

4. Future Feminism: Political Filmmaking and the Resonance of the West German Feminist Film Movement

Abstract

This chapter analyses Ottinger's *Ticket of No Return* (1979) and Turanskyj's *The Drifter* (2010), bringing into focus the imprint of West German feminist filmmaking on contemporary cinema, despite the significant undermining and obscuring of its legacy via processes of privatization and media conglomeration. Like the films discussed in the previous chapter, the two films under consideration here engage themes of refusal and disaffection with the status quo at the levels of both form and content. Focusing on women protagonists in Berlin who exhibit gender, sexual, and class mobility and refuse to accede to regimes of normativity, these films demonstrate how responsabilization, flexibilization, and professionalization emerge as "solutions" to problems of agency and sovereignty in neoliberal capitalism.

Keywords: Feminist film, Ulrike Ottinger, Tatjana Turanskyj, flexibilization, sovereignty, affect

At the outset of *Eine flexible Frau* (A Flexible Woman, 2010; released in English as *The Drifters*), we see protagonist Greta Mondo framed in long shot, standing immobile in the middle of a sunny wheat field. An abrupt cut shows her dancing in a strobe-lit disco, before she stumbles drunkenly up a darkened staircase and falls face first into her apartment. Already on view in this opening sequence, the physical acts of stasis, dancing, stumbling, and falling figure Greta's inability to adapt to—and indeed her ultimate refusal of—the mobility demanded by neoliberal capitalism. *Eine flexible Frau* depicts the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis in Berlin, focusing on the intertwined predicaments of gentrification and privatization and the rise of precarity for the city's creative classes. An unemployed

architect and single mother, Greta embodies this precarity across multiple social and economic dimensions, exhibiting the disproportionate toll that flexibilization takes on women.

Independently produced by writer-director Tatjana Turanskyj, *Eine flexible Frau* revives the project of the feminist *Frauenfilm*, which left a meaningful imprint on the landscape of West German cinema in the 1970s, but whose legacy had been significantly undermined by the deregulation, privatization, and conglomeration of media industries in subsequent decades.¹ Specifically, Turanskyj's film creates a strong—if not entirely deliberate—resonance with Ulrike Ottinger's iconoclastic feminist film *Bildnis einer Trinkerin – aller jamais retour* (Portrait of a Female Drinker, 1979; released in English as *Ticket of No Return*), which presents the transgressive narrative of a binge-drinking protagonist who refuses to accede to regimes of normativity. The resonance between the two films is evident in their mutual thematic focus on a female drinker in Berlin who exhibits gender, sexual, and class (im)mobility; in the aesthetic project of depicting the shifting terrain of ordinary life in neoliberalism; and in the political project of imaging gendered modes of refusal. Bracketing the period of neoliberal intensification (1980–2010), *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* and *Eine flexible Frau* employ similar strategies to make visible the discursive paradigms affecting women in 'the normalizing society' (Foucault), especially the way that professionalization, responsabilization, and flexibilization—technologies of self-management for market actors—emerge as 'solutions' to the problems of sovereignty, agency, and subjectivity in advanced capitalism.

In his elaboration of the principle of biopower, Foucault distinguishes between an older regime of discipline, focused on the control of individual bodies, and an emergent form of biopolitical control that regulates the social body of the population as a whole. For Foucault, it is in the relationship between the individual and the population, the disciplinary and the regulatory regimes that norms are established and circulated: 'The normalizing society is a society in which the norm of discipline and the norm of regulation intersect.'² Albeit at very different historical moments, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* and *Eine flexible Frau* both chart the often imperceptible ways in which these intersecting modes of normalization underpin the neoliberal repertoire.

In both films, the paradoxes experienced by female protagonists due to the precariousness of life and lack of sovereignty are illustrated via circular

1 On the consequences of media conglomeration for feminist cinema and contemporary attempts to combat these consequences, see Baer, 'The Berlin School and Women's Cinema'.

2 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 253.

narratives that fold back on themselves: *Eine flexible Frau* ends with Greta stumbling drunkenly—or perhaps dancing acrobatically—into the wheat field where she stood at the start of the film, while *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* ends with a coda that revives the female drinker Madame (who had collapsed and died in the previous scene), removing her from the diegetic space of the film into a hall of mirrors that she smashes in a final gesture of refusal.

Both films employ a multi-stranded narrative structure, which includes fiction, documentary-style sequences, and metacommentary to capture ordinary life and to disorganize our perception of the present. Particularly noteworthy in each case is the way commentators—the three fates in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* and the feminist blogger in *Eine flexible Frau*—bring into view discourses of feminism in the period circumscribed by these two films, with the fates figuring the emergence of post-feminism in the West German 1980s, and the blogger Kluge emphasizing the way that feminism has been simultaneously taken into account and disavowed in the neoliberal society of the Berlin Republic.³

In addition to its metadiscursive attention to the state of feminism, Kluge's commentary self-reflexively addresses the predicament of political filmmaking in neoliberalism more broadly. As we have seen, neoliberal culture characterizes itself as politically neutral and co-opts both oppositional aesthetics and modes of collective resistance and difference, including movements for social change; in this context, inherited schema of political cinema as employing subversive or resistant aesthetic practices or presenting a message of dissent may no longer be operative. In an interview with the feminist film journal *Frauen und Film*, Turanskyj addresses this predicament directly, claiming that it is impossible to make a film with 'feminist content' in the contemporary West. As Turanskyj suggests, such content would be illegible as feminist, not least because it would appear indistinguishable from the clichés of the mainstream Hollywood women's film and television that Rosalind Gill has described as postfeminist media culture.⁴ Instead, Turanskyj maintains, feminist filmmakers must develop a political critique through form, through an artistic strategy that emphasizes performativity and a lack of authenticity.⁵ Indeed, *Eine flexible Frau* constitutes a concerted attempt to redo feminist cinema for a neoliberal age at the levels of both form and content. However, the film also resonates with the project first

3 See McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*.

4 See Gill, *Gender and the Media*.

5 Kohler and Nessel, 'A Woman under the Influence in Berlin zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhundert', 177.

promoted by feminist filmmakers in the 1970s, in terms of both aesthetic interventions and production strategies.

Following on the successes of new wave cinema, 1970s feminist filmmakers working in a range of national contexts pursued both aesthetic experimentation with dominant cinematic codes and a political commitment to women's access to the means of film production, garnering widespread public support for feminist film projects in many places. Significantly for German film history, this success was perhaps most pronounced in West Germany, where the feminist film movement spearheaded by Helke Sander and Claudia von Alemann sought to change the landscape of filmmaking by rectifying the gender imbalance in the film industry, while also developing a new narrative and formal-aesthetic language of women's cinema. Through a series of interventions, including the International Women's Film Seminar in West Berlin (established 1973) and the journal *Frauen und Film* (founded 1974), they sought to educate women about film history and technology and empower them to seize the means of film production. Organized in 1979, the *Verband der Filmarbeiterinnen* (Union of Female Film Workers) was created to support and advocate for women's participation in filmmaking at a policy level; the group sought to establish gender parity, demanding that women's projects receive half of all available subvention funding and that women occupy half of all jobs and employee training programmes in the film industry.

The group was remarkably successful in achieving institutional and financial support for female directors and making inroads into production and distribution schemes, so much so that by 1989 Thomas Elsaesser proclaimed that 'West Germany possesses proportionally more women film-makers than any other film-producing country.'⁶ However, as Elsaesser points out, these women often faced a double bind: eschewing careers as independent auteurs in favour of collective organizing on behalf of women in the film industry, they were then relegated to making films for television, which had a voracious appetite for issues-related programming for women, in turn leading to their films being pigeonholed as trivial.⁷

A solution to this dilemma was formed by the distribution company Basis-Filmverleih, which played a significant role in promoting the work

6 Elsaesser, *New German Cinema*, 185.

7 In a sense, we see the inverse of this situation today, where the achievements of individual women filmmakers are overlooked owing to the lack of a larger collective context in which to consider their films, something that revitalized attention to women's film authorship and recent broad-based calls for quota systems in film funding are aiming to redress. See Baer and Fenner, 'Introduction.'

of women filmmakers in the Federal Republic and abroad by challenging the notion that

women could be successful filmmakers only by either specializing on women's issues (and thus be ghettoized in television) or as *authors* (and thus become competitive, make it on the international festival scene, in order to achieve a better bargaining position at home). The result was a redefinition and revitalization of the *Autoren-film* as practiced by Basis which was cooperative at the level of production, but individual at the level of exhibition.⁸

As Elsaesser suggests, the feminist film movement in Germany ultimately succeeded not only by helping women gain access and increasing their involvement at all levels of the film industry, but also by fundamentally transforming the categories of film production and distribution, not least that of the *Autorenfilm*, insisting on the creative freedom and rights of the individual filmmaker, but establishing a collective context and cooperative material structures to allow her to succeed. The diversity of the work that emerged—by notable directors including Jutta Brückner, Helma Sanders-Brahms, Margarethe von Trotta, and Ulrike Ottinger, whose *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* was distributed by Basis-Film—attests to the success of this model.

The conditions that enabled the flourishing of the Union of Female Filmworkers and Basis-Filmverleih have changed dramatically in the years since 1980, leading to the undoing of funding structures and rising inequality in media industries. Nonetheless, the legacy of the feminist film movement can be seen in the way contemporary films by women auteurs such as Maren Ade, Barbara Albert, Valeska Grisebach, Maria Speth, and Turanskyj combine an independent, cooperative production model with an individual filmmaking programme, as well as in their aesthetic practice (see also Chapters 5 and 6).

Developing out of a demand for women's self-representation, the feminist film movement of the 1970s sought access to the means of film production so that women could create their own images, and, in Sander's words, 'dare to see themselves and others, society, with their own eyes'.⁹ Accordingly, many films emerging from the movement were rooted in a political critique of patriarchal society, often drawing on autobiographical material or documentary-style engagement with social issues to express this critique.

8 Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 222.

9 Sander, 'Feminism and Film', 49-50.

Women protagonists predominated in these films, which sought new formal means to explore and trouble visual pleasure, the image of woman, and female subjectivity. As in the GDR, women characters in West German films of the period served as sites for the expression of political and social critique, but increasingly they also became flashpoints for what Elsaesser has termed 'spectacles of self-estrangement', in films 'whose cutting edge [...] is not (yet another form of) realism, but a *mise-en-scène* of perversion, paranoia, or schizophrenia: modes of perception and consciousness to which the cinema lends itself as no other art form'.¹⁰ As Elsaesser suggests, these films about affect aliens—outsiders, freaks, others—engage new modes of cinematic identification and develop new forms for representing gender on screen.

Pre-eminent among these is Ottinger's allegorical cinema, which, already in the 1970s, eschewed the social drama of authentic experience favoured by other feminist filmmakers. Though it was produced in the context of the New German Cinema and is now remembered as a feminist classic, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* did not fit comfortably within the predominant trajectories of German filmmaking at the time. Ottinger, who produced, wrote, directed, shot, and appeared in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, emerged as a vocal proponent of the German *Autorenkino*, but her fine arts training as a painter and her queer sensibility underpinned a filmmaking practice that diverged substantially from the era's auteur cinema. While Ottinger's work was strongly influenced by the historical avant-garde, evident in the surrealist scenarios that abound in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, the film's narrative style led experimental filmmakers at the time to reject it. Moreover, despite the film's roster of female, queer, and gender nonconforming characters, its representation of lesbian eroticism, and its subversion of the heteropatriarchal codes of dominant cinema, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* did not reflect the predominant formal-aesthetic and thematic concerns of feminist countercinema. In fact, Ottinger's film was panned by feminist critics in Germany, who questioned its aestheticism and narrative organization, argued with its lack of social realism, and skewered its politics, especially its ostensible objectification of women and its alleged failure to engage with class conflict.¹¹

10 Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 225.

11 Reviews in the key venue for feminist film criticism, *Frauen und Film*, were universally negative. See Wismeth, 'Bildnis einer Trinkerin'; Lenssen, 'Mit Glasigem Blick'; Reschke, 'Frau Ottingers (Kunst)Gewerbe.'

However, as Ulrike Sieglöhr observes, 'Ottinger's work, while out of synch with dominant trends in the 1970s, foreshadows contemporary developments',¹² and its political and aesthetic resonance in *Eine flexible Frau* retrospectively attests to this fact. Blurring generic categories, formal styles, and aesthetic modes, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* signalled new directions in both theoretical and cinematic approaches to gender and sexuality,¹³ emphasizing the performativity of gender and, as Alice Kuzniar has argued, developing a mode of allegory whose signifying structure, by relentlessly separating images from their potential meaning, underpins its depiction of queer genders and desires.¹⁴ Departing from a widely held conception of the political among feminist filmmakers at the time, who advocated a mode of realism designed for maximum accessibility and consciousness raising toward social change, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* instead expresses disaffection with prevailing circumstances by narrating a tale of gendered refusal in the form of excessive drinking, elements that recur in the more patently visible context of neoliberalism in *Eine flexible Frau* three decades later.

Julia Knight has suggested that *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* can 'be viewed as exploring *what it feels like to be a woman*, foregrounding the way women are continually objectified within dominant culture and how many consequently have no sense of their "true" selves'.¹⁵ Knight's reading emphasizes the key role played by affect in Ottinger's queer-feminist critique. While some critics have discovered a Utopian or affirmative strain in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, this film about wretched killjoys develops a form of critique that is not constrained by an orientation toward future ends or a horizon of happiness. Rather, Ottinger's film opens up, in Sara Ahmed's sense, onto 'other ways of being, of being perhaps': 'Affect aliens, those who are alienated by happiness, are creative: not only do we want the wrong things, not only do we embrace possibilities that we are asked to give up, but we can create lifeworlds around these wants.'¹⁶ Like Ahmed's affect aliens, the female drinkers in Ottinger's film (and those in Turanskyj's film as well) eschew the promise of happiness offered

12 Sieglöhr, 'Women Film-Makers, the Avant-Garde and the Case of Ulrike Ottinger', 194.

13 Caprio argues that *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* signals a turning point for feminism, away from the attention to female experience and modes of realism that characterized the 1970s and toward a critical focus on gender and representation that anticipates the emphasis on performativity of the later 1980s and 1990s. See Caprio, 'Ulrike Ottinger's *Ticket of No Return*.'

14 Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema*, 141.

15 Knight, *Women and the New German Cinema*, 132, my emphasis.

16 Ahmed, 'Killing Joy', 593.

by conventional expectations of professionalization or heterosexual family romance, thereby exposing the cruel optimism of these good-life fantasies.

Out of Synch with the Everyday: Crisis and Refusal in the Queer Feminist Film *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*

Writing about Ottinger's film in the 1980s, Miriam Hansen summed up its formal-aesthetic project: 'The whole film attempts nothing less than to disentangle visual pleasure from the voyeurism inherent in the codes of patriarchal cinema. [...] By reversing the traditional subordination of looking, display, and fascination to the logic of narrative, Ottinger sets visual pleasure free from the gender hierarchies inscribed in classical narrative cinema.'¹⁷ Reading *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* within the context of the psychoanalytic debates animating feminist film theory at the time, Hansen and other feminist critics have emphasized Ottinger's intervention into questions about woman as spectacle, female masquerade, and structures of looking in dominant cinema, among others.¹⁸

While acknowledging the crucial importance of psychoanalytic frameworks for understanding *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, my reading shifts the terms of feminist analysis in order to consider how Ottinger's film archives and comments on the transitional moment of its own production, around 1980, which marked a turning point for the New German Cinema and for West German culture and society more broadly. Characterized by downward mobility in the aftermath of the economic downturn of the 1970s, this era saw the intensification of neoliberal governmentality in the form of emergent discourses of privatization, individualization, and responsabilization, encapsulated by Helmut Kohl's 1982 policy statement announcing a transition in the Federal Republic 'away from more state, toward more market; away from collective burdens, toward more personal achievement [*Leistung*]; away from encrusted structures, toward more mobility, individual initiative, and increased competitiveness'.¹⁹ Like the other films considered here and in the previous chapter, Ottinger's film

17 Hansen, 'Visual Pleasure, Fetishism and the Problem of Feminine/Feminist Discourse', 103; 105.

18 See also Silverman, 'Narcissism.'

19 Ther, *Die neue Ordnung auf dem alten Kontinent*, 49. On West German neoliberalization in the early 1980s, see also my Introduction and Chapter 1.

represents out-of-control femininity as a response to changes in culture, society, and ordinary life at this historical moment. However, in contrast to *Solo Sunny* and *Sommer vorm Balkon*, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, with its emphasis on drinking to oblivion, ultimately presents no opportunity for the reincorporation of the female protagonists into society, and no vision whatsoever of a future that could accommodate them. Reflecting the cultural context of West Germany, with its pivot away from social democracy and the loss of hope in capitalism as a form of mass utopia, the absence of any futural orientation in Ottinger's film marks its political divergence from the paradigms of GDR filmmaking that underpin Wolf's film and resonate in Dresen's.

With its hybrid form, episodic narrative, and exploration of non-future-oriented conceptions of the political, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* develops a heterogeneous style that combines highly aestheticized tableaux with documentary-like images of ordinary life. Set in the walled-in city of West Berlin, the film portrays a liminal space of gender, sexual, and class (im)mobility, where anything goes, and where conventional categories of identity appear to be suspended. A tour-de-force of spectacle and stylization, Ottinger's film is chock full of unusual characters wearing extraordinary costumes and elaborate make-up in decadent settings. Yet this spectacular form is paired with a strong focus on the diurnal—in particular the cyclical and repetitive nature of binge-drinking and alcoholism—developed through location shooting and the revelations of a camera that dwells not only on the five-star hotels and fancy cafes but also on the overgrown train tracks, unspectacular corner bars, and ordinary streets of West Berlin in ways that anticipate Ottinger's future embrace of documentary forms, especially the essay film.

Significantly, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* intervenes into depictions of everyday life around 1980 by incorporating the fantastical and the extravagant. As Ottinger herself described the project, 'I exaggerate so that the viewer will see, otherwise no one will notice what I want to show [...] Today it is no longer sufficient just to *show* things in a film [...] I *work* with reality in order to create as many associations as possible for each image. You have to make reality conscious, not simply steal it by means of tape recorders and cameras.'²⁰ *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* thus combines the spectacular and the everyday in order to make reality visible, developing an exaggerated narrative style to represent the emergent crisis ordinary, tracked through the protagonist's deliberate choice to drink herself to death. Whereas in *Solo Sunny* and *Sommer vorm Balkon*, drinking leads to moments of crisis

20 Qtd. in Silberman, 'Women Filmmakers in West Germany', 133.

for the female protagonists in response to the pressures of ordinary life, in Ottinger's film, drinking itself has become ordinary, a way of indexing the systemic nature of crisis in the present.

By documenting West Berlin's counterculture at its moment of apotheosis, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*—like *Solo Sunny* and *Sommer vorm Balkon*—serves as a repository for disappearing forms of everyday life threatened by gentrification and co-optation, and for the alternative imaginaries they represent. Ottinger's specific repository archives an array of queer spaces, including gay and lesbian bars, the tunnels and bathrooms of Bahnhof Zoo, and public parks and botanical gardens, as well as the glamorous, fantastical, rebellious, and decadent personae of the many denizens of the punk and art scenes who make cameo appearances in the film, including singer Nina Hagen, writer Ginka Steinwachs, artists Martin Kippenberger and Wolf Vostell, actor Eddie Constantine, and Ottinger herself.

However, far from constituting the relic of a lost time, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* observes and anticipates key aspects of West German neoliberalization, including the emergent *geistig-moralische Wende* [intellectual-moral turn], the emphasis on quantification, and the penchant for conveying neoliberal thought as a common-sense worldview. These concepts are directly represented through the characters Social Question (Magdalena Montezuma), Exact Statistics (Orpha Termin), and Common Sense (Monika von Cube), a group of sociologists travelling to Berlin to attend an academic conference. Dressed in matching hounds-tooth suits, the three fates 'embody the didacticism and sententiousness of the allegorical strain' in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*.²¹ Like a Greek chorus, the women follow and remark upon the events of the film, providing a running commentary on the socioeconomic context of alcohol abuse and the status of women, as in this early observation by Social Question: 'Keep in mind, dear, that the woman who is rapidly becoming emancipated is often insecure and therefore also more prone to alcoholism.' Co-opting feminist discourse, the moralizing observations of the 'hounds-tooth ladies' coexist, clash, and contend with the dissent epitomized by the punk, art, and queer subcultures, and with the modes of gendered refusal represented by the film's female drinkers. A film fundamentally concerned with 'positions of desire and agency, subject and object, looking and being looked at, *as they exist between and among women*,'²² *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* thus employs women characters—representatives of affirmation *and* dissent—as sites for imaging the contradictions of the present.

21 Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema*, 140.

22 Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole*, 137.

The opening sequence of the film introduces us to a world that appears at first glance to be far from ordinary. *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* begins with a red screen, an extreme close-up of what slowly become recognizable as the swirling scarlet folds of a cape belonging to a female figure who walks away from the stationary camera and ascends an elaborate marble staircase. The clicking of high heels against a soundtrack of muted horns gives way to a female voiceover, proclaiming in German: 'She, a woman of exquisite beauty, of Classical dignity and Raphaelite proportions, a woman created like no other to be Medea, Madonna, Beatrice, Iphigenia, Aspasia, decided one sunny winter's day to leave La Rotonda.' Though she is otherwise mostly mute throughout the remainder of the film, we hear the woman's voice ordering a ticket to Berlin-Tegel, 'Aller – jamais retour', one ticket, no return. This is our first glimpse into the jet-setting world of Ottinger's nameless protagonist (Tabea Blumenschein), known only as Madame, a character who is presented as an exaggerated incarnation of ideal femininity at the breaking point.

A series of Polaroid snapshots presents the film's characters, cast, and crew in a credit sequence that highlights both the prominence of women's authorship in the creation of *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* and the film's signal focus on visual pleasure and the mediation of images (especially images of women), captured here via the mise-en-abyme of framed photos. A Pan-Am jet lands on a snowy runway and the voiceover resumes, explaining that 'She' wanted to follow her own pursuits and Berlin, a city fully unknown to her, seemed like a good place to leave the past behind and devote herself to her passion: 'Drinking, living to drink, leading a drunken life, the life of a female drinker. [...] She decided to make a kind of sightseeing tour of drinking.' An abrupt cut takes us inside Tegel airport. In a long take that reverses the film's opening shot, we see the female drinker walking toward us, traversing the distance from long-shot to close-up in an early instance of the film's disorienting use of diegetic space. Through this chiasitic structure, the opening sequence signals crossing, doubling, and inversion as the key formal and thematic concerns of *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*.

A female official intones over the airport's PA system, 'Berlin-Tegel, reality, Berlin-Tegel, reality please', calling our attention to the film's juxtaposition of the routines of ordinary life with an emphasis on the absurd, fantastical, and over-the-top. As Hansen describes it, 'The arrival of the strange lady seems to place a spell upon the workings of reality: accidents proliferate, suitcases and pushcarts tumble and eject their contents, objects rebel against their everyday function as if *her* refusal to function as a subject

were encouraging them to do the same.’²³ Underscoring its depiction of a reality that is out of joint, the arrival scene also introduces us to the three fates, who observe and comment on Madame along the stations of her journey through the city.

After imbibing a first drink at an airport kiosk, she heads to the terminal's exit, crossing paths with one of the film's few recurrent male characters, a dwarf (Paul Glauer), whose appearance functions as a hinge between the ordinary and the fantastic, often signalling the inception of a fantasy sequence. In a shot that will be repeated several times in the course of the film, we see the female drinker through a glass pane, as liquid is sloshed over the glass, blurring her image. Representing a rare instance of traditional shot/reverse-shot in a film that otherwise eschews the conventions of dominant cinema—particularly when it comes to specularizing women—a reverse angle reveals that the liquid came from the bucket of a cleaning woman, who grins at the drinker through the pane as she washes the window with a rag. Mayne suggests that the figure of sloshed water is ‘repeated at key moments of desire and recognition’ to underscore two of the film's key themes, the encounter with difference (in the form of a woman unlike the protagonist) and issues of surface and transparency (calling attention to forms of mediation between the viewer and the object of vision)²⁴: ‘In a more general way, the encounter with the cleaning woman prefigures the preoccupation in *Ticket of No Return* with women as both like and unlike each other, with separation and desire, projection and distance as the forces that determine women's relationships to each other.’²⁵ As Mayne's analysis suggests, this encounter with the ‘other’ woman through the blurred glass constitutes another example of the visual chiasmus that underpins Ottinger's depiction of women's identity and the problem of solidarity via doubled and inverted images.

This doubling recurs most prominently when the protagonist pairs up with Lutze (Christine Lutze), a homeless woman who sleeps at Bahnhof Zoo and pushes her belongings around in a shopping cart. Madame first encounters Lutze when the taxi she is riding in slams into the bag lady's shopping cart, upending it and breaking many of her possessions. Later, after helping the female drinker into another taxi, Lutze shines the car's

23 Hansen, ‘Visual Pleasure, Fetishism and the Problem of Feminine/Feminist Discourse’, 100.

24 As Mayne points out, this shot presents an intertextual reference to the opening shot of Josef von Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel* (The Blue Angel, 1930), one of many references to Marlene Dietrich in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*. Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole*, 140.

25 Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole*, 141.

windshield and the two women look at one another in a shot/reverse-shot sequence that echoes Madame's earlier encounter with the cleaning woman at the airport. Like the sloshing water in that sequence, here the night-time lights on the car's windows call attention to the surface of the glass, at once reflective and transparent, suggesting both recognition and desire between these two women from opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. In the course of the film, Madame and Lutze will—like Nike and Katrin in *Sommer vorm Balkon*—engage in close bodily relationships and forms of physical affection, such as when they bathe together. With its corporeal intimacy and solidarity across boundaries of class, language, and convention, their relationship attests to a complete renunciation of heterosexual forms of desire, of family life, and of kinship structures, all of which *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* eschews.

While Madame has made the conscious choice to drink herself to death, Lutze pursues alcoholism in a less purposeful fashion: 'She is unconsciously drinking herself to death.'²⁶ Whether deliberate or not, for both women binge-drinking functions as a response to, and a refusal of, conventional female behaviour, the chimera of rational choice, and prevailing modes of common sense. Representing a form of female solidarity that is not connected to economic or intimate optimism, one that dissolves class boundaries and heteronormative role expectations, drinking together offers the women a reprieve from isolation and loneliness, albeit one that culminates in oblivion, black-outs, and total physical collapse. As affect aliens, the two characters heighten our awareness of what there is to be unhappy about (Ahmed), while also demonstrating common cause in their mutual claim on the freedom to be unhappy. Ottinger's film thus employs drinking as a metaphor for the paradoxes of contemporary life across multiple registers. As Temby Caprio has argued:

Drinking is the desire which motivates [Madame's] journey through Berlin and yet also causes her ultimate collapse. The paradox of desire that is represented by drinking—that which represents agency, or desire, and that which also renders one helpless—is the paradoxical desire to be a subject within the Symbolic and yet not play by its rules. With the trope of alcohol, Ottinger takes the traditional story of more 'realistic' women, their desire (to drink), and their ultimate re-incorporation into

26 Silberman, 'Women Filmmakers in West Germany', 133.

society, beyond its conventional limits, which are marked primarily by heterosexual romance and family life.²⁷

Through the depiction of drinking as a form of agency that paradoxically renders one helpless, Ottinger explores the contradictions and quandaries of female subjectivity, sovereignty, and desire in the era after feminism and Fordist capitalism.

This depiction of drinking in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* crystallizes in an early sequence when Madame, dressed in a bright yellow costume with a headpiece and veil, sits alone at Café Möhring, ordering rounds of cognac, delivered to her by the waiter two glasses at a time. Alone in the café, she gesticulates, grimaces, and mouths words, as if reacting to an absent interlocutor across the table. Soon, she spies Lutze walking by outside the café's large plate glass window and beckons her to come inside. Leaving her shopping cart on the sidewalk, Lutze drinks several rounds with Madame. A long take from inside the café shows a tranquil tableau, with the female drinkers framed in deep focus against the plate glass window. An abrupt reverse shot takes us outside the café, where we now view the drinkers through the window, which Madame sloshes with a large cup of water, again blurring her image through the glass. Like the mirror sequences in *Solo Sunny* and *Sommer vorm Balkon*, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* calls attention here to the objectification and commodification of women in heteropatriarchal cinema. The film's attention to the representation of women in dominant culture is underscored in this scene by the appearance of several tabloid photographers who snap photos of the female drinkers as they slosh water, break glasses, and are finally ejected from the café, photos documenting the spectacle of non-normative female behaviour which will turn up on the tabloid's front page the next day ('Rich Foreigner Goes Berserk in Café Möhring!'). In contrast to the earlier scenes of water against glass, however, this time there is no one standing outside the window. Rather, the projection of female difference is turned back on the drinker herself—and reflected onto the spectator, who implicitly occupies the place of the 'other woman' at the threshold.

A crucial part of the film's project to explore 'both women's investment in the pleasures of fetishism and voyeurism and the possibilities of new forms of visual pleasure that take as their departure the erotic connections between women',²⁸ the suturing of the spectator into this

27 Caprio, 'Ulrike Ottinger's Ticket of No Return', 109.

28 Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole*, 147.

scene of recognition and desire opens up an explicit space for feminist and queer reception in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* that is unique to Ottinger's art cinema and that we don't find in realist-inflected films like *Solo Sunny* or *Sommer vorm Balkon*. While facilitating women's identification and same-sex desire, this sequence also interpellates the spectator into the scene of destruction and the politics of gendered refusal embodied by Madame and Lutze, signalled by the shattering of glass. An audiovisual trope that we first encounter in this scene and that recurs throughout the film in tandem with water-sloshing, shattering glass emerges as a signifier of both the allegorical iconoclasm and the narrative of self-obliteration that are key trajectories of the film. While, as Mayne has argued, the trope of water sloshing symbolizes the search for new forms of visual pleasure outside of patriarchal representation in Ottinger's film, its insistent pairing with the trope of shattering glass also emphasizes the violence that accompanies dissent and the refusal of normative behaviours. Rather than accede to the demands of self-regulation and responsabilization, the female drinkers create an alternative imaginary through the self-destructive behaviour of binge-drinking—'getting sloshed' and breaking things—that allows them 'to take joy in killing joy', gleefully calling attention to their unhappiness with the world.²⁹ As a bystander in the café remarks in response to the shattering glass, 'It's shocking when women get drunk in public!'

Crucial to the discourse of self-destruction developed in this scene is the commentary of the three hounds-tooth-clad sociologists, who enter the café in the midst of Madame's drinking binge, where they discuss the problem of alcoholism and quarrel over the best way of apprehending and contending with this scourge. Though their commentary is integral to the formal and thematic construction of *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* and to the film's political intervention, the three women have received little attention in the ample secondary literature on the film thus far. For this reason their emblematic conversation in this key scene is worth recounting at length here:

Exact Statistics: Upon closer inspection, the manifold damages of alcoholism can be calculated and expressed in marks and pfennigs.

Social Question: It's a matter of values, not of numbers.

Exact Statistics: We find this interesting above all because numbers have a much greater impact on public opinion.

Social Question: Believe me, when it comes to the necessity of preventative or rehabilitative measures against alcohol abuse, it really doesn't matter if millions of people feel concerned or if millions of marks are spent...

Exact Statistics: Yes, but think about the unreported cases. One can't take them seriously enough.

Social Question: Statistics are always tainted by errors.

Common Sense: Can't you forget your figures for a moment and recall the enchanting congress in Kenya, when that delightful little Sarotti-Moor served us the replica of a giant swan/giant penis [*eines Riesenschwans/schwanz*] made of banana ice cream?

Exact Statistics: The group of housewives without further employment outside the household represents, with 39.2 percent, the highest proportion of alcoholics.

Social Question: Certainly, but among the chronic alcoholics there is a remarkable number of people who exhibit an unstable character, which is more likely the cause of their behaviour than their professional status.

This conversation is noteworthy in several ways. On a narrative level, it contextualizes the exaggerated story of the female drinker within economic and political discourses about the social costs of alcoholism, strategies for combatting alcohol abuse, and the problem of women's oppression in patriarchal society. In terms of the film's larger metanarrative, this conversation allegorizes, via Exact Statistics and her discourse about public opinion, the quantification of social problems, or what Wendy Brown refers to as 'the distinctive signature of neoliberal rationality': 'the widespread economization of heretofore noneconomic domains, activities, and subjects'.³⁰ Moreover, the concluding dialogue about housewives constituting the highest percentage of female alcoholics provides a remarkably succinct example of both the co-optation of feminism and the rhetoric of responsabilization (blaming the individual—rather than social structures—for situations of social risk such as alcoholism), further trademarks of neoliberal thought.

Last but not least, the conversation is also striking for the interjection offered by Common Sense, a racist nonsequitur in which she urges her companions to recall a visit to Kenya during which a 'Sarotti-moor' served them ice cream. Referring to an iconic logo of German advertising for the Sarotti brand of chocolate, one of many racist and colonialist images populating Germany's visual landscape, the comment, particularly in

30 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 32; 31.

its attribution to 'common sense', adds everyday racism to the stream of sexist, classist comments uttered by the three fates, emphasizing racism as a constitutive component of social and economic discourse in advanced capitalism. At the same time, with its homonymic reference to a *Riesenschwan(z)* (giant swan/penis) made of banana ice cream, this comment calls our attention to the over-the-top rhetoric espoused by the hounds-tooth ladies and asks us to consider how its exaggerated absurdity reflects on the everyday.

Hansen has called the three characters 'little more than well-choreographed mouth-pieces of types of social discourse in the film's overall collage, adding one more level of meaning which, nonetheless, remains fragmentary and unassimilated'.³¹ In fact, however, their role is integral to the film's political conception. Like the three fates of classical mythology who spin the threads and weave the tapestry that comprises human destiny, Social Question, Exact Statistics, and Common Sense embody the principles that dictate life and death in the present. With their running commentary on alcoholism, the fates are literal embodiments of the principle of biopower as a technology of power in the normalizing society of the Federal Republic. Foucault describes the shift away from an older regime of discipline, in which the power to take life was vested in the sovereign, to a new form of population control: 'The right of sovereignty was the right to take life and let live. And then this new right was established: the right to make live and let die.'³² Dealing with the population as a scientific and political problem rather than disciplining individual bodies, biopower operates with forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures designed to optimize life as a whole. Seeking to 'make live', biopower regulates the population to eliminate accidents, random events, illnesses, disabilities, and deficiencies. For this reason, death becomes the ultimate threat to biopower: '[D]eath becomes, insofar as it is the end of life, the term, the limit, or the end of power too. Death is outside the power relationship. Death is beyond the reach of power, and power has a grip on it only in general, overall, or statistical terms' (the terms of Common Sense, Social Question, and Exact Statistics).³³ In Ottinger's film, the deliberate choice to drink oneself to death enacted by Madame thus constitutes a refusal of biopower's regulatory force to 'make live'. Meanwhile, the three fates in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* function as emblems of the normalizing society—reflecting

31 Hansen, 'Visual Pleasure, Fetishism and the Problem of Feminine/Feminist Discourse', 100.

32 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 241.

33 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 248.

the establishment of norms via the intersecting practices of discipline and regulation—insofar as they constantly seek to discipline the female drinkers while also serving as mouthpieces of biopolitical discourse on the broader population.

Significantly, the fates play an important role in a series of fantasy sequences in which Madame imagines herself practicing different professions, sequences that specifically address Madame's divergence from societal norms. Together with several scenes in which she imagines herself as a butch man with a moustache dressed in leather, the job fantasy scenes in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* offer glimpses of alternative lifeworlds that ultimately appear to be unavailable to the female drinker. She imagines herself as an actress in drag playing Hamlet, a performance that is criticized when she presents the famous 'to be or not to be' monologue drunk; as a secretary in an office, where she is fired for drinking; as a tightrope artist, where again her drinking impedes her ability to perform, so that she falls from the rope; as an advertising executive developing branding and marketing models for a new beverage; as a daredevil race-car driver executing dangerous stunts in a fireproof suit (a set-up particularly ill-suited to a heavy drinker); and, finally, as an undertaker selling coffins, again in male drag. In each of these scenarios, the drinker imagines herself into a professional role in which she might be able to live a socially sanctioned life, even as the outsider that she is.

However, as the presence of the three fates—arbiters of destiny—in many of these sequences suggests, these professional roles are not viable for Madame, who, as an expression of the feminine ideal, is caught between ossified role expectations and the abjection suggested by drinking to excess. Embodying neoliberal technologies of the self, Common Sense, Social Question, and Exact Statistics pose flexibilization, responsabilization, and professionalization as the solutions to Madame's dilemma, and to the paradoxical situation of women per se in advanced capitalism. Parodying such interpellations, the professional vignettes in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* portray the drinker's inability to regulate her body in order to adapt to the demands of work, let alone to achieve the promise of happiness through self-optimization. Highlighting the illusory nature of discourses of flexibilization and mobility, these professional scenarios literally place Madame on a stage contemplating the performance of identity, on a tightrope attempting a balancing act, and in a fireproof suit aiming to pull off amazing stunts, scenes that are echoed and re-enacted in *Eine flexible Frau*, a film that develops a much more explicit critique of the toll flexibilization takes on women (see Illustration 9).

Like the opening sequence, the closing scenes of *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* display a chiasmic structure in their presentation of the protagonist. In the first of these paired scenes, the solitary figure of the female drinker ascends the stairs of a train station, where she collapses in a blackout. Finding her there, Lutze attempts to revive her, but as she does so, both women are engulfed by a crowd of commuters rushing downstairs as they exit the train. Lutze screams, suggesting that the crowd has trampled Madame, who now lies dead on the staircase. In the film's final scene, which is diegetically removed from the spaces we have encountered thus far in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, the female drinker, wearing an elaborate dress of silver foil, walks down a hallway constructed entirely of mirrors, which she proceeds to shatter, breaking the glass with her high heels and thereby literally crushing her own image underfoot. With no narrative motivation, the sequence—which appears to revive Madame from the dead—provides a coda to the film's allegorical representation of women in dominant culture. As Kaja Silverman argues, this shot 'repeats the one that precedes it at a metacritical level. Together, these two shots make clear that Madame's death is less literal than symbolic'.³⁴ Indeed, this final shot re-animates Madame after her symbolic death in order to portray her in a final scene of iconoclastic refusal and destruction (of her mirror image, of representation), underscoring the impossibility of Madame's assimilation into heteropatriarchal, neoliberal society as well as the film's larger critique of the codes of dominant cinema.

Ottinger's film flouts cinematic conventions, blurring elements of documentary realism with the extravagant and fantastic in order to capture the shifting terrain of ordinary life and 'make reality conscious' to the viewer. Portraying contingency and fantasy, and emphasizing the quest to find new forms for the representation of alterity, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* underscores Kuzniar's suggestion in *The Queer German Cinema* that, 'if sexuality is contingently determined via word or image, the role played by an art or experimental cinema is crucial for fantasizing and promoting alternative representations'.³⁵ This project was significantly enabled by the independent production and distribution model of the feminist film project and Basis-Film, with its collective pooling of resources underwritten by state support, a model on the verge of obsolescence in 1980.

34 Silverman, 'Narcissism', 150.

35 Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema*, 5.



9. Highlighting the illusory nature of flexibilization and mobility: Madame (Tabea Blumenschein) attempts a balancing act on a tightrope in Ulrike Ottinger's *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* (*Ticket of No Return*, 1979). Image courtesy of Ulrike Ottinger Filmproduktion.



10. The brittle Greta (Mira Partecke) attempts and fails to become a flexible woman in the emblematic dance sequence of Tatjana Turanskyj's *Eine flexible Frau* (*The Drifter*, 2010).

One of Ottinger's final films produced within this model, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* was funded with federal subventions granted by West Germany's Federal Film Board (FFA) and the Kuratorium Junger Deutscher Film as well as state support from the Berlin Film Board, co-produced through a television deal with the public channel ZDF, and distributed by Basis. *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* epitomizes the art cinema of the era not least insofar

as its production and distribution model freed Ottinger from commercial constraints, enabling the development of her iconoclastic aesthetic vision. However, this mode of production, already threatened, would soon be transformed by the marketization of German cinema in the 1980s, signalled by the changes to federal film policy initiated by Prime Minister Friedrich Zimmerman in 1983. That year, in an essay entitled 'The Pressure to Make Genre Films: About the Endangered *Autorenkino*', Ottinger expressed her opposition to the transformations taking place in the German film landscape at the time. Emphasizing the tendency to 'put control back in the hands of the producers', exemplified by the ground-breaking transitional film *Das Boot* (1981, see Chapter 2), whose producer Günter Rohrbach she cites, Ottinger stresses that when producers are in control, 'artistic-aesthetic arguments are in the end always countered by box-office arguments'.³⁶ This results in the commercial mandate to make genre films:

The continuing endeavours of the film industry to limit filmmakers and directors to the most narrow, stereotyped genre cinema possible cannot be overlooked. The more one remains limited to the things which are ostensibly common to everyone, the less one can hope to further understanding for the singular, particular, or independent developments of certain individuals, groups, minorities, countries, etc. The consequence of this is an ignorant, intolerant society whose intolerance grows in accordance with its lack of information and its corresponding lack of understanding for different things.³⁷

Prescient in its early diagnosis of the emergent 'cinema of consensus' (Rentschler), Ottinger's essay pinpoints how the marketization of cinema gives rise to an impoverished monoculture that contrasts sharply with Ottinger's own filmmaking, which Janet Bergstrom has described as the difficult project of figuring out 'how to represent Difference as something positive within a repressive society'.³⁸ This project led Ottinger to transition over the course of the 1980s—like several other notable directors of the New German Cinema including Werner Herzog and Wim Wenders—away from features and toward nonfiction filmmaking as her primary mode of representing difference within ordinary life. In the meantime, *Bildnis einer*

36 Ottinger, 'The Pressure to Make Genre Films', 91.

37 Ottinger, 'The Pressure to Make Genre Films', 90–91.

38 Bergstrom, 'The Theater of Everyday Life', 44.

Trinkerin remains as a document in its own right of the changes taking hold in West German cinema and society around 1980.

The Paradoxes of Flexibilization: Ordinary Life in Tatjana Turanskyj's *Eine flexible Frau*

With its express aim of showing that 'the economy is not gender-neutral',³⁹ particularly in the age of flexibilized global capitalism, *Eine flexible Frau* brings into sharp focus the critique of emergent discourses of neoliberalization that is nascent in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*. Set in Berlin, Turanskyj's film depicts protagonist Greta Mondo (Mira Partecke), an out-of-work architect, experimenting with professionalization, engaging with the space of the city through corporeal gestures and acrobatics, seeking female solidarity through drinking, and falling down drunk. Independently produced by Turanskyj's own production company and distributed by the independent distributor Filmgalerie 451, the film revives the project of the feminist *Autorenfilm* as a concerted response to the dismal situation for female filmmakers in Europe wrought by media conglomeration and privatization.⁴⁰ In terms of form, content, and production context, *Eine flexible Frau* presents remarkable, even uncanny, similarities to *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, though this resonance may not have been entirely deliberate.

Writing about her relationship to the tradition of feminist filmmaking, Turanskyj explains: 'I was only half-conscious that my film was taking up where the feminist films of the 1970s left off. But I am a feminist above all and for me, feminism takes a stand against power. It is from this position that I conceived of my film.'⁴¹ This 'half-consciousness' of feminist precursors appears symptomatic of the contemporary moment 'after feminism', when even an auteur director steeped in the history of both film and feminist thought confesses only a passing connection to the considerable legacy of the West German feminist film tradition.⁴² However, as one of the few

39 Turanskyj, 'Dies ist unsere Zeit, weil wir sie erschaffen', 308.

40 In addition to the concerted feminist critique developed in her films, Turanskyj has been an outspoken advocate for gender equity in the film industry through her work as a co-founder and organizer of the activist group Pro Quote Film. For more on PQF, see Baer and Fenner, 'Representation Matters', and Heiduschke, 'Women's Interventions in the Contemporary German Film Industry'.

41 Turanskyj, 'Dies ist unsere Zeit, weil wir sie erschaffen', 307, n. 3.

42 In the interview Angelica Fenner and I conducted with Turanskyj in 2017, she qualified this position a bit when talking about the filmmakers who had influenced her, among them

contemporary German filmmakers to embrace feminism explicitly as a political and aesthetic project, Turanskyj conceived of *Eine flexible Frau* as a way of making visible and commenting upon precisely the co-optation of feminism in neoliberal societies—what she refers to as ‘false emancipation’—while also unmasking the ongoing economic oppression of women under the guise of flexibilized labour.⁴³

Drawing on the work of sociologist Richard Sennett in his influential 1998 book *The Corrosion of Character* (German title: *Der flexible Mensch*), Turanskyj’s film specifically investigates the gendering of flexibility as a characteristic that is equated with femininity but increasingly demanded of all employees in post-Fordist capitalism. This investigation connects *Eine flexible Frau* with the subsequent films in Turanskyj’s *Frauen und Arbeit* (Women and Work) trilogy, including *Top Girl oder la déformation professionnelle* (*Top Girl*, 2014) and an as yet untitled film in progress focusing on the gendering of reproductive labour. All three films were inspired by Turanskyj’s engagement with feminist theory, especially discussions of postfeminism, neoliberalism, and precarity, and Angela McRobbie’s *The Aftermath of Feminism* (German title: *Top Girls: Feminismus und der Aufstieg des neoliberalen Genderregimes*, 2010) formed a particular inspiration.

Eine Flexible Frau addresses the paradoxes of flexibilization through a formal structure that weaves together three distinct strands. First is the rather straightforward story arc, informed by generic qualities of both the domestic melodrama and the feminist *Frauenfilm*, which follows Greta’s search for employment, family conflicts, and drinking. Second is the documentary strand, which captures the changes taking place in Berlin in the first decade of the 21st century, or what Turanskyj has described as the

the feminist directors Helke Sander and Ula Stöckl. She also mentioned *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* explicitly as a model ‘with regard to its artifice and this protagonist whose refusal is so absolute’. See Baer and Fenner, ‘Representation Matters’, 139.

43 Whether deliberate or not, *Eine flexible Frau* makes overt intertextual relationships with numerous films in addition to *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, especially German films of the 1970s and 1980s. As critics have pointed out, Turanskyj’s film evidences many connections to the New German Cinema, including, a depiction of alcoholism and family life that references Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Händler der Vier Jahreszeiten* (*Merchant of the Four Seasons*, 1971), and citations of films by Alexander Kluge, whom Turanskyj has named as an influence and who is referenced through the character Kluge in *Eine flexible Frau*. In addition to Ottinger’s film, *Eine flexible Frau* also cites other feminist films, including notably Evelyn Schmidt’s DEFA film *Das Fahrrad* (*The Bicycle*, 1982)—Greta sings the song ‘Schwesterlein’, which is sung in similar circumstances by Schmidt’s protagonist, Susanne—and Helke Sander’s *REDUPERS – Die allseitig reduzierte Persönlichkeit* (*The All Around Reduced Personality*, 1977) via an emphasis on work, single motherhood, and the quest for solidarity. See especially Halle, ‘Großstadtfilm and Gentrification Debates’ and Mennel, ‘From Utopian Collectivity to Solitary Precarity.’

destruction of Berlin's urban fabric.⁴⁴ This strand focuses on the politics of city space and includes ample footage, often in the form of long takes or montage-style sequences, in which Greta moves through and explores gentrifying urban spaces, sometimes photographing them. Finally, the third strand of *Eine flexible Frau* consists of metacommentary about the status of feminism today articulated by the feminist blogger and tour guide whose appearances punctuate the film.

Like the other films explored in this and the previous chapter, and parallel to contemporary German cinema more broadly, *Eine flexible Frau* maps the crisis of contemporary capitalism onto the body of Greta Mondo, thereby employing its female protagonist as a site for imaging the transformations of the present. Rajendra Roy has observed that the protagonists of Berlin School films—cousins to Turanskyj's film in terms of narrative focus and formal-aesthetic approach—are 'almost invariably women'.⁴⁵ As Roy argues, 'The prominence of the female protagonist has remained a constant and critical element in the laboratory of post-Wall German identity proposed by the Berlin School films.'⁴⁶ Likewise, in its depiction of Greta Mondo, Turanskyj's film engages explicitly with the tropes and discourses of advanced capitalism in order to make visible the asymmetrical interpellation of women as the primary subjects of neoliberalism. However, *Eine flexible Frau* also differs from other nonstudio filmmaking in 21st century Germany insofar as it eschews the affectlessness that characterizes many Berlin School protagonists and adopts a more explicitly politicized feminist approach. As Turanskyj explains: 'With my film *Eine flexible Frau*, which I began in 2008, I wanted to set something in opposition to this false emancipation [characteristic of the postfeminist present]: the idea of refusal as critique.'⁴⁷ Positing unhappiness as the singular affect shared by women, Turanskyj's film emblematically portrays gendered refusal as a (the?) critical response to the general malaise, hopelessness, and lack of alternatives that characterize the present.

Barbara Mennel has argued that '*Eine flexible Frau* has put to rest any utopian possibilities. With pervasive hopelessness, Greta confronts those around her with questions central to the feminist project, demanding what she obviously will not receive.'⁴⁸ It is certainly true that Greta demands—and

44 Kohler and Nessel, 'A Woman under the Influence in Berlin zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhundert', 171.

45 Roy, 'Women's Lab', 47.

46 Roy, 'Women's Lab', 57.

47 Turanskyj, 'Dies ist unsere Zeit, weil wir sie erschaffen', 307.

48 Mennel, 'From Utopian Collectivity to Solitary Precarity', 131.

fails to receive—love, respect, employment, and the possibility of self-expression, fantasies of the good life that she is loath to relinquish, and in this sense Greta reflects Berlant's notion of cruel optimism. However, her awkward refusal to adapt to the mandates of the normalizing society, especially the injunction to flexibilize, and her wilful flouting of public and social norms, align Greta with the figure of the feminist killjoy, who disturbs 'the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places',⁴⁹ thereby exposing the precarity of intimacy, security, and equality as sites of optimistic attachment in neoliberalism.

Eine flexible Frau depicts the precarious situation for Berlin's creative classes due to privatization and economic downturn. Greta Mondo embodies this precarity across multiple social and economic dimensions. Laid off from her job with a global architecture firm which closed its Berlin branch office after the 2008 financial collapse, Greta seeks, and fails to find, stable employment. In a series of increasingly desperate measures, she takes a minimum-wage job at a Call Centre selling prefabricated houses, for which she is overqualified and ill-suited; enlists the services of an employment coach who excoriates her for failing to self-optimize and embrace positivity; and begrudgingly seeks freelancing work by networking with her colleagues from architecture school, who serially reject her efforts to obtain part-time employment through her personal connections.

Unmoored from her professional identity by virtue of her precarious employment situation, Greta also experiences the dismantling of traditional social and family structures that is a hallmark of the flexibilized present. The divorced mother of a 12-year old son, she ostensibly shares custody with her ex-husband, but her son Lucas (Mattis Hausig) finds every excuse to avoid his visits with her, eventually telling her outright: 'I don't want to spend my time with losers!' Her encounters with old friends—especially women—are similarly marked by avoidance and outright hostility, often culminating in shouting matches deriving from professional jealousy or personal misunderstanding.

In terms of gender and sexuality, Greta inhabits a precarious status as well, and the film makes palpable the insecurity that derives for her from the coexistence of traditional and flexible gender roles and norms.⁵⁰ Accustomed to working in the male-dominated field of architecture, Greta bristles at performing conventional femininity as embodied, for instance, by the girls who work at the Call Centre, who paint their nails and do their

49 Ahmed, 'Killing Joy', 582.

50 See Woltersdorff, 'Paradoxes of Precarious Sexualities.'

hair while deploying their most charming and persuasive voices in sales calls to potential customers. While she longs to have a better relationship with her son, she also refuses to perform the kind of domestic motherhood that he apparently desires, and the film shows her repeatedly entering into conflicts with the many mothers who populate what Greta derisively refers to as the 'Schnulli-Bulli-Welt, diese heile Mutti-Welt' (perfectly banal mommy world) of today's Berlin, including the pregnant woman who rams her with a stroller and accuses her of trespassing in a gated community of urban townhouses.

When Greta goes to a parent-teacher conference at Lucas's school, she frankly admits to the distant relationship she has with her son and refuses to participate in the 'gestalttherapeutische Spielchen' (little gestalt therapy games) that his teacher, Frau Zeller (Franziska Dick), proposes. Inspired by Greta's frankness, Frau Zeller casts aside her teacher's persona and the two women spend the afternoon together in what seems to be an impromptu date. We witness Greta rowing Frau Zeller in a boat on a lake and the two women drinking shots of whiskey at a bar. Frau Zeller's top slips down, exposing her breasts, and the two women touch, opening up the possibility of a sexual encounter. However, it is at this moment that the teacher confesses to Greta that she finds her son unpleasant and disagreeable, telling her 'he functionalizes everything and everyone'. Recognizing the truth in this assessment, Greta at first laughs, but then ends the encounter, leaving the bar with the words, 'Thanks, Frau Zeller, I've had enough.' As this awkward scene demonstrates, Greta's pursuit of flexibility causes her to seek out new forms of social interaction, but the breakdown of professional boundaries and codes of conduct (e.g. in the parent-teacher relationship) in the precarious present does not ultimately facilitate the formation of new relationships or communities.

Here and elsewhere in the film, Greta's quest for social solidarity often leads—as it did for Sunny, Katrin, and Madame—to drinking, usually with other women. In one sequence, a middle-aged blonde woman, a stranger, sits down next to Greta on a bench outside a shop and pours vodka into a thermos bottle. Greta lights the woman's cigarette, and the woman offers Greta vodka from her thermos. Like Madame and Lutze, Greta and the blonde drinker share an unspoken moment of camaraderie and common purpose in the anonymous space of the city.

Later in the film, Greta arrives at the employment office to seek job counselling and register for unemployment payments. Coincidentally, her case worker turns out to be the blonde drinker, Kracht (Angelika Sautter). Ticking off questions on an intake form, she asks about Greta's

qualifications, employment status, and personal debt. When she reaches the question, 'Do you have an addiction problem?', Greta lowers her sunglasses onto her face, and the case worker finally recognizes her. Locking the door of her office, she pulls out her thermos of vodka and offers Greta a mugful. As the two women drink together, the case worker complains: 'I often hate this job. I curse it. And it's my fault, but the system is all screwed up. It's ridiculous how it's organized. You know, I administer bureaucratic measures, but it doesn't help people at all. Do they think I have jobs to give out? All I can do is hand over a little cash. Orientation? Perspective? Bah. That doesn't exist anymore for most people. And I get paid to...it's depressing.' On the one hand, the case worker's confession about the empty promise of a no-longer functional employment office—'Do they think I have jobs to give out?'—unmasks the façade of job placement in the era of flexibilization and outsourced labour and, more broadly, the limitations of the social welfare system in the wake of the dismantling and privatization of public services. On the other hand, the case worker's litany of complaints appears highly ironic, given the disparity between her stable employment status as a civil servant and Greta's own increasingly hopeless situation. As with Frau Zeller, the connection Greta experiences with the case worker collapses in the face of eclipsed boundaries of professionalism and the flouting of social norms.

For as much as Greta can accede to the mandate of flexibilization in name, as a requirement not only of the modern work force but of contemporary life in general, she is unable or unwilling to embrace flexibility on an affective level or indeed to embody its demands. In this regard, Greta is, as Turanskyj describes her, 'not prepared to function in our contemporary society [...]' She is torn back and forth between readiness to conform and a spirit of contradiction'.⁵¹ This paradoxical relationship to flexibility is manifest in Greta's willingness to take a low-paying job at the Call Centre and her simultaneous difficulty in internalizing the manager Ann's instructions about how to succeed on the job: 'You always have to be friendly. *You have to smile on the inside.*' When she fires Greta ('I have the impression that it's time for us to part'), Ann (Laura Tonke) informs her, 'Since you've been here, you're performing under your potential. As a call centre agent, you have to be a bit more pliable.' However, this type of pliability is anathema to Greta, who, like Katrin in *Sommer vorm Balkon*, stumbles over the requirements and the vocabulary of the modern workforce.

51 Kohler and Nessel, 'A Woman under the Influence in Berlin zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhundert', 172; 173.

In an early sequence, Greta cold calls a construction company that is building a suburban enclave for federal workers, and we hear her repeatedly tell the employee on the other end of the line, in the self-optimizing vocabulary of flexibilized labour, 'I'm looking for a new challenge', before finally explaining in plain language that she is not calling to buy a townhouse, but to apply for a job. Like Katrin too, Greta attends training sessions with an employment coach, who videotapes mock interviews with her in order to critique her self-presentation. In a telling sequence, the coach zooms in on Greta's face with her digital video camera asking her to 'Spontaneously define your strengths. What can you do really well?' Greta hesitates: 'Nothing occurs to me right now.' The coach prompts her again, 'What are you really good at?' This time, Greta responds instantaneously: 'Drinking.' Calling her a cynic, the coach rewinds the video and we witness, in an excruciating audiovisual combination of squeaking tape and fast-motion images, Greta's contorted face crying in shame. Here and elsewhere, the coach repeatedly admonishes Greta to change her attitude and embrace positivity, suggesting that her unemployment is a matter of individual responsibility and personal failure, rather than a direct result of changes in the labour market. Through these coaching scenes, *Eine flexible Frau* exposes the neoliberal dogma that success results from hard work and failure is always the fault of the individual (even though capitalism is predicated on the systemic production of winners and losers).

Greta's attempt at and ultimate refusal of flexibility is also reflected symbolically in several dance scenes that strongly recall the vignettes of acrobatics and failure in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*. Greta arrives to join a group of friends spending a summer day on the Teufelsberg, with a long view of the city of Berlin stretching out behind them. Three dancers, the friends practice the corporeal art and theatrical artifice of falling down and physical collapse (see Illustration 10). When Greta joins them, they council her to soften her body and make her legs into an X-shape, but instead, the brittle Greta simply collapses to the ground and lies prostrate while the men dance around her.

This self-reflexive scene comments on the symbolic representation of falling down that is a key trope throughout *Eine flexible Frau*. It is ironic that Greta struggles with the corporeal gesture of collapse here since, beginning with the opening sequence in which she drunkenly trips on the stairs to her apartment, she regularly falls down as a matter of course on several occasions throughout the film. Like Madame's physical collapse in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, falling down is a gesture that indexes Greta's absolute refusal. As Turanskyj has noted, underpinning the conception of *Eine flexible Frau* was the key question of how much artifice could inform both the figure of

Greta and the film itself ('wie künstlich diese Frauenfigur bzw. der Film sein darf').⁵² This question animated the three-stranded structure of *Eine flexible Frau*, whose formal-aesthetic alternation among fiction, documentary, and metacommentary underpins the protagonist's peripatetic existence (reflected in the film's English title, *The Drifter*) as she drifts across social, class, and spatial milieus in the urban environment, inspiring the film's attempt to track the public, private, and employment status of a 'flexible' woman.

Crucial to the tracking of ordinary life in the present in *Eine flexible Frau*, and underpinning the film's intervention into modes of realism, is a series of documentary-like sequences that record the changing space of the city due to gentrification, globalization, and shifting conceptions of public and private. Like *Sommer vorm Balkon*, Turanskyj's film focuses on the obsolescence of previous forms of life initiated by gentrification in the name of economic development. While *Sommer vorm Balkon* traces this process in a neighbourhood of Prenzlauer Berg, here we see national-representational spaces that showcase Berlin's unique juxtaposition of historically and politically significant architectural styles, now threatened with destruction by the corporatization of the city. Specific landmarks depicted by the film include the Finance Ministry, the Mauerstreifen (strip where the Berlin Wall ran), and the Schlossplatz, the historic site of Berlin's Prussian City Palace, which exemplifies the market- and tourism-driven transformation of central Berlin. Damaged in World War II and razed during the postwar period, the Palace was replaced in the 1970s by the Palace of the Republic, the seat of parliament and a cultural centre in the GDR. At the time of shooting, the Schlossplatz was still a vacant green space in the void of the torn-down Palace of the Republic, before the erection of the reconstructed City Palace (Humboldt-Forum). Also significant to the documentary strand of *Eine flexible Frau* is its depiction of the rapidly changing built environment represented by the townhouse. Recurring at several junctures in the film, this narrative trope makes visible the marked shift away from collective forms of living that characterized the 20th century. Represented by typical Berlin architectural styles like the 19th-century *Mietskaserne* (tenement house; literally: rental barracks) or the postwar *Plattenbauten* (panel buildings) associated particularly with East Berlin, these large scale buildings included public, communal spaces like the *Hinterhof* (back courtyard) or park. In the 21st century, this style of building has been largely supplanted by the exclusive, solitary, and individual lifestyle driven by private ownership that

52 Kohler and Nessel, 'A Woman under the Influence in Berlin zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhundert', 171.

is the provenance of the townhouses and gated communities that Greta studies and photographs.

As we have seen, the blurring of fiction and documentary modes is a common characteristic of the disorganized formal language of German cinema in the age of neoliberalism. In *Eine flexible Frau*, this blurring takes place not least through the ambiguity of the virtual/actual divide suggested by a mise-en-abyme of screens, which figures the elision of generic, representational, and perceptual boundaries in the visual economy of the present. Screens abound in *Eine flexible Frau*, in which shots are often marked as mediated images only after the fact, when the camera pulls back to reveal that the picture we see is emanating from the screen of a laptop, video camera, or overhead projection. Disorganizing our perception, this embedded use of screens emphasizes the extent to which, insofar as they index the mandate to perform an optimized identity, achieved through technologies of the self, virtual images have real material effects. In the coaching sequences, for instance, Greta's larger-than-life screen image is unfavourably juxtaposed to her corporeal existence, demonstrating the gulf between her personal and digital presence. Just as the Call Centre manager urges Greta to *smile on the inside*, to embody happiness in order to convey its affective charge in the mediated venue of a telephone call, her employment coach (Gisela Gard) similarly exhorts her to change her attitude so that she will radiate positivity in mediated forms of self-presentation.

Not tied exclusively to the toxic positivity of neoliberal forms of self-improvement, however, screens in *Eine flexible Frau* also stream feminist metacommentary, emphasizing the paradoxical quality of contemporary technology as a tool of both marketization and new forms of access and participation. It is in a YouTube video that we first encounter the feminist blogger and city guide who serves as the mouthpiece for the film's discursive notes on contemporary feminism and the politics of labour. The video streams on the laptop of a minor character, the administrative assistant of one of Greta's architecture school colleagues, a successful entrepreneur who is crafting a transnational deal to build a golf course in the Moroccan desert. The assistant watches the video while sitting in the Schlossplatz, which, as noted above, is one of the most politically symbolic and fraught public spaces in contemporary Berlin. The conjunction of national-representational space and streaming YouTube video in this scene emphasizes the imbrication of gentrification, globalization, labour flexibilization, and postfeminism as key facets in the neoliberalization of Western societies.

In the YouTube video, the feminist blogger, known only as Kluge (Bastian Trost), delivers a lecture analysing contemporary postfeminism as a

'conservative emancipation' that buttresses the existing system, a system in which men and women alike are bound to lose. Turanskyj has explained her use of the term 'conservative emancipation', one that recurs several times in *Eine flexible Frau*:

In spite of facts and figures [that demonstrate the gender gap in wages, the glass ceiling, sexual violence against women, and so on] this gender hierarchy is strangely subject to denial today and in fact the opposite is claimed. In popular culture, print media, and also in films, images of female freedom and ostensible success are repeated excessively. These images falsely suggest that the gender hierarchy has already changed to the advantage of women, and it seems to be true: In fact there is a new level of participation and new promises in the name of profession, casual sex, and consumerism. This is what I mean by conservative emancipation. An emancipation that does not attack the status quo—that is, the gender hierarchy—but gets comfortable in it and gives it a new look that matches the Zeitgeist. Many women let themselves be deceived by these images, which are actually nothing other than narcissistic self-reflections.⁵³

It is the role of Kluge to puncture the fabric of the film by calling attention repeatedly to the deceiving nature of these images. In each of his three appearances, he intervenes into and comments on a different form of representational space that is implicated in the paradoxes of flexibilization. The first of these, as noted above, is the digital platform of the Internet, specifically YouTube, with its DIY and curated forms of self-presentation.

In the second instance, we see Kluge at work, guiding a group of tourists through the German Finance Ministry, where he points out the depiction of female labourers in a socialist realist wall mural: 'Work is not valued when it is performed by women, indeed, work is not valued *because* it is performed by women. Many poorly paid service jobs face off against fewer and fewer productive high-wage jobs, which the so-called male elite divvy up amongst themselves. You can see that not much has changed. Female labourers have turned into female service workers. This is the Federal Finance Ministry.' Taking place in another fraught architectural space in Berlin—the former Nazi Air Ministry Building, which was also the site of the GDR's official founding in 1949 and later served as the headquarters of the Treuhand, which oversaw the privatization of East German enterprises—this scene calls

53 Kohler and Nessel, 'A Woman under the Influence in Berlin zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhundert', 178-179.

attention to the layered history of the city as well as to changing discourses regarding the women's work upon which Berlin was built.

In a final episode, Kluge leads a tour group through a public park where Greta happens to overhear his lecture on the privatization and feminization of caregiving and domestic labour as a root cause of women's ongoing oppression and an unresolved problem that the feminist movement of the 20th Century did nothing to change. In a striking shot, we see Kluge and his tour group mirrored in Greta's sunglasses, emphasizing precisely how this feminist commentary reflects Greta's own situation.

The role of Kluge in *Eine flexible Frau* strongly parallels the reflexive role played by the three fates Common Sense, Social Question, and Exact Statistics in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*. As we have seen, those characters present a metacommentary that calls attention to the public discourse of neoliberalization—with its illusion of political neutrality, its management of social risk, and its emphasis on quantification—at the moment of its emergence around 1980. While structurally similar in terms of his formal role to provide commentary on the narrative, Kluge's actual message is something like the inverse of that articulated by the fates in Ottinger's film. Indeed, he is concerned precisely with unmasking the degree to which feminism has been 'taken into account' in Western societies, where some of its key principles have been incorporated into political life and institutions in the guise of individual freedom and choice, while feminism as a collective political movement is simultaneously disavowed as no longer necessary and reviled.⁵⁴ The fact that this feminist metacommentary is spoken by a man is also significant, since it reflects the self-understanding of contemporary feminism, under the sign of post-structuralism and Judith Butler's gender theory, as an anti-essentialist political movement that emphasizes the fluidity and contingency of gender and the fundamental instability of identity categories.

Eine flexible Frau ends, as it began, with Greta standing in a field, bringing the narrative full circle. In contrast to the character arc of conventional narrative, Greta is neither transformed nor redeemed in this circular narrative. Instead, as Randall Halle has suggested, 'That circularity can be understood as a reference to the cyclical nature of the capitalist market.'⁵⁵ This circularity also reflects the impasse of feminism in neoliberalism—characterized by a circuit of resistance and subversion, co-optation, marketization, and

54 See McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*.

55 Halle, 'Großstadtfilm and Gentrification Debates', 186.

consumption—that Turanskyj’s redoing of feminist cinema and her strategy of depicting refusal as critique aim to expose.⁵⁶

Developing signal images of gendered refusal, both *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* and *Eine flexible Frau* represent out-of-control femininity as a response to the private and professional isolation, responsabilization, and normalization characteristic of neoliberal(izing) societies. Emphasizing the lack of solidarity in an era defined by the erosion of collective politics, both films depict affect aliens who traverse the transforming spaces of Berlin while wilfully expressing disaffection with the prevailing circumstances.

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56 On the impasse and feminist works that grapple with and aim to dissolve it, see also Baer, Smith, and Stehle, ‘Digital Feminisms and the Impasse.’

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