

May 2018

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Recommended Citation

Swanson, Bridget (2018) "Margaret McCarthy. *Mad Mädchen: Feminism and Generational Conflict in Recent German Literature and Film*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 42: Iss. 2, Article 21. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2012>

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Abstract

Review of Margaret McCarthy. *Mad Mädchen: Feminism and Generational Conflict in Recent German Literature and Film*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017.

Keywords

Feminism, German Literature, German Film, Contemporary Studies

Margaret McCarthy. *Mad Mädchen: Feminism and Generational Conflict in Recent German Literature and Film*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017. 258 pp.

What can literature, film, and other media reveal about the discordant dynamics between second and third wave feminisms in twenty-first-century Germany? As Margaret McCarthy maintains in *Mad Mädchen: Feminism and Generational Conflict in Recent German Literature and Film*, recent literary and cinematic works challenge traditional and reductive readings of feminist waves as power struggles between stubborn mothers and rebellious daughters. This overly simplistic but commonly referenced template proves particularly problematic for comprehending feminisms in the German context. Here, national concerns at the turn of the century, including reunification efforts, muddled the emergence of a more cohesive third wave movement. Thus, two generations found themselves caught within the interstices of feminism's changing landscape in Germany. Because of its inherent messiness, the context of Germany's disrupted feminist narrative in the early 2000s led to the emergence of works that resist a teleological narrative and instead highlight productive commonalities between the two groups.

From popular literature to experimental films, McCarthy identifies third wave "daughters" suffering from a highly fragmented sense of female self. Several iconic second wave "mothers" are similarly depicted as having gone through their own struggles for autonomy. At the heart of these altering, incoherent identities, McCarthy contends, is a complex process of self-individuation, in which "daughters" must disavow core aspects of themselves in order to achieve greater autonomy from their "mothers." When this coming-of-age process remains unresolved, the protagonist's internal dissonance dooms her to a life of distress, self-sabotage, and—in some cases—premature death. However, in instances where this process is resolved, the protagonist's embrace of her own incongruities enables her to forge bridges across presumed divides with other women, resulting in intergenerational female solidarity. By revealing the mother/daughter trope as a complex relationship between women, McCarthy provides "a metaphorical framework and potential salve for feminist collectives" (56), pointing readers towards more productive understandings of all female identities as equal players in a larger feminist "ecosystem" (19).

McCarthy's investigation of intergenerational female relationships evolves deftly across three movements. In chapter 1, she examines how German mass media stylizes second and third wave feminist movements as antithetical, referencing the televised interaction between second wave figurehead Alice Schwarzer and third wave representative Verona Feldbusch. Such canned dynamics, McCarthy demonstrates, can be parsed through Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Diana Fuss's notion of elastic identities. In chapters 2 and 3, McCarthy puts this critical framework to task, turning from real-world social

interactions to the multifaceted interiority of literary female figures, whose unstable identities take center stage in Zöe Jenny's *Das Blütenstaubzimmer* (*The Pollen Room*, 1999), Alexa Hennig von Lange's *Relax* (1999), Elke Naters's *Lügen*, (*Lies*, 1999), and Charlotte Roche's *Feuchtgebiete* (*Wetlands*, 2008) and *Wrecked* (*Schoßgebete*, 2011). Across these narratives, McCarthy locates a girlish playfulness and performativity among “daughters” that actually belies pent up anger at and a desire for deeper connection with mother figures, thereby pointing to close affinities between the two groups rather than insurmountable differences.

In chapters 4 and 5, McCarthy moves away from literature concerned with third wave “daughters” to analyze recent portrayals of second wave “mothers” as they undergo their own coming-of-age trails. Chapter 4 explores how Uli Edel's *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* (*The Baader Meinhof Complex*, 2008) and Achim Bornhak's *Das wilde Leben* (*Eight Miles High*, 2008) succeed at revising harsh media portrayals of second-wave “mothers” as non-maternal monsters. Both mainstream films flesh out their female protagonists, (re)creating them as individuals with whom the contemporary viewer can identify and sympathize. Yet, McCarthy laments that these films stop short of placing these “mothers” within a multigenerational narrative of feminism, which might have harbored more political promise. In contrast, she sees Christian Petzold's *Die innere Sicherheit* (*The State I am In*, 2000) and Fatih Akın's *Auf der anderen Seite* (*The Edge of Heaven*, 2007) as experimental films that take issue with the naïve, navel-gazing Hollywood narrative of “finding oneself.” In Petzold's film, self-realization of the individual without regard to the collective remains a hopeless process with a dystopic ending. However, as Akın's film counters, fostering self-individuation in relationship to the other can lead toward a more optimistically utopian conclusion. In the context of this film, McCarthy locates the inclusive female solidarity that the other protagonists in her exploration devastatingly lack.

McCarthy succeeds at fleshing out points of connection that often go unacknowledged in the typical narrative of feminist history, and her careful study provides a much-needed revision of this story during a crucial juncture in contemporary sociopolitical landscapes. Her work lends itself well to scholars and students interested in learning more about recent German literature, film, and media in relation to feminist studies—particularly in its contemporary iterations. More concretely, chapters 2, 3, 4, or 5 could easily be implemented as secondary readings in a variety of undergraduate or graduate courses. In these contexts, *Mad Mädchen* can also serve as an illustrative model that bridges content with style. Throughout, McCarthy continuously channels the playfulness that third wave “daughters” perform: her writing is rich with poetic alliteration and section titles as refreshing as “*Missy Magazine* and *Popfeminist Dreams of Solidarity*” or as titillating as “*Girls Gone Wild*.” The only concern here is that McCarthy's performative panache is occasionally marred by typographical errors and chapter misnumberings.

McCarthy's study traverses a rather broad terrain of contemporary cultural products with incredible depth. Sorely missing from this investigation, however, is a single female filmmaker, which jarringly splits her investigation into gendered camps that seems to pit literary works by women against cinematic texts by men. It is as if McCarthy unintentionally reinforces traditional labor divisions, whereby women produce interior narratives and men (re)write histories that become disseminated more widely. This complaint aside, McCarthy's text brings into critical relief pressing questions about gender constructs, embodied femininities, and historiography in contemporary Germany. And, as with any good scholarship, it leaves readers yearning to find out more about how the key themes explored here will play out in fiction and reality in future decades.

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