

Women at work: Reflections on Social Identity and the Private Self in *Die Polizistin* (2000), *Willenbrock* (2005) and *Steigerlied* (2013)

JEAN E. CONACHER

In August 2013, the Thalia cinema in Potsdam marked Andreas Dresen's fiftieth birthday with a gala performance of all his films, including his most recent fifteen-minute documentary, *Steigerlied*, depicting a day in the life of Daniela Kabuth, a young worker at an open-cast mine in the Lausitz area south of Berlin. Dresen suggests *Steigerlied* constitutes an attempt to rectify the increasing lack of attention afforded the working world and workers in different media, despite their central role in driving society forwards and providing support for others.¹ Such sentiments may undoubtedly be traced, in part at least, to Dresen's upbringing in the GDR, the problematically self-designated 'workers' and peasants' state' which collapsed shortly before he completed his film studies at Potsdam's *Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen* (HFF). Indeed, Dresen himself acknowledges that the unwelcome requirement for all HFF students to spend time making documentaries of working people in their work-places opened his eyes to a genre which he might otherwise have ignored and which unexpectedly proved central to the creative process in his later work.²

For over forty years, DEFA itself produced a broad range of both documentaries and feature films glorifying the efforts of manual workers or critiquing the experiences of the working class.³ Directors such as Kurt Maetzig (*Das Kaninchen bin ich* / *The Rabbit is Me*, banned in the aftermath of the Eleventh Plenary of the Central Committee of the SED in 1965), Lothar Warneke (*Unser kurzes Leben* / *Our Short Life*, the 1981 film version of Brigitte Reimann's posthumous novel, *Franziska Linkerhand*) and Jürgen Böttcher (documentaries –

1 See Hans-Dieter Schütt, *Andreas Dresen Glücks Spiel* (Berlin: be.bra, 2013), pp.73-148, specifically p.131 and Heidi Jäger, "Ich hatte nie ganz große Lebensträume". Interview with Andreas Dresen', *Potsdam Kurier*, 16 August 2013, p.23.

2 Andreas Dresen, "Ein bisschen Kunst ohne Risiko geht nicht ..." Werkstattgespräch mit Andreas Dresen an der HFF "Konrad Wolf" Potsdam-Babelsberg', in Thomas Schick and Tobias Ebbrecht (eds.), *Kino in Bewegung. Perspektiven des deutschen Gegenwartsfilms* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011), pp.343-63, here p.348.

3 Nick Hodgin, "Only one noble topic remained: the workers." Sympathy, subtlety and subversion in East German documentary films', *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, (2015) 6:1, pp.49-63, esp. pp.51-53.

Stars, 1963; *Wäscherinnen* / Washerwomen, 1972; *Die Küche* / The Kitchen, 1986) also depict the specific challenges facing women in the working world.⁴ Against this background, therefore, Dresen's portrayal of Daniela Kabuth is less unusual than might appear to viewers in 2013 – for both ideological and economic reasons, women working in traditionally male domains were the norm in the GDR, so that the short film *Steigerlied*, without making direct reference to this, continues a tradition stretching back over sixty years.⁵ Equally, it might be argued that Kabuth shares the experience of many of the female characters Dresen portrays in his fictional work, as they endeavour to balance their professional and private lives, often under the gaze of male colleagues and partners.

Invoking the perspective of what Laura Mulvey in the mid-1970s termed the 'male gaze',⁶ this chapter primarily explores representations of women at work in *Die Polizistin* and *Willenbrock*, before returning briefly to *Steigerlied*. It analyses the extent to which Dresen's chosen genres – feature film, literary adaptation and even documentary – in each case depict work as offering female characters opportunities for personal and professional development and self-expression and examines to what extent this experience, which in the GDR was arguably the norm, is now challenged both by the gaze of individual male characters (and, indeed, by Dresen and his team) and by the self-reflection of the women characters themselves. Dresen depicts female workers in *Halbe Treppe*, in which Katrin who works in a lorry park finds herself like Daniela in an otherwise male environment, as well as *Sommer vorm Balkon* (agency nurse and unemployed shop-window decorator), *Wolke 9* (part-time seamstress) and *Halt auf freier Strecke* (tram driver). In *Die Polizistin*, *Willenbrock* and *Steigerlied* he problematizes this central theme more acutely than elsewhere, however. The broader discussion of representations of women at work is underpinned by a closer interpretation of example scenes. Focusing on a combined

4 Andrea Rinke notes the number of women directors working for DEFA was extremely low (three out of around thirty in the period 1946-1992). Andrea Rinke, 'From Models to Misfits: Women in DEFA films of the 1970s and 1980s', in Seán Allen and John Sandford, *DEFA: East German Cinema* (Oxford / New York: Berghahn, 1999), pp. 183-203, here p. 184. As a result, the vast majority of cinematic portrayals of women remains under the direction of men.

5 According to Friedrich Engels, of course, it is the ability to work which empowers human beings to control their environment and sets them apart from animal behaviour and desires, with work being the source of all wealth and the very basis of human life. ('Anteil der Arbeit an der Menschenwerdung des Affen', in Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Wladimir Iljitsch Lenin, *Über Kultur, Ästhetik, Literatur* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1987), pp. 40-42).

6 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in Marc Furstenuau (ed.), *The Film Theatre Reader. Debates and Arguments* (London/New York, Routledge, 2010), pp. 200-208, here p. 203 (originally published 1975).

analysis of content and cinematic technique, this approach reveals how both constructions of public and private space and the interplay of gender expectations, stereotypes and performance prove central to Dresen's exploration of female social identity and the private self in post-communist Germany.

The 'male gaze'

Mulvey's interest in the concept of the 'male gaze' arose from her exploration of how directorial decisions might position the image of the female figure at the centre of the erotic pleasure of male audiences, drawing both viewed and viewer (including, at one remove, a complicit audience) into an inter-twining of exhibitionism and voyeurism. For Mulvey, arguing from a feminist perspective, 'the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure ... In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed'.⁷ The male protagonist is thus 'free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action',⁸ although he continues to be threatened by the object of his desire, a situation which can only be overcome, in Freudian terms, by the degradation or fetishisation of the female image. By the early 1980s, Mulvey's inherent assumption that the audience is always male (or constructed as such) is challenged by E. Ann Kaplan in her exploration of how feminist theory potentially impacts upon our understandings of the nature of the female spectator.⁹ Concluding that the almost simultaneous historical emergence of Freudian psychoanalysis and the cinema creates an inextricable link between the two fields, Kaplan argues that film representations of women must first inevitably be considered through the theoretical lens of psychoanalysis in order to understand how its findings can be challenged.¹⁰

Within the context of Dresen's films, it is important, therefore, not only to consider the roles female characters play, how they are viewed by their male counterparts and how they see themselves, but also to pay particular attention to shot composition, selection and juxtaposition. The director's long-established preference for working with a core team of colleagues and the value he clearly places on this dynamic interaction means that the input of trusted and influential script-writers, camera-people and post-production editors combines with Dresen's directive

7 Ibid., p. 203.

8 Ibid., p. 205.

9 Ann E. Kaplan 'Is the Gaze Male?', in Marc Furstenau (ed.), *The Film Theatre Reader. Debates and Arguments* (London/New York, Routledge, 2010), pp. 209-221 (originally published in 1983).

10 Ibid., p. 217.

decisions to bring the final cinematic product to the screen with greater effect than might be the case in more transitory working constellations.¹¹

Die Polizistin

As former post-office worker Anne Küster (Gabriela Maria Schmeide) begins her new job in a Rostock police station, her gender is apparently of little importance, the traditional ‘experienced rookie cop’ script instead takes precedence.¹² As she confides in a voiceover, Anna is seeking adventure, professional fulfilment and --- a man. Entering a male-only preserve, she is immediately partnered with a married colleague, Mike (Axel Prah, who plays the male lead again in *Willenbrock*). Nonetheless, an unspoken question clearly remains for her male colleagues (and perhaps also for herself) around her capacity as a woman to be a ‘complete cop’; this question appears resolved when she deals aggressively with an escaping criminal in the one scene which (as Stieler explains in the accompanying DVD audio-commentary) female police officers, generally critical of the passive depiction of Anne, deemed true to life. The cinematic treatment of her spontaneous authoritative reaction here contrasts sharply with that of her subsequent examination of a suspected female thief and prostitute who has also suffered major physical violence. The high wall and enveloping darkness of the arrest-scene which serve to isolate Anne and the as-yet-unknown looter from her colleagues contrast sharply with the harsh artificial light of the examination-room where the enforced intimacy of helping the female suspect undress is intensified by the knowledge of her male colleagues’ presence on the other side of the door. The thick walls of the examination-room, originally designed to confine its inmates, instead create a private space for the two women, shut off from the male-dominated public space beyond. The only potential breach in this boundary is provided by the small window in the door, through which Mike is seen to glance occasionally. The dichotomy of public-private space established in this scene is central; the scene also introduces two further themes to which

11 Interview mit Andreas Dresen, *vierundzwanzig.de*, p. 10. While Dresen both wrote and directed *Steigerlied*, his longest-standing collaborator, Laila Stieler, was scriptwriter for both *Die Polizistin* and *Willenbrock* and Michael Hammon cameraman for all three. Post-production editing on *Die Polizistin* was undertaken by Monika Schindler, while Jörg Hausschild, another frequent collaborator, undertook this role for the subsequent films. For more on the roots of Dresen’s collaborative approach, see my ‘Adapting Hein’s *Willenbrock*: Andreas Dresen and the Legacy of the GDR “Ensemble” Tradition’, in Bernadette Cronin, Rachel MagShamhráin and Nikolai Preuschoff (eds.), *Adaptation as a Collaborative Art – Process and Practice*, Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming.

12 For more on the concept of script, see Jean Matter Mandler, *Stories, Scripts, and Scenes: Aspects of Schema Theory* (Hillsdale, NJ and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1984).

Dresen repeatedly returns in his depiction of the dynamics of male-female relations: objectification and infantilisation.

Where the layered clothing of the unknown looter masks the man who will later become her lover (Jegor), close-up shots of Anne peeling clothes from the female suspect – in movements which, in other circumstances, might produce an erotic effect – now increasingly objectify the woman. This concentration on her de-layering emphasises her gradual transformation from woman to impersonal body. Rather than uncovering her humanity, she is stripped of any human dignity. Increasingly conscious of this process, Anne's initial sympathy turns to empathy and a desire not only to support her suspect, but also to help. Finding the missing wallet, she rather naively hides it from her male colleagues, which ensures that when it is rediscovered her professional reputation suffers: the others' trust in her is broken, as her professional allegiance is deemed compromised by her apparently gender-led solidarity with the female thief.

Only Mike, who has arguably seen the changing dynamics within the private space of the examination-room, steps in on her behalf, re-emphasising her 'rookie' status as a mode of protecting her. Retreating to the locker-room, Anne becomes aware of his presence behind her as she stares into the mirror (Figure 1). This indirect eye-contact cements their recognition of complicity in what has just happened. His subsequent washing of her hands, a part-parental, part-tender gesture echoed later by Jegor, signals the transfer of Mike's professional seniority into the realm of their personal relationship.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Such adult-child interactions, which discourage Anne and the audience from questioning whether she might take greater responsibility for her own actions, are repeated throughout the film. For instance, Mike spins her on the children's roundabout in the middle of a desolate housing-estate, Jegor parallels his saving her from choking on a fishbone with an account of a similar incident with his son Benny and the older officer Albert transforms from sexist misogynist to joking colleague, as she emerges drenched from the woods after getting lost in the search for the missing Benny, and finally to fatherly protector as he picks her up following her escape from Jegor. Ironically, while Anne will have brief sexual relationships with both Mike and Jegor, it is only with Albert that Anne shares a cigarette, that standard cinematic marker of post-coital

intimacy, here instead reaffirming the pair as comrades-in-war against crime. Nonetheless, Albert's remark that she is lucky not to have been raped by Jegor reinforces the underlying threat that any situation can be permanently reduced to a struggle for male-female dominance which can strip away the professional hierarchy of police authority over criminal. Repeatedly, whether in moments of uncertainty or when striving to fulfil her personal needs, Anne reverts to 'performing' her gendered roles – the little girl, the helpless woman requiring protection, or the seductive temptress – and initially this gender performativity achieves her immediate ends.¹³ Only gradually, risking rejection by abandoning this strategy and engaging with others with greater authenticity, does she ultimately gain enduring respect from her male colleagues on her own terms.

This adult-child motif, however, initially drives the plot, as Anne's first arrest is revealed to be Jegor, a small-time thief whose son Benny provides an important thread through the film. Through their double back-story, Anne finds herself drawn to both boy and father, as they are transformed from professional cases to personal causes. Benny shoplifts to raise money for a school trip his mother cannot afford; his estranged father steals to support his relationship with his son. Throughout the film, Dresen draws attention to the double societal standards with which Anne is faced, as she embarks on a short passionate relationship with Jegor which once more breaches professional and private domains. In highlighting Anne's apparent naivety, combined with a steely determination in relation to her symbiotic relationship with Benny (he 'saves' her, as much as she him), Laila Stieler (in the audio-commentary) describes her as 'eigentlich für diesen Job zu gut' [actually too good for this job] and she is repeatedly told by her colleagues that she must toughen up and develop a thicker skin ('eine dickere Haut zulegen'), motifs which place her in the Brechtian tradition of Shen Te, Grusche and Kattrin, all of whom act against their own best interests to protect children, and suggest that it is society, not Anne, that needs to change.¹⁴

13 The term is borrowed from Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution. An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal* (1988) 40:4, pp.519-31.

14 In *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*, *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* and *Mutter Courage* respectively. Considering this Brechtian influence, it is worth noting that, in the same audio-commentary Dresen criticizes his film for its occasionally over-didactic tone. Elsewhere, he notes that what makes Anna unusual is that she ultimately prevails, despite her compassion (see Marco Abel "'There is no Authenticity in the Cinema!': An Interview with Andreas Dresen", *Conversations on Film* 50, April 2009, n.p.

The blurring of lines between public and private occurs in a number of scenes in the film, as the male view is explored, sometimes reinforced and increasingly challenged. In a key scene which both highlights the systemic lack of pre-planning for the introduction of women police officers and plays with standard expectations of the objectification of the female body, Anne discovers there is only one work shower which she and her male colleagues must now share. When she unexpectedly finds Mike using it, both are rather disconcerted by this clash of public and private space. As Anne gets ready, Mike makes efforts to cover their mutual discomfort through humour, but also takes the opportunity to observe her furtively as she undresses. Anne's awareness of this triggers a role reversal, as Mike becomes equally subject to her scrutiny, which both challenges the notion of objectification as an act exclusively the preserve of men and encourages the viewer to explore the boundaries of objectification and physical attraction. The combined Dresen/Hammon gaze on Mike focuses on his almost slapstick efforts to keep his nakedness covered, the camera – and audience – peers over Anne's shoulder, as Mike stretches from behind the shower screen to grab a towel (Figure 2) and she only sees Mike naked as his towel slips for a moment. In contrast, Anne, under the gaze of the camera, undresses with a hesitant determination to act as normal. Their mutual awareness of Mike's gaze is captured in a brief backward glance by Anne, which both silently acknowledges her vulnerability and alludes to her unavailability through placing her momentarily, if with rather less dignity, in the traditional pose of the classical goddess (Figure 3).

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Where the earlier peeling away of layers from the female thief has a dehumanising effect, here Anne is revealed as the woman beneath a professional façade. In fact, as Laila Stieler suggests in the audio-commentary, she becomes increasingly attractive through the film, not just *to* the other characters, but potentially *through* them and their gaze. Objectively, Stieler explains, this happens through the use of makeup and costume. While this subtle transformation may arguably increase our empathy for Anne, it equally deepens our dilemma as to how to interpret, and judge, her motivations and actions.

As we have already seen in the locker-room, Dresen uses mirrors to introduce further perspectives, but they equally represent moments of self-reflection for the main character: as we watch Anne get ready for work a few days later, the focus upon her application of lipstick

reveals this is no ‘warpaint’, no armour against the outside world, no retention of her femininity, but a full-on, conscious assault to make herself more alluring to Mike and to push him to notice her as the woman he has earlier spied beneath the uniform in the shower-room.

Her projected fantasy of their future together is simultaneously revealed, and thwarted, when she learns Mike is minding his sick children; paired now with the older and openly sexist Albert, Anne – finding herself inappropriately ‘painted’ as a woman and hurriedly wiping her lipstick away – faces the type of objectification and gender-stereotyping she and the audience might have more commonly expected in her situation, and in which she has unwittingly become complicit.

Dresen explores the complexities of such objectification and stereotyping in a series of other scenes in the film. In a brief interlude in the local döner café, Anne again appears to collude in her own objectification, as she becomes the focus of the customers’ discussion of her figure. Triggered by her own rather coquettish references to her weight, Mike immediately counters her statement. His subsequent comments are portrayed as a clumsy attempt to put her at ease and make her feel included by drawing the others in the café into an awkward discussion of her outward appearance. The interaction lays bare a fragile line between sexism and flirting in which the power position weaves from one participant to another without resolution.

Within the later disco scene, the dance-floor provides the ultimate site of objectification. The volume of the music prevents all communication or individualism except through outward self-expression and the reception of others through the male and female gaze. As Anne and Jegor first spot one another and then catch each other’s eye, Dresen continually plays with male and female gaze, alternating from one to the other to explore their motivations. Anne appears driven by curiosity and sexual attraction, as her gaze becomes fixed upon the man across the dance-floor. Jegor’s returned gaze, apparently matching her own, must be reinterpreted, however, as he rapidly approaches only to accuse her of harassing him. When she in turns accosts him, as he follows her in a threatening fashion from the disco, it emerges he has viewed purely her professional persona, despite the fact she is dressed casually for a night out.

Anne’s own conflicted attitudes around her growing attraction to Jegor are highlighted again through her professional attire and the cinematic exploitation of mirrors, as, while hand-washing her uniform, she uses a doubling of mirrors to contemplate her situation (Figure 4). Clearly, physical mirrors – like the voice-over used in opening and closing the film – allow the audience to enter the interior, subjective world of the central female figure, while elsewhere she

herself becomes a metaphorical mirror providing access to the inner world of the male characters around her.

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

Equally, the demystification of her police uniform through its domestic treatment here or through Jegor's playful gesture of flipping her police-hat in a moment of personal tension – a gesture which she herself cannot initially replicate – again blurs the boundaries between the personal and the professional. Step by step the uniform ceases to mask her personality but allows it to emerge.

Despite Stieler's comment in the audio-commentary that there is no need for Anne to develop as she is already good (in itself an implicit echoing of socialist realist expectations), she does undergo a process of self-realisation. Both her final accomplished flip of her police-hat, in the gesture learned from Jegor, and her departure from the police-station, her arm easily resting on Benny's shoulders, reveal a new, more confident Anne, comfortably inhabiting her professional and personal personae in a rejection of the insecure performativity of her life to date and a bid to embrace a new authenticity.

Willenbrock

While Christoph Hein's novel about a small-time car-dealer whose seemingly successful existence is shattered by a violent attempted break-in at his holiday cottage places the eponymous male central character at the centre of the plot, Dresen's interpretation of Stieler's film-script emphasises more strongly the important role female characters play in shaping our understanding of him. The surface success of Willenbrock's life is revealed through his initial ability to balance a series of relationships in his private time: with his wife, Susanne, whom he appears to support in her efforts to build herself a career in the fashion industry, with his long-term mistress, the university professor Vera, and with the young student, Anna, to whom he gives an expensive car before embarking on a brief and opportunistic fling. Likewise, in his professional life, he balances working relationships with his Polish head mechanic Jurek, who contributes much to the day-to-day success of the car compound and with the rather shady figure of Dr Krylow, the Russian businessman to whom he sells a steady stream of cars and who, following the break-in, furnishes Willenbrock with a pistol which, once he has used it on a would-be burglar at his home, threatens to destroy his life for ever.

While male figures (the intruders, Krylow and Willenbrock himself) may appear to drive the plot, it is arguably through Dresen's treatment of the three main female characters that much of the true fragility of Willenbrock's inner world is revealed. The first female figure to be introduced is Vera, with whom Willenbrock has clearly enjoyed a long-term open relationship in which both sides seem to understand the rules of the game. She knows he is married, as she is herself; both seem committed to an adulterous relationship based on sex and, at most, mutual affection. The imbalance in the relationship is, however, apparent from the outset: Vera is introduced initially in the guise of an independent business woman arriving for an important business meeting, but it quickly emerges that Willenbrock has typically broken the boundaries of the public and private sphere to suit his own ends by calling her out of a lecture for a rendezvous in their favoured hotel. The questionable realism of this scene hints both at his and the audience's sense of the female professional 'playing' at her job until a better option comes along, with Vera arguably made complicit in this interpretation through her genuine feelings for Willenbrock. Nonetheless, it is not insignificant that he negates Vera's identity as a working woman by removing her from her professional domain to meet her in a neutral public space. Equally, as their separate private worlds collide in a chance meeting at an auction rooms as both are accompanied by their respective spouses, it is Willenbrock who downplays his wife Susanne's professional knowledge of art and design in his efforts to dilute the tension between the two women. In their first meeting his ritualistic presentation of a perfume he has given Vera before and their matter-of-fact parting in the hotel car park emphasises the potential staleness of a relationship based not on romance but sex, an interpretation reinforced in parallel scenes when he ends their affair in a fit of remorse following the break-in. Vera is seen handling this situation by their rules in public, but within the private sphere of her car, she breaks down revealing the true depth of her feelings for Willenbrock and her greater investment in their relationship.

A significant forewarning of this emotional dichotomy emerges in the scene where Willenbrock once more brings the personal into the professional domain. Seeking out Anna in the university canteen, he is met by Vera who excitedly thinks his deviation from their normal pattern means he needs her for more than sex, only to discover his goal is another. It is not an insignificant indicator of Willenbrock's ability to compartmentalise his life that it never occurs to him the university professor might be present in the same professional location where he seeks out the university student. In his mind, their professional identities are completely subsumed under his personal construction of their identities as existing and potential lovers. Anna, while

initially flattered by his attention, is less impressed when, gate-crashing her birthday celebrations with friends and family, Willenbrock crosses the public-personal boundary in the other direction. This is not just a question of gender; Willenbrock is equally unsuccessful in crossing this divide when he attempts to engage in personal conversation with his male employees in the car compound. In contrast to Vera, the younger Anna is shown to be comfortable with her position as an emancipated woman. She enjoys the relationship with Willenbrock while it works, but appreciates its transitory nature. It is she who calls a halt, the parting taking place in a public place of her choosing, the sliding doors of the tram marking a physical finality to her declaration that she wants, and deserves, more from life. For the young woman whom Willenbrock initially sees as the unwitting innocent abroad in the insular world of the car compound over which he presides, the wider world stands for future opportunity and scope for personal development. Anna's reaction to the chance to study in Russia contrasts starkly with Willenbrock's own growing sense of the east as an ominous source of uncharted danger.

It is in the depiction of Willenbrock's wife, Susanne, that Dresen once again plays with the male gaze to best effect, with two scenes, one unfolding in private space, the other in the public domain, which are particularly worth examining in more detail. In the first scene, only six minutes into the film, Willenbrock, who until this point has been portrayed in his professional capacity, is shown preparing a meal. The camera shot focuses the viewer's attention on his reactions. Every indication is given that he is alone, until he looks up and is seen clearly casting his appreciative eye across the room. When it is revealed that before him, a woman is working hard, fitting a dress on a mannequin, the camera becomes Willenbrock's gaze moving down the bodies of the two figures, the tantalising strip of bare flesh on the woman's slightly arched waist contrasting directly with the outsized piece of material being pulled into place around the mannequin's lifeless hips (Figure 5). As the camera pans back up to Susanne's face and she smiles in his direction, asking if everything is all right, the amusement in the interaction simultaneously suggests her inner ease at his open gaze, and possibly also the infrequency of this gesture.

[Insert Figure 5 about here]

[Insert Figure 6 about here]

The cut again to Willenbrock's face shows a new reaction of pleasure and expectation, as he moves towards and behind her. While she continues working on the mannequin, Willenbrock's

posture mirrors her own (Figure 6), as he moves in first to spray her with the very perfume Vera has earlier rejected and then to kiss her on the neck. The central placement of Susanne in the shot encourages the viewer to gauge her reaction, as she finally succumbs to her husband's charm offensive and is distracted away from her work. That this sequence represents more than simply an intimate moment between a married couple is highlighted by their parallel conversation operating almost as a commentary crystallising the power struggle in their relationship.

When Susanne first rejects Willenbrock's advances, saying she needs to work, he asks her how much she needs to break even for the month. This offer of money disrupts the illusion of any role reversal which has previously been on display in the scene. Far from supporting his wife's career by relieving her of stereotypical female work such as cooking, Willenbrock relishes the control over her success that his financial contributions guarantee. This gesture vacillates between an infantilisation observed already in *Die Polizistin*, as Willenbrock essentially offers to provide her pocket-money, and a display of a 'prostitute-client' dynamic in which Susanne should abandon what she is doing and just take the money so as to be available to fulfil his immediate sexual and emotional needs. When Susanne verbalises the imbalance of their power-relationship in terms of agency: 'es ist demütigend, wenn man in meinem Alter nicht für sich selber sorgen kann' [it is humiliating, when you can't look after yourself at my age], Willenbrock reveals his own insecurities by countering with the suggestion that in the post-neolithic world this is all man can still do to protect his woman.

Dresen's brief depiction of Susanne working in her home (Willenbrock, in contrast, is only ever seen to work in the public space) reveals how central both professional and private domains are in shaping her own sense of identity while also highlighting the fragility of Willenbrock's sense of self-worth. His bravado with women is unveiled as an attempt to construct himself as having successfully profited from the transition to post-*Wende* Germany. Yet he knows little about cars, his professional success depends on Jurek's expertise, and when called upon to protect his wife in reality, he is terrified by the violence of their attackers. The contrast (drawn also in Hein's original novel) between female creativity and education (Susanne makes beautiful things with her own hands and Vera intellectually shapes young minds) and male trading in goods made by others, which is exemplified by both Willenbrock and Krylow's relationships with their male employees, offers more than a nod to the nineteenth-century transition of power from artisan to industrialist. Male-male employment relationships remind us that both gender- and class-based inequalities shape differences in opportunity and expectation

within the work domain. Willenbrock's quiet undermining of Susanne's confidence in her potential for professional success both maintains the façade to the outside world that he is sufficiently successful to afford a stay-at-home wife and reinforces his need to be the dominant force in their relationship. Both Willenbrock and his wife are clearly products of a vanished GDR society which would have considered working women the norm. Willenbrock's broader refusal to acknowledge such a past and his adoption now of an arguably more traditionally West German family model encourages the viewer at one level to interpret the couple's relationship as a symbol of the struggles of the east (through Susanne) to assert its right to self-determination in a new political model where the west (Willenbrock) literally holds the purse-strings.

This symbolism is challenged in the second sequence where Willenbrock observes his wife at work. This time the camera follows him running through the assembled crowd, bouquet in hand, in the self-appointed role of supportive husband on hand to congratulate (or, in his mind, rather to console) his wife on the event of a fashion show she has organised for her boutique in a large shopping centre. Across the space of the escalator being used as the catwalk, the camera cuts between Willenbrock's changing reaction in the crowd and his gaze across to the woman he sees now confidently and professionally in command of her own domain. As Susanne comperes the show, her husband views her interacting with male and female colleagues and drawing support from their obvious exhilaration at her performance.

As the camera returns intermittently to capture Willenbrock's reaction, he is depicted as increasingly isolated, surrounded by women who only have eyes for those on the other side of the escalator. As the crowd disperses, he is left alone (as Susanne in contrast is portrayed surrounded by well-wishers) and finally turns and leaves without ever publicly acknowledging his wife's success. This, however, proves a turning-point in their relationship. When Susanne has the confidence to leave him in response to his continued infidelities and finds herself a job in a gallery through her own professional connections, Willenbrock's world is shattered and he attempts to push the blame for their unequal relationship onto her. Ultimately, it is only in the final scene, as Susanne's concern for Willenbrock's welfare sees her return to the car compound that the pair, drawn together by the recognition of past mistakes on both sides, is portrayed experiencing a new honesty and authenticity in their relationship which leaves open the hope of balancing personal and professional domains in the future.

Steigerlied

Although only fifteen minutes long, *Steigerlied*, the film with which this discussion began, represents a significant development in Dresen's portrayal of women at work, not least in its exploitation of the male gaze, within a seemingly objective documentary piece, as a critical device challenging both male and female constructions of reality and revealing changing constellations of complicity between both viewed and viewer. *Steigerlied* portrays the everyday life of workers repairing the damage to the landscape caused by open-cast mining. The director's unashamed admiration for his female subject provides her with a major voice and ensures she is the focus of attention in this male environment. Daniela Kabuth's confidence and strength of personality make her the dominant force within both her personal and professional life, and any preliminary efforts she has had to make in countering stereotypical attitudes and expectations regarding her role at work belong to the past. Make-up, which Anna applied as a weapon of seduction in *Die Polizistin*, is shown here to be instead a successful retention of Daniela's individuality and feminine aesthetic in an otherwise sparse and impersonal workplace. Her desire to enhance her environment, whether through arranging flowers at home or cleaning up the cabin of her earth-moving equipment, does not diminish her in the eyes of the men around her; although they may not appear to understand her motivation, they do not denigrate her actions. Instead, both at home and at work, she dominates the men around her, as she confidently mixes her professional tasks with a femininity that strengthens rather than diminishes her position. Her husband and colleagues share the washing up, a result perhaps of Daniela's self-reported resistance to being pushed into such traditionally gender-bound activities; equally, she is shown relaxing with the men, singing, telling them jokes and confidently exchanging professional knowledge. Although Daniela references other women working at the mine, she is the only one portrayed, frequently alone in the vast, scarred landscape or juxtaposed with the massive earth-moving rig which represents the work of which she is so proud. Unlike Anne in *Die Polizistin* or the trio of women in *Willenbrock*, Daniela does not seem to act directly as an emotional mirror for males around her. Indeed, the viewer gains no personal background knowledge about her male colleagues, and everything seems positively coloured by Daniela's perspective, as she comments, interprets and explains. In the blurring of lines between working and private life, her work is shown to be her life, not just an activity which earns her a living, but rather one which is central to her being and her identity. She recognizes the future of her industry is limited, as coal will be overtaken by renewables, but accepts this as an inevitable phase in the life-cycle represented by the excavating and refilling of craters in the landscape around her.

Yet despite Daniela's central role in the film, it is clear that the male triangle of director, camera-man and editor (Dresen, Hammon and Hausschild) inject a male perspective or gaze which challenges the surface representation of her world and questions the very objectivity of documentary film as a genre. The only other character to be granted a direct voice in *Steigerlied* is Daniela's husband, most notably as they sit at home talking to each other and the camera about their different approaches to finding work. He jokes about enjoying lying on the sofa while she goes out to work, suggesting she is lucky not to have to interact with the job-centre. As she contrasts his passivity with her greater initiative, each strives to gain the empathy of the film-crew and the audience on their own contra-stereotypical terms: she, as a fellow-worker, self-confidently and rationally explaining their situation; he, as a fellow man, emotively nodding, smiling and shrugging his shoulders in some embarrassment, as she seems, in this male company, to challenge openly his masculinity and drive.

Similarly, in Daniela's work environment, her male colleagues remain silent, quietly resisting this female force of nature. While the camera focuses primarily on her, it also cuts to their non-verbal reaction, which suggests a certain empathy with their situation or interpretation of her words and actions. Daniela's constant singing and humming and her tales of her tipsy karaoke successes reflect a sense that performing for her is an essential element of her being. As her colleagues sit silently around the table in the works' shed, they are repeatedly shown either viewing her with bemusement or ignoring her – as adults might a child – as they go about their own business in parallel, making notes, reading the newspaper, and drinking tea. Her one attempt to break the silence, to engage with them on what she perceives as their own terms, is the single episode in the film in which Daniela's authenticity, so attractive to Dresen, appears threatened by her efforts to 'perform masculinity', telling a risqué joke, thumping on the table, laughing at the punchline, as the men smile thinly in response.

Whether they are embarrassed by her transgressing the boundaries of a discourse realm they deem inappropriate for a woman or by the film crew's witnessing the immaturity of her joke and their own reaction is unclear, but all appear relieved when the need to return to work diffuses the atmosphere. Focusing on the men's facial expressions in response to Daniela's seemingly boundless energies throughout the film speaks volumes both about their attitudes to her and Dresen's intentions as film-maker, but this is the one moment where her colleagues' male gaze, captured itself through an empathetic camera, reveals a chink in Daniela's own armour, an

insight into the effort it has taken, and continues to take, to assert herself in this male-dominated working world.

Thus Dresen, in the documentary genre which falsely promises an objective lens, exploits the very techniques he has developed in his earlier films not just to enliven his narrative or explore women's roles but also to question, expose and even undermine the very concepts of gendered gaze, authenticity and performativity which shape this real-life action.

Conclusion

In portraying women at work, Dresen draws inevitably on the cultural and socio-political traditions which have shaped his own upbringing. Even where women figures play a secondary role in the films discussed, work helps each of them assert her own identity and position herself as a useful member of society. As each strives to reconcile her professional and personal responsibilities, only in *Die Polizistin* is Anne portrayed operating within a strongly hierarchical professional environment. Nonetheless, each alludes to her efforts to be taken seriously in a professional capacity, a concern frequently played out in the women's interpersonal struggles to establish agency. Public and private space emerge as essentially gendered domains, with public displays of authority – or bravado – central to male characters such as Mike and Willenbrock and representative of women's successful initiation into a largely male-dominated professional world. While male characters often display a loss of control, as public and private spheres in their lives threaten to collide, the blurring of the public and private seems inevitable, unproblematic and even desirable for many of the women portrayed, once they establish their own frames of reference rather than continuing with learned patterns of behaviour. With the exception of Vera in *Willenbrock* (arguably the most successful career-woman), female characters triumph in both domains, a transformation often played out under the male gaze of those around them. In exploring this gaze and portraying characters 'performing' gendered roles whether in feature film, literary adaptation or supposedly objective documentary, Dresen destabilises traditional constructs of femininity (such as woman as helpless girl, needy wife, or seductress) and masculinity (man as provider or lothario), demanding more complex interpretations of gendered behaviour within interpersonal relationships. As a result, the cinematic portrayal of women at work raises issues well beyond the limited professional domain. Even in its apparent continuation of an East German documentary tradition depicting a young woman confidently succeeding on her own terms in a male working world, *Steigerlied* highlights

Daniela's pragmatic recognition that this world will come to an end, superseded by new systems and new ways of working. This insight, offered up to the camera rather than to her fellow-workers, and her positive, upbeat behaviour each day stand in stark contrast to the silent observation practised by her male colleagues. For them, as for Willenbrock, Mike or Jegor, a rapidly changing world constitutes a threat they seem unable to comprehend fully, let alone overcome.

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