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DOSSIER TECHNOLOGICAL & CULTURAL CHANGES IN THE DIGITAL ERA

The construction of family in German feature films in the digital era

A construção da família nos longas-metragens alemães na era digital

La construcción de la familia en los largometrajes alemanes en la era digital

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Abstract: This paper critically examines images of domestic life in German cinema in the digital era. Based on the assumption that the film medium in Germany, which is largely sponsored by the state, reflects struggles for legitimate meaning, the discourse analysis of 20 outstanding German feature films dealing with family matters from the past decade reveals that despite cultural and technological changes, national film output mainly constructs idealistic family scenarios that plead for cohesion and are hardly progressive.

Keywords: Cinema. German feature film. Reality construction.

Resumo: Este artigo examina criticamente as imagens da vida doméstica no cinema alemão na era digital. Partindo do pressuposto de que o meio cinematográfico na Alemanha, amplamente patrocinado pelo Estado, reflete lutas por um sentido legítimo, a análise discursiva de 20 longas-metragens alemãs de destaque que tratam de questões familiares da última década revela que, apesar das mudanças culturais e tecnológicas, a produção cinematográfica nacional constrói principalmente cenários familiares idealistas que clamam por coesão e dificilmente são progressistas.

Palavras-chave: Cinema. Longa-metragem alemã. Construção da realidade.

Resumen: Este artículo examina criticamente las imágenes de la vida doméstica en el cine alemán de la era digital. Basado en la suposición de que el medio cinematográfico en Alemania, que en gran medida está patrocinado por el estado, refleja luchas por un significado legítimo, el análisis del discurso de 20 destacados largometrajes alemanes que tratan sobre asuntos familiares de la última década revela que, a pesar de los cambios culturales y tecnológicos, la producción cinematográfica nacional construye principalmente escenarios familiares idealistas que abogan por la cohesión y son poco progresistas.

Palabras clave: Cine. Largometraje alemán. Construcción de la realidad.

Introduction

This paper critically examines the discursive construction of family in German cinema in the digital era. It shows that the vast majority of the most successful national feature film output dealing with family matters presents idealistic images of domestic life that are backward-looking, neglecting much of what family means today.

In Germany family is considered to be the center of society and the core of social coexistence. Moreover, as the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany states in Article 6, it shall enjoy the special pro-



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tection of the state. At the same time, however, the concept of family nowadays is diverse and confronted with numerous challenges. Besides traditional families with two parents and one or two children (two-thirds of the German population feel that a family of four with two children is the ideal size, while the birth rate is quite stable at 1.57 children per woman), there are large families or multigenerational households, families with unmarried parents or one parent only (especially mothers), jigsaw families and same-sex parented families. In addition, more than one-third of the families have a migration background. Apart from that, fathers have shown an increasing willingness to become involved in everyday domestic life and to take on child-rearing and caregiving tasks, at least on paper, and gainful employment is a matter of course for the majority of mothers in Germany today (69 percent are at least part-time employed). However, reconciling family and work as well as poverty and precariousness are problems that have become increasingly important with the COVID-19 pandemic (FEDERAL MINISTRY FOR FAMILY AFFAIRS, SENIOR CITIZENS, WOMEN AND YOUTH, 2020). In any case, the number of recorded cases of domestic violence, against women in particular, has been increasing for several years (FEDERAL CRIMINAL POLICE OFFICE, 2021), and the divorce rate is almost 40 percent, which is similar to the European average (FEDERAL AGENCY FOR CIVIC EDUCATION, 2018).

In socialization research, it is undisputed that media represent a decisive agent of orientation in postmodern societies characterized by multiple options and life models (PROT *et al.*, 2015), which certainly applies to the domestic sphere as well. What is more, given the disappearance of a single appropriate family concept passed from one generation to the next, one might assume that fictional entertainment formats, such as films in particular, have long been an indispensable system of reference for the formation of plural and diverse family identities and roles. This medium is full of social images that impart meaning and exemplify or produce knowledge (DENZIN, 1995; KELLNER, 2003; SUTHERLAND; FELTEY,

2013), simultaneously promising a high level of involvement and affective impact. It also has, in light of new digital technologies and distribution channels (DENSON; LEYDA, 2016), little to no access barriers.

Against this background, examining how family is constructed in German feature films is of the utmost relevance from at least two dimensions. First, focusing on German films means dealing with one of the largest film markets in Europe and one of the largest film production countries in the world. To a certain extent, one might even argue that, in light of the increasing significance of European film co-productions (HAMMETT-JAMART *et al.*, 2018) and the internationalization of German film, the filmic construction of social reality in Germany affects (transnational) film content and aesthetics in other countries (HALLE, 2014).

Second, the medium of film in Germany is not only an economic asset and a form of cultural heritage. Instead, given the state sponsorship of film production, it is also an important topic in media-oriented policy interventions and, as in several other national contexts with state cinema policies, especially in Europe (MINGANT; TIRTAINE, 2016), it is directly subject to public subsidy structures (COOKE, 2012). More precisely, to mitigate the competitive disadvantages of the socially relevant product of film at the international level and on the world market, a highly ramified system of state funding institutions has developed in Germany, which supports national film production to the tune of more than half a billion Euros per year (GERMAN FEDERAL FILM BOARD, 2022). Although high in their own right, those figures do not include additional financial support provided by the European Union's and the Council of Europe's funds, MEDIA and Eurimages, which also aim at defending European art films against US blockbusters (ELSAESSER, 2005). Furthermore, as in other European countries, public television, an agent shaped by societal and political influences, often acts as a co-producer of films intended for the cinema (HICK, 2010). Thus, not surprisingly, German filmmaking is highly charged, and the digitization of filmmaking has definitely not altered

this picture. Consequently, it is likely to reflect hierarchies and power constraints that exceed the simple yet sometimes conflicting interactions between authors and producers in the industrial film context, but primarily refer to implicit ideological implications of the state support for film production. Otherwise said, despite the possibility of different decoding processes suggested by the cultural studies approach (HALL, 1980), the filmic construction of social reality in Germany is presumably the result of a conscious or unconscious struggle for legitimate — or at least, widely accepted — meaning (RYAN; KELLNER, 1988). Put differently again, to draw on Foucault's (1972) sociology of knowledge perspective, German films are about to contribute to a socially shaped regime of understanding the world, and political impacts on the discursive construction of family through this medium hence seem to be unavoidable (WIEDEMANN, 2020).

To those ends, the next section addresses the theoretical background of the study presented here (that is, as previously alluded to, the discourse theory), adapts the research framework to the analysis of films, primarily on a content level, and additionally informs about the research material (20 outstanding German feature films from the past ten years). The third section discusses the findings of the empirical analysis, which are organized to reflect the theoretical background and demonstrate that German film output mainly constructs family scenarios that plead for cohesion and are hardly progressive.

Theoretical background, method and research material

In order to examine how family is constructed in contemporary German feature films against the background of society's power structures, this study draws on the discourse theoretical perspective outlined first and foremost by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, which focuses, among other factors, on power mechanisms in the archeology and genealogy of society's knowledge. Accordingly, this paper argues that discourse analyses, which "systematically des-

cribe the various structures and strategies of texts or talks, and relate these to the societal and political context" (VAN DIJK, 2000, p. 35), are more appropriate for exploring the semantics of media, in this case movies, and its social and political implications than traditional media content analyses (VAN BRUSSEL *et al.*, 2019).

Based on a constructivist understanding of society, Foucault (1980) starts from the assumption that all human knowledge goes back to a socially shaped and to varying degrees legitimized worldview, which reflects specific power constellations and exercises or reinforces social power. More precisely, what is considered as wrong, true, reasonable, exemplary, or morally liable, all these classification decisions are conditioned by imperative discourses, which define "the ordering of objects" (FOUCAULT, 1972, p. 49), and, therefore, construct social reality (ORGAD, 2012). The notion of discourse, defined in a number of different ways throughout Foucault's work, refers to "the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements" (FOUCAULT, 1972, p. 80). Following leading scholars in the field of critical discourse analysis, Foucault considers discourse a "social force," which "determines how the world can be seen and what can be known and done within it" (PHILO, 2007, p. 176). Not far from that, Norman Fairclough (2004, p. 176) describes discourses as "ways of representing aspects of the world—the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the 'mental world' of thoughts, feelings, beliefs," which underlines their link to ideology and the "role of discourses in the (re)production and challenge of dominance" (VAN DIJK, 1993, p. 249). For John Fiske (1987, p. 14), in turn, the term simply refers to a "system of representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings."

Even though Foucault's concept of discourse analysis mainly addresses power relationships in society and the construction of social reality through language, there are good reasons for

adopting a broader understanding of texts, as, for example, the British cultural studies suggest (HALL, 1980), and considering complex text-image relationships such as films as discourses or discourse carriers as well (JANCSARY *et al.*, 2016; ROSE, 2016; WILDFEUER, 2014). Accordingly, a Foucauldian analysis of the construction of meaning and behavior in family matters and domestic life through German feature films makes it necessary to explore the so-called discursive formations of this media outlet. Therefore, following Foucault's suggestions (1972, p. 31-76), a closer look should be taken at the formation of objects, the formation of enunciative modalities, the formation of concepts, and the formation of strategies. Ultimately, these shape the archive of rules guiding society's games of truth. Accordingly, these dimensions must be distinguished in the film analysis: dominant ideas (what is the substantive content in terms of family?), legitimate speakers (who speaks and acts legitimately and from which perspective?) and rhetoric (which arguments are presented and which audio-visual design is used?). Certainly, only the interplay of these dimensions can cover all facets of a film's enunciation, reveal how social reality is constructed, and, at the same time, allow a statement about how this specific discursive practice relates to society's knowledge regime, i.e., to what extent the filmic construction of family stabilizes the symbolic arrangement of domestic life in general.

Examining the construction of family in contemporary German feature films from such a perspective required a qualitative research design. Therefore, to make the research process transparent and to guarantee systematics, the study made flexible use of a category system reflecting the theoretical background (global classification units: ideas, legitimate speakers and rhetoric). Nevertheless, building categories on the base of this framework also took into consideration the logic of the medium film, in particular the multimodal filmic modes of expression (BENSHOFF, 2016; RYAN; LENOS, 2012), even if the analysis primarily addressed film content and plot relating it to the social and political context.

This study's research material consists of 20 outstanding German feature films dealing with family matters from the past ten years, which were selected according to their economic or artistic success. In this spirit, the sample includes chart breakers such as *Head Full of Honey* by Til Schweiger and *Welcome to Germany* by Simon Verhoeven—among the most successful movies at the German box office in 2014 and 2016, with 7.3 and 3.8 million viewers respectively—along with prize-winning art films such as *Toni Erdmann* by Maren Ade, which premiered in competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 2016, won five European Film Awards that year, and was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 2017 Academy Awards, and *In the Fade* by Fatih Akin, which was selected to compete for the Palme d'Or at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival and won the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2018. Among the selected films, eight were directed by women and 12 by men (even if the percentage of films by female directors in Germany is even lower; LOIST; PROMMER, 2019). Both long-established filmmakers and, although less frequently, young upcoming talents (such as Nora Fingscheidt with her first fiction feature film *System Crasher*, which won eight German Film Awards in 2020) are represented, and all films in the sample received extensive public funding. Finally, the research material was complemented by additional documents (in particular, public statements by the filmmakers, information provided by distributors as well as film reviews), which were also analyzed with the aid of the category system, too.

Findings

In light of the study's theoretical background, this section retraces the most important characteristics of the discursive construction of family in contemporary German feature film, though space only allows for the inclusion of limited source-based evidence to support the successive stages of the argument. As a result, not all films of the sample can be discussed in the same detail or even sufficiently.

Dominant ideas of family

If one looks at the substantive content of the 20 analyzed feature films in terms of family matters, the first impression that inevitably arises is that family life in Germany — always with children, by the way — does not function well at all. Instead, family appears to be full of tensions and conflicts, where stress, excessive demands, and disappointments are the order of the day and happiness or a harmonious life is a long way off. More specifically, the films of the sample portray mothers and fathers who are absent, who have set other priorities in their lives (mainly their jobs, but also, though rarely, love affairs) and who neglect their family responsibilities. Unsurprisingly, we also see underage children who are lonely and left to their own devices, who have psychological problems due to their lack of care, or who are faced with parental expectations that they do not meet. In addition, the focus is on grandparents who have become needy but for whom there seems to be no place, on close family members who have lost sight of each other over the years, and, last but not least, albeit less frequently, on family crises triggered by illness or death that call future family life into question.

It must be emphasized, however, that the dominant ideas of family presented in German feature films do not stop at this point. Rather, the challenges or problems are then framed differently, since the films' plots come to another end, as the domestic conflicts almost always find a satisfactory solution, no matter how great the centrifugal forces. In the 2015 box office hit *The Manny*, for example, directed and co-written by Matthias Schweighöfer, the extremely busy real-estate developer "Clemens," whose two children rarely get to see him, mutates into a loving and caring family man. In the prize-winning 2016 comedy *The Bloom of Yesterday*, which involves the right way to deal with Germany's Nazi past and was written and directed by Chris Kraus, the 40-year-old Holocaust researcher "Totila Blume" and his wife finally put an end to their infidelities, and their small family with an adopted daughter experiences a positive transformation. In *Ms.*

Mueller Must Go, a 2015 school comedy directed by Sönke Wortmann, the parents of fourth graders realize that they do not really know their children and get a lesson in parenting from the class teacher. In the chart breaker tragicomedy *Head Full of Honey*, the quirky and trouble causing "Grandpa Amandus," who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, is not simply put into a nursing home after all, but accompanied until his death by his close family and his beloved 11-year-old granddaughter "Tilda." The 2016 comedy-drama *Toni Erdmann* is about the urgent and finally successful attempt of the retired high school teacher "Winfried Conradi" to gain access to the life of his adult daughter "Ines," a management consultant, and to revive the father-daughter relationship. The 2018 road movie *25 km/h*, directed by Markus Goller and produced for a broad target audience, presents "Christian" and "Georg," two quite different brothers around 50 years of age who had not been in contact for a long time. However, after their father's funeral, they spontaneously realize a childhood dream and ride across Germany on a moped, thus reconciling and getting closer to each other again. In turn, director Caroline Link's 2018 biopic *All About Me* focuses on the childhood of the German comedian Hape Kerkeling about 40 years ago. It depicts how the pudgy boy "Hans-Peter" grows up in the security of his relatives, especially his two grandmothers. Their love and care become even more important after the suicide of his depressed mother, enabling him to survive the ensuing emotional turmoil, use his comedic talents to heal his wounds, and eventually start his career as an entertainer.

All of these examples illustrate that the construction of family reality in German feature films ultimately pleads, contrary to what it might initially seem, for social cohesion, integration and respectful, loving and caring interaction, combined with recognition of the high value of functioning family structures in life. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that such an optimistic view is by no means characteristic only of mainstream productions, because even beyond family entertainment and romantic comedies, there is

at least a serious attempt to reach out to one another and achieve harmonious coexistence in domestic life. In fact, this dominant formation of meaning remains the same even in the few exceptions from the non-mainstream sector, in which crises cannot be overcome. This applies, in particular, to the 2016 drama *A Heavy Heart*, directed and co-written by Thomas Stuber, in which the aging East German boxer "Herbert" tries to mend his broken relationship with his daughter "Sandra" shortly before his death, but is met with rejection. It is also true for *System Crasher*, in which a nine-year-old girl "Benni," abandoned by her mother and considered aggressive and wayward, falls through the framework of the state support system for children and youth, so that the only option left is a closed psychiatric ward. In any case, there are no winners in these two rather depressing first feature films.

Legitimate speakers in family matters

The considerable optimism German feature films convey with regard to the family is also due to the fact that the challenges or problems depicted are not as serious or existential at the end of the day. In fact, real abysses or hardships resulting from structural disadvantages in terms of race, class and gender, for example, rarely play a role in most of the 20 films in the sample. More precisely, taking a critical look at the protagonists who speak and act legitimately in family matters reveals that almost exclusively small families with heteronormative parents from the upper middle class are portrayed. Five films—all blockbuster comedies, including *The Manny* and *Welcome to Germany*, and also *High Society* from 2017, written and directed by Annika Decker—even focus on the very rich upper class represented by entrepreneurs, managers, and chief physicians who live in large, palatial mansions, drive super-expensive cars and constantly jet back and forth between Europe and Asia. Surprisingly enough, single fathers are more likely to be found portrayed in the families than mothers. But this setting is apparently just to give the films a modern look or fulfill satirical purposes, because their double

role usually causes no significant problems for the film fathers.

However, the majority of German feature film's legitimate speakers in family matters are not only unaware of financial or material worries. As the analysis shows, they are also often quite young, good-looking and in the best of health, or at least hardly marked by their advanced age, and additionally almost never have a migration background. Furthermore, it is important to mention that, especially in mainstream productions, their crisis management strategy is to abandon ego trips, to put professional careers aside, since resource problems rarely exist, and to resort to traditional, rather conservative role models. In the 2014 gender slapstick movie *Men Refuge*, for instance, directed by Franziska Meyer Price, four men flee their regular life and the demands of their partnerships, indulging their masculinity in a secret hobby room in the cellar, until they realize that soccer, beer, and crude sayings will not solve their luxury problems. In the immigration comedy *Welcome to Germany*, the physician "Richard," who is getting up in age, finally decides to retire and take better care of his marriage, also thanks to "Diallo," an Nigerian refugee taken in by the family, whereas his son "Philip," a business lawyer on the verge of collapse, turns down a job offer in Shanghai in order to spend more time with his adolescent offspring "Basti," who is in serious trouble at school.

This is somewhat similar to the previously mentioned greedy real estate developer "Clemens" in *The Manny*, who lets the deal for a big project in Berlin fall through at the last second due to pressure from his two children and their nanny, and instead embarks on a spontaneous vacation trip with all three of them. *Head Full of Honey*, in turn, is not only about "Niko," who is willing to show more family commitment after his daughter runs away from home to Venice with her grandfather suffering from dementia, but also his wife "Sarah" who ends the love affair with her boss and quits her job to fully live up her role as a selfless mother and a helpful daughter-in-law. Even voluntary family structures seem to be

more important than personal egoism, as shown in the 2020 comedy *Granny Nanny*, directed by Wolfgang Groos, about three senior citizens who arrange to have grandchildren on loan through an agency.

In the films of the sample that are more middle ground or tend toward non-mainstream productions, the main protagonists' background and settings are undoubtedly more diverse and their characters and perspectives are more complex. However, as the analysis reveals, almost all legitimate speakers here as well have a fairly high level of education, behave in a civilized manner, and consequently deal with conflicts with great prudence and empathy. Hence, significantly, references to values such as understanding, tolerance, and willingness to compromise are the dominant means of choice, even at the expense of giving up long-cherished wishes and goals, if necessary. In the ambitious art drama *24 Weeks*, to give just one example, which was written and directed by Anne Berrached and which premiered in competition at the 2016 Berlin International Film Festival, the cabaret performer "Astrid," who is six months pregnant, and her supportive husband and manager "Markus" learn that their unborn child will be severely disabled. For the couple, who are used to making every decision together, a late-term abortion is initially out of question. But then "Astrid" begins to have doubts as to whether the child will have a life worth living and whether she, as the mother, will have the necessary strength. She feels increasingly lost, and finally decides with a heavy heart to end the pregnancy. "Markus," on his part, takes a completely different view, but ultimately accepts this decision, stands by his wife, and thus ensures that their relationship does not break down despite this stroke of fate.

Of course, there are also films in the sample, albeit very few, that focus on socially weak milieus (the losers of reunification in East Germany in *A Heavy Heart*, the petite bourgeoisie in 1970s West Germany in *All About Me*), portray interculturality (the German-Turkish community in Hamburg in the courtroom and revenge drama *In the Fade*, directed and co-written by Fatih Akin) or discuss

non-heterosexual orientations (the love of two teenage girls in Berlin in the 2020 coming-of-age film *Cocoon*, written and directed by Leonie Krippendorff). But all in all, these exceptions rather confirm the rule. Beyond that, it is significant that children are always and immediately presented as legitimate speakers, fighting for the cohesion and survival of the family and standing for the true values and priorities in life. In *Head Full of Honey*, once again, it is mainly "Tilda" who wants to see "Grandpa Amandus" integrated into the family despite his dementia and ensures a change of attitude among the parents. Similarly, in *System Crasher* it is not "Benni" who is to blame for her hopeless situation, but the environment, which fails to create a stable family structure. The same goes for director Theresa von Eltz's first feature film *4 Kings* from 2015, in which four traumatized teenagers have to spend Christmas in a home because their parents are not willing to take responsibility for them.

Rhetoric

The line of reasoning underlying the discursive construction of family in German feature films should hardly come as a surprise at this point. First, all of the films in the sample leave no doubt that only with intact family structures does it seem possible to cope with everyday life and find genuine happiness. More so, family definitely promises greater happiness than any other area of life, whereas material wealth, for instance, despite the large space it is given, paradoxically plays no role at all, as shown in *High Society*, which satirically deals with mistaken identities and the clash of social classes. Correspondingly, it is argued that if the family bond is lost, happiness is denied. This is the case of "Benni" in *System Crasher*, for whom there is little chance of recovery in a closed psychiatric ward. It is also true for the young woman "Katja" in *In the Fade*, who, after her Turkish husband and adorable young son are killed in a neo-Nazi bomb attack, considers vigilante justice and suicide as the only way out. In the equally award-winning and monumental 2018 coming-of-age drama *Never*

Look Away, written and directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, the painter "Kurt Barnert" (inspired by Gerhard Richter) at least manages, albeit after more than two decades and several political system changes, to artistically process the trauma of losing his beloved aunt, the only real person of reference in his childhood, who was deported and killed during the Third Reich.

Second, and closely linked to the latter, family is semantically framed as a place of love, care and support that offers protection and security. Furthermore, it provides strength and self-confidence and is thus essential for the growing up of children and adolescents or, even more generally, for personal development and self-fulfillment as well as for mastering crises. In this spirit, with reference to two film examples that have not yet been mentioned, the 2018 romantic musical comedy *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, which follows the play *Cyrano de Bergerac* and was directed and co-written by Aron Lehmann, shows how the shy teenager "Cyril," a talented rapper but teased by his classmates because of his long nose, dares to confess his love to "Roxy," the new girl at school, thanks to his parents' encouragement. Director Marc Rothemund's 2017 tragicomedy *My Blind Date with Life*, in turn, retraces how the ambitious "Saliya," who almost entirely lost his eyesight at the age of 15, graduates from a regular high school and successfully completes the training as a clerk and waiter in a five-star hotel, which, especially at the beginning, he owes to the great support of his mother and sister.

Finally, third, despite all familiarity, we learn that domestic life is very often the place of a gainful confrontation with new and different elements. This refers to the integration of hitherto largely unknown perspectives coming from outside (through a refugee with another cultural background taken in, through a nanny from a completely different social milieu), as well as from long-time family members (the old father, the long-lost brother), which results in a comprehensive reassessment of one's own thinking and behavior. Ethical principles or common moral concepts thus eventually gain acceptance in family life.

This rhetoric is completed by the audio-visual configuration, which supports the presented reality construction. Even though it is impossible to make a singular statement that applies to the entire body of film material, it can be said that the design of most of the analyzed feature films is strikingly conventional, with little in the way of boldness or aesthetic experimentation. In addition to the classic composition of the films (linear storytelling, schematized usage of three-act structure), genre traditions are strictly followed without exception. In this spirit, the comedy films of the sample, especially in the mainstream sector, are characterized by happy endings, exaggerations, and an emphasis on humor, but without omitting social commentaries, whereas the tragicomedies are softer, more expressive, and thoughtful. The coming-of-age films particularly focus on the protagonists' personal development and always include lessons learned, using perfectly clear dialogs and a lot of nature metaphors, and the road movies equally highlight processes of self-discovery, combined with adventures and the feeling of freedom. The pure drama films, located almost exclusively in the art sector, strive for authenticity (via natural acting, everyday language, the integration of hand camera shots and the abstinence of loud coloring). They also rely on emotional force (with an intense focus on the protagonists' conflicts, using close-ups, long shots, and dramatic music), which both underlines the seriousness of their concerns and simultaneously triggers a high recognition effect and involvement. However, there is little irritation or provocation. Instead, a clear leading of the spectator's positioning can be discerned, which hardly allows for ambiguity or alternative interpretations.

Conclusion

Based on the assumption that the film medium in Germany, which is largely sponsored by the state, reflects struggles for legitimate meaning, this paper has critically examined the construction of family in German cinema in the digital era. The preceding findings leave no need for

an extensive summary. Drawing on a discourse theoretical research approach, the analysis of 20 outstanding German feature films dealing with family matters from the past decade reveals that the filmic construction of domestic life in Germany arguably has a political dimension, referring mainly to ideological implications resulting from the state patronage of the medium. More precisely, German feature films' text-image relationships push forward three discourses, which arise from the interplay of presented ideas of family, legitimate speakers in family matters, and rhetoric. This tends to promote *social cohesion* (through an integrative approach), *private happiness* (essential for individual fulfillment, stronger than any other external requirement), and *ethics* (via self-reflection in everyday life and a continuous renegotiating of norms).

On one hand, one might argue that in a democratic system like the Federal Republic of Germany, which emphasizes the protection of individual liberty and general welfare while at the same time considering family life to be the core of social coexistence, such meaning-making is probably the best message for movies financed above all by state funding institutions. However, while German feature films obviously contribute to the socially shaped regime of understanding the world and support society's power-knowledge structures (FOUCAULT, 1972), the spectrum of family images, on the other hand, is limited, especially in those films that strive for a broad audience.

To make the point, social gaps, fears for the future, discrimination, and exclusion, which are particularly prevalent in families with many children, low incomes, precarious housing situations, poor levels of education, few opportunities for advancement, migration contexts, and in families whose members are people of color or have sexual orientations and identities that do not correspond to the majority, are largely left out. Even the daily challenges of jigsaw families or of single parents threatening to break down from the double burden of family and job are hardly addressed, and divorces seem to be just

as non-existent, not to mention domestic violence. Thus, to conclude, it cannot be denied that despite cultural and technological changes, the most successful German film output dealing with family matters in the digital era constructs rather idealistic scenarios of domestic life, which are backward-looking and hardly progressive, neglecting much of what family means in Germany today.

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