

TOUCHING DISTANCE: GENDER, GERMANNESS, AND THE GAZE IN ANGELINA MACCARONE'S *FREMDE HAUT* (2005)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Angelina Maccarone's 2005 film *Fremde Haut*, arguing that it exposes the combined force of the constructs 'nation' and 'gender', which rely on covert or overt violence to maintain their borders and assert their authority. The film tells of Fariba Tabrizi, an Iranian lesbian who enters Germany illegally. Fariba cross-dresses in order to gain access to the country, and forms a relationship with a German woman. The article investigates how *Fremde Haut* opens up genders as performative, shifting, and variable, drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler, R. W. Connell, and Judith Halberstam. As well as challenging the apparent fixity and discreteness of sexes, genders, and sexualities, the film also celebrates transnational exchange, suggesting that nations are not static and impenetrable. Thus, it mounts a dual challenge to heterosexism and nationalism. It also asserts the gaze as (potentially) mutual and 'feminine', and challenges masculinist scopophilia (Laura Mulvey) by emphasising touch.

Dieser Artikel untersucht Angelina Maccarones *Fremde Haut* (2005). Meine Analyse zeigt, wie der Film die vereinte Wirkung der Konstrukte 'Nation' und 'Gender' offenlegt, die auf verdeckte oder offenkundige Gewalt angewiesen sind, um ihre Grenzen und ihren Einfluss zu behaupten. Der Film erzählt die Geschichte von Fariba Tabrizi, einer iranischen lesbischen Frau, die illegal nach Deutschland einreist. Fariba gibt sich als Mann aus, um sich Zugang zu Deutschland zu verschaffen, und baut eine Beziehung zu einer deutschen Frau auf. Dieser Artikel analysiert, wie *Fremde Haut* Gender als performativ, veränderlich und mannigfaltig erschließt. Meine Diskussion bezieht Untersuchungen von Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler, R. W. Connell und Judith Halberstam ein. Der Film bestreitet die offenkundige Festigkeit und Eigenständigkeit von Geschlechtern, Gender und Sexualitäten, genauso wie er transnationalen Austausch preist. Er legt damit nahe, dass Nationen nicht feststehend und undurchdringlich sind. Der Film ficht auf diese Weise sowohl Heterozentrismus als auch Nationalismus an. Außerdem beschreibt er den 'Blick' (*gaze*) als (potentiell) wechselseitig und 'weiblich' und stellt *masculinist scopophilia* (Laura Mulvey) in Frage, indem er den Akzent auf Berührung legt.

I like the themes of absurdity, the absurdity of norms, and of crossing borders, of overstepping the line. I cross them every day [...]. Even as a child I had

¹ With thanks to Frauke Matthes for organising the stimulating colloquium, "The German Masculine and "The Other" (31 October 2009, University of Edinburgh), which provided the impetus for the writing of this article, and for offering valuable feedback on an earlier version.

to explain my name. Then I had to explain myself as a lesbian. Things always had to be explained. I think that is so absurd. (Angelina Maccarone)²

INTRODUCTION

Gender and nationality are both cultural performances. As Judith Butler has observed, gender is not something we are, but something we do.³ Nationality, likewise, is a set of discursive and material practices whereby identities are constructed, or – following Butler – performed, where this performance involves not the simple imposition of an identity on to a passive subject but the active participation of the subject in its own construction.⁴ The constructs nation and gender are intertwined, as Nira Yuval-Davis recognises: ‘constructions of nationhood usually involve specific notions of both “manhood” and “womanhood”’.⁵ A dual challenge to these constructions and notions might then prove both logical and fruitful. In the context of contemporary German studies, for which Germanness and gender are key concerns, such a dual challenge is arguably timely.⁶

Angelina Maccarone's 2005 film *Fremde Haut* exposes ‘the interpenetration of nationalism and sexuality’,⁷ suggesting how the entwined constructs of nation and gender rest upon and assert xenophobia and homophobia. The film tells of Fariba Tabrizi, a lesbian who flees Iran for Germany but is detained on landing when it is discovered that her papers are false. In the holding centre, Fariba befriends another Iranian, Siamak Mostafai, a young (male) political dissident who commits suicide and whose identity Fariba adopts. Fariba, as Siamak, lives in a cramped hostel room in Sielmingen, Swabia, and illegally acquires work in a sauerkraut factory. She develops a relationship with Anne, a fellow factory worker and single mother. But the relationship causes tension among Anne's friends, Sabine and partner Andi, and Uwe, Anne's on-off boyfriend. The discovery of Fariba's ‘true’ sex prompts a violent outburst on the part of Andi and Uwe. This moment – when homophobia, misogyny,

² Angelina Maccarone, ‘Interview’, <http://www.german-films.de/en/germanfilmsquarterly/previousissues/seriesgermandirectors/angelinamaccarone/index.html> (accessed 11 January 2010).

³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York 1990, p. 33.

⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, London 1997, p. 1.

⁶ As suggested by, for example: Stephanie Bird, *Women Writers and National Identity: Bachmann, Duden, Özdamar*, Cambridge 2003; Patricia Herminghouse and Magda Mueller (eds), *Gender and Germanness: Cultural Productions of Nation*, New York 1998; Barbara Kosta and Helga Kraft (eds), *Writing Against Boundaries: Nationality, Ethnicity and Gender in the German-Speaking Context*, Amsterdam 2003.

⁷ Lee Edelman, ‘Tearooms and Sympathy, or The Epistemology of the Water Closet’, in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*, New York 1994, pp. 148–70; Angelina Maccarone, *Fremde Haut* (DVD 2005).

and xenophobia combine – demonstrates the ‘interpenetration’ of nation and gender, and the violent exclusion of the deviant or foreign ‘other’.

The film also exposes and unsettles hegemonic masculinity. As R. W. Connell points out, masculinity is not ‘a stable object of knowledge’.⁸ Masculinities are, rather, ‘configurations of practice structured by gender relations’ (*M*, 44). They are, then, performative, in Butlerian terms, and variable; at any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Connell terms this exalted form ‘hegemonic’ (after Antonio Gramsci), whereby ‘hegemony’ is ‘a historically mobile relation’ (*M*, 77). But what can usefully be said to characterise the shifting and variable performances of masculinity? Queer and feminist theories share a perception of hegemonic masculinity as being ‘fundamentally linked to power’ (*M*, 42). Power serves as a useful term in discussions of masculinity. As we will see, Maccarone’s film both exposes and challenges masculine domination, revealing (gendered) power relations as shifting and unstable.

The film also calls into question the autonomy of the individual subject, offering a further challenge to hegemonic masculinity and to hierarchical power relations, which are necessarily founded on a rigid self/other opposition. Connell cites an anthropological study that finds that, psychologically, masculinity is ‘a defence against regression to pre-Oedipal identification with the mother’, and then dismisses this conclusion for its ‘staggering banality’ (*M*, 33). However, I would like to hold on to the association of masculinity with defensive individuation, encouraged by the work of such psychoanalysts as Jessica Benjamin, Nancy Chodorow, and Dorothy Dinnerstein. These analysts point to the association in Western culture of masculinity with rationality, mastery, and individuality; and femininity with emotionality, servitude, and connectedness. They offer varying (but comparable) analyses of and responses to this set of associations, and the corollary socio-political dynamics. Chodorow argues that the masculine insistence on separateness has its roots in the social organisation of parenting, in what she terms ‘the reproduction of mothering’. Women are typically mothered by women and so identify more readily with their caregiver and subsequently with others; men, however, must strive from a young age to differentiate themselves, and so habitually define themselves in opposition to others, and as autonomous.⁹

This individuation is a delicate and difficult task, and masculine domination is not a simple or stable affair. Chodorow suggests that masculinity is fraught with anxiety. Benjamin, too, asserts that what

⁸ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, Cambridge 1995, p. 33. Further references are given in the text and preceded by *M*.

⁹ Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkeley 1999, p. 169. Compare Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Domination*, London 1990: ‘While all children identify with their first loved one, boys must dissolve this identification and define themselves as the different sex’ (p. 75). See also Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*, New York 1991.

underlies the widespread masculine obsession with control and dominance is fear.¹⁰ For the purposes of this article, then, masculinity will be understood to connote power and autonomy, where these are never straightforward, unchallengeable, or entirely free of anxiety. They are also not exclusive to men, as will shortly be made clear.

This article explores how *Fremde Haut* undermines heteronormative accounts of gender and nationalist accounts of identity by putting forward an understanding of subjectivity as performative and relational. It then turns to the questions of the gendered gaze and of touch, to suggest that Maccarone, through her film, posits new ways of seeing and relating that go beyond masculine/feminine, subject/object, self/other oppositions, offering a productively queer view of national and gender identities.

CHALLENGING GENDER

In featuring a female protagonist who passes as a man, *Fremde Haut* is already calling into question essentialist accounts of gender, suggesting in a Butlerian fashion that gender is performative. Fariba successfully adopts a masculine persona; masculinity is thereby revealed as a matter not of being but of doing. Fariba's performance also exposes genders as relative and relational (see *M*, 44). Binarism is challenged, as genders are shown as overlapping and fluid. Masculinity, in particular, is revealed as constructed. As Judith Halberstam has noted, this is an unsettling idea, for masculinity is widely accepted as something that 'just is'.¹¹ Female masculinity points up the constructedness of masculinity *per se*, as Halberstam argues: 'Masculinity [...] becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body' (*FM*, 2). Masculinity in women also challenges the complex social structures that align masculinity with maleness and with power and domination (*FM*, 2). It is therefore a source of discomfort (*FM*, xi). For Halberstam, as already implied, masculinity 'conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege', and for her female masculinity can be a healthy option, offering as it does release from restrictive, debilitating forms of femininity – this goes for heterosexual women as well as for queers (*FM*, 2, 268). It is not that all females would desire masculinity, she asserts, but that 'the protection of masculinity from women bears examination' (*FM*, 270).

In the film, however, female masculinity is uncomfortable and enforced; Fariba's masquerade is not a positive choice, a matter of voluntarism, but a desperate strategy. Fariba's tightly bound breasts and her furtive nocturnal showering and search for tampons imply discomfort. However,

¹⁰ Chodorow, *Reproduction of Mothering*, p. 196. Benjamin, *Bonds of Love*, p. 77.

¹¹ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, Durham, NC 1998, pp. 13, 234. Further references are given in the text, preceded by *FM*.

the film hardly returns to an essentialist or biologist position; Fariba's lesbianism poses a challenge to heterosexist accounts of gender, which rest on normative binarism. The fact that Fariba does not choose her masculinity usefully interrupts the perceived link between lesbianism and masculinity, or femininity gone wrong.¹² And yet Fariba is a lesbian and she does assume and perform masculinity. As Halberstam notes: 'when and where female masculinity conjoins with possibly queer identities, it is [not] likely to meet with approval', for 'the excessive masculinity of the dyke' is disturbing (*FM*, 28). In this way, the film rather cleverly opts out of the mannishness/lesbianism elision, while at the same time asserting the possibility of female masculinity and of queerness – as potentially, but not necessarily, co-existent. It also avoids the suggestion that queerness is a dirty secret, or an essential truth. We are not privy to the moment Fariba tells Anne she is in fact a woman – if indeed she does – and the sex scene, when Fariba's breasts are unbound by Anne, is lacking in drama or fuss. Maccarone has defended her decision to downplay such moments thus:

Of course, it was a conscious decision to not show these moments as dramatic plot points with a lot of music and other cinematographic devices. One reason is that I wanted to avoid the cliché of such scenes. They always stay on the surface and put a distance between the character and the spectator [...]. To be with Fariba when she has to succeed in her Siamak identity [...] allows us to be emotionally closer to her. Anne falls in love with Siamak/Fariba. Her hesitation due to the fact that she learns she actually fell in love with a woman seems petty when she is faced with the threat of Fariba's deportation.¹³

Maccarone wished, then, to avoid the creation of distance between character and spectator, an issue to which I will return later. Anne's feelings towards Fariba are also shown to be unrelated to, or not dependent upon, the latter's gender. The relationship between Fariba and Anne implies, then, that sexual orientation is not necessarily fixed or definite; Anne believes she is straight and unwittingly becomes a lesbian.

While the English-language title of the film, *Unveiled*, suggests a truth uncovered – the truth of the sexed body – the film itself does not do so. Anne's recognition of Fariba's female corporeality is, crucially, a relational act – the gaze here is mutual, as will be discussed further later. Thus the body does not hold 'the answer' to the truth about gender or sexuality; but it is a salient factor in culture, as demonstrated by the men's reactions to Fariba's female body at the end of the film. As Connell asserts: 'we cannot ignore either the radically cultural character of gender or the bodily presence' (*M*, 52). Gender has particular dynamics and effects in

¹² Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Durham, NC 2006, p. 190.

¹³ Shauna Swartz, 'Interview with *Unveiled* Director Angelina Maccarone', 17 November 2005, <http://www.afterellen.com/archive/ellen/Movies/2005/11/unveiled2.html> (accessed 31 January 2010).

particular contexts. As a woman, Fariba is subjected to the lecherous gaze of a German policeman; in this way, female masculinity can indeed be seen to offer liberation, from the assessing male gaze. Certainly in the Iranian context this might be the case, as implied by the subtle but telling detail of female heads being uncovered once Fariba's aeroplane leaves Iranian air-space. While Fariba's female masculinity is enforced, rather than chosen, the end of the film, when she adopts masculine clothing in the aeroplane toilet, suggests that it might be a strategy that serves her well.

We cannot ignore the 'radically cultural character' of gender or of sexuality, then. The queer relationship occurs in the context of a society in which heterosexuality is assumed and enforced.¹⁴ In Iran, homosexuality is punishable – hence Fariba's flight. Germany is 'freer' in this regard (it is 'ein freies Land', as one character puts it) – we glimpse, with Fariba, two men kissing on a city street – but it is still a society in which heterosexuality is assumed. Fariba is asked, regarding her heavy suitcase: 'Ehemann mitgebracht?' Homophobia is also pointed up by Fariba's silence about her sexuality to the immigration officials; she is ashamed to pronounce herself a lesbian.

What of male masculinity in the film? As Halberstam has pointed out, studies in male masculinity are 'predictably' not very interested in taking apart the 'patriarchal bonds between white maleness and privilege', being more concerned with 'the fragilities of male socialization, the pains of manhood, and the fear of female empowerment' (*FM*, 19). *Fremde Haut* engages in both these projects; it uncovers the links between maleness and power and it probes the anxious and pained nature of masculinity. In the brothel where Fariba/Siamak is taken by Uwe and Andi, the two indulge in men's talk about the incomprehensibility of women. They react aggressively to Fariba/Siamak when (s)he tries to contribute. Their macho posturing in front of or against 'Siamak' suggests what Halberstam terms 'the absolute dependence of dominant masculinities on minority masculinities' (*FM*, 4). Connell describes relations between different kinds of masculinity as involving 'alliance, dominance and subordination' (*M*, 37) – a thesis echoed in this uncomfortable scene. The German men set 'Siamak' up with a prostitute: a complex gesture involving aggression, jealousy, and projected desire.

At the same time, the men in question are not simply brutish, or very dominant. They are unskilled factory workers. Andi, in the scene discussed above, expresses anxiety about his partner's lack of desire for sex; Uwe reacts insensitively with an allusion to his own sexual history with

¹⁴ Compare Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Signs*, 5/4 (1980), 631–60.

Sabine. Thus, women are positioned by men as 'objects of exchange';¹⁵ but insecurity and anxiety underlie the men's conversation, which thus echoes Chodorow's and Benjamin's observations regarding masculine fearfulness. Uwe, in addition, takes an active part in Anne's son's life (although he is not his biological father); the film highlights paternity as a caring practice and exposes the family as other than the heterosexual, nuclear ideal.

And yet, the discovery that Anne's lover is a woman is a shock that provokes violence. As mentioned, the preceding sex scene between Anne and Fariba is undramatic. The only moment at which Fariba's sex becomes a source of difficulty is when the male gaze is trained on her body, revealed as female to the men when they enter Anne's house. Entering the kitchen, where Fariba is sitting in darkness, the men look for beer, commenting that Anne's is a typical woman's fridge. Such notions of typicality are soon cast into doubt. Andi is more obviously angry than Uwe, feeling that he has been belittled. His incredulous exclamation that all this – the drama with Anne and Uwe – has been 'wegen einer Frau' reveals a view of femaleness as inferior, and female homosexuality as unserious. He exhorts Uwe to respond with aggression. The police arrive and Fariba is arrested, only to be forcibly parted from Anne and sent back to Iran. The unofficial policing of gender and the official policing of national borders combine to effect expulsion of the undesirable deviant, the foreign queer.

TRANSLATION, TRANSFORMATION, TRANSNATIONALISM

Maccarone has long been interested in Germanness, and irked by exclusionary definitions of the nation.¹⁶ *Fremde Haut* is concerned with nationality as well as with gender. The film begins with an arrival and with Fariba's request for entry into Germany. In so doing, it draws attention to the ways in which national borders are maintained; Fariba is subjected to extensive questioning and a full body search. The film defamiliarises Germany; Fariba's outsider's gaze notes cleanliness and strange bread, for example. Fariba takes off her shoes upon entering a church; in this way Germany is relativised, its customs and practices revealed as contingent. Fariba, who is from Tehran, encounters provincial Germany, acknowledged as dull by Anne, who reveals that she tried to leave her home town but was forced to return. When Fariba/Siamak observes that Anne can still leave,

¹⁵ See here Luce Irigaray, 'Women on the Market', in *This Sex Which is Not One*, tr. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke, Ithaca, NY 1985, pp. 170–91.

¹⁶ 'I wrote a number of scripts until I made *Alles wird gut* in 1997. I'd wanted to tackle the subject of race in Germany because this country is in denial. My then girlfriend was black and people kept praising her for how good her German was purely because she's black! For so many people the idea of a black German is an oxymoron. It was all so absurd so we co-wrote a comedy that I directed to tackle the theme' (Maccarone, 'Interview').

the latter concedes this with apparent surprise ('Ja, stimmt eigentlich'). Fariba opens Anne up to the possibility of change.

The sauerkraut factory uses the labour of immigrants. Sauerkraut, typically German, is thus revealed as manufactured – like Germanness itself? – and its purity as a national product brought into question. Fariba and a fellow illegal worker hide in a vat of cabbage to escape the attention of the government inspectors: a scene that suggests the ways in which the labour of immigrants has frequently been undervalued and overlooked in Germany. It also calls attention to the precariousness of life for those excluded by nations. The cramped centre in which Fariba lives reveals the poverty and discomfort experienced by those on the margins, as Anne realises when she visits. The graffiti on the wall ('Kanaken ficken') hints at the reductive accounts of outsiders propagated by Germans. Fariba/Siamak is dubbed 'Ayatollah' or 'Salmi', a shortened, mangled version of 'his' name, which Sabine finds amusing. S/he is labelled both Mexican and Tajik. In the locker room, Uwe lays a menacing hand on Fariba/Siamak's shoulder, pretending to be a government inspector and interrupting Fariba and Anne's conversation. Thus Uwe, threatened by Anne's interest in the stranger, asserts the (limited) power he has – as a German.

The film exposes and blurs boundaries between nations as well as genders. In the liminal space of the holding centre, Fariba and Siamak – a girlish man – both look in the mirror in the apparently unisex toilets. This is a space 'before' Germanness, and 'before' gender, perhaps.¹⁷ The film features other moments and motifs that suggest the possibility of more fluid genders and nationalities. Fariba is a translator. Her facility with German allows her to shock a German official at the start of the film – he had assumed her lack of comprehension – and to help a guard out with his crossword. The trope of translation is significant in the light of ideas of border-crossing and transgression. Translation, which undermines the idea of discrete sets of signs, echoes Fariba's challenge to conventional gender boundaries. The film itself can be seen as a form of translation. In the 'Making Of' documentary that accompanies the feature on DVD, the director comments that she would like the film to offer 'einen Blick auf Deutschland'.

Transnational encounters can be productive. Fariba/Siamak is treated with kindness by the German factory owners. A transnational community of sorts is formed in the hostel she occupies. When Fariba/Siamak sings in the bowling alley – having been bullied into performing by Anne's friends – her song silences them, forcing them to acknowledge her subjectivity. But it is above all in the relationship between Fariba and Anne that transnational relationality is celebrated. Anne is at first sceptical when it is suggested she

¹⁷ But compare Halberstam's description of 'the bathroom problem' as 'the violent enforcement of our current gender system', and her suggestion that at airports, gender is more intensively policed than elsewhere (*FM*, 25, 20).

go out with the Iranian, wondering what they would have to talk about. However, in conversation with Fariba/Siamak, Anne displays empathy; she wonders how she would find it if she were suddenly to arrive in Tehran. She later explains to Sabine that she is interested in the stranger because of her/his difference, because (s)he '[denkt] anders'.

The introduction of the idea of difference, 'anders sein', is provocative in the context of female same-sex relations. Sexual difference – 'so often seen as the sole producer of desire'¹⁸ – is relativised. Sara Ahmed examines the assumption that heterosexual attraction is founded on difference, while homosexual attraction is based on sameness, suggesting that this latter association is 'crucial to the pathologizing of homosexuality as a perversion that leads the body astray'. It must be contested, Ahmed argues, noting that the very idea that lesbian desire is to do with sameness 'relies on a fantasy that women are "the same"', and suggesting that the distinction same/different should itself be questioned.¹⁹

Ahmed also notes that the concepts of separation and autonomy 'secure the masculine and heteronormative subject as a social and bodily ideal'.²⁰ If one accepts the equation of masculinity with separateness and independence, an association already discussed, one could see relationality as subversively 'feminine'. Maccarone's film, with its emphasis on transnational encounters between women, can be linked to theoretical challenges to notions of the self as fixed, stable, and masculine.²¹ And if one accepts Halberstam's idea that female masculinity is threatening, and the view that lesbian relationships are disturbing to the patriarchal status quo – they challenge the understanding of women as objects of exchange and desire for men – then Maccarone's film can be seen to critique and undermine hegemonic masculinity in numerous ways.

GAZING TOUCHINGLY

Fremde Haut also challenges the mainstream, masculine cinematic gaze. Obviously – too obviously – it does this by boasting a female director and a camerawoman, Judith Kaufmann, who also co-wrote the script with Maccarone. In terms of the film's technique, however, it might seem rather straight; it is not explicitly experimental. But within the film, the gaze itself is thematised and problematised.

The term 'the male gaze' was made famous by Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which claimed that women in film

¹⁸ Jackie Stacey, 'Desperately Seeking Difference', in *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, ed. Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, London 1988, pp. 112–29 (p. 122).

¹⁹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, pp. 96, 97.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²¹ For example, Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women and Contemporary Philosophy*, Cambridge 1991, p. 10.

are habitually objectified. Mainstream cinema, in Mulvey's view, appeals to the scopophilic instinct and is designed for the male gaze, which is at work in the camera, the male actor(s), and the spectator, who is presumed male.²² Thus, Mulvey foregrounds the fact that 'the ideal spectator of the classical cinema is male'.²³ Her thesis echoes John Berger, who in 1972 argued that in Western culture: 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.'²⁴

Mulvey's article has been much contested and elaborated upon.²⁵ As Judith Mayne observes, Mulvey falsely suggests the existence of a homogeneous body of spectators.²⁶ While cinema may indeed project an ideal viewer, it is not certain whether its projections are accurate or effective (see also *FM*, 179). There are lacunae in Mulvey's account: what about men as erotic objects, for example? Identification is a complex matter. Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure assumes that the male spectator identifies with the male protagonist, that is, that identification in cinema is a matter of individual audience members identifying with characters on the screen – an excessively literal understanding of the process that assumes that (gender) identity is stable. In contrast, 'identification understood as a position – and more properly as a series of shifting positions – assumes that cinematic identification is as fragile and unstable as identity itself'.²⁷ Such an understanding might be understood as 'queer', for it troubles assumptions about the relationship between sex, gender, and desire.

Thus, Mulvey's thesis relies on an assumption that male/female, seer/seen and desirer/desired are binaries that are fixed and connected – but a queer understanding of desire unsettles this view. As Jackie Stacey suggests: 'we need to separate gender identification from sexuality, so often conflated in the name of sexual difference'.²⁸ We need also to rethink ways of framing desire in film. To imply the existence of a rigid distinction between desire on the one hand and identification on the other is problematic.²⁹ Halberstam speculates that at this historical moment, we may have to avoid psychoanalytic formulations in order to get to a 'new cinematic vocabulary' (*FM*, 179).³⁰ Writing about lesbian desire in film, Stacey supplements this critique: 'the language of psychoanalysis situates desire between women firmly within masculinity'.³¹ It does not allow for queer desire.

²² Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16/3 (1975), 6–19.

²³ Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, New York 1993, p. 49.

²⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London 2008, p. 41.

²⁵ See here Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema*, Bloomington 1990, pp. 19–20.

²⁶ Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, p. 53.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁸ Stacey, 'Desperately Seeking Difference', p. 121.

²⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 129.

³⁰ See also Maggie Humm, *Feminism and Film*, Edinburgh 1997, p. 195.

³¹ Stacey, 'Desperately Seeking Difference', p. 113.

Fremde Haut participates in such queer challenges to notions of the gaze as (necessarily) masculine and objectifying; and to gender and desire as simply or causally connected to sex. Upon arrival in Germany, Fariba's mug-shots are taken. The act of photography is foregrounded, and linked to the policing of national borders. The gaze is also gendered and a matter of power; in the car, Fariba is scrutinised by a police officer in the front seat, who adjusts the rear-view mirror to get a better view of her breasts. She meets his gaze but then looks away, putting on a pair of sun-glasses; she is not in a position to counter or object. Later on, in a visual echo of that earlier scene, Uwe from his driver's seat notices the growing intimacy between Anne and Fariba/Siamak in the rear-view mirror, and he hits the brakes abruptly. The male gaze is in the first instance oppressive and controlling, and in the second anxious and insecure. In both cases, a proprietorial attitude is on show; but Uwe's failure to prevent Anne from expressing and acting on her desire exposes the limitations of masculine domination. In a later scene, when Anne is driving, she looks at Fariba, who is next to her on the passenger seat; Fariba looks back.

The film both asserts the power of the male gaze – as in the scene in which Fariba is discovered in Anne's kitchen, which leads to her exposure and expulsion – and undermines it, asserting another kind of looking. In the sex scene between Fariba and Anne, the actors frequently look into each other's eyes, as mentioned, so that the mutuality of looking is suggested. In an article about lesbian independent film, Andrea Weiss refers to 'the prevalent construction of lesbian lovemaking as cinematic spectacle designed to titillate male desire'.³² As already indicated, one cannot predict or control the response of 'a viewer', female or male. But in emphasising the lovers' mutual gaze, the film challenges a heterosexual masculine gaze that would seek to objectify the women's bodies. The film raises the matter of gender interestingly when Anne shows Fariba/Siamak her scar, caused by a Caesarian section. Fariba asks if Anne can still feel it, the latter responding that no one has ever asked her that, at least 'kein Mann'. Perhaps there is a suggestion here of a specifically feminine or lesbian mode of relation, one that is not grounded in self/other, subject/object, seer/seen relations.

Touch is appealed to as a mode of perception. Hands constitute a motif in the film; Fariba wears a pendant representing the Hand of Fatima, which Anne notices. She likens Fariba's hand to it. Anne offers to help Fariba in the cabbage field, saying: 'Gib mir deine Hand'. In the back seat of the car, she carefully inspects and touches Fariba's hand. In this way, touch is emphasised alongside sight – and phallic penetration also deemphasised. The motif of skin, highlighted by the film's title, also evokes

³² Andrea Weiss, 'Transgressive Cinema: Lesbian Independent Film', in *Queer Cinema, The Film Reader*, ed. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, New York 2004, pp. 43–52 (p. 46).

the sense of touch, and it points to the permeability of subjects: 'Skin opens our bodies to other bodies: through touch, the separation of self and other is undermined in the very intimacy or proximity of the encounter.'³³ But skin also serves as a site of differentiation; Ahmed asserts: 'the skin [is] the locus of social differentiation – the skin is touched differently by different others'.³⁴ The differentiating quality of skin is suggested when the prostitute realises Fariba is a woman from the feel of her face.

Acting as a boundary between inner and outer, and between self and other, skin thus suggests both the porosity and the separateness, or 'difference', of the subject. The film, while concerned with communication and intimacy, also suggests the barriers to exchange. Fariba shares little of her past. She tells Anne 'Ich will dir alles erzählen', but their subsequent dialogue is brief, and Fariba only hints at what she has undergone in Iran, speaking in generalisations. The communicative act is never achieved in the film, only anticipated. This silence can be linked to the emphasis on touch; for Ahmed, touch usefully challenges the assumption that communication can involve transparent, pure exchange. She calls for a 'communicative ethics' that involves acknowledging, even working with, the impossibility of unmediated dialogue, pointing out that in encounters between subjects, 'there are always [...] other speech acts, scars and traumas, that remain unspoken, unvoiced, or not fully spoken or voiced'. In ethical communication, 'one gets close enough to others to be touched by that which cannot be simply got across'.³⁵ The relationship between Anne and Fariba hints at such proximity; and through its emphasis on touch and on unknowability, the film avoids objectifying and reducing its protagonists, perhaps – to speculate strategically – encouraging its viewers to be similarly receptive and respectful. It is just such intimacy that MacCarone wished to evoke, as mentioned before.

For Ahmed: 'It is the act of getting closer to [the] other's skin that prevents us from fleshing out her body as "the stranger's body".'³⁶ Thus the title *Fremde Haut* can be seen as paradoxical. It is, in addition, multivalent; it could refer to the skin of the no-longer-strange other, the lover; it could allude to the skin of the othered non-German; or to the skin of Siamak, whose identity Fariba adopts. In all cases, a blurring of self and other is suggested; as it is early on in the film, when Fariba corrects a child's English, pointing at him while saying 'I', and then at herself, saying 'you'.

³³ Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, 'Introduction: Dermographies', in *Thinking Through the Skin*, ed. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, London 2001, pp. 1–17 (p. 6).

³⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, London 2000, p. 155.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 156, 157. Mayne refers similarly to 'conversations [between women] where impossible ideals of "simple" communication and impermeable boundaries of rigid isolation are both put to the test' (*Woman at the Keyhole*, p. 228).

³⁶ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, p. 158.

CONCLUSION

Fremde Haut features a film-within-a-film: Fariba/Siamak's room-mate again and again watches videos of his home village, a detail that suggests how representation can fix origins and shore up nostalgia. *Fremde Haut* itself refuses such nostalgia. It challenges the apparent fixity and discreteness of sexes, genders, and sexualities, and it exposes masculinity and nationality as intertwined constructs that rely on covert or overt violence to maintain their borders and assert their authority. At the same time, it opens up masculinity as complex, shifting, and variable, and it suggests that transnational exchange can occur, that nations are not static and impenetrable. It also asserts the gaze as (potentially) mutual, and challenges masculinist scopophilia by emphasising touch. Connell calls for 'gender multiculturalism', for a culture in which genders are acknowledged and celebrated as diverse (*M*, 234). Maccarone's film can be seen to practise and propose (gender) multiculturalism, suggesting new ways of conceiving both Germanness and gender.