

Masculinity in Crisis? – *What a Man* (2011) and the German ‘relationship comedy’

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Abstract

This article discusses the German romantic comedy *What a Man* (Schweighöfer, 2011) as a continuation of the Comedy Wave of 1990s German film. Eric Rentschler dismissed these ‘New German Comedies’ for being conservative and pedestrian in form and content, considering them the epitome of the ‘cinema of consensus’. It is argued that *What a Man*, while highly similar to the 1990s ‘relationship comedies’ in its narrative structure and content, is indicative of a shift in dominant ideas and values relating to romantic relationships between the 1990s and 2010s, moving away from a display of male chauvinism and sexism and replacing it with gender images that reflect both the ongoing female emancipation and a crisis of masculinity. *What a Man* is analysed in relation to two current sub-genres of the romantic comedy, the German ‘postromance’ and the American ‘geek-centred comedy’, in order to place the film within discernible production trends that explore changing gender roles in western societies. The article also situates *What a Man* in the context of German film production by exploring how its generic affiliation, choice of location and use of public funding ensure its success as a mainstream, popular film.

Keywords

German Cinema

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postromance

***What a Man* (Schweighöfer, 2011) and the continuation of the German ‘relationship comedy’**

The 2011 romantic comedy *What a Man*, the directorial debut of popular actor Matthias Schweighöfer, strongly resembles the ‘New German Comedies’ or ‘relationship comedies’ (*Beziehungskomödie*) that dominated German mainstream cinema in the 1990s, being the most successful domestic films at the German box office in that decade. *What a Man* is part of a group of popular films suggesting that German mainstream comedies coexist with, rather than being replaced by, internationally successful productions such as *Der Untergang/Downfall* (Hirschbiegel, 2004), *Good Bye, Lenin!* (Becker, 2003) or *Das Leben der Anderen/The Lives of Others* (Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006) and the acclaimed Berlin School art film movement, which, taken together, are often seen as the renaissance of German film in the 2000s after a decade of obscurity. While big-budget productions engaging with the dark chapters of German history such as *Downfall* or *The Lives of Others* only account for occasional German box office hits, a string of romantic comedies such as *Keinohrhasen/Rabbit without Ears* (Schweiger, 2007), *Kokowääh* (Schweiger, 2011) and their respective sequels *Rabbit without Zweiohrküken/Ears 2* (Schweiger, 2009) and *Kokowääh 2* (Schweiger, 2013) have guaranteed consistently high box office takings. It is therefore worth enquiring why this type of romantic comedy that targets exclusively German audiences, rarely getting wide international releases, resonates as it does with German viewers. Eric Rentschler has discussed the reasons for the popularity of the ‘New German Comedy’ in his article ‘From New German Cinema to the post-wall cinema of consensus’,

which has become the most influential critical reading of 1990s German film. Rentschler therein observes that the socially critical and formally experimental New German Cinema after its decline in the 1980s made way in the 1990s for a wave of generic comedies, which Rentschler calls ‘unabashedly conventional in [their] appearance and structure’ (2000: 275) and which Paul Cooke describes as ‘both politically and aesthetically conservative’ (2012: 27). Rentschler believes that the reason the films were extremely popular in Germany yet did not do well abroad is that they addressed a specific German sensibility: its ‘directors [...] aim to please, which is to say that they consciously solicit a new German consensus’ (2000: 264). He contends that with the end of the oppressive GDR regime after the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, Germany was keen to insist on its ‘normalcy’ as a member of the community of nations.

Rainer Kaufmann, director of the comedy *Stadtgespräch/Talk of the Town* (1995), for example, explained: ‘only since reunification have we felt whole enough to make films about normal people in normal situations, to look at ourselves and say I’m okay. Now we can make other films, more serious and vital films’ (cited in Halle 2000: 6–7). Film-makers like Kaufmann avoided disturbing the consensus of the recently reunified republic by inspecting its problematic (national socialist and communist) past: Rentschler detects in 1990s German films ‘an overdetermined [...] desire for normalcy as well as [...] a marked disinclination towards any serious political reflection or sustained historical retrospection’ (2000: 263). Stephen Brockmann confirms this view in his analysis of Sönke Wortmann’s comedy film *Der bewegte Mann/Maybe, Maybe not* (Wortmann, 1994). As Brockmann observes, *Maybe, Maybe not* ‘suggests a materially comfortable West German milieu bent on consumption and pleasure, not on political change or social consciousness [...] Watching *Der bewegte Mann*, a viewer would never know that West and East Germany has been united only a few years earlier’ (2010: 439). *Maybe, Maybe not* implies a social consensus according to which West

German consumerism paired with a drive for personal self-fulfilment is the desirable way of living. *Maybe, Maybe not* is a typical New German comedy of the 1990s, all of which centre on young urban professionals who are solely concerned with personal problems relating to their love life or career. As Sabine Hake explains,

the films advertised the affluent lifestyles and consumerist tastes personified by the new class of yuppies. Featuring attractive young [...] professionals working in consulting, advertising, mass media, and investment banking, the comedies evoke a contemporary society unburdened by ideology, politics and history and held together by the unbridled pursuit of money and status. (2013: 202)

Rentschler does not deny his disdain for the ‘New German comedies’, lamenting that ‘these films focus on identity crises which are in fact pseudo-crises for they have no depth of despair, no true suffering, no real joy’ (2000: 263). Other scholars have looked in more detail at some of the New German Comedies, developing and refining Rentschler’s analysis of the attitudes and ideologies behind the films.

Investigating gender (images) and sexuality in New German Comedy

Rentschler argues that the ‘essential female centrepiece of German comedies, played by Katja Riemann, longs above all for romantic bliss and bourgeois security’ (2000: 273), thereby denying the films the ability to question middle-class values or introduce feminist ideas despite their frequent focus on female protagonists. Dickson Copsey on the other hand, analyses three of Riemann’s films –*Talk of the Town*, *Abgeschminkt/Making Up!* (von

Garnier, 1993), *Ein Mann für jede Tonart/A Man for Every Situation* (Timm, 1993) – as well as the female-centred comedies *Das Superweib/The Superwife* (Wortmann, 1996) and *Workaholic* (von Wietersheim, 1996) in detail and concludes that ‘these [...] romantic comedies fail completely as romances in that they can never convincingly resolve their representation of female independence, solidarity and recognition of patriarchal inadequacy with the sexual norms their generic form historically dictates’ (2006: 199). The films frequently expose heterosexual men as chauvinist and exploitative while foregrounding female camaraderie, as Randall Halle observes: ‘in the Comedy Wave the relationship between her and her is not represented as blocked. The female buddy is frequently present’ (2000: 25). At the end of *Talk of the Town* for example, Riemann’s Monika rejects her older lover Erik (August Zirner) in favour of a flatshare with his (ex-)wife Sabine (Martina Gedeck) and her children, and her own brother (Kai Wiesner) and his partner (Moritz Bleibtreu). Though handsome and sophisticated, Erik proves to be a compulsive liar who makes both Monika and Sabine suffer greatly throughout the film. Consequently, Monika’s close friendship with Sabine is presented as a valuable alternative to a romantic relationship. In many of the relationship comedies, female bonding and friendship are central to the plot, and are portrayed as potentially more fulfilling than romance. Thus, while David N. Coury writes that all New German comedies share a ‘reliance on traditional elements of the classic cinema: causality, linear narrative, closure, and the most necessary element of all, a happy end’ (cited in Copsey 2006: 182–83), it is important to note that this happy end very often is not the stable heterosexual relationship typical of classic romance films.

The above-mentioned film *Maybe, Maybe not* is an interesting example in this context. Attracting more than 6.5 million viewers and becoming the most successful German film of the 1990s, *Maybe, Maybe not* epitomizes the New German Comedy trend like no other film. It tells the story of macho Axel (Til Schweiger) whose girlfriend Doro (Katja

Riemann) throws him out of their shared apartment when she finds him having sex with another woman. Axel moves in with the gay Norbert (Joachim Król), who teaches him to become a somewhat more caring partner to Doro and to overcome his homophobia. However, while the ending suggests a likely rekindling of Axel's and Doro's relationship, their liaison is all but a stable, fulfilling heterosexual romance. Rather, the imbalance of power in their relationship is indicated, if not openly problematized, throughout the film. From Doro's conversations with her female friends, we learn that while she was always faithful to Axel, he had cheated on her at least once before she caught him with yet another woman. The fact that she is pregnant with his child is one of the reasons Doro reconciles with Axel and marries him halfway through the film. Yet Axel arranges to meet another woman for sex when Doro is nine months pregnant, causing him to miss the birth (it is Norbert who takes Doro to the hospital and witnesses the birth).

The film does not dwell too much on the dynamic of Doro's and Axel's relationship, because its primary focus is the interaction between Axel and Norbert and his friends, from which it draws its comic mileage. However, by implying that Doro might take Axel back after a few days of sulking, *Maybe, Maybe not* condones the inequality that structures their relationship: Axel's philandering and unfaithfulness have no lasting consequences, and Doro's continued emotional and material dependence on her unreliable husband is not explored further. Axel may have learned to cook, clean up the house and appear to be more sympathetic to Doro's wishes and worries, but his attitude towards women and relationships has not fundamentally changed. The film's representation of both the male and female protagonists is therefore highly problematic from a feminist point of view, since it leaves it to viewers to either condemn Axel's callousness and Doro's weakness, or to accept them as 'natural' qualities of their masculine and feminine selves. Thus, the New German comedies of the 1990s failed to fully endorse gender equality, but they must nonetheless be credited for

engaging with the dominant social discourses of their time. They exposed the lingering patriarchal structures, male chauvinism, sexism and lack of equality in heterosexual romantic relationships by depicting how female characters suffer or escape from them.

Til Schweiger and Matthias Schweighöfer – carrying the relationship comedy into the 2000s

Maybe, Maybe not occupies an important role in German cinema not only due to its sexual politics, but also because it contributed to the rare phenomenon of creating a German film star. Its lead actor Til Schweiger became hugely popular with viewers, *Maybe, Maybe not* ‘establish[ing him] as a national pin-up’ (Bock and Bergfelder 2010: 437). Schweiger appeared in a number of films similar to *Maybe, Maybe not* throughout the decade, such as *Männerpension/Jailbirds* (Buck, 1996) and *The Superwife*, and has become one of the few stars of German cinema. As Bock and Bergfelder explain, Schweiger is ‘something of a Teutonic version of Brad Pitt’, who ‘embodies with its muscular good looks and rough-edged charm a romantic ideal of masculinity that appeals to domestic audiences’ (2009: 436). Schweiger has been able to sustain his popularity throughout his career, and he is responsible for the continued success of the relationship comedies in the 2000s, when he began to make his own films. Schweiger directed, produced and starred in the romantic comedies *Barfuss/Barefoot* (2005) as well as the above-mentioned *Rabbit without Ears* (2007), *Kokowääh* (2011), *Rabbit without Ears 2* (2009) and *Kokowääh 2* (2013). In the same way Rentschler condemned the New German Comedies of the 1990s, Schweiger’s films are dismissed by critics for being formulaic and neglecting social and economic problems of contemporary Germany in favour of a picture-postcard depiction of Berlin and a focus on the love life of its affluent protagonists. In a review of *Kokowääh* (the film’s title refers to a child’s pronunciation of the French dish coq au vin) for example, Jan Füchtjohann condemns

the film for its ‘predictable story’ and complacent visual style: ‘the film mostly looks like a TV commercial for yoghurt, building societies or coffee pads: flatteringly backlit people throw down feathers at one another, run after each other on a sunny meadow or sit on a sofa with a laptop, smiling’ (2011). However, Schweiger’s films are immensely popular, attracting between 1.5 million (*Barefoot*) and 6.3 million viewers (*Rabbit without Ears*), with *Rabbit without Ears* being the third most watched German film of the 2000s.

With its subject matter and glossy visual style, *What a Man* resembles Schweiger’s romantic comedies, and this is no coincidence: its director Matthias Schweighöfer had parts in *Rabbit without Ears*, *Rabbit without Ears 2* and *Kokowääh 2*, and he has named Schweiger as a ‘great role model’ (cited in Zander 2011). Schweighöfer has attempted to emulate Schweiger’s successful formula with *What a Man* and his two subsequent directorial efforts *Schlussmacher/Break-Up Man* (2012) and *Frau Ella* (2013). As Christina Freko observes in her review of *What a Man*,

Schweighöfer already got the chance to go looking for the right girl in Schweiger’s romcom. What he actually found was a sheer inexhaustible source of inspiration for his own film: softly and warmly lit, playful settings, flashbacks to [the protagonist’s childhood] and a group of [...] prepubescents who give their teacher (Schweighöfer) relationship advice. (2011)

Making *What a Man*, Schweighöfer has looked to the examples of Til Schweiger’s mainstream romantic comedies that succeed at the German box office and ideally allow the film-maker to repay the funding obtained from local film boards, which invest in films that they hope will showcase their city or region as a tourist attraction. *Rabbit without Ears* and

Rabbit without Ears 2 for example were partly funded by the Media Board Berlin Brandenburg, and both films portrayed the city of Berlin as a place dipped in a warm, glowing light. *What a Man* on the other hand was filmed in and is set in Frankfurt am Main, Germany's banking capital and the largest city in the state of Hesse. It received 500,000 euros of funding from HessenInvestFilm, an economically rather than culturally oriented funding body that seeks to strengthen the state of Hesse as a film location (Filmland Hessen 2010). The financial support from HessenInvestFilm is likely to have contributed to Schweighöfer's decision in favour of Frankfurt, but the director gives a number of reasons for his choice of location. He states that Frankfurt, with its 'unique skyline', is 'very photogenic' (cited in Rosendorff 2011) and has not been used so often as a film location (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) 2013). He goes on to say that Frankfurt is 'more anonymous' than his current home of Berlin (cited in Rosendorff 2011). This cements the impression that *What a Man* continues the lineage of 1990s relationship comedies, which omitted any issues relating to Germany's past or current political issues, and instead focused on the personal problems of young urbanites. Like Schweighöfer, TV director Franziska Meyer Price, responsible for successful TV series¹ attracting young audiences, favours Frankfurt over Berlin because, as she explains 'when you're in Berlin, at some point you always get stuck in front of something that's steeped in history' (cited in FAZ 2013). This suggests that Berlin would have been an unsuitable setting for *What a Man*, since the reminders of Germany's complex history that pervade the city would have undermined the film's status as a light entertainment film seeking to avoid any confrontation with Germany's current political or social problems. Meyer Price also points out that Frankfurt is 'very un-German' (FAZ 2013), suggesting that with its skyline of high-rise bank and office buildings it is more reminiscent of US metropolises such as New York, where many Hollywood romantic comedies are set. *What a Man*'s choice of Frankfurt as a setting can therefore be seen as a part of

Schweighöfer's conscious attempt to emulate US mainstream romantic comedies, which I will discuss below.

What a Man was a very respectable box office success for Schweighöfer: attracting more than 1.78 million viewers, the film occupied sixteenth place at the 2011 German box office. It was the second most watched German film that year after Schweiger's *Kokowääh* (4.3 million viewers). *What a Man* and *Kokowääh* helped making 2011 a very successful year for German film. The domestic market share of German films 2011 was 27.9 per cent, the highest since 1991 (Cooke 2012: 22). Although celebrated by the industry and public funding bodies alike, the nearly 28 per cent market share 'is still a long way away from the 35 per cent average market share for domestic productions worldwide and far below the 47 per cent that French films or the 60 per cent that Korean film enjoy at home' (Cooke 2012: 23). The success of *What a Man* and *Kokowääh* nonetheless suggests that romantic comedies featuring well-established actors are the best type of film to raise the chronically low box office shares of indigenous films in Germany.

***What a Man*, relationship comedies and the crisis of masculinity**

What a Man is reminiscent of the 1990s New German Comedy not only in terms of its popularity. It also resembles the relationship comedies in its attempt to probe issues of gender and sexuality. *What a Man* centres on schoolteacher Alex (Schweighöfer). He is ditched by his domineering girlfriend Karolin (Mavie Hörbiger) who decides that Alex's muscly neighbour Jens (Thomas Kretschmann) is better suited to her sexual needs. This greatly affects Alex's self-esteem and causes him to question his manhood, prompting his best friend Okke (Elyas M'Barek) to engage Alex in a number of supposedly 'masculine' activities. Meanwhile, Alex has moved in with his childhood friend Nele, a waitress and animal rights activist played by Sibel Kekilli. Alex and the kind and quirky Nele grow closer until they

spend a night together which both subsequently dismiss as a mistake. Alex finally realizes his feelings for Nele and meets her on a plane to China (where she is travelling to participate in a panda rescue project) to declare his love for her, which she reciprocates.

In his review of the film for the magazine *backstage*, American critic Aaron Coleman observes that *What a Man* ‘mimick[s] generic Hollywood rom-coms of the past decade’ (2012). The film does indeed reproduce various key features of the romantic comedy genre, starting from its storyline, which is a variation of ‘the basic plot of all mainstream romantic comedies[:] [...] boy meets, loses, regains, girl’ (Jeffers McDonald 2007: 12). Tamar Jeffers McDonald defines the romantic comedy as ‘a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion’ (2007: 9). In *What a Man*, the unsympathetic Karolin is posited as an obviously unsuitable partner for Alex at the beginning of the film, making his search for a better suited partner a clear narrative priority. As Jeffers McDonald (2007: 11) explains, the protagonist’s original pairing with a mismatched partner is another common trope of the romantic comedy, as is the urban location as a dwelling place for attractive single men and women that gives them ample opportunity to socialize and meet romantic interests. These formulaic elements highlight that the film is seeking to emulate the timeless appeal of mainstream American romantic comedies.

However, most romantic comedies are more than an exercise in genre film-making. They often reflect changing social conventions relating to gender roles, love and relationships. As Frank Krutnik points out, ‘in the case of the romantic comedy, it is particularly important to stress how specific films or cycles mediate between a body of conventionalised “generic rules” [...] and a shifting environment of sexual-cultural codifications’ (1990: 58). *What a Man* reflects the shifts in gender roles due to the increasing social resonance of female emancipation initiated by second wave feminism, and the related

phenomenon of the masculinity crisis. The film explores what it means to be a man or a woman in twenty-first-century Germany by playing with stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity: Karolin exhibits traits commonly associated with masculinity, while Alex's masculinity is called into question. His emasculation becomes a source of comedy already in the opening sequence: since Karolin has taken his car, we see him struggling to ride a small folding bike, earning a derisive look from another male cyclist. Not only does Alex have difficulties asserting himself vis-à-vis the domineering Karolin, whose affair with Alex's neighbour is an open attack on his sexual prowess, the visits to gyms, boxing rings and bars ordered by his friend Okke also suggest that Alex needs to improve both his physical strength and his seductive powers in order to meet the generally accepted image of masculinity. Moreover, the writers have made Alex a primary school teacher, a profession that is heavily dominated by and associated with women: according to a survey by the Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), in 2004 more than 85 per cent of all German primary school teachers were female (BMFSFJ 2005). Next to allowing the easy integration of sweet, precocious child characters who aid the protagonist's romance (a narrative contrivance Schweighöfer has taken over from Schweiger's films), Alex's teacher job is also used to identify him as a man who is unclear about his masculine role. While his rapport with his pupils suggests that he is generally well suited to the job, the first classroom scene demonstrates that he also struggles to assert his authority at work: after he repeatedly asked a pupil to stop eating in class, Alex's remarks about the unappetizing ingredients of the sausage in question only prompt the boy to spit it out in front of him.

Having as its protagonist a man whose authority is challenged both in his work and his private life, *What a Man* explores the phenomenon of a 'masculinity crisis', which has been discussed by scholars for a number of years. In her 1999 book *Stiffed. The Betrayal of Modern Man*, Susan Faludi argues that male authority in western societies has become

undermined since the end of World War II due to a number of social and economic changes. Faludi asks polemically: ‘If men are the masters of their fate, what do they do about the unspoken sense that they are being mastered, in the marketplace and at home, by forces that seem to be sweeping the soil beneath their feet?’ (1999: 13). Key developments associated with the crisis in masculinity include changes in the labour market, which saw a decline of heavy industries in favour of the service economy, and thus a decline of hard physical labour and jobs for life, both of which associated with masculine identities; changes in family and private life such as the rise of single-parent families and same-sex relationships, which undermine the patriarchal family model, and the increased presence of women in the labour market and in politics, challenging male dominance in this sphere (Morgan 2006: 111–12).

Social surveys indicate that these developments also affected German men: interviews with more than 700 men conducted in 1990 suggested that the men were much more respectful of women than in a comparable study from 1975, the participants of which had insisted on women’s nurturing role and passivity (Hollstein 2012). The flipside of this according to interviewer Walter Hollstein was the ‘notable and [...] alarming general dissatisfaction of men with themselves and their situation’, who now were much more critical of their male role (2012). His findings were confirmed by a study by the German Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) from 2007, for which 20-year-old men and women were questioned about how they saw their roles in society, as well as about their aspirations and fears for the future. The study revealed a profound sense of self-doubt and confusion among the participants, who were lacking a ‘positive vision for their role as men’ (BMFSFJ 2007: 11). The young men were ‘extremely insecure and on the defensive [...] because they perceive a sense of dynamism, power and self-confidence only among women’ (BMFSFJ 2007: 11). They recognize the merits of female equality, and they are aware that traditional gender images (i.e. the housewife and the male breadwinner) are no

longer tenable, but they have not been presented with more progressive ones. This is partly due to their socialization: the 20-year-olds questioned for the study, like *What a Man*'s screenwriter Doron Wisotzky (who was 27 in 2007, when the study was published), grew up in West Germany in the 1980s. Between 1980 and 1990, only 50 per cent of German women were in employment (Fliegner 2010), while most men worked full time and provided for the family. The number of working women increased steadily in the following decade, from 52.2 per cent in 1990 to 58.1 per cent in the year 2000, and to 63.2 per cent in 2007 (*OECD Factbook* 2005, 2009).

Thus, many young men struggle to reconcile the more conservative gender roles they grew up with, and the demand for gender equality that now pervades society and politics: 'young men underestimate their female peers' desire for autonomy, and they overestimate their desire to [...] get married and have children. They are stuck in old [gender] roles and have not understood [...] that the young women have emancipated themselves to an extent' (Allmendinger 2008: 71). Being confronted with women of their own age who are extremely confident and demand complete equality, the men questioned for the BMFSFJ study were understandably unsure about appropriate male and female roles in contemporary society.

Filmic representations of changing gender roles: *What a Man*, the 'postromance' and the 'geek-centred romantic comedy'

Marco Abel has argued that this shift in men's self-image has also been problematized in a number of recent German films centring on romantic relationships. Abel and Antje Ascheid have introduced the concept of the 'postromance' to situate these films in their socio-historical context. Abel uses the term postromance to describe a group of recent international

films centring on love, sex and romance that have ‘an essentially pessimistic outlook on romantic relationships’ (2010: 77), informed by the generation of 1968 and the tenets of second wave feminism. The characters in these films share the ‘the awareness that marriage is neither the necessary nor the “normal” framework one needs in post-adolescent life, as well as the post-1968 scepticism of the traditional “ideal” of lifelong, monogamous relationships’ (Abel 2010: 77). Ascheid suggests that filmic representations of romance reflect a phenomenon politicians and the media have described as ‘singularization’ or the rise of the ‘singles society’, that is, the increase in single adults and decreasing birth rates in the West:

Frequently held accountable for these shifts, particularly by conservatives, [is] the increasing [...] self-sufficiency of women [...], which includes reproductive control, an increased emphasis on personal happiness and self-realisation over social and familial responsibilities (the collective ‘selfishness’ of what the German have dubbed the Spassgesellschaft [fun society]), and ‘unrealistic’ expectations regarding the nature of love, sex, and romance (2013: 247).

Some recent German films suggest that this increased female confidence prompts considerable insecurities among men. Abel observes that the films of German director Oskar Roehler, which he considers as emblematic of the postromance genre, ‘all depict [...] male characters who experience great anxieties from the imposing demands of modern romantic relationships’ (2010: 77). Featuring an insecure male lead and egotistic, pleasure-seeking female antagonist, *What a Man* suggests the very ‘(im)possibility of sustaining a (hetero-)sexual relationship’ (Abel 2010: 77) that is a key theme of the postromance: in their initial scenes together, Alex is constantly failing to communicate with, please or placate a

partner whose emotional detachment and constant focus on her personal interests make it impossible to maintain their romance.

However, the film's happy ending firmly places it in the category of the classical romance, or, as Ascheid calls it, the utopian mode, which 'in an era of "post's"' (2013: 248) coexists with two other generic modes of romance: the nostalgic mode (meaning costume or period dramas) and the dystopian mode or postromance. Ascheid uses Schweiger's *Rabbit Without Ears* as an example of a classical romance, but points out that 'its entertaining escapism' notwithstanding, the film does 'respond to fantasies and desires rooted in the social real' (2013: 255), the initial enmity between its socially awkward heroine Anna (Nora Tschirner) and the cocky, womanizing hero Ludo (Til Schweiger) 'acknowledging fundamental social conflict' (Ascheid 2013: 255). This conflict is resolved through a 'reorient[ation of] male identities and motivations' (Ascheid 2013: 256): 'Ludo needs to learn how not to be an "asshole", and over the course of the plot he is taught how to give women sexual pleasure, how to be a caring father figure, and finally, how to love' (Ascheid 2013: 254). A comparable process takes place in *What a Man*: Alex learns that a desirable version of masculinity is not founded on physical strength and a macho attitude (as suggested by Okke) or sexual aggressiveness (as represented by Jens) but rather a healthy dose of self-confidence.

Next to resembling the male protagonists of the German postromance, *What a Man*'s Alex is also reminiscent of the type of male lead featured in what Carter Soles (2013) has identified as the 'geek-centred romantic comedy': an essentially weak male character lacking both personal and sexual confidence and a prestigious profession to showcase either his leadership skills or physical prowess, which typically characterize male romantic heroes. Soles observes the rise of this sub-genre in recent US romantic comedies, epitomized by a group of films directed or produced by Judd Apatow such as *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*

(Apatow, 2005), *Knocked Up* (Apatow, 2007), and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (Stoller, 2008) in which the ‘classically appealing male lead’ (2013) is replaced by the ‘figure of the “sensitive” geek or undesirable schlub’ (2013), ostensibly ‘deconstruct[ing] traditional masculine paradigms via their intellectual, non-materialistic, underdog status’ (2013). Soles takes a negative view on the films’ progressive potential, arguing that ‘the rise of the geek protagonist is troubling because under the guise of offering a kinder, more intelligent, more sensitive alternative to the traditional jockish male, the geek acts as a Trojan horse for rampant misogyny, [...] infantilism, and reification of [...] male centrality and privilege’ (2013). In order to highlight the films’ problematic gender representations, Carter identifies eight tropes typically featured in geek-centred romantic comedies, a number of which are also found in *What a Man*. These include the trope of the ‘bromance’, the conflict with jocks, geek melodrama and the vilification and marginalisation of female characters. It is worth considering the use of these tropes in *What a Man* in order to evaluate the extent to which the film is complicit in reaffirming male dominance, and conversely, the extent to which it mirrors genuine male anxieties and a reworking of masculine identities.

Bromance or scenes of male bonding define the interactions between Alex and his best friend Okke, to whom the protagonist turns for advice when he is dumped by Karolin. *What a Man* contains a montage showing Okke and Alex together at a boxing ring and playing paintball, and a scene in which the two attend a party sporting comically exaggerated rapper outfits including baseball caps and large gold chains, failing to meet any women due to their social ineptitude. Okke’s dating advice to Alex is replete with sexist platitudes, he for example tells Alex a ‘parable’ in which two bulls manage to breed with a whole herd of cows after approaching them cautiously. This appears to support the criticism of the bromance motif presented by Soles, who observes that ‘objectifying women and graphically discussing sex are key bonding rituals in which these boys-only groups engage’ (2013). However,

Okke's goofiness and lack of success with women, as well as the fact that he is frequently accompanied by his reproachful grandmother constantly undercut his macho persona. Also, his chauvinist comments are often immediately contradicted. For example, Okke's assertion that 'You have to give women direction [...] That's what we're here for' is followed by a shot of a large group of male rowers in a boat taking directions from a petite blonde woman. Also, Nele quickly dismisses Okke's advice to Alex by calling Okke 'insane' and pointing out that the sexually aggressive behaviour he is advocating 'would not suit Alex's personality'. *What a Man* thus ridicules and debunks the sexist attitudes informing bromance narratives by identifying them as immature and inappropriate.

Alex's ongoing rivalry with his neighbour Jens exemplifies the conflict between the geek and a jock, recalling another trope of the geek-centred comedy. Jens is a typical jock, an 'anti-intellectual, sexually confident individual[] whose main role [...] is to best geeks sexually and to bully them verbally and/or physically' (Soles 2013). In their first confrontation, Alex, on Karolin's insistence, asks Jens to keep the noise down in his apartment, to which Jens replies: 'I could stuff your head up your arse. Then you won't hear a thing!' Later on, Alex, while hiding in Jens's wardrobe, finds a range of sex toys, before Jens catches him and throws him out of the apartment, announcing that 'one of us is going to fuck now. And I bet it isn't you'. This is followed by shots of a dejected and confused Alex standing in front of the house. Finally, during a party, Karolin and Jens, who sit in a sauna, watch Alex throw up, Jens's comment 'Well, let Alex have some fun, then' furthering his humiliation even more. Soles considers the geek-jock rivalry problematic since 'the geek's fundamental antagonism with people he deems less intelligent than he gives his melodramatised victimhood its raison d'être' (2013), allowing the protagonist to continuously pity himself rather than being forced to evolve or develop personally. However, this does not apply to Alex, who goes through a learning process in the course of the film: his attempts to

imitate Jens's masculinity relying on physical prowess and chauvinist attitudes are dismissed by female characters, and prove to be irreconcilable with his own personality. Instead his self-confidence grows in response to Nele's affection for him, and the film's ending suggests that he will be a supportive partner to Nele, who accompanies her on her animal rights activism trip to China.

The final trope of the geek-centred romantic comedy also found in *What a Man* is the vilification and marginalization of female characters. As Soles observes, 'the films of Team Apatow tend to depict women characters as either two-dimensional objects of male sexual desire' or as [...] scary, masculinised butches' (2013), and the representation of the female characters in *What a Man* is indeed similarly problematic.

Femininities in *What a Man*: The businesswoman and the manic pixie dream girl

What a Man both vilifies and masculinises the Karolin character, presenting her as domineering, egotistic, unfeeling and irritable. The opening sequence, in which she attempts to force Alex into an overseas holiday trip despite his fear of flying, suggests that she does not refrain from emotionally manipulating him to get what she wants, and that she shows no gratitude when her requests are being met. The dynamic of their relationship corresponds to the experiences of the 20-years-olds taking part in the BMFSFJ study, many of whom felt that their girlfriend dominated their relationship while they saw themselves in a passive role (2007: 10). Alex suffers the ultimate humiliation at the hands of Karolin when she asks him to pick her up from the hospital after having injured herself while having sex with Jens, causing Alex to be ridiculed by a group of doctors. Karolin's cheating on Alex in *What a Man* mirrors Axel's cheating on Doro in *Maybe, Maybe not*, except that the roles of the faithful woman and the philandering man have been reversed, highlighting the shift in gender images in the thirteen years that separate the two films.

Karolin reflects the anxieties of young men regarding romantic relationships and gender roles: she is not so much a three-dimensional character as she is the personification of young men's fears and stereotypes relating to women of their own age. The BMFSFJ study revealed that a common female stereotype named by men with a lower or intermediate level of education is that of the 'Businessfrau', or 'businesswoman': an educated woman who has the ambition to succeed in formerly male-dominated lines of work, for example as a politician, manager, sports journalist or talk show host (2007: 36). These women are seen to 'act "masculine"', they have to be strong, brave, confident, strong-willed and tough' (BMFSFJ 2007: 36). Counteracting traditional female roles, they are perceived as a threat: the men feel inferior to them in terms of their position in society and their eloquence (2007: 10). Although being a model – a profession associated with appearance and objectification rather than intellect or responsibility – Karolin is identified as a 'businesswoman' due to the central role of work in her life and her professional ambition. One of her first lines in the film is a complaint to Alex that she is 'so stressed with the campaign', and she rushes off to work before the couple have finished their breakfast. Through the character of Karolin, a completely independent, callous woman who dominates the kind and defenceless male protagonist, *What a Man* explores the 'diffuse fears' (2007: 40) of young men regarding gender equality revealed by the BMFSFJ study, evidenced in their 'concern that their self-image and the (power) relations between genders 'spirals out of control' due to an "extreme drive for emancipation"' (BMFSFJ 2007: 40).

The Karolin character can thus be seen as a 'postromance' element within the otherwise romantically minded *What a Man*, representing the shift in women's attitudes brought about by second wave feminism, which are held responsible for the rise of the 'singles society': Karolin is unwilling to sacrifice her independence and self-realization for a romantic relationship; she is identified as 'narcissistic, egoistic [and] unsocial' (Abel 2010:

79), thus embodying precisely those characteristics commonly attributed to singles. While the exaggerated and caricatured representation of Karolin can be partly explained as an element of the film-makers' strategy to generate humour – in that respect she resembles the Okke character, who is equally ridiculed – the character doubtlessly pays tribute to a conservative view of gender roles that vilifies women's growing financial and personal independence, suggesting that it is unsuitable for women to appropriate behaviour previously associated with men such as promiscuity and defining oneself via one's work.

Alex's childhood friend and new love interest Nele is a similarly problematic female character, in that she is largely reduced to her function as the protagonist's love interest, thereby once more resembling geek-centred films that 'usually [...] sell short their female leads as well' (Soles 2013). Nele is reminiscent of a type female of character found in a number of US romantic comedies in recent years: the 'manic pixie dream girl'. Film critic Nathan Rabin coined the term 'manic pixie dream girl' to describe Natalie Portman's and Kirsten Dunst's childishly cheerful characters in *Garden State* (Braff, 2004) and *Elizabethtown* (Crowe, 2005), respectively. Rabin writes that 'the manic pixie dream girl exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures' (2007), suggesting that she is more of a narrative ploy than a fully rounded character. The term has since been adopted by scholars who analyse the gender politics that determine the representation of romantic relationships on film and television. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker for example point out that 'the manic pixie dream girl's "exuberance, vibrancy and light-hearted relation to life counterbalances a serious, burdened male protagonist"' (Negra and Tasker 2013: 351), and their sole concern in life appears to be a romantic relationship with said protagonist. Thus, the manic pixie dream girl is a problematic female lead since she is essentially a muse, whose only function it is to pull the male protagonist out of his

existential crisis. She has few aspirations or interests of her own, and therefore fails to represent the realities of contemporary women's lives.

Nele, too, is largely reduced to her function as Alex's future partner, and her quirky and irreverent nature further identifies her as a manic pixie dream girl. She for example writes little notes addressed not only to Alex but also to herself, and she surprises the timid Alex by asking him to dance with her in the middle of a city square, rather than at the party they just left. Nele does have an occupation unrelated to her relationship with Alex, which is her participation in a panda rescue organization that she pursues with great passion and conviction. However, her involvement with the animal rights movement is more frequently played for laughs than presented as a worthwhile pursuit, for example, when Nele surprises a sleeping Alex in a full-body panda suit, or in a scene in which Alex first pursues a person in a panda costume through the streets and then addresses a group of animal rights activists rendered unrecognizable by their costumes. Also, upon being denied permission to go to China to take part in an animal rights protest because this might be dangerous, Nele asks: 'What could possibly be dangerous about that?'. This suggests her naivety about a project she is supposedly interested and invested in, and presents her less as a sensible adult, and more like a wide-eyed child. While the penultimate scene, which shows Nele on a plane to China, confirms her commitment to the animal rights movement, the focus of the scene is Alex's successful attempt to overcome his fear of flying to be able to declare his love for Nele, demonstrating once more that the film's heavy focus on the male protagonist's journey of self-realization eclipses the agency of his female counterpart.

Conclusion

What a Man's focus on the romantic trials of young affluent urban professionals and its glossy Frankfurt setting is representative of director Matthias Schweighöfer's attempt to

largely eschew an engagement with current political or social issues and instead emulate Hollywood romantic comedies in terms of narrative and setting, with Frankfurt standing in for New York. The generous funding the film obtained demonstrates German cinema's heavy dependence on support by regional and national funding bodies as the German box office continues to be dominated by US imports, as well as the increasingly commercial orientation of these funding bodies, testifying to the films' status as a product rather than a means of cultural expression in a competitive international marketplace.

What a Man shows that alongside the revival of German cinema in the 2000s that produced films of international interest, highly conventional relationship comedies typical of 1990s German film continue to be made, generating the highest box office takings of indigenous films in Germany and proving that films that dissect heterosexual romantic relationships and gender roles still resonate with German audiences.

Like its predecessors from a decade earlier, *What a Man* reproduces gender images dominant in German society rather than counteracting or deconstructing them. However, in doing so, the film indicates changes in masculine identities and self-image through its insecure, self-effacing protagonist, who is a far cry from the male chauvinists of 1990s relationship comedies epitomized by Til Schweiger's characters in films such as *Maybe*, *Maybe not*. *What a Man*'s protagonist, uncertain about his masculine role and occupying a 'feminine' profession, and his experience of being dominated by his partner rather than being required to provide for her, reflect the erosion of traditional male role models, which has also caused considerable insecurity among young German men. Regardless of whether the idea of a crisis in masculinity accurately describes the social changes that have led to a shift in gender roles, these changes unquestionably require men to reconsider their self-image and role in relationships and society.

What a Man incorporates elements of both the German postromance and the US geek-

centred romantic comedy, two recent strands of films exploring the ways in which changing gender images affect heterosexual romantic relationships. The critical outlook on romantic relationships associated with the postromance has seeped into recent German romantic comedies such as *What a Man* and *Rabbit Without Ears*, which otherwise elide any social conflict and thereby emulate the 1990s consensus film-making. Unlike the protagonist of the consensus comedy *Maybe, Maybe not*, but akin to the chauvinistic male lead of *Rabbit Without Ears*, *What a Man*'s Alex is forced to reflect on and adjust his understanding of masculinity in view of an increasing female equality and independence.

While many US geek-centred comedies feature insecure, weak males only to reinstate male dominance in the course of the film, *What a Man* does not use the tropes of the bromance and the geek-jock rivalry associated with this sub-genre to propagate sexist values and validate the geek protagonist's behaviour. Instead, the chauvinist and hollow masculinities represented by Alex's best friend Okke and his jockish rival Jens, while initially admired by the protagonist, are quickly ridiculed and exposed for being sexist and inauthentic.

The film's representation of the female characters is more problematic: *What a Man* is complicit in the vilification and marginalization of female characters affecting the geek-centred romantic comedies, thereby further underlining the male screenwriters' and director's uncertainties regarding appropriate gender roles as they failed to couple their insecure male protagonist with independent and confident, but sympathetic women characters. The negative representation of the emotionally and financially independent Karolin, which corresponds to female stereotypes named by the young men questioned by the BMFSFJ study suggests that the film adequately reflects the attitudes of contemporary German men in their 20s who, rather than perceiving women as equals and meeting them at eye level, feel threatened by women of their own age whom they perceive to be overly confident and dominant.

The character of Nele bears witness to the efforts of Schweighöfer to emulate the successful formula of US indie comedies such as *Garden State*, which include a childish and quirky but lovable female character. Like in *Garden State*, and in contrast to some of the female-centred German relationship comedies of the 1990s, in *What a Man*, with its strong focus on men's problems and process of identity formation, the agency and voice of the female protagonist fall by the wayside. A 'manic pixie dream girl', Nele's primary function in the narrative is to help Alex out of his masculinity crisis and boost his self-esteem. Thus, while *What a Man* offers an interesting exploration of the male psyche, this comes at the expense of three-dimensional, independent female characters that capture the experiences, aspirations and struggles of young women in Germany today.

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Notes

¹ Such as *Berlin, Berlin* (2002–2005) and *Doctor's Diary* (2008–2011).

² Director Schweighöfer on the other hand was born and raised in East Germany, which propagated female equality as part of its Marxist-Leninist ideology, wherefore the 'the regime actively encouraged women to take waged work' (Tipton 2003: 526).