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Listening In/To *Germany, Pale Mother*

Kate Lacey



[Link to film clip in criticalcommons.org: "Listening To/In GERMANY, PALE MOTHER"](https://www.criticalcommons.org/clip/listening-to-in-germany-pale-mother)

Thirty-four years after its original release to mixed reviews [1] and just three months before the director's death at the age of 73, a newly restored version of Helma Sanders-Brahms' 1980 film, *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* (*Germany, Pale Mother*), was premiered in the 2014 programme of "Berlinale Classics". [2] In this now celebrated film, Sanders-Brahms tells a fictionalised version of her mother's experience of marriage and motherhood through the "Third Reich" and beyond; but it is also her passionate critique of how postwar historiography and film-making in Germany were dealing with this troubled past, and her controversial response to the challenging questions of everyday collusion, complicity and resistance.

The film opens with a recital of Brecht's 1933 poem (by his daughter, Hanne Hiob), from which the film takes its title. It includes a stanza about how in Germany the truth must remain silent, while lies are roared aloud. This dialectical interplay between sound and silence, truth and untruth, home and homeland runs right through this complex, compelling film, a film that therefore traverses the shadow lines between the personal and the political, between past and present, between memory, art and history. But it is also the story of a family – specifically, a daughter's memoir of her mother. The daughter-director (Helma as Anna) narrates the film in a voice-over addressed to her mother (the protagonist of the film, Lene, played by Eva Mattes). This is the mother who, as we hear in the opening scene, had had to learn to keep silent,

but from whom the daughter had learned to speak, from whom she had learned her “mother-tongue.” The daughter-director’s intimate, self-reflexive address to her mother positions the film audience in the role of eavesdropper, but also grounds the audience in the present tense, inviting a constant awareness of and reflection on the distance – temporal and metaphorical – between the events of the past and the moment of their remembering, or “working through.”

Much has been made in the literature on this film about its intercutting of the fictionalized memoir with documentary film footage – the most celebrated moment being where the protagonist, Lene, seems to be engaged in a conversation with a young boy filmed among the rubble of Berlin in 1945. But the soundtrack, too, perhaps to an even greater extent, is a tapestry of sounds woven together from both “authentic” archival recordings and imagined reconstructions. A key source of “original” sound is the radio archive, and radio is used as a leitmotif throughout the film to highlight the inextricability of public and private histories. The radio brings the sound of public life, of speeches and rallies, performances and propaganda, into domestic space, and serves as a wider metaphor for the ways in which the state and the Party invisibly – but pervasively and persistently – insinuated its way into everyday life.

The radio first appears on screen when Lene turns on her wireless when her new husband Hans’s Nazi friends come to call on them. The soundtrack foregrounds the sounds of Hitler’s birthday rally almost to the point of drowning out the women’s mundane exchanges about the newly laundered curtains as they ostensibly ignore the broadcast. It is the loyal Nazi party member who has to draw the others’ attention to what Hitler is saying on the radio about wanting peace – a message immediately, and melodramatically belied as Hans opens his call-up letter.

In another scene a little later, the strident chant of “Sieg Heil” blasts from the radio as Anna and her sister watch the widow of a fallen soldier walk past their window to the graveyard. The public propaganda of victory on the march is shown to be clearly at odds with the lived experience of women on the home front.

The third time our focus is drawn to the radio, it is the sight of a *Volksempfänger* (People’s Receiver) at the foot of a sand dune somewhere in France, its loudspeaker insistently overlaying the occupied territory with a voice from the Fatherland. The radio announcements continue to underscore the soundtrack as a member of Hans’ squadron reads out a list of names and birthdates with cold, bureaucratic efficiency. The names belong to a troupe of resistance fighters (including a woman—played by Mattes—who reminds Hans of his wife), as they are led to the top of the dune to meet their execution.

As these scenes show, “his master’s voice” (the radio voices are invariably male), disembodied and dislocated, but thoroughly normalised, invades and territorialises spaces both private and public, domestic and foreign, banal and brutal. Each time, the sounds of the radio are situated by a close-up or a narrative framing of the wireless set in order to signal the documentary provenance of the audio, and to draw attention explicitly to the manipulations of the soundscape and to the different modes of listening experience presented – attentive or absent-minded, resistant or involved, indifferent or inspired. Each time, it seems the radio is tuned to some bombastic propaganda event – a Party rally, a victorious news report or, at the end of the clip described below, the

famous *Weihnachtsringsendung*, a technical and propaganda coup in which troops stationed across the occupied territories broadcast in relay their Christmas greetings to the Fatherland and unite in a rendition of “Silent Night.”[3]

Most of the output on German radio of the period was not, however, of this order. Goebbels was too sophisticated a propagandist to think that an unrelenting diet of undiluted indoctrination would keep audiences tuning in, so the schedules continued to broadcast their fair share of musical distraction and light entertainment. The point, though, is not to suggest that Sanders-Brahms was ignorant of this fact – indeed, precisely the opposite. In her selection of this archetypal Nazi fare over a more “representative” sample of the broadcast output of the era, Sanders-Brahms is in fact drawing a subtle distinction between history and memory in her film. This is not about objective, documented history from the outside, but about subjective, reconstructed memory from the inside. These strident radio voices form the soundtrack to a past constructed in collective memory; they serve as an acoustic shorthand that immediately transport later generations to this particular time and place in history, and that signify, perhaps, the “otherness” of this particular regime.

The clip I've chosen for closer analysis immediately follows the execution scene described above. As the distant row of silhouetted figures falls in a hail of bullets, the screen fades to black as the sound of gunfire continues to echo; and then the soundtrack cuts to an air-raid sounding over the heavy breathing as Lene enters the final throes of childbirth. While the camera lingers tight on Lene's pain-wracked face, the soundtrack foregrounds the engine-noise of the approaching bombers and the onset of the attack, almost obscuring the calm and soothing encouragement of the midwife's voice. When Lene moans that “it's coming again,” the ambiguity of whether she means the next contraction or the next bombardment is clearly intentional. Suddenly, the image changes to catch up with the soundtrack, cutting to documentary footage of a bombing raid – though clearly the unsynchronised sound does still not quite “belong.” The scene continues to cut between the mother giving birth and the planes raining death on the city below. The soundtrack builds to a crescendo, the midwife's instructions and the mother's screams eventually competing with the sound of destruction in pitch and volume, until the child is welcomed into the world with the midwife's exclamation, “Heil Hitler, it's a girl!” These are words which remind us – and Lene – that the state intrudes even into this most intimate and private moment. On screen we see (in a cut away, presumably, to more “documentary” footage) the newborn baby, covered in blood, umbilical cord still intact, lying on the bloodied sheets, as the non-diegetic piano theme (a parallel narrative voice throughout the film) gently resurfaces, and the daughter's voiceover returns to say, “As they cut me from you, Lene, I fell onto a battlefield.” The image cuts to more documentary footage taken from a plane flying over the devastated city, as Anna's voiceover observes that, “So much of what I could not yet see, was already kaput”: a child born into a broken land and into a broken past that would shape the physical and psychical landscape of her future yet to come.

This scene was the subject of much controversy, criticized for its overly simplistic opposing of life-bearing women and death-dealing men; but there is more to it than that, not least if we remember that motherhood during this period had itself been conscripted to the Nazi cause. For one thing, it is an avowedly feminist rejection of the pallid representations of childbirth in mainstream cinema, where the screams of pain

are muted, the long, slow duration edited out, the bloodied sheets whitewashed over with demure references to hot water and clean towels, and where, as often as not, the camera turns away from the woman in childbirth altogether, to focus on the expectant father pacing up and down outside. But beyond all that, the scene represents a critical re-calibration of what counts as a momentous event in the course of a life – the birth of a first child being a powerful personal recollection that competes in the memory with the unfolding of world-historical events. It recognises that battles come in many forms, and that personal life stories continue to advance in times of great social and political upheaval – and deserve to be told.

The sound design in the scene is interesting. At one level it is anything but subtle – the sirens and the distant engine noises presage the deafening bombing raid itself, while the midwife's gentle coaxing and Lene's heavy breathing gradually give rise to more insistent instructions and primal screams. But again, the very technique of mirroring and overlapping these two competing soundscapes produces a distancing effect. While the image track switches between the two spaces, the soundtrack requires the audience to imaginatively inhabit them simultaneously. The dualism that Sanders-Brahms sets up in this scene is not either/or, but both/and. Moreover, the realism of the images – switching between the fictional and documentary – contrasts with the symbolic artifice of the soundtrack that binds together this private life with the public history. Neither of the two women on screen seems aware of the sirens or the impending raid, and it is only by association, rather than by any profilmic evidence that we imagine the birth scene to be happening *during* an air raid. Again, it seems that Sanders-Brahms is manipulating the soundtrack to help reconstruct what must have been the overriding *sense impression* of bearing a child during wartime – rather than reconstructing a particular historical moment in time. Or rather, she is reconstructing how she must have imagined since childhood her mother's experience of childbirth in the midst of war. As the voiceover re-enters the soundtrack, we are reminded that this scene is told from the viewpoint of the child who cannot have "remembered" these events, but can only have pieced them together from stories her mother must have told her, combined with what she had come to know of the war from other histories and documentary footage. For some critics – perhaps focusing in the traditional way on the film as image – this scene exemplified their view that Sanders-Brahms was guilty of making a film that suggested women stood outside of History, and were therefore exonerated from responsibility and guilt for the crimes committed in their name. Attending to the interplay of sound and image, however, allows for a more complex, contradictory and nuanced reading. Moreover, the very realism of the birthing scene, with its screams and blood and pain, seems to insist that this is precisely about this very particular, very embodied woman, and that she should precisely not be read as an abstracted cipher for Womanhood or Motherhood. Meanwhile, the ghostly aerial images of the documentary footage do work at some level as "stock images" of war, ripped from their particularity to stand in for the destruction of total war in general. Put together, the scene disrupts conventional assumptions about historical documentation, authenticity and representation.

In a sudden change of scene, as the camera pans slowly across a darkened set, we hear, for the first time, a male voiceover. But this, as the camera soon reveals, is not the autobiographical voiceover of a memory being shared, but the live (or as live) commentary of a radio reporter accompanying a group of combat soldiers on a long, cold train journey to their next deployment to the Eastern front; among them is Lene's

husband, whom we see gazing longingly by the light of a match at a small black and white photograph of his wife and newborn daughter. A hand reaches out to him, as if to offer a torchlight; but it is the reporter, sensing a human interest story, pressing the microphone for him to tell his story. But Hans refuses to speak, content in his reverie. Soon, the film cuts to a close-up of a radio dial, from which the reporter's voice continues to evoke the scene inside the carriage for the listeners at home – including Lene and her daughter, as the precious photograph now seems to come to life (the artifice in this change of scene again clearly signifying how the film – and family history in general - is reconstructed from the still lives handed down in family albums).

As the evocative commentary continues, for a moment Sanders-Brahms lets us see how the radio was used as a means to connect the home front with the front line, not so much as a channel of information, but as a space of shared experience and imagination. Lene seems transported by the reporter's poetic turn of phrase and gentle intonation as he describes the hardships and the fears facing the men as they are transported into war. The sonorous tones of the reporter's reverie work almost as a lullaby, seeming even, perhaps, to echo the gentle blandishments of the midwife in the preceding scene, a moment to treasure the calm before the onset of battle. In aestheticising an aggressive military operation, the radio report still functions as propaganda, but the director allows us to see how broadcasting even under these conditions could still function as a means of communication – of *connection* – rather than just dissemination. Moreover, in Hans' refusal to share his private thoughts for public consumption, there is a small moment of resistance. As his body is physically transported and poetically described to serve the will of the Fatherland, he keeps his thoughts to himself. It is a small moment that adds another dimension to the film's treatment of the shifting power relations of speech and silence, and of different registers of truth-telling. Finally, though, the soundtrack segues from this fictionalised reportage to the archive recording of the *Weihnachtsringsendung*, the sympathetic voice that had momentarily acknowledged the soldiers as vulnerable individual men overtaken again by the propaganda version of an invincible, unified army. But as the scene closes, the lie of that propaganda voice is exposed by the overpowering sound of the air-raid siren and the vision of Lene with her pram picking her way through the flaming rubble to a shelter, and to survival.

Listening to the sound of *Germany, Pale Mother*, then, draws attention to the representation of listening in the film, and not least the representation of listening to the radio as a site of competing politics and experience. But more than that, listening to the film sound reveals a complex composition of recorded and (re-)constructed sound that amplifies the film's problematisation of the relationship between public history and private memory and the competing claims to authenticity and authority in telling the stories of the past. The different registers of sound in the film at turns underscore or undermine the authority of the image, reinforcing the sense of the fragile and fragmentary access to historical truth.

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Notes

[1] Ellen E. Seiter, "Women's history, Women's Melodrama: *Deutschland, Bleiche Mutter*," *German Quarterly* 59, (1986): 573; Angelika Bammer, "Through a daughter's eyes: Helma Sanders-Brahms' *Germany, Pale Mother*," *New German Critique* 36, special issue on Heimat (Autumn 1985): 94; Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: the Return of History as Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 250.

[2]

https://www.berlinale.de/en/archiv/jahresarchive/2014/02_programm_2014/02_Filmdat_enblatt_2014_20147554.php#tab=filmStills

[3] Ansgar Diller, "Die Weihnachtsringsendung 1942: Der Produktionsfahrplan der RRG," *Rundfunk und Geschichte* 29 (Jan./Apr. 2003): 47-51.

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