

Vier Minuten / Four Minutes: Transcript

Hi, I'm Bex Harper and I'm a PhD student at The University of Nottingham. Today I am going to discuss the film *Vier Minuten* and the main issues the film raises. *Vier Minuten*, or *Four Minutes*, is a 2006 film directed by Chris Klaus. The film won a number of awards around the globe for Best Actress, Best Film and Best Soundtrack. It won two Golden Lola awards, also known as the Deutscher Filmpreis, one for Best Film and one for Best Actress.

The film takes place in a contemporary women's prison in Germany, where inmate Jenny is being held for murder. A piano teacher, Frau Krüger, arrives at the prison with the view to taking on several students. She is allowed four — one of whom is Jenny. Krüger discovers that Jenny is talented but that her dangerously violent outbursts pose an extreme problem to those around her. Violence, death, control and power hierarchies continue to be key themes throughout *Vier Minuten* and the film remains critical of the concepts of deviancy and criminalisation. I am going to read the film from a gender studies perspective and will examine to what extent women are represented in the film as victims and also consider how place and temporalities play a major role in the film.

Trends in German Cinema

Both women are portrayed as being products of a society that renders them victims and outsiders, two topics that have been frequently discussed in German culture since the 1960s as part of the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. This is a German word that means 'coming to terms with the past'. In 1962, a group of filmmakers including Alexander Kluge, wrote the

Oberhausener Manifest. This group were critical of ‘Papap Kino’ – films being made by their parents’ generation – due to their former involvement in the National Socialist regime. From the 1960s to 1980s, West German filmmakers such as Fassbinder, Herzog and von Trotta, among many others, were making films that discussed the National Socialist past, notions of victims and the contemporary generational divide that led to the 1968 student movement and the left-wing terrorism of the 1970s. These directors were mainly dealing with contemporary issues that were a result of ideologies and infrastructures that were left over from the National Socialist era, i.e. their parents’ generation.

Recent cinema, however, has also dealt significantly with the German past through costume dramas – often using first person narrative techniques to create a false sense of trust in the characters or closeness with the situations being portrayed and these dramas are sometimes even nostalgic or uncritical. Recent examples of German films dealing with the issues of victims and outsiders include: *Aimée und Jaguar* (1999), *Sonnenallee* (1999), *Helden Wie Wir* (1999), *Berlin is in Germany* (2001), *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003), *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006), *Der rote Kakadu* (2006), *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* (2008) and *Das Weiße Band* (2009). Some of these, such as *Sonnenallee*, *Good Bye, Lenin!* and *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* can be viewed as falling under the heritage film genre. Heritage films are set in the past and usually portray a nostalgic, idealised or glamorous version of it. For example, *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for East Germany) has been a feature of several films. Overall, *Vier Minuten* is neither nostalgic about its past, nor idealises its present. Yet, unlike many other German films dealing with the National Socialist past, this film draws strong parallels between National Socialist society’s and contemporary German society’s justice systems through its use of different temporalities in the same location.

One question which arises in a discussion of *Vier Minuten* is: as Frau Krüger’s character is a lesbian, how does this film fit into other contemporary German lesbian narratives? In contrast

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to the aforementioned trend of German costume dramas and also the vast number of British productions that can be classed as ‘queer heritage films’, German film does not, on the whole, use the costume drama format to depict lesbian narratives.¹ Aside from *Aimée and Jaguar* and the few flashbacks in *Vier Minuten*, recent German representations of non-heterosexual women are almost exclusively set in the present day. Recent queer German films do, however, engage with notions of victimhood and the violence women face, for example, in films such as *Fremde Haut* (2005), *Auf der anderen Seite* (2007) and *Mein Freund aus Faro* (2008). I view *Vier Minuten* as playing with these two tendencies – merging the two trends to highlight how parallels can be drawn between violent past events and violence in contemporary German society. I am now going to discuss this technique in more depth.

Temporalities and Victims

Vier Minuten follows the relationship between Jenny and Frau Krüger and how their pasts made them who they are. The film has a complex storyline with interwoven character histories which intersect with Germany’s national history. The film takes the perspectives of both the women, which enables an insight into their pasts. The film uses flashbacks to Frau Krüger’s past during the National Socialist period and it explains Jenny’s past through dialogue. The treatment of Jenny by other characters and life in the prison are paralleled with the treatment of Krüger’s girlfriend and life in Nazi Germany as inhumane and

¹ Queer cinema is a term used to describe films which explore alternative expressions of gender (what exactly is ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’) and different types of sexuality. These films also look at the power structures in place which promote (or suppress) non-mainstream expressions of gender and sexuality.

dehumanising. The film shows that Jenny's behaviour is a reaction to being treated in a dehumanising way by various sections of society – her father, her ex-boyfriend and the prison and hospital staff. It appears that at the start of the film, she does not respect others because they do not respect her. However, Krüger demands respect, but she also shows it to Jenny. Krüger's expectation of mutual respect is noticed by Jenny, who responds by at first addressing her using 'du' but then she begins to address Krüger using the more respectful 'Sie'. It is these nuances in language that show power relations between characters in the film.

Krüger, at first, appears to be a woman who has always conformed to rules and normative social expectations. Yet the film later reveals Krüger's character as a lesbian. Nevertheless, flashbacks reveal her as desperately trying to fit in and conform to the National Socialist society, whilst secretly having a lesbian relationship. Krüger did not resist the National Socialist regime, but instead conformed to remain as invisible as possible, due to fear. In one scene depicting her interrogation by the SS, Krüger is portrayed as being intimidated by an SS officer. He then convinces her to say that she did not know her girlfriend very well and was just her music teacher, which he records in official National Socialist documents. Her girlfriend is then later executed for being a communist in the same prison at which Krüger teaches in the present of the narrative. The numerous flashbacks, depicted as being Krüger's thoughts, demonstrate that these events play on her mind and that she perhaps blames herself for her girlfriend's death. It appears through the flashbacks that she did not have the courage to defend Hannah for the fear that she, too, could be imprisoned. No other person features heavily in Krüger's past flashbacks and in the present she lives alone.

Krüger is presented as both a victim of National Socialist society but also, by having her file in a national archive, she is seen by Jenny's father as a perpetrator – a collaborator with the Nazis. One of the prison guards even says to Frau Krüger: 'komplett guter Mensch sind Sie

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auch nicht!'. This comment is in response to the first time she met Jenny. Krüger tells Jenny that she cannot play as her hands are all rough and sore from her biting them. Jenny then violently attacks the prison guard and, meanwhile, Krüger just walks away. By not intervening in the situation, she is viewed as an immoral person. Thus, throughout the film, Krüger's position shifts between victim and collaborator.

There are similar events in Jenny's life that parallels Krüger's past. Jenny also lives in a solitary manner – she has no contact from outside the prison and her only cellmate commits suicide by hanging herself at the start of the film. This the exact same method used to execute Hannah in the 1940s. Jenny, who was adopted only then to be sexually abused by her adoptive father, is convicted of a murder that her ex-boyfriend carried out. Her father could not testify against Jenny's ex, because he was worried that the truth would be discovered regarding Jenny's sexual abuse. He appears to show remorse and to blame himself for Jenny's imprisonment but justifies his actions by commenting that his wife would have killed herself, should she have discovered the truth.

The space of the family home and the prison are both portrayed as violent and controlled by men. The male prison guards treat Jenny in a demeaning and patronising way, even allowing other prisoners to set her arm on fire whilst she sleeps, in one scene. Even the staff at the hospital where Jenny had her baby treated her badly. Jenny comments to Frau Krüger that they should have given her a caesarean section but just let her tear, because they thought she was just trying to avoid being in jail for a few more hours. As a result of the difficult birth she blacked out and even lost her baby. This sort of cruelty that Jenny describes is depicted alongside the cruelty that Krüger witnessed occurring in the National Socialist past, drawing parallels between both generations' violent behaviour. Jenny's father and many of the prison guards can be seen to be a critical representation of the '68 generation mentioned earlier in this talk.

I mentioned earlier that the generation of the 1960s and 1970s were critical of their parents' generation for their involvement with Nazism. Through the sexual abuse that Jenny's father carries out, the film problematizes the '68 generation to show that they, too, used control and violence and cannot be seen to be any better than Nazi collaborators. Moreover, Jenny's sexual abuse also highlights that no real progress has been made since the feminist campaigns of the 1970s and the previous depictions of violence against women in feminist films by Helke Sander and Margarethe von Trotta.

The relationship between the two women is what makes this film critical of even the protagonists themselves. There is a constant power struggle between these women. Krüger eventually gains Jenny's trust but tells her that she has no interest in her as a person, only in her ability to play. Yet, when Jenny discovers that it was her own father who approached Krüger and asked to train her up to compete in the national competition, Krüger comments that it was never about Jenny and that she is only interested in the music. Jenny is thus once again rendered a victim of her father's manipulation. Yet Jenny gets revenge in the final of the competition - she rebels against Krüger by manipulating the classical music that Krüger picked out for her, and plays her own creative take on the piece, which makes her even more popular with the audience. In this final scene, Jenny is thus able to reclaim her autonomy and assert her own desires, even if it is for just four minutes.

Conclusion

By combining different time-periods that are set in the same place – the women's prison – *Vier Minuten* is able to critically portray violence against women and how the 1968 generation have become just as violent and controlling as they viewed their parents'

generation. Both women's narratives in the film emphasize them being victims, controlled by men. Yet other characters, predominantly men, view Krüger as a collaborator and Jenny as a murderer. By blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator, *Vier Minuten* can perhaps be seen to be indirectly commenting on the problem of representing the past and highlighting that no one is simply just one of these positions, just that these terms are fraught with difficulty.