Märchen as Trauma Narrative

Helma Sanders-Brahms’s Film Germany, Pale Mother

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“Deeper meaning lies in the fairy tales of my childhood than in the truth taught by life.”

—Friedrich Schiller, The Piccolomini, 3.4.93 (my translation)

Storytelling as a Means of Survival

In Germany, Pale Mother (1980), Helma Sanders-Brahms depicts her childhood experiences in Germany during and after World War II. The film’s tripartite structure consists of the prewar courtship of the filmmaker’s parents, the wartime tribulations and adventures of mother and child, and the postwar era of domestic misery. In an attempt to survive during the war, mother, Lene (Eva Mattes), and child, Anna (Anna Sanders), form a self-sufficient bond that excludes the father, Hans (Ernst Jacobi), who returns from the war an embittered man. His desperate, sometimes brutal efforts to reassert his authority drive Lene to silence and ultimately to a suicide attempt, which the daughter prevents.

The cinematic narrative represents Sanders-Brahms’s attempt to give her mother a voice by telling her story as well as that of the German women who experienced the war. Thus, the film depicts the relationship between national and family history, between the public and private spheres, which is a dominant motif in postwar German (and French) cinema, particularly in films by women. As Helen Fehervary observes, “Whether it be the writer Christa Wolf or the filmmaker Helma Sanders-Brahms reflecting on fascism, women have managed to describe—without all the abstract theoretical paraphernalia—the relationship between history and subjective processes. They show that it is not a matter of grasping the truth in history as some objective entity, but in finding the truth of the experience” (1982, 176).
Although Sanders-Brahms poignantly portrays German women’s experience during the war and postwar years, feminists take issue with her use of a melodramatic plot that portrays women as powerless, as victimized. Ellen Seiter argues, “The use of the melodramatic code…creates enormous obstacles to the filmmaker’s attempt to historicize the events of the mother’s life and to see her suffering in terms of a broader social context.…Like the conventional melodramatic victim, Lene is acted upon, but disengaged from her social world. She is assigned to the emotional and psychological, as neither resistance nor participation in history was possible” (1986, 574–78). Seiter claims that the film’s central section, which portrays Lene and Anna wandering the German countryside as they attempt to survive the end of the war, transcends political reality. Mother and daughter appear to enjoy an idyllic existence of self-sufficiency separate from the devastation of war.

Not all critics agree, however, that the women are depicted as relegated to a personal realm that is separated from the political one. The juxtaposition of Lene’s fictionalized personal story with documentary war footage demonstrates “the intrusion of the historical reality into her mother’s life and her entrance into the ‘public realm’ of history” (McCormick 1993, 191). The women’s “idyllic” journey contains not only references to war, such as a dead soldier, but also to the Holocaust. A smoke-stack of an abandoned factory suggests a crematorium. It appears while Lene recites to Anna the fairy tale of “The Robber Bridegroom,” which depicts a “house of murderers.” Both the visual and verbal metaphors serve as indirect references to the Holocaust and concentration camps. In an interview, Sanders-Brahms stated that she deliberately inserted the Märchen sequence into the film script to represent not only women’s fear of men but also German history (Moehrman 1980, 155).

Thus, as Lene narrates “The Robber Bridegroom” to Anna during their trek through war-torn Germany she presents an apt trope for both her own story and women’s experience during and after the war (Sanders-Brahms 1984, 115–16). Although the film depicts the victimization of both mother and country, Lene’s act of telling the story portrays women not merely as survivors but also as subjects in history, not as conquerors, as narrators of their own stories. Lene transcends her victim status through the power of storytelling, a means of survival and self-determination that she passes on to her daughter and that is illustrated by the fairy tale’s ending, which recounts the triumph of a potential victim over her persecutors.

The Grimms’ tale that Lene recites affirms the power of speech, of narration, in overcoming one’s enemies. In the story, a young, naïve bride
witnesses her fiancé and his cohorts murder a young woman and eat her flesh. When one of the robbers cuts off the victim’s finger in order to retrieve her golden ring, it flies into the hidden bride’s breast. A friendly older woman dissuades the robbers from searching for it and helps the bride to escape and return home. Claiming her story is merely a dream, the heroine recites it during a feast for her family, the groom, and guests, then suddenly produces the finger, bringing about the capture and execution of the groom and his gang. The director chose to insert the folk-tale sequence instead of Lene’s rape by Russian soldiers and subsequent abortion and regarded the substitution as one of the more successful aspects of the film (Sanders-Brahms 1984, 116). The filmmaker’s act thus paralleled that of the bride’s: both chose to expose criminals—whether robbers or soldiers—through narrative (Hyams 1988, 49). Through her film, Sanders-Brahms simultaneously broke the chain of silence so pervasive in German women of her mother’s generation and demonstrated the power of speech, of story.

Although Lene’s silence is ubiquitous in the film’s initial and concluding sections, in the central section the director depicts her as both survivor and storyteller. Through a voice-over in the film’s initial scene, Sanders-Brahms observes: “My mother. ‘I have learned to remain silent,’ you said. From you, I have learned to speak. Mother tongue.” Just as the elder woman rescues the bride in the Grimms’ tale, so too Lene enables her daughter to survive by passing her means of enduring hardship, her storytelling, down to her to retell in her film. Lene’s ability to find food and shelter for Anna and her in a war-ravaged landscape provides the backdrop to her repetitious telling of the tale, which underscores the role of storytelling, in particular of folktales, as a survival tactic. Reciting a story about the eventual triumph of victim over perpetrator sustains mother and daughter during their long trek through danger, offering hope that the powerless—women and children—can escape violence and survive through their wits and speech, just as Scheherazade in *The Thousand and One Nights* saved her life by enchanting the sultan with her nightly tales.

As Jack Zipes has noted, *Märchen* were told to “provide hope in a world seemingly on the brink of catastrophe.” The hope they fostered was that “miracles involving some kind of magical transformation were possible to bring about a better world” (1996, 370–71). Zipes calls wondrous metamorphosis the key theme of the folktale. Simpletons become princes and lowly maids such as Cinderella become queens. The potential victim of “The Robber Bridegroom” turns the tables on the robbers and brings them to justice. In many folktales, the power
of metamorphosis is in the hands of women, as fairies (Zipes 1996, 380). Not surprisingly, the value system of the folktale, including the emphases on compassion and on the hope that the low and meek will triumph, often gives precedence to the powerless. Furthermore, a central message in many folktales is that the weak and oppressed—such as children, women, and members of the working classes—can survive through brains, if not brawn.

Thus, folktales in which lowly heroes or heroines overcome obstacles and rivals and enemies through their wits function as narratives of the dispossessed. In his landmark essay “On the Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life,” Michel de Certeau claimed, “Popular cultures, proverbs, tales, folk wisdom, have long seemed to be the place in which such a hero (‘the ordinary man’) might be sought and reidentified.” In distinguishing between strategies, “actions dependent on a space of power,” and tactics, “the calculated action which is determined by the absence of a proper place,” de Certeau stated that tactics such as narratives found in popular culture constitute “an art of the weak.” In particular, “Where dominating powers exploit the order of things, where ideological discourse represses or ignores it, tactics fool this order and make it the field of their art” (1980, 3–7). Moreover, de Certeau claimed that storytelling constitutes theory and practice, both “an art of doing and an art of thinking.” In other words, “a tactic [is]... a way of scoring or taking a trick: the narrative does not merely describe such a ‘hit,’ it effects one in its own right: ...skill at manipulating, arranging, ‘placing’ a given utterance and displacing a preexisting set of relations, all are artfully combined” (1980, 33–34). Thus, the young bride’s artful telling of her frightening experience as a mere dream and her timely revelation of the narrative’s true nature by suddenly displaying the victim’s finger aptly demonstrate oral storytelling as a tactic of theory and practice, of narrative and action, of description and effect. As de Certeau observes, the moment of tactics, the moment of art, occurs when opportunities are “grasped, not created” and “the maximum effect is obtained with minimal force” (1980, 37, 40).

A tactic, however, does not achieve permanent change in the existing order: “What it gains cannot be held....It must vigilantly utilize the gaps which the particular combination of circumstances open in the control of the proprietary power. It poaches there. It creates surprises. It is possible for it to be where no one expects it. It is wile. In sum it is an art of the weak” (de Certeau 1980, 6). The conclusion of the Grimms’ “The Robber Bridegroom” illustrates de Certeau’s description of tactics, literally and metaphorically. Although the bride temporarily upsets the
preexisting order of patriarchal power through her narrative, she has not permanently overthrown it. She may have escaped the marriage that her father sought for her, but she has not undermined the patriarchal order in which arranged marriages occur.

Sanders-Brahms’s film underscores the temporary character of the dispossessed’s victory in the ideal Märchen world with the horrific worlds of war and of the postwar period, in which the disparity between powerful evil-doers and helpless victims suggests that not much has changed. Lene’s rape by American soldiers abruptly interrupts her narration and depicts the cruel reality of her powerlessness. This shocking scene, witnessed by Anna, contrasts sharply with the bride’s triumph over the robber bridegroom. Victimized folktale heroines such as Cinderella rise or return to the ranks of royalty after they have suffered, but Lene suffers without enjoying the fruits of West Germany’s Economic Miracle. The bride escapes her ogre of a bridegroom; Lene must endure her husband’s harsh treatment. Justice triumphs in the tale; Lene’s rapists never answer for their crime. In the postwar period, ex-Nazis advance quickly in their careers while Lene’s husband, who never joined the party, is left behind. The bride’s story empowers her; Lene and Anna survive, but remain victims of a patriarchal society.

The contrast between the just world of the Märchen and the unjust nature of Nazi and postwar Germany supports William Bascom’s claim that one of the four functions of folklore is an attempt to escape into fantasy from the repressions and taboos imposed by society (1965, 290). “The Robber Bridegroom” offers the hope that the weak and lowly, specifically women, can survive and overcome stronger and more powerful predators through their wits and speech. Similarly, Lene’s narration of the fairy tale allows mother and child to form an idyllic utopia of self-sufficiency sequestered from the horrors of war.

Thus, although the central part of the film, like the Märchen, provides a temporary escape from the harsh, violent reality of war, Lene’s suffering in the rest of the cinematic narrative reminds the viewer that such a utopia is not sustainable. This juxtaposition of the ideal, just world of the folktale with Lene’s real experiences emphasizes the need for a woman’s cinematic narrative that can serve as an instrument for real social change. Germany, Pale Mother critiques the horrors of war and the repression of a patriarchal postwar society and provides a voice for Lene and women of her generation, but it does not offer an alternative vision for a more egalitarian society.
Folktale as Trauma Narrative

Germany, Pale Mother does not offer a new cinematic narrative that can spur social change; if viewed as a trauma narrative, it does suggest a different sort of transformation: it enables the filmmaker to confront her past, albeit in fictionalized form, and transform suffering into something creative and life affirming. The cinematic retelling of her traumatic childhood bears witness to the past and enables her to reshape it, create meaning out of suffering, and establish a new identity, moving from passive, helpless victim of history to active creator of her and her mother’s life stories. These three elements of Germany, Pale Mother—reinterpretation of the past, discovery of meaning, and creation of a new self—constitute the central components of successful trauma narrative.

Similarly, the transformation through numerous trials and tribulations of a folktale protagonist from a powerless victim to a more mature, effective person constitutes the central plotline in Märchen, which consequently serve as an appropriate model for trauma narrative. If we consider how and why some western folktales can function as trauma narratives, we can see how Lene’s reciting of “The Robber Bridegroom” serves as a microcosm for the Sanders-Brahms’s cinematic narrative. Folktales and most films are each products of popular culture—in this instance, German popular culture—and they contain common language and motifs that allow communication between patient and therapist and director and audience alike.

The therapeutic role of reciting and listening to folktales has been acknowledged by traditional psychoanalysts such as the Freudian Bruno Bettelheim, Carl Jung, and Marie-Louise von Franz and more contemporary therapists such as the storyteller Mary Gordon. Gordon has noted that “stories naturally invite us to examine our own lives and choices and then to grow beyond them” and stated further that stories invite us “to envision new possibilities” and “to see that despite the way we feel, and sometimes behave, each of us can sustain losses and yet be generative, caring, and competent” (1993, 266). While stories enable us to confront our own sufferings through empathy with a protagonist, they also draw a boundary between the world of fiction and our reality, establishing a safe distance between the tribulations of protagonists and our world. This dual role of narratives, particularly folktales, in evoking empathy with the characters while also protecting us from direct confrontation with difficult issues provides the effective mechanisms of trauma narrative.

Drawing upon Husserl’s philosophy and Pennebaker’s clinical experiments, Aaron Mishara explains the therapeutic results of narrating
traumatic events. Pennebaker (1990) discovered the healing power of confiding to others. For example, students who wrote about their traumatic experiences showed significant improvement in immune responsiveness, physical health, and remission of psychosomatic symptoms (Pennebaker, Hughes, and O’Heeron 1987). Pennebaker claimed that coping with trauma could be “speeded up” through writing about it and explained that writing is healing because it translates an emotional experience into a cognitive-linguistic one. He and Harber stated that “language brings about the organization and assimilation of traumatic memories and experiences” (1992, 360).

Mishara offered an alternative explanation for the salutary effects of narrating trauma. He claimed that narration enables one to establish distance from and transcend the narrated, traumatized self:

The healing factor in both writing and the talking cure is the changed relationship of the subject to his or her own past painful experiencing by virtue of a narrative act. This act brings reflective distance and insight.... From the phenomenological point of view, the narration of an event, even if one’s self is the only auditor or witness, makes possible the actively taking up of a new perspective in which the formerly envisioned self, the self that passively suffered the event, is now experienced as “other” to the present self. By means of the narrative act the narrating subject in the present moment of becoming detaches from the subject who experienced the traumatic or painful experience. (1995, 187)

Furthermore, through narration, the traumatic event itself is perceived as past: “The event is experienced as no longer present, or having direct ‘affective’ connection with the present.... As now past, sealed off from the present, it no longer overwhelms the subject in emotional pain” (Mishara 1995, 189).

Sanders-Brahms’s film clearly portrays this split between past and present selves: the director is depicted in the film as a helpless child, yet the occasional voice-over of the filmmaker, which intrudes into various scenes, reminds the spectator of the mature director, who has survived the war and her parents’ volatile marriage and now has control over unfolding the plot on both a personal and a political, historical level. Kaja Silverman analyzes the significance of the female voice-over, which is almost completely absent in Hollywood films: “The female subject...is excluded from positions of discursive authority both outside and inside the classic film diegesis; she is confined not only to a safe place of the story, but to the safe places within the story (to positions, that is, which come within the eventual range of male vision or audition)” (1988, 164).
Thus, Sanders-Brahms underscores her own position of authority as narrator and filmmaker when she not only speaks for her mother in the film and reconstructs their common past together but also offers an alternative account of the war, as a “history from below,” that is, as a narrative of the common suffering of civilians, particularly women and children, from a female perspective.

The use of symbols and metaphors constitutes one means of achieving the necessary distance from, transcendence of, a traumatic past (and victimized self) through narrative. The benefits of using metaphor in psychotherapy to treat patients are well known. Jacob Arlow explains, “Because of the element of displacement of meaning, metaphor readily lends itself as a means of warding off anxiety” (1979, 371). Metaphor enables the patient to maintain a safe distance from the traumatic content while also allowing the expression of emotion. In particular, “The themes that cluster around the metaphor during the course of therapy often lead to the discovery of an unconscious fantasy that is usually connected with some trauma” (Arlow 1979, 380).

Some therapists stimulate the patient’s associations by using metaphors taken from folklore. They are effective in therapy because patient and therapist are familiar with the plot lines, which strengthens their relationship since studies have shown that sharing a common language and culture enhances the analyst’s empathy for the patient. This use of common cultural metaphors in the analyst/patient dialogue resembles the process of aesthetic communication: “The devices that make poetry and enable the poet to transmit to others the emotion he experiences are the same ones which make the patient’s material assume configurations that transmit meaning and emotion to the therapist, making empathy possible. Contiguity, repetition, symbolism, allusion, contrast, and, above all, metaphor...are the most important of these devices.” (Beres and Arlow 1974, 45)

In Sanders-Brahms’s film, Lene’s reciting of the Grimms’ tale with its allusions to brutality and murder clearly serves as an extended metaphor for the terrors of war, particularly for women, as well as the horrors of the Holocaust that are alluded to in the central scene. For example, just as Lene mentions the ashes that the bride of the tale strews along her path, the factory smokestack reminiscent of a crematorium appears along Lene and Anna’s path. Thus, the folktale mirrors the cinematic story itself as trauma narrative. Both are fictionalized representations of suffering, the ultimate survival of the victims, and their power over the past. Both Lene and her daughter, the filmmaker, survive the war, albeit scarred, and Sanders-Brahms creates a work of art from their
tribulations. Both the Grimms’ tale and the film incorporate a figure, heroine or filmmaker, who retells the sufferings of a past self that no longer exists but has been integrated into the continuity of the storyteller’s life through the act of narrating.

The *Märchen* serves as a perfect paradigm for the trauma narrative in general. Psychoanalysts such as Bruno Bettelheim, folklorists such as Jack Zipes, and writers such as J. R. R. Tolkien have noted the therapeutic effects of narrating folktales. Bettelheim suggested that *Märchen* provide an effective educational tool with which children can come to terms with such dilemmas and fears as anxiety over abandonment by one’s parents or feelings of inadequacy. He claimed that folktales externalize inner processes and that “Fairy tales intimate that a rewarding, good life is within one’s reach despite adversity—but only if one does not shy away from the hazardous struggles without which one can never achieve true identity” (1977, 24). He pointed out that the use of these tales in therapy had not been limited to western psychoanalysis but had been practiced for centuries elsewhere. Similarly, Zipes has suggested that *Märchen* can disguise common human fears and conflicts through the use of metaphors. He argued that folktale plots externalize in symbolic form universal psychic conflicts such as the fears of being alone and unprotected in a dangerous world, of the loss of love, and of failure and, thus, provide a rich source for metaphors of common human problems.

Some folklorists find Bettelheim’s and Zipes’ hypotheses problematic, claiming they cannot be verified and noting that they view folktales as depicting universal rather than culture-specific themes. For example, in *The Dynamics of Folklore*, Barre Toelken pointed out that folktales with similar plots may have different connotative meanings that “reside not as manifest content in the item or text or in the denotation of words, but in the feelings and associations people share about the items, situations and words. Since these attitudes are usually culture-specific, the deepest meanings seldom arise openly from the text but need to be extrapolated from ethnographic evidence as well as further discussion from the tradition bearers themselves” (Toelken 1996, 246). Thus, the European and American hero/heroine tales in which the protagonist leaves home and bravely confronts dangers during the journey have a positive connotation whereas a similar plot in another culture, such as the Sun Myth, a Kathlamet Chinook text, portrays the adventurer as egotistical and his actions as destroying the culture (Toelken 1996, 257). If the former tale depicts the western emphasis on the development of the individual, the latter focuses on the well-being of the community, of the clan.
Consequently, it needs to be said that Bettelheim’s and Zipes’s views of the function of the fairy tale themselves represent not a universal but a culture-specific viewpoint, a traditional western and masculine perspective. It should be assumed, then, that all discussion of folktales in this essay refers to western, European or European-American tales.

Irrespective of Bettelheim’s or Zipes’ specific interpretations of the therapeutic role of folktales, both folklorists and storytellers have observed that stories trigger in their audiences provocative insights into their own lives. Susan Gordon, for example, discussed her listeners’ reaction to her retelling of her version of the Grimms’ tale, “The Handless Maiden,” noting that those who had been abused as children recognized themselves in the maiden whose father cut off her hands (Gordon 1993, 274). “The Handless Maiden” concludes with the protagonist regaining her hands while saving her child from drowning and then reuniting with her husband, the King, and thereby illustrates the ability to survive trauma and even thrive. Gordon observed “that even handless we are capable of the choices of maturation and development” (1993, 284). Her listeners’ identification with the heroine and her tale demonstrated that such Freudian mechanisms as compensation and projection of repressed desires could occur in listeners or readers of folktales.

In a similar vein, Bettelheim believed that *Märchen* provide characters onto which the child, not a society, can project either taboo desires or compensatory scenarios. An evildoer, for example, can embody the child’s destructive wishes, whereas the simpleton who makes his way in the world may represent the child’s own fears of succeeding on his or her own terms; the simpleton’s eventual realization of his goals offers consolation that success is achievable. In *Germany, Pale Mother*, the mother’s reciting of “The Robber Bridegroom,” which concludes with the bride’s triumph over the robbers through a helper and her own wits, clearly provides hope that mother and child will successfully navigate the dangers along their path. The role of folktales in offering hope becomes especially poignant in the scene after the rape. Despite the abuse, Lene does not give into despair but continues telling the tale of the triumphant bride with unexpected resilience.

According to J. R. R. Tolkien, recovery from despair constitutes one of the essential elements of the folktale. The other three are fantasy, escape from danger, and consolation. Except for fantasy, these folktale components are also essential components of successful therapy (1996, 271–86). Indeed Lene’s repeated telling of the triumph of the bride over the robber bridegroom clearly serves as a means of consoling Anna and reminding her that ultimately we can triumph over difficulties and
survive. As Tolkien pointed out, folktales offer the greatest consolation because they often portray the Great Escape, the escape from death (1996, 284). Lene and Anna’s journey through a war-ravaged country, which requires a daily search for food, shelter, and safety, poignantly underscores the need for such consolation. By retelling this tale in her film and contrasting its optimistic message with the harsh realities of life, Sanders-Brahms offers her own daughter a different tale in which the triumphant ending consists in the ability only to survive but also to create meaning out of suffering through narrative.

The positive metamorphosis of the central character of a western folktales from naïve child vulnerable to the manipulations of others during his or her trials and tribulations to a self-sufficient actor on the world stage mirrors the transformation that frequently occurs with trauma victims after they recite their stories. In *Morphology of the Folktale*, Vladimir Propp notes that in most tales the protagonist has to endure a difficult task, whether it is an ordeal by fire, riddle guessing, or a test of strength, endurance, or fortitude. When the task is resolved, the hero or heroine is usually recognized and often undergoes a transfiguration, resulting in a new appearance, and/or gets married, a mark of entering mature adulthood (1968, 60–64).

Similarly, Max Lüthi claims that “the fairy tale depicts processes of development and maturation” (1996, 298). Bettelheim has observed that folktales heroes and heroines often experience a reawakening or rebirth that “symbolizes the reaching of a higher state of maturity and understanding. It is one of the fairy tale’s ways to stimulate the wish for higher meaning in life: deeper consciousness, more self-knowledge, and greater maturity” (1977, 214). He further claims that the essential lesson of these tales is “that if one wishes to gain selfhood, achieve integrity, and secure one’s identity, difficult developments must be undergone: hardships suffered, dangers met, victories won” (1977, 278). Similarly, trauma narratives enable their tellers to integrate their former victimized selves into their life scripts and make the transition from helpless victims to active, mature participants in life.

In the voice-over narration of her film, Sanders-Brahms clearly states some personal insights that she has gained by retelling her family’s story, such as her decision not to marry. Scenes that reenact the discord and anguish that marked her parents’ marriage offer a probable reason for this choice. Nevertheless, her decision to bear a child attests to the strength of her bond to her mother and implies the optimistic view that the next generation of women may profit and learn from their mothers’ (and grandmothers’) suffering.
As Carol Gilligan has repeatedly observed, when women let their voices be heard, the world itself can be transformed: “As we have listened for centuries to the voices of men and the theories of development that their experience informs, so we have come more recently to notice not only the silence of women but the difficulty in hearing what they say when they speak. Yet in the different voice of women lies the truth of an ethic of care, the tie between relationship and responsibility, and the origins of aggression in the failure of connection” (1993, 173). Thus, the bride’s escape from her treacherous bridegroom in the Grimms’ tale and the subsequent opportunity to reveal his treachery result from female solidarity, from the old woman’s assistance in her escape. Similarly, Lene and Anna are able to survive the war years and the postwar domination of husband and father through their close bonds. Lene as a mother feels an obligation to take care of her child and to survive, and in turn her child prevents her suicide by reminding her of their connection. Similarly, the handless maiden in Gordon’s tale only recovers her hands when she saves her child. Conversely, as Gilligan notes, the origins of aggression lie in the failure of such connection. Because of his separation from his wife and child during the war years, Anna’s father has no intimate link with them, and the only relationship that he knows how to establish is one of dominance and submission.

Finally, the political, subversive aspect of this feminist director’s film cannot be ignored. The narratives of “The Robber Bridegroom,” the mother’s Märchen, and Sanders-Brahm’s voice-over offer a critique of patriarchal culture and male-dominated narrative. In “Oppositional Practices in Women’s Traditional Narrative,” Marie Maclean discussed the subversive nature of some seemingly utopian folktales. Drawing upon de Certeau’s theory of “tactics,” Maclean pointed out that folktales constituted an important aspect of women’s subculture and that women have employed de Certeau’s “tactics” of the weak with them. Maclean noted that Metis, the divinity of tactics, is the first wife of Zeus and the goddess of nets, associated with the powers of binding and unbinding. Metis, who represents the overcoming of the strong by the weak, is swallowed by Zeus and becomes the hidden mother of the goddess of wisdom, Athena, who springs out of Zeus’s head. Observing that folktales were the province of female storytellers until they “became the property” of Monsieur Perrault, the brothers Grimm, and other men, Maclean interpreted Zeus’s swallowing of Metis “as the symbol of the constant reterritorialization of popular culture and especially of women’s culture by the ideologically dominant” (1987, 40–41). From the subgenre of folktales that depict violence and women’s suffering and resistance, Maclean...
chose “The Robber Bridegroom” as a paradigm of female solidarity and stratagems against violence. She described women’s tale-telling as an oppositional practice and cited the bride’s revelation of her experiences in the bridegroom’s lair as a combination of narrative authority and audience manipulation. She drew plot parallels between the fairy tale and *Germany, Pale Mother* and observed that the feminist filmmaker used the tale to great effect in the film because she knew the hidden messages of women’s traditional tales.

Thus, Sanders-Brahms’s film narrative, which alternates, from a woman and child’s perspective, among the pre-war, war, and postwar years in Germany, is an oppositional practice that counters the numerous male versions of the war by depicting women’s strength and solidarity. By bequeathing her life story to her own daughter—who also is named Anna, who stars in the film, and to whom the film is dedicated—the filmmaker belongs to a long tradition of women telling folktales to their daughters. For, as Marie Maclean noted, despite the Grimms’ assertion that the “vast numbers” of stories and customs were handed down from father to son, in actuality at least eighty percent of their tales were collected from female informants. Cinema, which reaches millions, serves as an effective popular culture medium to communicate not only personal and collective stories but those of nations.

### Film as Collective Trauma Narrative

Sanders-Brahms’s use of a German *Märchen* with its dual ability to distance the narrator-filmmaker as well as spectators from horrific historical events while also evoking empathy from a German audience that shares the artist’s past and cultural heritage, including its folktales, offers a cinematic model for a collective trauma narrative that both remembers and mourns a painful past while also holding out the hope of overcoming it. The criteria for this model come from traditional psychoanalysis as well as contemporary film studies.

Citing Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” and Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s 1975 study on postwar Germans’ inability to mourn the past, Eric Santner (1990) examined the role of art, particularly film, as an instrument of mourning. Believing that the sense of self develops around the child’s initial separation from the mother, Freud claimed that the capacity to mourn depends on the child’s early ability to regard the (m)other as a separate human being. Thus, if distinct boundaries are established between self and other, there is “space” for empathy that enables one person truly to grieve another’s loss. Conversely,
melancholy results if this separation is not achieved and the lost love object is regarded as an extension of the self (Freud 1957, 14:244–45). Drawing upon Freud’s theory of mourning, the Mitscherlichs stated that Trauerarbeit or mourning never took place in postwar Germany, because Germans identified with Hitler and used such defense mechanisms as identification with the victim that prevented guilt from surfacing (1975, 4). Santner focused on Freud’s observation that the lack of anxiety, rather than the actual loss, traumatizes the patient. This emotion can be recuperated and overcome only with an empathetic witness present. In the case of a child, a parent could play the role of witness; for a trauma victim, it could be an empathetic analyst (1990, 25).

An artistic endeavor can enable the adult to deal with a past trauma just as the capacity for imaginative play allows a toddler to convert a sense of helplessness at the mother’s disappearance into a feeling of power. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Freud stated that the fort/da (“hide-and-seek”) game that his grandson played allowed him to overcome his grief at separation from his mother by creating his own game of disappearance and reappearance (1955, 18:14–15). Thus, the game served as a homeopathic means of reenacting the separation and controlling its outcome. Similarly, a creative project enables the artist to transform, to reconstruct, a loss into a work of art and thus allows the creator control over the (fictionalized) event. Moreover, a trauma narrative empowers the narrator/artist to break through psychic numbness, a common reaction to trauma, by allowing an empathetic listener/observer to bear witness to one’s past. For example, participants in Yale’s Holocaust Survivors Film Project felt empowered by narrating their past suffering in the presence of sympathetic listeners (Hartmann 1996, 152–54).

Santner cited the German director’s Edgar Reitz’s belief that film is an inherently elegiac medium (1990, 67–72). In Liebe zum Kino (Love of Film), Reitz claimed that cinema is the last available site for funerary ritual in a consumer society: “When one looks closely, film always has something to do with parting. Film concerns itself with things and people that disappear from our sensory perception, with this pain that every good frame reproduces and produces. …Parting is the great theme of film” (Reitz quoted in Santner 1990, 68–69). In a similar vein, Susan Sontag noted, “Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos….All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s mortality), vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt” (1977, 15).
Because of film’s elegiac nature, Santner believes that an audience should be able to experience the mourning process through cinema: “Film invites viewers to overcome a chronic inability to mourn precisely by becoming sensitized to the experience of chronos, that is, the passing of time and the losses and separations that belong to their being-in-time” (1990, 72). Thus film serves as a medium for collective mourning by recounting a country’s traumatic past that elicits spectators’ empathy.

How can cinematic images elicit this empathy? The seemingly continual onslaught of horrific images of war or other violence in documentaries, feature films, and television news can overwhelm spectators, who may react with horror or helplessness, shock or numbed indifference, rather than sympathy. Such troubling images may even cause secondary trauma in viewers, who may feel a sense of powerlessness when confronting their inability to change the situation (Hartmann 1996, 152–54).

Sanders-Brahms’s feature film constitutes an effective means to induce public mourning of the past as it elicits from the audience not only emotional involvement but also intellectual distance, two prerequisites for mourning. The film establishes a common human bond in suffering between the fictional characters and audience through melodramatic devices and also creates a distance between spectators and characters through Brechtian disruptions of the melodramatic plot. This distance allows viewers to separate from the film narrative and the characters. As Freud pointed out, this ability to distinguish between self and other enables the audience to empathize, to reflect on the unique suffering of others as well as their own losses, and to mourn.

Although critics of Sanders-Brahms’s film such as Seiter claim that Germany, Pale Mother constitutes a melodramatic, apolitical narrative of women’s role in the war, Richard McCormick has pointed out that the melodramatic plot is undercut with cinematic distancing techniques in the tradition of Fassbinder, a leading director of the New German Cinema (1993, 195). In particular, although the narrative focuses on Lene’s excessive suffering and contains such melodramatic plot devices as love and loss, loyalty and betrayal, and the erosion of domestic bliss, Brechtian distancing techniques such as the voice-over narration break the illusion of reality and remind the spectator that the film is a fictional, artificial construct and interrupts emotional identification with the characters. For example, Sanders-Brahms opens her film with a reading of a Brecht poem by his daughter Hanna Hiob, which draws the viewer’s attention to the film’s discursive nature (McCormick 1993, 195). Other distancing techniques include the intercutting of documentary war footage, such as seemingly interminable aerial shots of bombed-out German
cities, with scenes from Lene’s life, such as the birth of her daughter. An especially disorienting distancing technique is choosing Eva Mattes, who plays Lene, to also portray a Polish peasant and a French partisan, whom Hans and other German soldiers execute. The voice-over, the splicing of documentary sequences into the fictional narrative, the multiple casting of Eva Mattes, and an occasionally dissonant musical score all remind the audience that the film is a fictional construct, the filmmaker’s manipulation of past events into her own personal narrative.

Sanders-Brahms claims that she inserted the Märchen because it served not only as an appropriate metaphor for women’s war experiences but also as an effective distancing (Verfremdung) technique (Moehrmann 1980, 156). The folktale not only interrupts the fictional narrative as a story-within-a-story but also comments on the film’s visuals, including a soldier’s corpse, a smokestack, an oven, documentary footage of a bombed-out Berlin, and Lene’s rape, all of which establish a connection between the folktale and its historical context (McCormick 1993, 201).

Consequently, the Märchen sequence works as a distancing technique in both a psychological and an aesthetic sense. As a metaphor, as a fictional construct, it enables the narrator/filmmaker to distance herself from her childhood trauma. As a Brechtian alienation technique, it breaks the illusion of fiction, which allows the spectator to gain distance from the story and the characters and to reflect upon and mourn the losses and horrors of the war. Thus, the folktale and the film function as both a personal trauma narrative and a collective one that elicits empathy for the artist and her mother as well as Holocaust victims and German women and children who suffered in the war.

Some Holocaust narratives such as Jane Yolen’s Briar Rose (2002; originally published in 1997) or Louise Murphy’s The True Story of Hansel and Gretel: A Novel of War and Survival (2003) employ or refer to folktales. Conversely, contemporary fairy tales such as Gregory Maguire’s Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West (1995) allude to the Third Reich and the Holocaust. Thus, the fairy tale becomes an appropriate narrative device that enables its creator to grapple with traumas too painful to confront directly. As a genre, it no longer is relegated to the nursery. Whether on the psychoanalyst’s couch or the public forum of the stage or cinema, the fairy tale has the ability to depict universal human fears and provide language to express the unspeakable.
Notes

1. “In a fairy tale, internal processes are externalized and become comprehensible as represented by the figures of the story and its events. This is the reason why in traditional Hindu medicine a fairy tale giving form to his [or her] particular problem was offered to a psychically disoriented person, for his meditation. It was expected that through contemplating the story, the disturbed person would be led to visualize both the nature of the impasse in living from which he suffered, and the possibility of its resolution. From what a particular tale implied about man’s [or woman’s] despair, hopes and methods of overcoming tribulations, the patient could discover not only a way out of his distress but also a way to find himself as the hero of the story did” (Bettelheim 1977, 25).

2. Bettelheim makes a similar observation: “Consolation is the greatest service that a fairy tale can offer a child: the confidence that despite all tribulations that he [or she] has to suffer…not only will he succeed, but the evil forces will be done away with and never again threaten his peace of mind” (1977, 47).

3. For details, see Wilhelm Schoof, cited in Maclean (1987, 37).

4. Angelika Bammer also discusses the use of Brechtian alienation techniques (1985, 102).

5. “Ausserdem setzte ich das Maerchen auch als ein Mittel der Verfremdung ein. Das hatte Hanne Hiob, die Brecht Tochter, auch so gesehen….Das hat mich sehr bestaetigt, denn in der Phase der Herstellung ist sehr darueber diskutiert worden, ob das Maerchen drin bleiben oder rausgeschnitten werden sollte. Manche fanden es viel zu lange und deplaziert. Aber Hanne Hiob hat sich das am Schneidetisch angeguckt und gesagt: Das Maerchen, das ist ja das allerbeste! Das hat mich bestaetigt” (Moehrmann 1980, 156). Literally “I also added the fairy tale as an alienation technique. Hanne Hiob, Brecht’s daughter also saw it that way….That also confirmed [my choice] as in the phase of production, it was discussed a lot if the fairy tale should stay or be edited out (of the film). Some found it too long and out of place. But Hanne Hiob looked out on the editing table and said: ‘The fairy tale, that is the very best!’ That was a confirmation” (my translation).

6. I am indebted to Andrea Leva, whose thesis on adolescent Holocaust narratives mentions the use of folktales in Holocaust literature and cites these works in her conclusion.

Filmography


Works Cited


