

Women as Victims of Violence in German Films

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This paper focuses on women as victims of violence as shown in films. Seven German films were selected for the analysis, namely *Die Fremde* (2010) by Feo Aladag, *Die Frau des Polizisten* (2013) by Philip Gröning, *Festung* (2011) by Kirsi Liimatainen, *Reeperbahn* (2016) by Timo Rose, *Schneeland* (2005) by Hans W. Geißendörfer, *Der Brand* (2010) by Brigitte Berteleund and *L'amour* (2000) by Philip Gröning. There were three main research questions: (1) What kinds of violence against women are represented in selected German films; (2) Why do the women in these films become victims of violence; and (3) How do the women in these films find solutions to the problem? There are four forms of violence in the analyzed films: physical violence, psychological violence, sexual violence, and witnessed violence. Physical violence is found in all the films, however, witnessed violence appears only in two films with young female characters. The other two kinds of violence are also found in most of the films. The reasons why women become victims of violence are weakness, love, poverty and carelessness. All of these factors appear in different types of women. Furthermore, the female characters in the films react differently to violence. Some women flee from their abusers because they fear or cannot fight with them. In other cases, they accept the violence with patience, or they take revenge on their offenders to get justice or stop the violence.

Keywords: women, victims, violence, German films

Introduction

Nowadays, violence is a global problem with no solution because people still try to solve many other problems with violence. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines “violence” as follows:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (WHO, 2002)

As mentioned above, this definition clearly describes the damage caused by violence, thus the problem should not be ignored. In addition, violence against women is also a serious problem. Many women suffer from physical, psychological or sexual abuse. According to a survey on violence against women, 42,000 women in the 28 member states of the European Union suffer from violence, which means approximately 1,500 cases per country. The result of the FRA study in Germany indicates that 35% of German women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from their partners or other persons since the age of 15 (FRA, 2014).

Although women and men are equal under the law, society is still dominated by patriarchy, even in a highly developed country like Germany. In this social system, men are leaders and women are in a disadvantageous situation, hence women often become victims. Violence against women can happen anywhere

and at any time, especially within a family, when it is called domestic violence.

Since people are regularly concerned about violence against women, this topic is represented in different kinds of media, especially in films, because films can illustrate violence clearly and realistically. This study therefore focuses on women who are victims of violence and tries to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What kinds of violence against women are represented in the selected German films?
- (2) Why do the women in these films become victims of violence?
- (3) How do the women in these films find solutions to the problem?

In order to answer the research questions, seven German films in which women play important roles were selected and analyzed: *L'amour* (2000), *Schneeland* (2005), *Der Brand* (2010), *Die Fremde* (2010), *Festung* (2011), *Die Frau des Polizisten* (2013), and *Reeperbahn* (2016).

“Violence Against Women”: What Does it Means?

The definition of “violence against women” used for this study is derived from the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action produced at the Fourth World Conference on Women from 4-15 September 1995:

The term “violence against women” means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. Accordingly, violence against women encompasses but is not limited to the following:

- a) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation.
- b) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution.
- c) Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs.

(United Nations, 1995)

In short, violence against women means that women suffer from physical, psychological or sexual harm from gender based violence. Violence against women can be performed by husbands, family members, colleagues or even strangers. It can take place both at home and in a public place.

Synopsis of Analyzed German Films

***L'amour* (2000) Directed by Philip Gröning**

A laborer, David, falls in love with a prostitute, Marie. They decide to live together and leave Germany but they have a big problem because they have no money. David tries to find a job and does not allow Marie to work as a prostitute, but he spends money extravagantly. Finally, Marie has to work as a prostitute. However, it is a rough test for both of them, so they have to choose between love and money.

***Schneeland* (2005) Directed by Hans W. Geißendörfer**

A writer named Elisabeth loses her husband Ingmar in a car accident. She lives with her three children and suffers from depression. For this reason, she wants to die. Elisabeth goes to the snow-covered territory of Lapland where she meets Ingmar. She discovers an older women's body here and hides herself in a house in a

heavy snowstorm. In the house, she finds the diary of Ina from the year 1973. The diary tells the story of Ina's childhood as she had lived with her mother and irascible father. Ina was often beaten up by her father. After the death of her mother, her father raped and assaulted her. Ina's diary encourages Elisabeth to return to her children again.

***Der Brand* (2010) Directed by Brigitte Bertele**

After an evening dance party, 35-year-old Judith Hoffmann is raped and assaulted by Ralph Nester. She presses charges against Nester and her lawyer Valentin Stein is willing to help her, but she is not successful because she lacks evidence. Besides, Nester is a doctor and a reliable person. She therefore decides to prove his guilt herself to get her revenge.

***Die Fremde* (2010) Directed by Feo Aladag**

Umay escapes from Istanbul with her son because she has a failed married life and she has been physically abused by her husband. She flees back to Germany to gain independence from her husband. She wants to live with her family but everything does not go as planned as her family cannot stand the social disapproval. They want to send Cem (her son) back to his father in order to solve the problem. Umay attempts reconciliation with her family but they think that social standing and traditional conventions are more important than family relationships. In the end, it is a tragedy for Umay because her brother kills her son.

***Festung* (2011) Directed by Kirsi Liimatainen**

A 13-year-old girl named Johanna lives with her mother Erika and her younger sister Monika. Her elder sister Claudia has already moved to Hamburg. Johanna bears a burden of responsibility for her mother and also has to take care of her sister, hence she loses the joy of teenage life. One day, her violent father comes back and domestic violence begins again in this family. Her father uses physical violence on her mother and showers her with abuse. Johanna lives with this violent situation for a long time. She tries to keep the family's secret while with her first love, Christian. She therefore has to confront both love and family problems.

***Die Frau des Polizisten* (2013) Directed by Philip Gröning**

This film is divided into 59 Chapters. It's a story of a family that consists of father, mother and daughter. Christine lives together with Uwe (her husband) and her 14-year-old daughter in a small town. In the opening scene, they appear to bear happy family. Uwe works as a policeman and he has to go on patrol, so he has little time for his family. Christine takes more care of Clara than he does. Uwe is always bad-tempered and physically abuses his wife. Each chapter deals with the story of this family and their everyday life that alternates with a picture of an old man who might be Uwe in the future.

***Reeperbahn* (2016) Directed by Timo Rose**

This film tells a story about the dark side of Reeperbahn, a district in Hamburg which is a place of illegal business and violence. The story is divided into several parts and shows the ways of life and actions of each character. Sarah works as a prostitute with Uffuk who is her pimp in Reeperbahn. Her brother Markus and his friend Django conduct dark business. Markus is a loser in his life and in debt to Uffuk, however Markus cannot repay him. Uffuk therefore kills Django and takes Sarah, his girlfriend, and the unlucky woman Maria as hostages. In the end, Uffuk wildly kills three women.

Film Analysis

Forms of Violence Against Women

There are different forms of violence and they can be classified in different ways. In the analyzed films, four forms of violence can be found. These consist of physical violence, psychological violence, sexual violence and witnessed violence which are illustrated in the Table 1.

Table 1

Forms of Violence Against Women in Analyzed German Films

Films	Physical violence	Psychological violence	Sexual violence	Witnessed violence
<i>L'amour</i>	*	*	*	
<i>Schneeland</i>	*	*	*	
<i>Der Brand</i>	*		*	
<i>Die Fremde</i>	*	*		
<i>Festung</i>	*			*
<i>Die Frau des Polizisten</i>	*	*		*
<i>Reeperbahn</i>	*	*	*	

Physical violence. Physical violence or physical assault is measured on the revised (CTS2) version of “The Conflict Tactic Scales”. Straus, Boney-McCoy, and Sugarman (1996) lists different acts showing physical violence as follows: kicking, biting, spapping, beating up, hitting with something, choking, slamming against wall, grabbing, throwing something at, using knife or gun on someone, pushing, twisting one’s hair, burning or scalding someone on purpose. The results of physical violence are pain and illness that women have to experience which are bad for their health, including bleeding wounds, bruises on the body, fractures or even death.

According to Table 1, physical violence against women appears in all of the analyzed films. The films also show that the majority offenders are male. The analyzed films mostly deal with domestic violence, in which husbands or family members are woman abusers. For example, the main female character in *Die Fremde*, named Umay, is thrown against the wall by her husband. She then flees to her family but her father slaps her face and does not accept her. Her brother also mistreats her. They beat up Umay and twist her hair. In the end, both of them try to kill her. Another example is found in *Die Frau des Polizisten* where we can see that the husband abuses his wife by beating her up and twisting her hair. In violent quarrels, he hits her face until she becomes unconscious. In every chapter of the film, the audience can see more bruises on her body which result from being attacked by her husband.

Likewise, prostitutes are women who are often physically injured. This job has a high potential for physical violence. These women are abused by pimps and sadistic customers. This picture of violence is represented in the films *Reeperbahn* and *L'amour*. In *Reeperbahn*, the pimp Uffuk is the offender. He threatens Sarah, the prostitute, to keep her under his control. Uffuk beats up Sarah, and finally she is brutally killed with a knife. The film *L'amour* shows that a prostitute named Marie is never happy when she acts as a prostitute. She has many bruises on her body because of being abused by bad customers. Moreover, she is violently threatened by her pimp because he wants to gain a share of Marie’s earnings.

Psychological violence. Psychological violence has no clear definition because it is hard to separate from physical violence. Physically violent acts can have psychological consequences and psychological acts can

have physical consequence (Hart & Bassard, 1991). However, Follingstad (1990) describes the following categories as acts of psychological violence:

- verbal attacks such as ridicule, verbal harassment, and name calling, designed to make the woman believe she is not worthwhile in order to keep her under the control of the abuser.
- isolation that separates a woman from her social support networks or denies her access to finances and other resources, thus limiting her independence.
- extreme jealousy or possessiveness, such as excessive monitoring of her behavior, repeated accusations of infidelity, and controlling with whom she has contact.
- verbal threats of abuse, harm, or torture directed at the woman herself or at her family, children, or friends.
- repeated threats of abandonment, divorce, or of initiating an affair if the woman does not comply with the abuser's wishes.
- damage or destruction of the woman's personal property.

It is therefore hard to separate psychological violence from physical violence. Both forms frequently happen at the same time, which is why both physical and psychological violence are found in most of the analyzed films (5 out of 7). Psychological violence is shown in many films, for example the main female character in *Die Fremde* hurts because she is insulted by men; in a telephone scene between her father and her husband, when her father hangs up, he slaps her face and said "Bitch!" (34:48), and her husband calls her "a German whore" (35:06). These insults hurt her mentally, especially because these insults are made by persons whom she loves. In another scene, Umay visits her father at the Eid al-Fitr festival, a festival to celebrate the breaking of the fast. She gives him Baklava, a Turkish pastry, in order to be reconciled with her father, but he rejects her and says "you are my failure as a father" (1:31:56). It ruinously breaks her heart.

Perhaps psychological violence is a threat which leads the female victims to feel worthless and lose their self-esteem. For example, in the film *Die Frau des Polizisten*, little Clara blames herself and hits herself on her head because her father refuses to play with her. "I'm bad" (1:41:46), she says very sadly.

Sexual violence. Sexual violence against women includes both sexual assault and rape. The abuser forces or threatens his female victim to have sex. There are women in five of the films who experience sexual violence, who are raped by strangers or members of their family. For example, the female character named Ina in *Schneeland* is raped by her evil father. After her mother dies, her father says, "The important thing is that you also are mother of Nattmyberg. Now, you are Ina and Hilma (her mother)" (22:43). It means that she is his daughter and wife at the same time.

Another example appears in film *Der Brand* which is about a woman who is raped by a stranger. After she is raped, her psychological and life-practical consequences are worse because she still suffers because of this rape. Judith is always nervous and obsessed with the procedure of taking evidence, and it also destroys her 6-year relationship with her boyfriend. Even her health gets worse. This form of violence has an effect on her body and mind. It becomes a big scar in her heart that never disappears.

Witnessed violence. Witnessed violence is a form of psychological violence when someone becomes a witness to acts of violence against a close person (Brauer, 2017). This witnessed violence usually involves children who are affected by the violence, hence it is separated from psychological violence in this study. Although children may not be directly abused, they also suffer from the violence. Because the violence is within their family, children are aware of it by seeing, hearing or feeling. Accordingly, they are witnesses of the violence. Adults always think that children are too young to understand it, but actually they can perceive

everything. Moreover, the effects of witnessed violence against children can lead to other mental illness.

In the film *Festung*, Johanna, a 13-year-old girl, is the main character. She lives in a family in which the parents behave violently, or, to be more precise, her father beats up her mother. She often sees the pictures of violence in her family and hears the loud insults of her father. The weak mother is very patient, but she cannot take good care of her daughters, therefore Johanna has to look after both her mother and her sister. The violence greatly affects her. She attempts to keep this family secret because she feels embarrassed and is afraid that this secret might be revealed. In addition, the violence influences her little sister Monika. This is shown in a scene when the two sisters are quarreling and Monika snarls at Johanna with venom, for instance shouting, “take it back, you’re a slut” (08:50) or “shut up, fucking shit!” (21:54).

In the film *Die Frau des Polizisten*, Clara also lives with domestic violence. Although the film does not show clearly whether she perceives this negatively or not, she can feel the abnormality of the situation in the house, as we can see in a scene when her parents quarrel and her mother escapes into Clara’s bedroom. The father follows her into the bedroom with a knife in his hand. In another scene, as her father opens the bathroom door, Clara sees her mother with bruises on her body.

The Reasons Why Women Become Victims of Violence

The structure of society is still patriarchal which is proved by male dominance. In the family, men are leaders and women are subordinates. Men therefore violently treat women in order to control them. There are various types of female characters who are victims in these films, depending on individual cases. In addition, social environment and economic situation also have an influence on the types of women characters in films. The reasons for violence against women can possibly be traced back to some factors which contribute to the characters of the different types of women. They are weakness, love, poverty and carelessness.

Weakness. Women are not only physically, but also psychologically weak. The films show that the women in all of the selected films do not accept the male abuser’s violence, but they cannot fight with men because they are weaker. *Die Fremde* and *Schneeland* are two films that obviously show that weak female characters are controlled by men. In early scenes in these films, the audience can see these female characters’ weaknesses.

Umay in *Die Fremde* is a Turkish woman who lives in Istanbul with her husband’s family. Her husband is the head of a family which follows Turkish values and norms. He beats her up and slaps their son in front of other members of the family without feeling guilty. Umay can protect neither herself nor her son (see Figure 1), so she flees from her husband. This, however, goes against Turkish traditional values and norms. It is the first time that she is brave enough to make her own decisions. When she comes back to Germany, she cannot protect her son again. Her brother wants to return her son to Istanbul and she cannot fight against him. After that, she quarrels with her father. Because of the stress of this situation, she slashes her wrists (see Figure 2). Society makes her so weak that she cannot protect herself from the violence. She only flees to start a new life again.



Figure 1. Umay cries because she cannot protect her son (06:20).



Figure 2. Umay quarrels with her father and slashes her wrists (37:24).

Ina in *Schneeland* is a daughter who is abused by her father and her mother cannot help her. Her evil father hits her with a stick every day to force her to obey him. Because she is his daughter, she has to follow his orders. Her mother is only an emotional restraint. After her mother dies, she is even weaker and then her father rapes her. Although she is not consenting, she does not flee from him and submits to her destiny because she is afraid of her father and believes that she cannot fight him back.

Ina: “My body is in the house over there, but myself, I ran away through the woods, over the mountains, across the moors. I found some escape routes, where no one can follow me” (36:32).

Ina speaks to her mother’s grave and that shows her weakness. She is not willing to be in this bad situation and wants to go far away, however she is not brave enough to break out to escape.

Love. Many women suffer from violence because of their overwhelming love of men. Sometimes, when a husband cruelly treats his wife, she can still accept it. She always forgives him and gives him a chance because she loves him and she wants to have a happy family, or she may believe that her patience will lead them to that, for example, Christiane in *Die Frau des Polizisten* and Erika in *Festung*. Christiane in *Die Frau des Polizisten* is a housewife and her husband Uwe is a policeman. He is bad-tempered and abuses his wife but she is very patient and never lets him go. This can be observed in a scene when this couple quarrels as shown in Figure 3 (2:39:18):

Uwe: “Stop crying now or I’ll go!”
 “Stop it!”
 “Stop it now or I’ll go!”
 Christiane: “Then, go. Why don’t you go!!!”
 Christiane: “I didn’t mean it like that. Please, stay”



Figure 3. She hugs his knee and begs him to stay (2:39:40).

The above scene shows that she really loves him and she is willing to give him everything he wants. Although he replies with violence, she says “I love you. You’re good”.

Erika in *Festung* is another female victim of love. She has a husband who beats her up. He leaves his family in order to be treated with psychotherapy. One day, he comes back and Erika gives him a chance because she wants to have a warm-hearted family. She also hopes that he has changed and she will not be hit anymore. Nevertheless, he has not changed and hits her again regardless of whether their daughters will see or hear it. Despite this repeated violence, Erika still gives him another chance because she loves him so much. She does not even think about her daughters’ feelings and her acceptance of violence as a victim of love has also caused witnessed violence in her family.

Poverty. The economic situation is very important and poverty can have a negative effect on a family’s livelihood. Poor women have to work hard to earn money, but sometimes it is still not enough for their expenses. Most of the women in the analyzed films are uneducated, hence they do not have many choices. Prostitution is a job which they choose because they can make a lot of money. However, being a prostitute is more dangerous than other jobs, as we can see in the cases of the prostitutes in the films *L’amour* and *Reeperbahn*.

Marie in *L’amour* is a prostitute. She meets a man named David. Both of them decide to move away together from Germany. They only have a little money and only Marie’s car. They want to begin a new life. He has to find a job and she does not want to work as a prostitute, however he loses his job because of an arm injury. Marie has to become a prostitute again because they have no money. She is abused and suffers physical violence while being a prostitute (see Figure 4), but she has no choice because she wants to earn money quickly and her boyfriend spends money on expensive items. She suffers both physically and psychologically.



Figure 4. Marie and David. She suffers mentally because she is abused by her customers (30:35).

This is the same as Sarah’s case in *Reeperbahn*. She also works as prostitute in *Reeperbahn*, a dark district in Hamburg. Sarah is never happy or content with what she is. She only needs money. In addition, she is an addict. She has to deal with the cruel pimp or bad customers who abuse her.

Carelessness. Sometimes, the violence affects ordinary women who have a normal daily life, however they become victims just because they are too careless. They lack caution and are not aware of possible risks or danger.

Judith in *Der Brand* works as a physiotherapist. She helps her patients to recover from tension and injuries. She is gentle, friendly and has self-esteem. She goes alone to an evening dance because her boyfriend cannot come with her, but she is not sad. At the dance, she finds other men to dance with, but she is unfortunate because she is physically abused by a stranger named Ralph Nester, who rapes her on the way home. He did not show his cruelty from the beginning (see Figure 5). Judith is not mentally weak but she is physically weaker than her abuser. Accordingly, she cannot help herself, although she struggles to fight him.



Figure 5. Judith and Nester talk to each other on the way home (06:45).

The factors or characters described above are found in the analyzed films. They are reflected in different types of women to show reasons why these women become victims of violence. However, these are not all of the reasons. The use of violence against women also depends on the motives of the abusers, hence women should protect themselves and ask for help when they need it.

Solutions for Female Characters

The female characters in the films react to violence in different ways. Some choose to flee or to be patient and accept their fate, while others react to the violence with a desire for revenge.

Flight. Umay in *Die Fremde* solves the violence problem with flight. She believes that she can keep her son with her and have a happy life and family but eventually it does not turn out to be what she hoped for. Moreover, she cannot escape from the violence, or traditional values and norms. The main character Marie in *L'amour* is abused and raped. It is a turning point of the film. She cannot tolerate the situation anymore and wants to get away from this pain. She says to her boyfriend, "I want to get away, I want to get away from here". After that, she leaves that place and she becomes aware that money is no longer necessary whenever her boyfriend is with her; it is her real happiness.

Patience. Christiane in *Die Frau des Polizisten* has a lot of patience. She is beaten by her husband. He beats her up for no reason at all, but she does not fight him back. Her husband feels guilty but he does not improve. She always gives him chances and she also has chances to flee or let him go but she does not take them.

Likewise, Erika in *Festung* is regularly beaten. She is a female character who is never happy. She will smile or laugh when her husband is nice to her or she spends time with members of her family. She is, however, very weak but also patient. As a result, her family life returns to normal again, but she is injured because her husband abuses her every day, thus she cannot solve the problem.

Sarah in *Reeperbahn* is also very patient. She is a strong woman. Every day, she has to experience violence from her pimp and her customers while working, however she is always patient and tries to stay calm. Furthermore, she learns martial arts to defend herself but she cannot cope with the evil pimp who mistreats her. In the end, her patience is overwhelmed by her death.

Revenge. Ina in *Schneeland* tolerates the violence but when she meets a man named Aron, it seems like she has new hope again. Unfortunately, her father does not agree with their relationship because he is afraid that she will leave him. When her father is sick, she looks after him, although he disparages and reviles her. She tells him without fear, "...also that I'm only Ina from now on, only myself" (1:35:10). After her father gets better, he beats her up again but now she cannot stand it, so she kills him to stop the use of violence.

In *Der Brand*, Judith is raped and it destroys her emotions and soul. She gets extremely angry because of the pain and injustice which she has experienced, and she solves the problem with revenge. Although it is not the correct action and she might be assaulted, she gets her justice.

These solutions for female characters in the analyzed films do not indicate for one moment that the problems of violence are solved, however they can reflect the problems of victims of violence as part of society. Through these films, we can also see that the victims have to experience violence and confront its consequence alone, suggesting that other people should help them.

Conclusion

In this study, the topic of violence against women in German films is described and discussed. The method is an analysis of seven selected films in order to answer three research questions: What kinds of violence against women are represented in selected German films? Why do the women in these films become victims of violence? How do the women in these films find solutions to the problem?

There are four forms of violence in the analyzed films: physical violence, psychological violence, sexual violence and witnessed violence. Physical violence appears in all of the films, but witnessed violence is only found in young female characters. The reasons why women become victims of violence are weakness, love, poverty and carelessness which appear in different types of women. The female characters in the films have different reactions to violence. Some women flee from their abusers because they fear them or cannot fight them. In other cases, some women are very patient and tolerant of the violence, or they extract revenge on the offenders to get justice or stop the violence.

Due to the limitation of the number of films selected for this study, not all forms, reasons and solutions relating to violence against women can be described and analyzed. Besides, the women victims in German films analyzed here may not only represent those in German society, but may also reflect violence against women in general in our global community. Violence against women is an important problem and people should be seriously concerned about this. In addition, the reasons for unjust treatment of women can be the results of other factors, for instance the motives of the offenders, alcohol, or even the culture and morals in each society which are very important. It is therefore recommended that future research should study other reasons and factors for closer examination of this problem.

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