. As a result, Maggy is visually disconnected from the work sphere firstly by the window between her and the inside of the salon and secondly through the division of the frame between her and her working friend. Maggy's desire for individual fulfilment via a job is quickly dismissed by her friend who indicates that Maggy has her boyfriend Gordon instead. With this statement the film unfolds the societal view that the domestic is a mother's natural place, in which her greatest joy is not just to take care of her child but also of her husband (or in Maggy's case her boyfriend). The working woman and the stay-at-home mother become separate concepts that do not intersect.

Lara in *Breaking Horizons* does not face the challenge of combining work with motherhood, like Maggy does in *Lucy*, as her pregnancy ends during the sixth month in a miscarriage. However, even before the child is born, Lara makes the decision

between raising her child or continuing her architectural studies in favour of her child. During her pregnancy Lara loses any remnant of her already low interest in studying architecture and focuses on her future as a mother. In the middle of the film, when Lara meets her friend Nora in a maternity clothes shop, Nora is wearing a casual smart jacket. This is a visual contrast between these two characters, with Lara representing the young single mother on one hand, and the future young business woman represented by Nora on the other. Both women struggle to pay attention to each other as their conversation circles around their own individual interests. The camera focuses on the uninterested faces of the two friends, barely placing them as a unit within its mise-en-scène. When the camera does not show the faces in close-up, it positions the women in two corners of the screen sitting on one sofa. Nora and Lara barely physically interact with each other in this scene and are visually separated by objects in between them. Only when Lara feels her child kicking inside her belly does she take Nora's hand to let her feel the movement. However, Nora does not seem to appreciate the gesture and pulls her hand back politely. Motherhood – signified by Lara – and career – signified by Nora – are therefore, as in *Lucy*, strictly separated spheres within a woman's life in *Breaking Horizons*.

The films reflect how this strict separation of motherhood and work leads to a societal anxiety in Germany of dependent young women who become parents outside of the cultural-temporal norm Donath describes. If Lara had not suffered a miscarriage, she might have struggled in the future to earn her own money and be fully independent from her parents, just as Maggy does. The mothers are, therefore, faced with the dilemma many mothers experience when staying at home to parent their children instead of pursuing the career they were originally trained for. As Nancy Chodorow says:

Parenting, as an unpaid occupation outside the world of public power, entails lower status, less power, and less control of resources than paid work. Women's mothering reinforces and perpetuates women's relative powerlessness (Chodorow, 1978, 31).

This power struggle is apparent in the scene with Nora and Lara, in which both women try to convince the other to be fully engaged in their individual interest of motherhood or work. The non-working mother becomes less interesting for her working friends as

well as for men, as this article will show. This powerlessness applies not just to the married, stay-at-home mother Chodorow mainly refers to, but especially to the single mother. In *Lucy*, Maggy's inability to combine motherhood and work leads to her dependence on her parents. Both films expose the dilemma that motherhood comes with occupational as well as social restrictions which leads to an eager pursuit of creating a heteronormative family model to be accepted by society for Maggy.

She tries to create this family within the cultural-temporal logic Donath mentions by initially keeping the fact that Lucy is her daughter from Gordon. However, this logic is broken when Gordon learns that Maggy is Lucy's mother. While he is still interested in a relationship, Maggy's only option to save this relationship later in the movie is to give Lucy away to her mother. Therefore, she ultimately must abandon her maternal identity to secure a long-term relationship, while her life before was predominantly shaped by her daughter. During the film, Maggy repeatedly tries to negotiate this maternal identity, searching for alternatives outside of motherhood. In *Lucy*, mothers must put aside their maternal identity to have a lasting relationship. This split between sexual identity and maternal identity will resolve itself in favour of the latter as the child becomes the focal point of identification for the young single mother. Motherhood and serious relationships, therefore, are ultimately incompatible in the film.

Sexuality creates tension in the mother-daughter relationship in *Lucy*. Sex is only actively shown once and implied a second time during a conversation between Maggy and her mother Eva. Both mothers are shown in close-ups in the scene, highlighting the rather emotional discussion. Here, sex is represented as something that divides mother and daughter but at the same time indicates that Maggy's relationships resemble what she learned from her mother's actions. After encountering her daughter with a guy in the kitchen, Eva confronts Maggy, stating her opinion about her daughter's behaviour:

Eva: Ja, findest du das normal?

(Well, do you think that is normal?)

Maggy: Was denn?

(What?)

Eva: Dass du dann gleich mit dem ins Bett gehst?

(That you immediately sleep with him?)

Maggy: Musst du gerade sagen.

(You should talk!)

Eva: Wieso?

(Why?)

Maggy: Na meinst du ich habe dich hier noch nicht ficken gehört?

(Don't you think I haven't heard you fucking in here?)

This statement does not represent sex positively but simply blames the mother for the supposedly bad traits of her daughter. As Lucy Fischer states: 'In many films, the mother is blamed for her transgressions or for the ills she visits upon her offspring' (Fischer, 1996, 30). In *Lucy*, she is blamed for both. This confirms Chodorow's perception of the reproduction of mothering, whereby the mother teaches the daughter about her presupposed future role (Chodorow, 1978, 7). By doing so, the mother hands down not just traits that are positively conceived by society but also negatively perceived ones. By defining an active (and somewhat promiscuous) sex life as abnormal for a young single mother, *Lucy's* grandmother others and condemns the maternal character for living out a free sexuality. In *Lucy*, motherhood is, therefore, not just incompatible with serious relationships but also a trigger of conflict in relation to sex.

While *Lucy* offers a conflict-laden representation of sex, *Breaking Horizons* highlights the desexualisation of mothers by men. Although Lara is a sexually active woman before her pregnancy, this abruptly stops once she knows that she is pregnant. When Lara and Nora finish their painting job of the future baby room, the editing slows down and captures both girls in an intimate close-up shot, while they are having a discussion about sex and their current situation. However, when Nora alleges that a pregnancy is perceived as sexy by men, the camera distances itself from the women, showing them in a medium shot instead of the former close-up. By doing so, the camera distances itself not just physically from Nora, but also in regards to Nora's assumption, revealing it as fallacy. When Lara explains that in her experience most men are sexually repelled by pregnant women, the camera changes again to a close-up shot. During this, the focus of the *mise-en-scène* lies on Nora's face, instead of the speaking Lara, waiting for her to respond to her friend's explanation. Nora, however, refuses to acknowledge the maternal difficulties by changing the subject to herself as

she complains that Lara never asks about her relationship to Martin (Godehard Giese). The scene shows that the sexuality of the mother is hindered by men's perception of the pregnant body and highlights the struggle especially young mothers encounter by trying to explain themselves to their peers who did not experience motherhood yet.

In *Breaking Horizons* sex is only actively portrayed in conjunction with the act of conceiving a child. When Lara is clubbing with her friend Nora, Lara meets Martin, her university teacher. The two of them engage in a conversation and flirt with each other. However, while Lara gets herself another drink, her friend Nora leaves the club with Martin. As in *Lucy*, sex triggers a conflict in *Breaking Horizons* between the two main female characters. Lara, frustrated about the libidinous rivalry, keeps on dancing and consuming drugs. At this point, the camera changes to a faster rhythm and just like Lara loses focus. This subjective use of the camera narrows the cinematic space around her while refusing to fully take her point of view. The audience still stays outside of Lara's world observing her closely and at the same time being invited to share part of the experience via a blurry focus. The fast editing of blurred backgrounds of people and lights unfold Lara's feelings of being lost within too many decisions, searching for a direction in her life. In order to find this direction, however, Lara chooses – and needs – to lose herself in the moment first.

The fast editing of mainly close-up shots of which most are blurred continues during Lara's sex with the barkeeper on the toilet of the club. Her attempt at losing herself through drugs and sex, therefore, ultimately causes the conception of her child, and with this comes a direction in her life outside of having a career. Michel Foucault describes in *The History of Sexuality* how sex was confined to the domestic sphere in the 19th century and only functioned as reproductive tool (Foucault, 1978, 3). *Breaking Horizons* detaches sex from the domestic sphere placing it in the public toilet of a club. However, even though Lara has sex out of enjoyment and does not intend to get pregnant, the film still visually reduces the sexual act to reproductive purposes for the young single mother. After conceiving, an active sex life is excluded from motherhood and remains acceptable only for non-mothers. The portrayal of sexuality in regards to the young single mother, therefore, somewhat stays in line with the conservative idea of the nineteenth century.

In conclusion, the young single mother in contemporary German film constitutes part of a new category outside of Kaplan's original definition of maternal representations in American media. The young mothers in *Lucy* and *Breaking Horizons* are neither self-fulfilled, absent, abusive, employed, homosexual nor do they refuse to mother. Nevertheless, they represent a form of non-traditional motherhood that is often ignored within maternal representations. Therefore, this article focused on films by the Berlin School that intend to show realities outside of the mainstream representation of a Madonna-like mother, while the protagonists still try to fit within the cultural-temporal heteronormative logic Donath describes.

The article shows that camera work, mise-en-scène and narration detaches motherhood from work and from having a constant partnership or active sex life in *Lucy* and *Breaking Horizons*. While Maggy pursues a heteronormative nuclear family model by being a stay-at-home mother who somehow wishes for another place of fulfilment outside of motherhood, work becomes strictly separated from a maternal identity in *Breaking Horizons*. Both films locate the young single mothers as being dependent on their parents. This situates them outside of the cultural-temporal heteronormative logic Donath describes, and positions them within Chodorow's framework of reinforced powerlessness by withholding the possibility of further pursuing school, an apprenticeship or work.

Furthermore, to be able to pursue a heteronormative partnership, the young single mother is forced to deny her motherhood, as sexual identity and maternal identity are clearly separate concepts in both films. The narration positions sexuality as a point of conflict between the young single mother and her own mother, while blaming her mother for her supposedly bad traits. The young single mother is desexualised by men and an active sex life perceived as abnormal by her own mother. Sex is merely depicted in relation to conceiving the child, which follows a somewhat conservative understanding of the sexuality of the maternal character. Only the woman who is not a mother is able to pursue a lasting relationship and can have an active sex life.

While films of the Berlin School claim to merely show social realities outside of mainstream knowledge, they still imply social critique and challenge social norms. It is up to the audience to interpret this criticism. This article shows, that on the one hand

the films refuse to combine the representation of motherhood with both work and an active sex life and therefore follow a rather conservative stance on maternal representations. However, on the other hand, they seem to implicitly critique these boundaries ultimately set by society and not necessarily by the filmmakers themselves. The films, therefore, seem to follow a cultural ideology and in a way mirror the ambitions of the German New Wave (German: Neuer Deutscher Film) by encouraging the audience to step away from the events and reflect them rather than merely identifying with the characters on screen.

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