CHAPTER 12

Adapting (to) Non-Motherhood: Ulrike Kofler's Film *What We Wanted* (2020)

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In 2020, Ulrike Kofler's debut film *What We Wanted* (Kofler 2020a) was chosen as Austria's submission for the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film.[1] Though the film was not ultimately nominated for the prestigious prize, its submission nevertheless marks a defining moment in European cinema. Kofler's film foregrounds the problem of involuntary childlessness and non-motherhood and sheds light on the profound grief and distress that the inability to conceive can cause

[1] The original German title of Kofler's film is *Was wir wollten* (Kofler 2020a).

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for a couple. The pain of infertility is not often the subject of filmic representation, and certainly not in mainstream cinema. The fact that Kofler's feature film was selected to be put forward for consideration for this prestigious international award demonstrates the extent to which involuntary childlessness is increasingly seen as an important social issue that is worthy of public attention and discussion.

The screenplay for the film, which was written by Kofler and Austrian producer Sandra Bohle in collaboration with Austrian director and screenwriter Marie Kreutzer, is based on a short story by Swiss writer Peter Stamm entitled "The Natural Way of Things".[2] In many ways, the plotline of the Kofler's film remains the same as that of Stamm's short story: Niklas and Alice are a childless couple whose tranquil holiday is disrupted by the arrival of the family next door, whose boisterous interaction gets under their skin and ultimately causes them to question their relationship and the choices they have made about children. However, as this chapter will show, Kofler's film builds on and departs from Stamm's narrative in some interesting ways. In particular, I argue here that in adapting Stamm's short story for the big screen, Kofler places particular emphasis on non-motherhood. She also amplifies an ambivalence inherent in the short story to demonstrate that reproductive decision-making is seldom as simple or as stable as conventional notions of voluntary and involuntary childlessness might cause us to assume.

Until relatively recently, the success or failure of an adaptation was judged in terms of its fidelity to the original; a good adaptation was one that stuck closely to the source text, and when an artist or director inserted him- or herself into the work, modifying the text or changing its meaning or context, this was often viewed negatively by readers of the original. This is especially true of film adaptations of novels, which, as theorist Robert Stam (2000) points out, are often discussed in moralistic terms that assume that the film version represents a "vulgarization" or even "desecration" of the prose original (54). Stam argues that this prioritisation of the written word over visual representation reinscribes a classical hierarchy between literature as a form of 'high' culture and cinema as a form of popular or 'low' culture: "Much of the discussion of film adaptation quietly reinscribes the axiomatic superiority of literary art to film, an assumption

[2] Stamm's short story was originally published in German in 2008 as 'Der Lauf der Dinge' in the anthology *Wir fliegen* (Stamm 2008). The collection was translated into English and published as *We're Flying* in 2012.

derived from a number of superimposed prejudices" (58). Against this traditional and rather reductive view, adaptation has in recent years begun to be understood as a creative practice, where the content and form of the source text are re-created and re-imagined from a different point of view. As Adrienne Rich (1972) contends, every adaptation is a "re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18). Contrary to the idea that an adaptation can only ever represent an impoverished version of the source text, critics such as Rich argue that reworking an existing text for a new medium or a new audience can represent an enriching process that can produce new readings and new meanings.

Drawing on Rich's approach, this chapter considers the creative potential of Kofler's cinematic 're-vision' of Stamm's short story. This chapter explores some of the similarities and differences between the film and its narrative inspiration and relates the changes made in the process of adaptation to the different media chosen, as well as to the conventional depiction and perception of childlessness and non-motherhood in the contemporary moment. Specifically, this chapter 'looks back' at some of the assumptions underlying Stamm's short story and considers how they are re-imagined in the transition from written text to a filmic representation. In particular, I explore how, in both texts, the main characters vacillate between wanting and not wanting to have children of their own, and how this ambivalence is represented both in narrative and in visual form.

Moving Between Childfreedom and Childlessness

One of the strengths of Kofler's film *What We Wanted* is its sensitive depiction of the deep pain of infertility, as well as the cruel reality of Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART). In one of the opening scenes of the film, we watch as Niklas and Alice wait in their doctor's office to be told that their fourth attempt to conceive via In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) has been unsuccessful. We observe the couple's tense silence as they wait to be called into the office and Alice's vulnerability as she lies, legs splayed, while her specialist carries out a vaginal ultrasound; we eavesdrop on the jargon-peppered conversation as the specialist informs the couple that the fertilised egg has failed to develop into a viable embryo; and we witness Alice pause and take a deep breath as she struggles to compose herself before emerging from behind the curtain after the scan. Later, we are privy to a conversation between Alice and Niklas and the receptionist as they

negotiate how to cover the substantial shortfall in the cost of the treatment that is not covered by their insurance. This opening scene is key; apart from providing the impetus for the trip to Sardinia that is the central location of the family drama that will follow—their specialist has advised them to take a break from the treatment and do something nice, perhaps take a vacation together—it also offers viewers insight into the couple's profound desire to have a child and the difficulties they face in trying to make their desire a reality. These short scenes lay bare the discomfort, helplessness, vulnerability, humiliation, and disappointment that accompany the couple on their quest to conceive, where what is left unsaid is often far more powerful than the words that are spoken.

The fact that we, as viewers, are given a window into Alice and Niklas's failure to conceive means that we immediately understand how distressing it must be, and how unfair it must seem, when they find themselves holidaying next to the quintessential nuclear family, complete with sporty nouveau-riche dad Romed, yoga-practising yummy mummy Christl, and their good-looking, if somewhat sulky, teenaged son David and uber-cute blonde daughter Denise. The extent to which this alternate reality clashes with their own unfulfilled desire for family is evident when they arrive to find their villa kitted out with the toddler bed and teddy intended for the family next door. This cruel form of confrontation therapy, as Niklas jokingly refers to it, sets the scene for their everyday interaction while on holiday. When they want to enjoy a meal in their garden or lie in the sun on the sandy beach, the family next door is always close by to remind them of what's missing from their life. Despite their attempts to keep their distance from their neighbours, they repeatedly find their paths crossing, and Alice and Niklas see an image of how their lives might have been if they had been able to have the children they so desperately want.

Given the centrality of the infertility plotline to Kofler's film, it is perhaps surprising to note that the short story that served as its inspiration rests on an entirely different premise: in Stamm's narrative, Alice and Niklaus are childless by choice.[3] Their leisurely holiday—in Italy, in this case—is one of many that they, unconstrained by children, have been able to enjoy, and according to Niklaus, from whose perspective the short story is told, this lifestyle-choice is one they agreed upon early:

[3]While Stamm's short story names the male protagonist Niklaus, he is called Niklas in Kofler's film. In this essay, I use the name as given in the chosen medium, though they are variations of the same character.

> Alice had never wanted children. When Niklaus found that out, his first reaction had been relief, and he saw that it was only convention in him that had assumed he would one day start a family. On the occasions they had talked about it, it had been to assure each other that they had come to the right decision. Perhaps there's something wrong with me, said Alice with a complacent expression, but I find children boring and annoying. Perhaps I have a wrong gene somewhere. They both worked hard and enjoyed their work, Alice in customer service at a bank, and Niklaus as an engineer. If they had had children, one of them would have had to sacrifice his career, and that was something neither of them was prepared to do. They travelled to exotic countries, had been on a trekking holiday in Nepal, and a cruise in the Antarctic. They often went to concerts and plays, and they went out a lot. All that would have been impossible with children. (Stamm 2012, 220–1)

As this passage elucidates, Niklaus and Alice have decided on a childfree life, and have enjoyed the freedom and autonomy that this choice has afforded them. Their unfettered life of travel and career success is premised on their commitment to their agreed position of not wanting children, even as they recognise that this stance flies in the face of convention.

Unlike the couple in Kofler's cinematic rendition, the arrival of the family next door is—initially, at least—more of an inconvenience to Stamm's Alice and Niklaus than a source of heartache. They react with dismay as they watch the father of the family unloading a kid's bicycle and a toddler's tricycle from his shiny black SUV, recognising that their relaxing sojourn has likely come to an abrupt end. Indeed, they soon find that their quiet afternoons reading in the garden are interrupted by the sounds of the couple's six-year-old daughter screaming or their three-year-old son banging his toys together incessantly, and their peaceful al fresco dinners are spoiled by the noise of the children squabbling or their parents berating them for said squabbling. Seen through Niklaus's eyes, Alice grows increasingly frustrated with the unwelcome disturbance caused by the family next door and increasingly impatient with her husband that he cannot or will not do anything to prevent their noisy neighbours from disturbing their peaceful holiday.

The fact that Kofler has turned Stamm's story of a voluntarily childless couple into a drama that revolves around infertility is a crucial variation from the plot line of the source text and one that has a significant impact on the way in which the characters and their stories are depicted. Indeed, at first glance, it seems as though the two couples are depicted in very stereotypical ways. As Gayle Letherby (2002) argues, individuals and

couples who cannot have children are often portrayed in culture and the media as "desperate and unfulfilled", while those who choose not to have children tend to be presented as "selfish and deviant" (10). In many ways, the different depictions of the couple in Stamm's short story and Kofler's film correspond to this timeworn pattern. In the short story, the primary reasons given for the couple's decision to remain childfree relate to their unwillingness to sacrifice the lifestyle they've created for themselves; having children would prevent them from going out whenever they want and from travelling to exotic locations, and it might mean that one of them would have to make compromises in their career. The couple in Stamm's short story are thus depicted in quite unsympathetic terms, and their decision not to have children comes across as selfish and uncompromising. Niklaus's depiction of Alice and her apparent indifference to children suggests that she is cold and unfeeling, traits that are often attributed to women who are childless by choice. On the other hand, the same stereotypical representation of childlessness identified by Letherby is also discernible in the depiction of the childless couple in Kofler's film. The main part of the film focuses on their grief and despondency at their inability to conceive a child, even with the help of IVF. Alice's desperation is so noticeable that even little Denise picks up on it, drawing a picture of her in the sand and telling her, "Das bist du, die traurige Frau". ["That's you, the sad woman".] The melancholy of the childless woman follows her everywhere, it seems, even on her luxury vacation.

In their screenplay, Kofler, Bohle, and Kreutzer imagine a very different backstory for Niklas and Alice than that which is offered in the short story that served as its inspiration. Indeed, this difference may well have influenced the reception of the filmic story, as there is some evidence to suggest that the audience is more likely to be sympathetic to a childless couple who wishes to have a family than to a couple who has chosen not to have children. Leslie Ashburn-Nardo's (2017) recent survey of a large number of studies into perceptions of childless men and women in the United States since the 1970s finds that "reactions to people who choose to be childfree, relative to those who choose to have children, have remained consistently negative" (394). Despite the growing rates of childlessness in Western societies, and especially in European countries, in recent years (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka 2017, 3), and the increasing prevalence of voluntary childlessness, there is still a social expectation that individuals and couples will want to have children and a corresponding lack of understanding when that is not the case. It is easier for an audience to

understand and relate to a couple who cannot have children than a couple who have chosen not to. The decision to re-envision the story of Alice and Niklaus as one of involuntary childlessness probably contributed to the popularity of the film and its appeal to a broad audience.

Gendered Perspectives on Childlessness

Reading Peter Stamm's "The Natural Way of Things", it is striking that the short story is written entirely from Niklaus's perspective. Our image of Alice, the non-mother, is mediated entirely through her husband, and she is at times presented quite negatively when seen from Niklaus's eyes. In Stamm's short story, the holiday starts off badly from the outset. Alice is grumpy because their Italian country villa isn't as nice as the travel agent's brochures had led her to expect. Though Niklaus does his best to distract her with leisurely walks to the beach and a daytrip to nearby Siena, Alice is irritated by the other travellers, who seem to her to have no appreciation for the cultural richness of the area and make no effort to respect the local language and customs. The arrival of the family next door is especially upsetting for Alice though, and Niklaus describes her uneasiness and discomfort from the moment they pull into the driveway. She seems hyper-aware of their comings and goings; even when they are not home, Niklaus remarks upon how frequently Alice glances over to their villa. It seems clear from Niklaus's observations of his wife's actions and his interpretation of her reactions that the family represents a particularly unwelcome intrusion on her restful vacation. He describes her extreme irritation at the noise the children make and her impatience with him that he is not willing or able to do anything about it. In all this, Alice's behaviour and words are filtered through her husband and interpreted from his point of view.

It is also important to note that it is Niklaus who tells us about the couple's decision not to have children. While he himself admits to the occasional twinge of regret—or more specifically, we are told, "he had never regretted not having children, but sometimes he regretted that he had never even felt the desire to have any" (Stamm 2012, 221)—he seems convinced that Alice has never had a moment's doubt about her lifestyle choices. He insinuates that she is unwavering in the position she evidently articulated to him early in their relationship, namely that she "had never wanted children" (220). Whilst Niklaus does not criticise his wife overtly for her professed commitment to non-motherhood, there is an implied criticism in his description of the flippancy with which she dismisses her

lack of interest in children and the way she jokes that she must "have a wrong gene somewhere" (220). In particular, Niklaus's description of Alice's facial expression as "complacent" when she passes this offhand remark presents an image of her as smug and self-satisfied.

However, the reality is that this partial narrative perspective means that we never gain any real insight into Alice's thoughts or emotions, and certain events in the narrative cause us to doubt Niklaus's reliability as a narrator. His partiality is revealed in his description of Alice's extreme sensitivity to the goings-on next door; this is particularly evident on one occasion, when a loud quarrel between the neighbours' children brings Alice to tears:

> Alice lowered her newspaper and looked up at the sky. Niklaus pretended to be engrossed in his book. After a while, she threw it down, and went inside. Niklaus waited a moment, and followed her. He found her sitting at the living room table, staring into space. He sat down opposite her, but she avoided his gaze. She was breathing fast, and suddenly she fell into a furious sobbing. Niklaus went around the table, and stood behind her. He thought of laying his hand on her shoulder, or stroking her hair, but in the end he only said, just imagine if they were our children. (220)

In this passage, Niklaus describes Alice's crying as "furious sobbing", attributing her extreme emotional reaction thus to anger or frustration at the noise rather than any other kind of distress or discomfort that might be triggered by the situation. Niklaus evidently recognises that the presence of the children has hit a raw nerve with his wife, but his limited understanding of her response is manifest in his hesitation; he is unsure whether her outburst calls for pacification ("laying his hand on her shoulder") or comfort ("stroking her hair"). Similarly, he interprets Alice's sensitivity to the sights and sounds of the family next door as infuriation and her unwillingness to leave the house in the days following this interaction as defensiveness: "She was at war, and had to guard the terrain" (223). As the story unfolds, we as readers begin to question Niklaus's assumption that Alice's nigh-on visceral reaction to the family next door is purely due to annoyance. The limited point of view that he offers as narrator also reminds us that in the short story, Alice's experience as non-mother is always mediated from male point of view.

The point of view of a film is generally less easily discernible than that of a narrative text, and in this respect, it might be seen as inevitable that

Kofler departs from the original in adapting Stamm's short story for the screen. Film theorist Robert Stam suggests that in analysing the question of point of view in relation to film adaptations of narrative texts, there are a number of related questions to consider: "Does the film adaptation maintain the point of view and the focalization (Genette)—of the novel? Who tells the story in the novel vis-à-vis the film? Who focalizes the story—that is, who sees within the story?" (2000, 72). As is the case with most films, there is no narrator or narrative instance throughout Kofler's *What We Wanted*; rather, the film tends to focus its depiction on external events, action, and dialogue. This means that we must examine the question of who sees in order to understand how the director has opted to render the characters' point of view in the film.

Like Stamm's short story, Kofler's film also centres on the relationship between Alice and Niklas, but unlike its narrative inspiration, the film tends to privilege Alice's perspective over Niklas's. In many cases, the couple are depicted together in the same shot, eating together in the garden of their villa or lying together on a sunbed on the beach; however, in scenes where they go their separate ways, the camera most often sticks with Alice so that we gain a deeper insight into her world and her experience than that of Niklas. For example, when the couple visit their doctor, the camera follows Alice behind the curtain while Niklas waits in the doctor's office, and while Niklas chats to the couple next door, the camera concentrates on Alice's conversations with their children. On two occasions where the couple argue, the audience gets to see how both Alice and Niklas deal with the aftermath, but on both occasions, the camera spends more time focusing on Alice, as if taking her side in the argument. In this way, the film version tends to give more attention to the female perspective, depicting Alice's view of events and fostering the audience's sympathy for her.

Kofler's film also introduces a narrative element that reveals a clear bias towards Alice's perspective. The film is interspersed with hazy images of Alice and Niklas's first trip to Sardinia right at the beginning of their relationship, of them sleeping in a tent, swimming in the sea, and making love. The first of these, which appears as the opening sequence of the film, gives us a strong steer as to how these sequences should be interpreted: Alice stands on a beach while she tells us in voiceover of her dreams of a child that is hers and Niklas's. Alice's interior monologue in voiceover lets the audience know from the outset that the recurring flashbacks that punctuate the film are her dreamlike memories of a time in their

relationship when they were young and carefree as well as her musings on an alternative reality that might have followed. This voiceover picks up on the narrative element of the short story and allows us an insight into Alice's thoughts and feelings that would not otherwise be accessible in a visual medium such as film.

This modification in the move from short story to film means that the two texts differ significantly in their point of view: while Stamm's narrative is told entirely from Niklaus's point of view, and our image of Alice is mediated entirely through him, Kofler's film moves between Niklas and Alice and ultimately privileges her perspective over his. If Stamm's short story tells the story of childlessness and non-motherhood from a male standpoint, Kofler upsets this power dynamic and hands the narrative power over to Alice. She reimagines the experience from Alice's perspective and allows her to tell her own story of childlessness and non-motherhood from her own perspective and on occasion even in her own words.

It is important to note that this shift in gendered perspective is not neutral; on the contrary, research shows that non-mothers often face more pressure than non-fathers to explain their childlessness. Rosemary Gillespie (2000) points out that despite changing social roles and increasing rates of childlessness in many Western countries, the majority of women will still become mothers; in the minority, many childless women then still find their choices questioned, belittled, or disbelieved. Maura Kelly (2009) examines 20 years of scholarship on women's childlessness and finds that many women mention the disapproval they sense from friends and family and the stigma they experience in wider society. Indeed, as Kelly underlines, the women's perception of being viewed negatively is in fact borne out by attitudinal surveys that find that women without children are assumed to be unhappy and their lives less rewarding than women with children (165). The fact that Kofler's film focuses on the situation of the non-mother, on her choices and her emotions, means that it offers insight into an identity that is often disregarded or even denigrated in society and culture.

Approaches to Ambivalence

In the course of the two texts—both the short story and its film adaptation—it gradually becomes clear to readers and viewers that the understanding of childlessness they convey is far more complex than how it is

frequently represented in culture and the media or viewed by wider society. All too often, individuals and couples without children are assumed to fall into one of two groups—that is, either they cannot have children or they have chosen a childfree life—but these simple categorisations overlook the myriad ways that fertility intentions can change in accordance with life circumstances and the passage of time. A couple might enter a relationship with no intention to have children but may come to feel differently and decide to try for children; or they might initially want to be parents but find themselves unable to conceive; in this case, they may accept this and even come to embrace a childfree lifestyle, or they might choose to pursue other avenues, seeking fertility treatment or adoption as a route to parenthood. It is for these reasons that James Monach (1993) suggests that "it is probably more helpful to consider childlessness in general as a continuum, on which there are those clearly at either end, but there is a group in the middle whose position is not so simple and might change over time" (5; see also Letherby 2002, 7–8). Indeed, we might well imagine that a substantial proportion of childless individuals and couples belong in this "group in the middle", as fertility decisions are seldom clear-cut or stable.

Focussing specifically on the choices and situations of non-mothers, Letherby (2002) reminds us that many women's positions on the childless/childfree continuum are difficult to pin down, even for themselves: "Whereas some 'voluntarily' childless women define themselves as childfree and some 'involuntarily' childless women feel desperate some of the time, others are more ambivalent" (8). In many respects, it is this ambiguous area between voluntary and involuntary non-motherhood that is explored in Stamm's "The Natural Way of Things" and Kofler's *What We Wanted*. Both the short story and its cinematic adaptation highlight the idea that the identity of non-mother is often far more nuanced than it initially seems, and that it can shift and change over time. Although, as discussed above, the two versions of the figure of Alice may initially seem to signify polar opposites, with Alice in the short story representing the position of childfree woman and Alice in the film denoting the position of childless woman, both texts ultimately emphasise ways in which these apparently stable identities can reveal themselves to be far more complex and ambivalent. This section will explore the ways to which the ambivalence that is present already in Stamm's short story is translated in Kofler's film, as well as the ways in which both texts raise questions about conventional assumptions about voluntary and involuntary childlessness.

There is some evidence in Stamm's short story to suggest that Niklaus and Alice's interaction with the family next door, which seems at first glance to be a source of great irritation to them, also reveals sensitivities in their relationship related to their decision not to have children. Niklaus, from whose perspective the story is told, admits to feeling of ambivalence about the lifestyle that he and Alice have chosen and how they have arranged their life together; in particular, he wonders whether "having a family might entail not just a loss of freedom, but perhaps a certain gain as well, perhaps he and Alice might have been more independent of each other, without the exclusivity of love and irritation" (Stamm 2012, 221). Even as Niklaus recognises that the childfreedom that he and Alice have chosen has afforded them the time and money to take advantage of opportunities that would otherwise not have been available to them, he also acknowledges that the choices they have made have robbed them of certain experiences as well. In this way, the confrontation with the family next door has triggered some soul-searching for Niklaus, and he finds himself pondering the road not taken.

Alice's ambivalence about her non-motherhood is explored in quite different, and much more subtle ways in Stamm's short story. Though, as discussed earlier in this chapter, Niklaus seems unable or unwilling to see it, it gradually becomes clear to the reader that Alice's extreme sensitivity to the goings-on of the parents and children next door, which is rendered most obvious in her fit of "furious sobbing" (220) after one interaction, points to more than mere irritation due to the noise. Her overt interest in the children and her continuous stolen glances over to the villa next door suggest that Alice is not as secure in her life-choices as Niklaus sees to assume and that she, like him, is contemplating another life, one in which they have children. Seen thus, Niklaus's words of comfort to his wife after her tearful outburst—"just imagine if they were our children" (220)—give voice to the uncertainty that she too is experiencing in this moment; on the surface, his words suggest an appeal for empathy for the couple next door, who are probably doing their best to keep their children happy and quiet, but on a deeper level, they can be read as an invitation to Alice to imagine herself into the role of mother to the two children next door, or even to consider an alternative life to the one that they have chosen.

In some respects then, the couple from Stuttgart comes to represent a fantasy counterpoint to the life that Niklaus and Alice have chosen to live. Their fascination with the family next door is tinged with curiosity and

even envy about how their lives might have turned out if they had made different choices. Niklaus's fantasy of an alternative life extends to an imagined sexual encounter with the young wife who sunbathes topless in her garden, and that fantasy spills over into reality when his excitement at this daydream inspires him to initiate sex with Alice. Their voyeuristic vision of an alternative life reignites their passion for one another, and this incident marks a change in their holiday. The fantasy is brought to an abrupt end, however, when all goes quiet from one day to the next and the couple stops coming out of their holiday villa. Niklaus and Alice learn to their horror that the sudden silence is due to a tragic event: the father of the family accidentally ran over his son with his car and killed him. Niklaus and Alice stand at their window, watching the father pack up the family car—the tricycle that once pointed metonymically to the presence of a child now serving as a haunting reminder of the absence of that child. Despite this morbid turn of events, the closeness that Alice and Niklaus have regained remains, and after the car has driven away, they make love "urgently" and "more forcefully than a few days before" (232).

Alice and Niklaus's ambivalence regarding the life-choices they have made and their decision not to have children is not explored in explicit terms in the short story, and a reader or viewer might thus be forgiven for wondering why Kofler and Bohle chose to introduce what may seem like a new thread into the story when they wrote the screenplay for the film. However, Kofler asserts that this theme is already evident in Stamm's narrative, albeit in intangible form: "The desire for children is only addressed subtly in the short story", she says; "You can see it if you choose to".[4] The challenge for Kofler is how to portray the ambiguity she perceives in Stamm's text in such a way that it is equally open to personal reading and interpretation. To use Adrienne Rich's terms, how can her "re-vision" of Stamm's short story reimagine the sensitive issues and raw emotions that fuel the tense relationship between Alice and Niklaus in a way that allows viewers to see them "with fresh eyes" (1972, 18)?

There are a number of ways that the couple's uncertain feelings about their desire for family, and the ambivalent emotions that this provokes, are handled in the film adaptation, some overt and some less so. The first and most obvious means by which the simplistic distinction between voluntary and involuntary childlessness is unsettled is through the backstory

[4] "Der Kinderwunsch ist in der Kurzgeschichte nur subtil erzählt. Wenn man will, kann man es lesen" (Kofler 2020b).

attributed to the couple in Kohler's film. After Alice discovers that Niklas has confided in the couple next door about their struggles to conceive, she reveals to them—defiantly, as if inviting their criticism—that she fell unexpectedly pregnant early in their relationship but decided not to continue with the pregnancy. This revelation sketches a life trajectory that demonstrates the way in which her desire for children has changed over time and in line with her life circumstances. Alice evokes a memory of herself as a young woman—the same young woman whom we now recognise from the hazy images in the flashbacks that recur throughout the film—who is not ready to be a mother and chooses non-motherhood, opting to terminate her pregnancy. We also recognise that the voiceover in which she tells of her dreams of a child is not mere fancy but rather an alternative reality, another potential life-course in which she continues with her pregnancy and becomes a mother. Alice's disclosure of her confrontation with the possibility of motherhood at a time in her life when she was unable or unwilling to take on the responsibility associated with it stands in sharp contrast to her inability to conceive at a time in her life when she is now ready to be a mother. Moreover, it is clear from her defensive attitude in telling her story that she makes a connection between the two experiences, as though her inability to maintain a pregnancy now is somehow a punishment for her decision not to continue with her pregnancy when she was younger. This moment of painful revelation is one of the most poignant moments in Kofler's film.

A second way in which Kofler translates the ambivalence of Stamm's narrative into her film adaptation is through silence and facial expressions. Just as in the written text, what is not said in the film is often more telling than the action and dialogue. We are repeatedly presented with images of Alice and Niklas sitting beside one another but not looking at or speaking to one another. This is most evident in the scene in which they wait in the doctor's office, not speaking or touching: first Niklas turns to look at Alice, but she does not meet his gaze and so he turns away, then Alice turns to look at Niklas, but he does not return her glance, so she looks away. There is no dialogue or action to interpret this scene for us; we are left to read the emotion on the characters' faces and interpret their silence for ourselves. The same is true of several scenes between Alice and the two children next door, particularly her interactions with six-year-old Denise. Though these scenes usually do involve some dialogue, childish and innocent as it is, Alice's facial expressions and gestures, as well as her many

stolen glances at the child, leave it to the viewer to decipher her thoughts and the emotion she feels in these moments. In one scene, which takes place just after Denise has broken her expensive designer sunglasses, it is not quite clear from Alice's demeanour whether she is actually annoyed with Denise or merely feigning irritation to hold the child at a distance. When Denise leans her body against Alice, Alice hesitates and then puts her arm around the little girl, pausing at the top of her head as if to smell her hair. There is no narrator to interpret this scene for us, nor does Alice comment on the gesture or on the emotions it evokes in her, so it falls to the viewer to draw these inferences from her facial expressions and attitude.[5]

Finally, it is noteworthy that the ending of film is left open, and we as viewers are not provided with a clear answer to the question as to whether Alice and Niklas will try again to conceive, explore other routes to parenthood, or come to terms with their inability to have children. On a hike together, Niklas lets Alice know—not for the first time—that he is prepared to consider adoption; he even suggests to her that they deserve to have a nice life even if they don't have children and points out how they could use some of the space in their new house to make their own lives more pleasant and enjoyable. However, Alice won't countenance the idea of giving up on her dream of carrying their biological child, and she stomps off in a temper, leaving Niklas to hike home alone. Later, in a conversation over a drink with the hotel receptionist Sabrina about the physical and emotional toll the IVF has taken on her and on her relationship with Niklas, she admits, "I don't know if we can stop"—and then corrects herself with "I don't know if *I* can stop". As in the novel, however, the film takes tragic turn; when the son of the couple next door, the good-looking but troubled teenager David, attempts suicide, it shatters the illusion of the perfect family and causes Alice and Niklas to forget about what's missing from their life and focus instead on what they have together. Their journey home to Austria is pensive, but their arguments are put aside. In the final scene of the film, Alice tears open the waterproof covering in the loft of their new house to look out at the view across the city and

[5] Indeed, this aspect of the film is one that was picked up in some of the reviews of the film. For example, Matthias Hoff (2023) notes that "Director Ulrike Kofler presents *What We Wanted* as a quiet, contemplative drama that gives us ample time to explore the characters' feelings".

asks Niklas how he would feel about putting in a panoramic window. While it is not clear what the future holds for her, this gesture of opening, with its hint of possibility, suggests an openness also to a new perspective on her life—even if it doesn't involve motherhood.

Conclusion

Ulrike Kofler's film adaptation of Peter Stamm's "The Natural Way of Things" may at first glance seem to depart significantly from its narrative source text. As this chapter has shown, the move from a story of voluntary childlessness and non-motherhood to one of involuntary childlessness and infertility is, at least on the face of it, a considerable deviation from the original, and the change from a male-centred written text to a female-centred visual text might also be seen as a substantial shift in focus. Against this, this chapter has argued that Kofler's film both brings to the surface undercurrents that were already present in the short story and offers a view of voluntary and involuntary childlessness that shatters the assumed opposition between these two positions. Though in many ways Kofler's cinematic adaptation might be seen as being "unfaithful" to the original, it arguably offers another side of the same story, laying bare the ambivalence and vacillation that underlie many, if not most, fertility decisions.

The figure of Alice—her backstory, her desire for family and her position as non-mother—might be seen as having undergone the most significant adaptation in the transition from short story to film, especially as Stamm's Alice is presented in somewhat negative terms. As this chapter has shown, the difficulty we face as readers of Stamm's short story is that we have no direct access to Alice; her story is mediated through the (subjective) eyes and ears of her husband, Niklaus. In a sense then, Kofler liberates Alice from her role as object of her husband's story and offers a more nuanced view of her story of childlessness and non-motherhood. If Kofler's "re-vision" of Stamm's short story offers a more complex and more ambivalent view of the myriad ways in which an individual's desire for children might change over the life-course and in reaction to different life circumstances, her "re-vision" of Alice is arguably even more powerful. The image of the non-mother that emerges through this adaptation is one that invites us to reconsider conventional notions of childlessness and revisit our own preconceptions "with fresh eyes" and "from a new critical direction" (Rich 1972, 18).

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