

Regretting Motherhood in Maria Speth's *Madonnen* (2007)

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This article will demonstrate how the *mise-en-scène* of the German film *Madonnen* by Maria Speth (2007) reflects maternal regret by creating a visual discontinuity and/or distance between mother and children. In addition, the iconography as well as the camera work will bring into question a German society that generally celebrates a strong myth of motherhood as a woman's ultimate fulfillment. The taboo on discussing maternal regret in Germany has recently been broken: Orna Donath (2015, p. 362) and Christina Mundlos (2016, p. 14) argue that it is important to distinguish between the love of mothers for their children, which they definitely feel, and the aversion to the role of being a mother.

Madonnen is set in Germany in the year 2007. Rita (Sandra Hüller), the protagonist of the film, is a mother of five children. Four of these children live with Rita's mother Isabella (Susanne Lothar). Only the youngest child—J.T. (Jermaine Sanders, Devante Jackson)—stays with his mother. However, after being released from prison, Rita takes back her four children and tries to form something close to a traditional family life with the help of her new boyfriend Marc (Coleman Swinton)—a US soldier, stationed in Germany. Rita quickly feels overwhelmed and restricted by her new role of being a mother of five. After Marc tells her that he will return to America, Rita decides to hand all of her five children back to her mother.

German culture upholds a strong myth of motherhood as the ultimate fulfilment of a woman and being a mother is often depicted as her source of happiness. Cultural institutions still practice an idealised picture of the traditional family with the man as 'breadwinner' and the woman as carer. Maternal employment statistics in fact show that in 2006 just 60.6% of German mothers were employed and only 30% of these were working in a full-time position (Bundesministerium, 2012, pp. 26, 46). This is caused among other reasons by the fact that the availability of crèches in Germany only started in August 2013, as many Germans believe that a child should stay with his or her mother for the first three years. Therefore, parents were generally able to enrol their child in daycare from the age of three before 2013. Furthermore, full-time school and kindergarten is quite a new concept in Germany and still very rare, which requires one parent to stay at home at least part-time.

The phenomenon of 'Regretting Motherhood' went viral in Germany with studies by the Israeli sociologist Orna Donath in 2015 and the German sociologist Christina Mundlos in 2016. The publications broke the taboo on discussing maternal regret in Germany, which even resulted in threats of violence against Mundlos (SRF, 2016). It is very important to distinguish between the two different feelings regretting mothers experience. On one hand, they love their children, but on the other, they are not happy with their role of being a mother (Mundlos, 2016, p. 14). In *Madonnen*, Rita is torn by exactly this ambivalent feeling.

The iconography invoked by the title *Madonnen*—which is the plural in German of Madonna—stands in a strong contrast to the depiction of Rita with her child or children. Through its title, the film therefore builds a tension between its protagonist Rita and the celebrated Catholic symbol of the Madonna and Child. Even though Germany is influenced by a largely Protestant

history, nowadays one third of Germans are Catholic, while one third are Protestant, and the rest are part of another religion or no religion (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, 2014, p. 41). Maria Speth herself was born in Bavaria, a predominantly Catholic county. She says about her reason of naming the film *Madonnen*:

The title of the film is meant provocatively. Rita is a different kind of mother than the one symbolised by the Madonna and Child. I grew up Catholic, Church attendance was mandatory several times a week. And there, I always had this statue of the Mother of God with child on her arm in front of my eyes. The quasi-epitome of the mother. I wanted to create a tension between this and the figure of Rita (Speth, 2007; transl. by author).

The introductory scene of the film reveals an obvious contrast between the dark lightning of the movie and the usually luminous depiction of the Madonna. Here, Rita is situated in a telephone booth, carrying her son in front of her in a baby carrier, while it is raining heavily outside. She calls her mother to figure out the address of her biological father (Olivier Gourmet), whom she apparently never met. Rita does not, as the comparison to the Madonna would suggest, embody self-sacrifice within this scene. Her eyes do not rest serenely on her son in her arms. Instead, she is searching for support, carrying her son relatively carelessly along the way, while the visual axis only connects her and her child briefly. The scene is sparsely lit, in contrast to the luminous Madonna, who is typically surrounded by a halo. This indicates to the audience from the beginning that *Madonnen* will break with the cliché of self-sacrificial motherhood to depict a rather ambivalent form of the maternal role (Bühler, 2007).

Madonnen's iconography further addresses the *Madonna Lactans*—or the nursing Madonna—as well as the myth of the *Lactation of St. Bernard*. Rita is nursing her son J.T. while staying for a couple of days with her father, after finding him in his current home in Brussels. In contrast to the first comparison between the Madonna and Child and Rita, this scene (*Madonnen*: 00:14:13-00:16:00) is much closer to the traditional Catholic depiction. Both women wear a blue robe and are luminous around their faces. Whereas usually the light also hits Jesus in the depiction of the Madonna and Child, J.T., by contrast, stays in shadow during this scene. Furthermore, the eye contact between Rita and her child is only given temporarily, unlike the strong connecting eye contact between the Madonna and Child.

While the nursing Madonna symbolises the gift of life, Rita will be sanctioned for nursing not only her child, but also her adolescent half-brother within this scene. The depiction is reminiscent of the *Lactation of St. Bernard*. St. Bernard Clairvaux was a French abbot, who founded a monastery in the 12th century. Different stories exist about the Catholic myth and its depiction varies. However, one of the stories says that the Madonna healed St. Bernard's eye infection by nursing him (Looney, 2015). The milk of the mother is therefore attributed to healing abilities. Rita, in contrast, does not embody these healing powers and therefore will not be able to cure the broken leg of her half-brother (Martin Goossens). Instead, she will be sent out of the house in consequence of nursing him and be consigned to prison by her father for her past offenses, such as shoplifting. The contrasting iconography of the self-sacrificing Madonna and Child shows that the figure of Rita offers an alternative form of motherhood within the film. Rita's nursing of her half-brother is depicted as slightly grotesque and childish play between the two of them, which will be sanctioned immediately and is far away from the once selfless and life-spending interpretation of the portrayal of the *Lactation of St. Bernard*.

Speth's film *Madonnen* challenges as a myth the societal construction of a woman who is fulfilled by her maternal instinct. The director implies the existence of a relatively restrictive society within her film that is especially constricted for mothers who want to behave outside of the traditional norm of the self-fulfilled mother. In an interview, Speth says about motherhood in Germany:

I always had the impression that the role of the mother in this society is defined very rigidly. And if these role expectations are not fulfilled by the mothers, social pressure and ostracism follow very quickly. (Speth, 2007, trans. by author)

In *Madonnen*, the pressure imposed by this traditional societal expectation is visualised by means of a rather static camera. After being released from prison, Rita rents a flat in one of the high-rise buildings in, or near, Frankfurt (*Madonnen*: 00:46:10-00:46:59). The camera rests on Rita and the letting agent, who asks her if she is married to the man she brought along to the viewing appointment. Rita feels obliged to lie to the letting agent by telling her that she is indeed married to the man. Thereupon, the camera pans slightly to the right to follow Rita walking over to the man. After the camera is static again, the audience witnesses a brief conversation between Rita and the man, during which he hands her a bundle of banknotes. As Rita has no income of her own, she receives the deposit for the flat from this man, who is most likely one of the children's biological fathers. This scene indicates that Rita is scared to be stigmatised by the letting agent as a single mother with five children. Therefore, she tells her that she is married to the man behind her. The facial response of the letting agent makes it doubtful that Rita would have been able to rent the apartment without this lie.

In the subsequent scene (*Madonnen*: 00:47:00-00:48:30), Rita seeks unemployment benefits or possibly child benefits, although this is not entirely clear. Here, cameraman Reinhold Vorschneider—who is part of the Berlin School, a movement that uses a minimalist aesthetic to show excerpts of contemporary Germany and German society—presents two shots to the audience, in which the camera is absolutely static. The first shot shows Rita from a slight distance framed by an open door, while she is talking to a public official. The second shot is an over-the-shoulder shot of Rita talking to the woman in the office. In this scene, Rita again lies about her maternal status and only registers three children instead of five. She also tries to hide the fact that she just served a prison sentence by lying to the public official, making up a story about a husband she supposedly divorced in America. By using this rather static camera work in these two scenes, *Madonnen* visualises the still traditional and often restrictive way of thinking within German society. This and the unnecessary lie to the public official—Rita would not encounter any restrictions of her benefits due to her past within German law—underlines the expectations and constraints that come with motherhood and also womanhood in Germany.

While German society upholds the idea of happy, selfless mothers as normality, Speth depicts her protagonist Rita as a relatively self-centred woman. The film visually separates Rita from the rest of her temporary family by placing her repeatedly behind a glass wall within the frame. As mentioned, she experiences the ambivalent feeling that regretting mothers encounter between the love of their children and their repulsion for the role of being a mother. Rita loves her children on the one hand and wants to be reunited with them, but finds out on the other hand that she does not feel able to care for her children, especially after her partner leaves the temporary family unit.

While Rita is serving her prison sentence, she is initially allowed out on day parole, and uses this parole to drive past her children with one of her fellow inmates (Gerti Drassl). In this scene (*Madonnen*: 00:42:51-00:43:23), Rita sits with J.T. on her lap on the passenger seat of the car watching at a distance as three of her children get on the school bus. The glass of the car's windscreen functions here almost like a film screen. It creates a spatial separation between Rita and her children, but at the same time she tries to identify with the people she watches on the screen—just like the audience will try to do with the protagonist of the movie. It is clear that Rita longs for her children and therefore she takes all of them back after being released from prison.

That Rita does not want to embrace her role as a mother on the other hand is depicted in *Madonnen* through a growing visual separation of Rita and her children. When she is reunited with her children, she stays at home with them during the day, while Marc mostly organises pizza for the whole family in the evenings. After a fight between Rita and her oldest daughter Fanny (Luisa Sappelt), we see Rita smoking on the left side of the screen behind a glass door, while the rest of her family is placed on the right side of the glass door sitting in front of the TV within the living room (*Madonnen*: 01:22:00-01:23:05). Only Rita is covered by the reflections of the glass in front of her, while the audience can see the rest of the family without any hindrance. The thick end of the glass door gives an illusion of a split screen between Rita and her children and creates a strong visual disconnection between them.

Near the end of the film, when she hands her children back to her mother Isabella, Rita is again visually separated from the rest of her family by a glass wall—as she slips out of the café leaving behind her unknowing mother with all of her five children (*Madonnen*: 01:47:27-01:48:40). The audience is placed outside of the glass building, watching Rita disappearing in the background of the shot and from her children's lives. Here, the visual disconnection shows in three levels: the audience, who watches the scene from behind a glass screen, Rita's children in the middle, and Rita in the background behind the glass wall between her and her family. The *mise-en-scène* of *Madonnen* shows a growing visual discontinuity between Rita and her children as well as a growing dissociation between the audience and Rita in these three scenes. The described visual discontinuity in *Madonnen*, and also the defiant character of Rita make it often difficult for the audience to relate to the protagonist.

In conclusion, by making reference in its title to the Madonna and Child but by challenging its traditional iconography, *Madonnen* creates a strong contrast between Rita and the ideal mother in German society. The static camera work supports this argument by suggesting a traditional and restrictive society that makes it difficult for women to express feelings of maternal regret. The visual separation within *Madonnen*'s *mise-en-scène* represents the emotional tension that Rita, as a regretting mother, encounters. This embodies the ambivalent feeling between a woman's love of her children and her repulsion for the role imposed by motherhood, a phenomenon described by the sociologists Orna Donath and Christina Mundlos. Furthermore, the composition as well as the performance of the character Rita drives the audience into the position of the society implied by Speth, which sanctions mothers who do not want to fulfill their roles.

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