

Conclusion: German Cinema in the Age of Neoliberalism

In a key scene toward the end of Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann* (2016), Ines (Sandra Hüller), a management consultant in Bucharest, hosts a brunch party to celebrate her birthday. An exemplary neoliberal subject, Ines knows only work and the constant quest for self-optimization; accordingly, her birthday brunch has been organized as a team-building event for her management group, whose mission to modernize a Romanian oil company through the massive outsourcing of jobs has caused strife among her colleagues. However, when the doorbell rings just as she is struggling with a wardrobe malfunction, Ines answers the door naked, and spontaneously decides only to admit guests to the party who agree to shed their clothes as well. Initially repelled by the naked party, several of her colleagues surmise that it must be part of the team-building exercise and awkwardly stand around Ines's living room sipping wine in the nude.

Toni Erdmann chronicles the attempts of Ines's father Winfried (Peter Simonischek), a retired music teacher with a penchant for practical jokes, to puncture the glossy façade of Ines's life, which, as he suspects, belies her insecurity, obstructed agency, and ultimate emptiness. He does this by adopting an array of wigs, prostheses, masks, and personae—notably that of the 'life coach' Toni Erdmann—that call attention to the performance of the self enacted by Ines and her business-world colleagues, a mode of self-fashioning whose ostensibly blank style makes it otherwise illegible as performance. At the naked brunch, Winfried arrives in his most extravagant get-up yet: clothed as a Kukeri, he wears a traditional Bulgarian costume designed to ward away evil spirits that consists of a full-body suit covered in long, dark hair, replete with a massive mask decorated in bright pom-poms. His strange and troubling presence at the party, where no one can determine his identity beneath the hairy mask, further disturbs the already immensely uncomfortable guests. Awkward, unsettling, and hilarious, this scene employs slapstick comedy and visual jokes to generate an affective response among viewers that conjoins laughter with discomfort. Like *Toni Erdmann* as a whole, the naked brunch scene makes visible the illusion of



20. Figuring insecurity and the lack of social solidarity in neoliberalism. Ines (Sandra Hüller) hosts a naked brunch in Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann* (2016). Image courtesy of Komplizen Film.

neutrality that characterizes neoliberal subjectivity and unmasking insecurity as the dominant contemporary structure of experience; with its send-up of 'team-building', the naked brunch points specifically to the lack of social solidarity in Ines's life and in today's world more broadly.

Toni Erdmann is a film that aims to depict the contemporary economy in all of its facets: we see oil production, the 'business case' of attempts to modernize an outdated conglomerate, interactions between CEOs and management consultants, conspicuous consumption at 'the largest mall in Europe', and a wide range of trades, barter, and gifts. Money and transactional exchanges play a prominent role in nearly every scene, foregrounding the ubiquitous economization that characterizes millennial capitalism. Shifting class structures in the aftermath of state socialism and globalization underpin the film's representation of characters from the international business class, Romanians adapting to or threatened by emergent capitalism and those barely subsisting, as well as the two German protagonists, whose status as middle-class Western Europeans continues to inform their privilege, even as this class status seems increasingly out of the ordinary. With its narrative of workplace sexism, Ade's film also lays bare the coexistence of flexible gender roles and new forms of mobility with entrenched patriarchal conventions and social hierarchies, exposing the discourse of responsabilization that blames the individual, rather than social structures, for failure to get ahead. In its remarkable depiction of all of these facets of the present, *Toni Erdmann* constitutes a landmark in the cinematic representation of neoliberalism.

A culmination of many of the emergent tendencies of German cinema in the age of neoliberalism traced in this book, *Toni Erdmann* might also be

viewed as emblematic of a new stage in the interrelated developments of neoliberalization and German film history. Following the financial crisis of 2008, which exacerbated endemic insecurity and gave new visibility to the repertoire of advanced capitalism, neoliberalism came to form a more explicit and direct focus of films made in its wake. Exemplary among these, *Toni Erdmann* employs—like many of the films discussed throughout this book—a disorganized aesthetic language that indexes, on a formal level, the precarity that forms the matrix of its narrative, while indelibly revealing the incommensurability that shapes life in the present.

Toni Erdmann also boasts the highest ticket sales of any film to date made by a director associated with the Berlin School, a fact that results not least from its intervention into the comedy genre and its marketing campaign, especially abroad, where it was widely promoted under the banner of that oxymoronic entity, a German comedy. With its comparably large budget, verge into genre cinema, departure from the austere formal language and affectless acting style typically associated with Berlin School films, not to speak of its remarkable popular success, *Toni Erdmann* heralds new possibilities; as a German comedy that travels *and* as a blockbuster art film, Ade's film also reverses the characteristic dynamic of popular German cinema in the age of neoliberalism, which has typically succeeded, as we have seen, by cannibalizing the aesthetics and politics of art cinema in the service of market-driven, affirmative culture. In this regard, it is even more remarkable that *Toni Erdmann* made the short list of Oscar nominees for Best Foreign Language Film and was subsequently optioned for a Hollywood remake.

Scholarship on contemporary German cinema has tended to reiterate longstanding categories and oppositions that have structured our apprehension of film history, categories that the marketization of culture and the omnivorousness of global neoliberalism render problematic. In response, I have sought throughout this book to develop new strategies of analysis that emphasize formal-aesthetic and thematic continuities across ostensibly opposed registers, styles, and classifications of film. Focusing on the period of neoliberalism's emergence and intensification (1980–2010), I have traced the way films from East, West, and post-unification Germany have both participated in and resisted the neoliberal project, sometimes encompassing both impulses at once, while also comprising an archive of what is being lost due to globalization, gentrification, labour flexibilization, and the demise of collective utopias, among other associated developments.

In considering the commonalities among the diverse spectrum of films addressed here, and the way they defy conventional categorization, I have engaged with varied theoretical frames across the chapters of this book.

Chapters 1 and 2 address the neoliberal transition in dialogue with Gilles Deleuze's theory of cinema, especially the concept of the crystal-image, a figure that helps to conceptualize the changing cinematic relationship between time and money and the eclipse of postwar art cinema by commercial imperatives in the 1980s and beyond. Chapters 3 and 4 draw on feminist/queer affect theory, especially the work of Lauren Berlant and Sara Ahmed, in examining political and cultural re-orientation in the context of the transformation of everyday life driven by neoliberalization. Chapters 5 and 6 consider questions of genre in dialogue with feminist, queer, and critical race theory, including the work of Volker Woltersdorff and Fatima El-Tayeb, focusing on changing understandings of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and citizenship in neoliberal times. Throughout the book, my close readings of individual films also engage with a range of critical approaches in German film studies. An integral aspect of this project is my feminist analysis of how neoliberal social and economic policies contribute to the recasting of gender and national identities around the new millennium, developments that the films discussed here make uniquely visible.

Ultimately, my analysis shows how contemporary German film productions respond to the changed context in which cinema operates today, when the contradiction between the commercial and cultural functions of film—which shaped German film history in the 20th century so profoundly—has been largely resolved in favour of the mandate for profitability. However, as the example of *Toni Erdmann* suggests, this context has led not only to affirmative, conciliatory, and consensus-driven filmmaking, but also to new aesthetic constellations and imaginaries.