Princess Antigone, or Fairy Tale, Tragedy, Chance, and Choice in Tom Tykwer’s  
*Der Krieger und die Kaiserin*  

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Inspired by the implicit critique of Nazi occupation in Jean Anouilh’s adaptation of *Antigone* in 1944 Paris, a number of literary works and films began to associate Antigone’s resistance and determined mourning with postwar history in Germany. Many aspects of Sophocles’ *Antigone* also inhabit Tom Tykwer’s *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* (*The Princess and the Warrior*, 2000), but his film quickly develops into a heady contest between Greek tragedy and a most unlikely partner, fairy tale. Released in the shadow of Tykwer’s mesmerizing, techno-driven *Lola rennt* (*Run Lola Run*, 1998), *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* has been comparatively neglected. Admittedly, it does not have the same pulsating appeal to pop culture. The setting is Wuppertal, not Berlin, and most of the action occurs at a trance-like pace in the estranged, closed environment of a mental asylum. But Franka Potente stars here again, now as Simone Schmidt, a psychiatric nurse who buries her own past, and whose steadfast resolution and power to mourn recall Sophocles’ Antigone. Within this framework of resistance and memory, themes from fairy tales vie for attention, and although tragedy and fairy tale contend for recognition as interpretive modes, the notion of destiny in both genres loses to a storyline marked by chance and choice.

To argue that the film privileges the accidental over fate, the following discussion examines Tykwer’s cinematic narrative first in terms of the fairy tales *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* and the film’s references to the fairy-tale scenarios of *Heimatfilm*, idyllic romances whose widespread popularity in the 1950s provoked young filmmakers to break with this type of filmmaking and found the New German Cinema in 1962. Next, this essay situates *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* within the tradition of the *Antigone* tragedy, and considers how the film engages themes of resistance and mourning. In critically re-assessing these notions, Tykwer’s film extends beyond the narratives of many films of the New German Cinema. Released a decade after reunification, *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* both acknowledges and takes leave of somber and tragic issues that preoccupied a great number of German films of the 1970s and 1980s, from concerned mourning over the Holocaust to the history of the
Rote Armee Fraktion. Lastly, this inquiry considers accident and random occurrence, notions that ultimately outranked the foreseeable and foreseen in the two other forms of storytelling. Commenting on German filmmaking since the Second World War in terms of tragedy and fairy tale, *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* embarks into a new landscape of chance and risk. The film neither «tells» time as fate-driven tragedy, nor as fairy tale in which good is predestined to win over evil, but instead, reconsiders the significance of coincidence and individual choice.

Elements of fairy tale and classical tragedy not only compete for precedence as explanatory models in the film, but also influence the spectator’s hermeneutic processes. Events indicate that the plot will develop along the lines of predestined events; sometimes hinting at tragic resolution, and at other times promising a happy end. Consequently, spectators trying to make sense of the film’s storyline adopt the same types of narrative strategies that its characters use to deal with their situations. Because the film repeatedly undermines the paradigms of tragedy and fairy tales by anticipating and disappointing established devices, it alerts viewers to their own tendencies to base private and public histories on certain underlying models.

In contrast to its absorbed focus on mourning and the more subtle underlying conceptual foundation of *Antigone*, *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* hardly bothers to disguise motifs from *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*. Even the film’s title suggests this genre, and conventions of fairy tale quickly become obvious in a storyline about a heroine who lives a humdrum life without desire, a handsome prince who comes to her rescue, and the pursuit of a lengthy quest. Simone Schmidt (Franka Potente), known as Sissi, falls in love with Bodo Riemer (Benno Fürmann) under unusual circumstances. She rebels against a life devoted to psychiatric patients at Birkenhof Asylum, manages to leave the institution with this man, and buries the past behind her.

The lead characters meet because Sissi receives a letter from a friend. The first establishing shot gives a view of a remote and bedazzling castle-like house on the sea that creates a once-upon-a-time atmosphere, and establishes the source of the letter. The initial extreme long shot of the isolated oceanside house abruptly cuts to a woman writing a letter inside the magnificent dwelling, but one’s gaze automatically moves past her into the vast and empty coast that recalls the solitude of Caspar David Friedrich’s nineteenth-century Romantic landscapes. When she finishes writing and the opening credits start in unobtrusively small print, the importance of the letter takes precedence. After a long walk, she drops the letter into a mailbox. We suddenly enter the peculiar space inside the box and learn in this way that the letter is going to
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Germany from France. In choosing an idyllic natural setting, as well as using the snail’s pace of the postal service rather than telephone or E-mail, Tykwer removes the story from pop culture. Following the title, painstaking close-ups follow the steps from letter sorting to transport in images that resemble the old-school, predigital machinery of filmmaking, and thus establish a subliminal self-reflective framework. But because potentially any part of any step can go wrong, an element of chance lurks behind each precision-like process. As a result, the actual delivery of a letter approaches the miraculous.

Despite the myriad possible mishaps, the postman delivers the letter to the colossal, ominous castle-like Birkenhof Asylum, and it arrives in Sissi’s hands. We discover later that we have seen Sissi’s old friend Meike writing about the death of her mother who has left her daughter something in a safe deposit box. In her letter, Meike announces that she will not return for the funeral, and she asks Sissi to retrieve the inheritance, but the actual contents of the treasure remain secret until near the end of the film. Sissi soon leaves Birkenhof, her dungeon-like home and workplace, with blind patient Otto, but on the way to the bank she is run over by a truck. At that very moment, Bodo, who is not looking for a princess, but who soon becomes the man of Sissi’s dreams, flees frantically from pursuers after a minor theft. He dives under the same truck to hide, discovers her flat on her back gasping for air, and brings his Sleeping Beauty back to life, not by a kiss, but by the emergency tracheotomy he performs. Thus, the mysterious man saves the beautiful woman, whose life and work in the clinical ward at Birkenhof have already become death-like. Aside from the anticipated romance, even his astonishing presence revives her, and although she dimly feels drawn to him, she is left with only a vivid memory of his peppermint breath and a button that comes off his shirt on the way to the emergency room. After what doctors call a «miracle» recovery, she sets off to find him with the button, her only clue. Her quest reverses the Cinderella story, for here of course, it is not a prince who identifies the girl he loves by means of a lost slipper, but instead a girl who takes action and locates the prince based on her evidence.

Ironically, Sissi’s own determined yearning for fairy-tale happiness moves the action forward after her release from the hospital. Spectator memory of Meike’s castle-like home on the sea also helps to frame Sissi’s nascent desire, reinforcing the Never-Never-Land feeling of her first other-worldly meeting with Bodo. Before her traffic accident, her patients’ demands and isolated quarters prevent her from establishing a personal life, and she exists as one of fairy tale’s persecuted heroines, to use Maria Tatar’s term (150). At the same time, she considers herself the benumbed victim of a tragic chain of events that has confined her life to the asylum. Meeting Bodo jolts her into thinking
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of her life no longer in terms of tragic fate, but as the equally unchangeable
destiny of fairy tales.

After Sissi’s accident, Tykwer reinforces the notion of fate and fairy tale by
having Sissi watch a clip from Vittorio De Sica’s *Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in
Milan*, 1951), an Italian neo-realist retelling of *Cinderella* (De Sica). Sissi sits
primly on her bed, next to a poster of a large white seagull, viewing the film on
the television in her room at Birkenhof. Although we see only a few seconds
of De Sica’s film, it is integrally tied to Tykwer’s, and contains elements of the
*Heimatfilm*, a genre that existed in the Nazi years in Germany, but reached
its culmination after the war in the 1950s. *Miracolo a Milano* begins with the
familiar phrase «Once upon a time» boldly superimposed onto an establish-
ing shot of pastoral bliss. Drawing from conventions of fairy tale, the film
tells of a compassionate old woman who discovers an abandoned infant in a
countryside cabbage patch, and affectionately raises the boy she calls Toto.
He continues to radiate love and humor long after her death, inspiring the
homeless and unemployed of postwar Milan to assemble a shanty town from
rubble scattered at the edge of the city. When events indicate that the squatters
will be evicted, the old woman appears in the sky and gives him something
to grant all his wishes, a white dove apparently borrowed from the Grimms’
version of the tale. In the clip shown on Sissi’s old television, Toto asks the girl
he loves if she would like the sun, and seconds later they ecstatically witness
the sun rise. Sissi’s face lights up as she watches the love scene. Unfortunately,
we do not see the remarkable ending of De Sica’s film, in which the dove’s
magic enables Toto and his friends to soar into the sky on broomsticks behind
the final superimposed message, «to a better future.» (A similar closing se-
quence in *Heaven* [2002] underscores De Sica’s strong influence on Tykwer’s
filmmaking.) De Sica’s and Tykwer’s films engage *Cinderella* by synthesiz-
ing realism and fantasy into storylines of empowerment and liberation, but
the utopian endings of both films contain bittersweet messages. Despite the
squatters’ confidence that they will find a better place to live, one does not
forget De Sica’s grimly realistic postwar Milan, or the complicated turns in
the lives of Tykwer’s Bodo and Sissi.

By choosing the nickname «Sissi» for Simone, Tykwer calls up another set
of ties to the *Heimatfilm*. Ernst Marischka’s *Sissi* trilogy popularized the his-
torical «Sissi,» Princess of Bavaria and Empress of Austria. She became en-
sconced in postwar cinematic memory as the heroine of three popular 1950s
films that told history as a fairy tale, inviting viewers eager to sidestep the
task of mourning and enter an evasively distant prewar period. Consequently,
the associations of Sissi’s name recall widespread disinterest in dealing with
trauma in German history during the early postwar years. Beginning with a
typically cheerful sequence of life in the countryside, Marischka’s versions of the *Heimatfilm* fascinated spectators by retelling the story of a «poor» provincial Bavarian princess who is swept off her feet by Austrian emperor Franz Joseph. Their marriage immerses her at first in a life of romance, splendor, and frilly gowns in Vienna, but her impetuous personality eventually leads her to resist court protocol, risk an affair with Hungarian Count Andrásy, and yearn for the mountains, lakes, and family life of her Bavarian childhood (Marischka *Sissi, Junge Kaiserin, Schicksalsjahre*). The German title of Tykwer’s film, *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin*, and its English release title, *The Princess and the Warrior*, both establish undeniable links between Sissi, Princess of Bavaria, later the beloved Empress of Austria, and Simone Schmidt. Like Empress Sissi, she is ironically idolized by her demanding patients, but she can only long for fairy-tale romance to brighten her uneventful life.

We therefore join Sissi in envisioning her second encounter with Bodo as a moment of bliss. Physically healed and propelled by an inexplicable desire to see him again, she returns to the scene of the accident with Otto, who vividly remembers the sounds of the event, and with his help, she is able to locate her rescuer. Bodo, however, rejects her forcefully and repeatedly until she finally attends the decisive event, not a dance but a bank robbery, and her sure footing in a moment of crisis wins his admiration. While she is claiming Meike’s secret remembrance from the safe deposit box, she becomes entangled in the violent bank theft that Bodo and his older brother Walter consider necessary to secure funds for a new life in Australia. Unwittingly, she becomes an accomplice and helps Bodo escape with Walter, mortally wounded by a guard. To Sissi’s dismay, even after she actually connects with Bodo in the bank, her prince is not only unwilling, but unable to return her affection.

Disappointing Sissi’s fairy tale expectations and viewer hopes for a love story, Bodo’s own unprocessed trauma, marked by seemingly unmotivated and profuse weeping, holds him back until the final sequences, long after they escape together from the asylum. By the time Sissi and Bodo leave, her devoted Otto has become suicidal over her intense affection for Bodo, and another jealous patient, Steinkohl (Steini), has tried to electrocute him. Moments before his murder attempt, Steini has notified police that Bodo is hiding in the asylum, but when they arrive, eager to capture Bodo, new events distract them. As everyone congregates on the rooftop, it now seems that Steini’s failed murder attempt will cause him to jump from the roof. Spectators forget fairy tale and imagine any number of tragic endings. Held captive not only by the authority of the institution, but by yet another attempt of her demanding and needy patients, Sissi remains resolute despite Steini’s dangerously fragile emotional state. In wordless agreement with Bodo, she takes his hand and
they leap from the roof in a running jump. Christine Haase suggests in recent articles that Tykwer’s films synthesize national and global filmmaking by playing with various paradigms, in particular by appropriating structural elements of Hollywood action thrillers and romance in films such as *Lola rennt* and *Heaven* («Transcultural Filmmaking» 406; «From «Lola»» 37). Bodo and Sissi’s spontaneous and dramatic leap is undoubtedly one of these moments. Viewers expect that the jump will end as a tragedy, since earlier shots indicate a driveway in front of the building. Moreover, drawn out in an extreme slow motion shot, the jump elicits spectator memory of the tragic closing freeze frame of Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise* (1991). Unexpectedly, however, Bodo and Sissi land in a deep pool of water, and drive off the next day in a car borrowed from Sissi’s colleague. The anticipated tragic suicidal ending thus becomes a surprising baptismal rebirth.

Not only do Sissi and Bodo survive their leap from the building, but the final frames also reestablish the feel of fairy tale. The couple arrives at the grand castle on the sea that we recognize as Meike’s house, and the exceedingly slow, lingering aerial zoom out of the last shot hints of the inevitable. In this sense, the storyline seems to follow many structural «actions» that Vladimir Propp famously isolated in his *Morphology of the Folk Tale*. Sister-like Meike asks Sissi to carry out a task («absent family member» [26]), Sissi finally retrieves the remembrance from Meike’s mother («task is revolved» [62]), and they arrive at Meike’s castle-like home as hesitant but potential lovers («hero marries and ascends throne» [63]). Yet despite the ambiance of a happy end, events have complicated and undermined the fragile closure. Sissi and Bodo feel the tentative nature of their emerging relationship, and they also know that his brother Walter died after the bank robbery. Furthermore, Bodo is wanted by the police, and she has been identified as an accomplice. The technique of presenting and subverting the same notion in a single image, here tragedy and fairy tale, resounds in many of Tykwer’s films. As Heidi Schlipphacke’s article on entrapment and escape suggests, particularly Tykwer’s final utopian images tend to construct and deconstruct simple narratives (108–09).

While Sissi’s story flirts with destiny and predetermined happy ends in fairy tales by establishing and frustrating these expectations, it simultaneously raises questions of tragic fate, female resistance, and mourning, familiar themes since Sophocles’ *Antigone*. In her resolution to leave the asylum, Sissi buries her dead, in other words, her past life, by withstanding and freeing herself from the controlling authority of the asylum and its patients, the only world she knows. Likewise, Bodo is finally able to abandon his weeping alter ego after his jump. We have seen him reliving his wife’s death in dreams, hallucina-
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tions, and tearful responses to the traumatic gas station fire in which she died. Although Bodo and Sissi’s emancipatory acts recall Sophocles’ play, they resist the concept of fate embodied in Antigone. Der Krieger und die Kaiserin overlays Antigone’s story about mourning and burying the dead onto the structures of fairy tale in a delicate and cautious tale about trauma processing that enables its characters to survive and reach states of empowerment.

Unlike Sophocles’ heroine who takes her own life after standing firm against authority, Sissi’s escape to Meike’s house means entering a precarious future whose open-endedness does not suggest the deaths and suicides that mark the conclusion of Sophocles’ tragedy. Recall that in his drama, Antigone disobeys orders issued by Creon, her uncle and ruler of Thebes, against burying her brother Polynices, who has been killed in a battle against his native city. In reworking Antigone’s fascinatingly courageous but futilely defiant resistance to institutional authority, Tykwer takes up a theme that not only defined conflict between state and moral law for centuries, but also influenced modes of thinking and writing about the tragic collision of ethical principles. Antigone manages to perform the customary burial rites and carry out her act of mourning for Polynices, but she sacrifices her life. Creon relents too late, at first deaf to pleas from blind seer Tiresias, Antigone’s fiancé and Creon’s son, Haemon, as well as members of the chorus, who beg him to free her and bury the dead warrior. He changes his mind only after Antigone, Haemon, and Creon’s wife, Eurydice, end their own lives, leaving Ismene, the sister who initially refuses to help bury her brother as the sole survivor of the next generation. Creon loses his power and family, and thus the curse on Oedipus’ family is fulfilled. In Tykwer’s film, however, everyone except Bodo’s brother Walter survives. Unlike Antigone, who commits suicide in her tomb, Sissi only seems to be jumping to her death, and she revives her «brother» Bodo instead of burying him.

In recreating Sophocles’ Antigone in the figure of Sissi, Tykwer’s film implicitly acknowledges the story’s wide reception in German storytelling. His film responds to reworkings of writers and filmmakers in postwar and post-Wall Germany, such as Bertolt Brecht’s play (1948), Rolf Hochhuth’s narrative Berlin Antigone (1968), and landmark films of the New German Cinema about female resistance and mourning from Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum (The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum, 1975), co-directed by Volker Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta, to the weighty collaborative venture of Deutschland im Herbst (Germany in Autumn, 1978), made by a large group of filmmakers, including Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Edgar Reitz, and Volker Schlöndorff. Themes from Antigone reverberate particularly in Deutschland im Herbst, a film that powerfully reveals
to what extent Sophocles’ classical tragedy preoccupied German imagination about mourning and profoundly inspired its retelling ever since Hegel’s nineteenth-century tribute to the play. Even contemporary works for the stage reflect the story’s substantial influence, including George Tabori’s adaptation of Brecht’s *Antigone* (2006) in terms of youth wasted by senseless wars.

Shortly after the Second World War, Brecht’s pacifist staging was quick to reflect critically on what Hegel regarded as the master narrative for German literature. In unconditional praise for the text he considered deeply significant, Hegel had written, «Von allem Herrlichen der alten und modernen Welt […] erscheint mir nach dieser Seite die Antigone als das vortrefflichste, befriedigendst Kunstwerk» (*Ästhetik III* 550). Turning from the Bible (and Judaism) toward the Grecian cultural model, Hegel called *Antigone* the «für mich absolutes Exempel der Tragödie» (*Religion* 557), «[eins] der allererhabensten, in jeder Rücksicht vortrefflichsten Kunstwerke aller Zeiten» (*Ästhetik II* 60). Hegel’s tribute stimulated thought about the confrontation of two concepts of law, localized in the figures of Creon and Antigone, a woman whose understanding of what is right conflicts with that of established authority. Despite her critique and individual action, Antigone’s entombment as decreed by Creon is determined by fate, and she remains a victim. Tykwer’s Sissi, however, manages to escape from the restraints of her life at Birkenhof. And by extension, as will be pursued below, her act also suggests another kind of resistance. Taking into account how the entire film comments on other institutional models of cinema by rethinking many paradigms of the *Heimatfilm* and the New German Cinema, it too stands out as a gesture of resistance.

But first, on the level of spectatorship, *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* also challenges any latent tendencies its spectators might still have to privilege tragedy, Greek tragedy and *Antigone* in particular, to interpret critical and even limit events. Tykwer’s film echoes the skeptical view of destiny that explicitly characterizes Brecht’s early postwar adaptation, designed to speak out against the concept of fate: «Die Änderungen […] sind gemacht, um die griechische möira» (das Schicksalhafte) herauszuschneiden» (Brecht 440). As the strategies of tragedy and fairy tale play out against each other in the film, Tykwer’s cinematic narration distances itself from reading histories of many kinds, personal and by implication also national history, in terms of fated tragedy.

Tykwer’s film is not set in a palace in Thebes, but in a closed psychiatric ward at Birkenhof Asylum in Germany, where Sissi was born, raised, and works as the beloved nurse of schizophrenic patients. In setting a film that tells of estrangement, murder, and escape in his own native city of Wuppertal, Tykwer naturally comments ironically on the expectations of *Heimatfilm*. Until Sissi meets Bodo, the interior of Birkenhof Asylum has been her en-
tire environment, her home, her *Heimat*, and the source of all her memories. Although she yearns for fairy tale, she accepts her anesthetized life as destiny. She performs her professional tasks mechanically under the controlling power of these memories and the institution, not only under the guardianship and authority of its staff, but also of its patients, who attempt to restrain subversive action, as Creon tries to hold back Antigone. Casting the hospital and patients as a collective form of state law, the film also refashions the figure of Tiresias as Otto, a blind boy who tells the past, not the future, and who helps Sissi find Bodo by remembering the sounds of the accident. In the changing perspectives of the admiring, demanding, and finally critically possessive patients, one recognizes the vacillating positions of Sophocles’ citizen chorus.

More fundamental than the correspondences between the characters and events in *Antigone* and *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin*, the film’s emphasis on mourning for the dead is its strongest and most obvious tie to Sophocles’ tragedy and many works of the New German Cinema. Tykwer presents a wide variety of responses to death. By the end of the film, most of Tykwer’s figures develop strategies of remembering and overcoming the past that simultaneously recall and challenge events in *Antigone*. Sissi’s friend Meike, for instance, whose mother succumbs to old age, appears untraumatized. Bringing to mind Antigone’s sister Ismene, Meike is strangely uninterested in attending her mother’s funeral, and simply explains in her letter to Sissi that her mother was quite old and her death is not hard to accept. Meike’s relationship with Sissi remains mysterious; we speculate that if Meike is one of Birkenhof’s former nurses, since Sissi’s colleague Maria Blum also knows her, she has freed herself from its institutional grasp.

Sissi lives in a state similar to Meike’s lack of mourning, practically devoid of emotional responses until her encounter with Bodo, and she does not begin to process her own mother’s traumatic death until near the end of the film, when she has reason to question her lifelong belief that her mother died in an accident caused by a hairdryer falling into the bathtub. Events finally lead her to conclude that it was not a random event or suicide, but in fact murder, and the insight intensifies her desire to change her life abruptly by leaving the asylum with Bodo. With his help, she is able to confront her latent mourning over her mother’s death, and she not only overcomes, or «buries,» the shock over her discovery, but also her entire past history in the psychiatric hospital. Sissi’s resistance conflates responses to many issues, including her existence in the oppressive environment of the institution and her violent physical abuse by patient Werner Strack, who is supposedly her father.

Sissi is unwilling to reflect either on the traumatic elements in her life or her entrapment at Birkenhof before she meets Bodo. While he dwells on the
trauma of his wife’s death, she exists in a preconscious state, and seems to accept her life as the unalterable conclusion of a tragedy. But after she encounters Bodo, instead of regarding her life at the asylum as a fateful and predestined conclusion to events, Sissi sees herself enacting a fairy tale in which he is destined to be her prince. She tries to find out if it means something that he was under the truck or if it was only by chance: “Ich will wissen, ob sich mein Leben ändern muss und ob du der Grund dafür bist.” She follows Bodo determinedly in the spirit of Heinrich von Kleist’s Käthchen, who relentlessly pursues Graf vom Strahl in the play *Das Käthchen von Heilbronn oder Die Feuerprobe* (1808). Similar to Kleist’s pair, Sissi and Bodo share several dreams, and as sleepwalkers interred in a present that simply seems to rewind the past, they both move at the slow dream-like pace of *Sleeping Beauty*. Initially, Sissi’s life is as metaphorically catatonic as suggested by the extreme close-up of her choking, voiceless face under the truck after her accident. Here, our insight into her yearning for a personal relationship comes only through her voiced-over thoughts.

During the film, however, Sissi gradually becomes able to articulate her desire and can distance herself from thinking of her life as predestined, either as tragedy or fairy tale. One of Tykwer’s complex sequences of gaze initiates an important decision in Sissi’s life. Steini happens to be watching the nightly newscast when her description comes up, and unseen by him, Sissi learns at the same moment that she is wanted by the police. She knows that Steini has this information as well. Aware of the tenuous situation, she promptly confronts Bodo and announces a decision that challenges any earlier conceptions of her life and actions as determined by fate of whatever sort, tragedy or fairy tale. Her choice casts her neither as an immobilized victim at Birkenhof, nor as a mistreated princess looking for a happy end in a fairy tale, but as open and willing to take a risk. She will leave the asylum, she says, and leaves it up to him to decide if he will come with her. She then recounts a dream that begins like a fairy tale, in which they are brother and sister, mother and father, man and wife, a constellation that seemed like happiness to her.

Before he can decide to join Sissi, his imagination replays the trauma of his wife’s death. Meike’s lack of mourning and Sissi’s initial denial of her need to work through trauma stand distinctly apart from Bodo’s incessant preoccupation with the death that still causes nightmares. Caught in this loop, he sees images from the conflagration that he views as a tragedy. This time, instead of only seeing him respond in a kind of hallucinatory sleepwalk, we enter his memory and view the flashback as he imagines it: an argument in the car, a stop for gas, and an explosion while he is in the restroom, caused, as he visualizes it, by the lit cigarette his wife drops at the pump. He takes the blame for the event, admit-
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ting to Sissi that it was not an accident. We never learn exactly how the accident
was caused at the gas station. To a lesser extent, Sissi’s memory also replays
her traffic accident and her mother’s death. We see a flashback of her mother
explaining that men disappear and do not come back. But Bodo comes back
to Sissi under the truck, bringing a straw to administer the tracheotomy. If we
recognize that Bodo and Sissi are ensnared in the narrative structures of their
recurring memories, we can ask whether one can remember or tell personal and
even national history without images, how cinematically structured images af-
fect memory and trauma, and if one can redirect memory from repeating these
visual playbacks. This leads one to wonder, aside from its love-hate relationship
with Hollywood paradigms, to what extent many important films of the New
German Cinema influence the kinds of questions we ask about the Nazi era,
reconstruction under Adenauer, and the 1970s Rote Armee Fraktion. In this
regard, one would consider Volker Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta’s
Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum (The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum,
1975), Volker Schlöndorff’s Die Blechtrommel (The Tin Drum, 1979), Rainer
Werner Fassbinder’s Die Ehe der Maria Braun (The Marriage of Maria Braun,
1979), Helma Sanders-Brahms’ Deutschland bleiche Mutter (Germany Pale
Mother, 1979), and Edgar Reitz’s Heimat (1984). Anton Kaes asks in From Hit-
der to Heimat, «As the Hitler era slowly passes from the realm of experience
and personal memory into the realm of images, will it also become a mere movie
myth?» (198). Tykwer seems interested in moving on, and as suggested below,
his film is not only about mourning that happens within the film, but also about
the need to bury and mourn for the end of an era of German filmmaking.

In connection with Bodo’s fixation on his wife’s death, Freud’s essay Trauer
und Melancholie (Mourning and Melancholia, 1917) suggests that Bodo is
a melancholic. Freud explains that the real loss of a beloved person, object,
or an abstraction can result either in natural mourning that will eventually
reach a conclusion, or pathological melancholia that persists over a prolonged
period. For the mourner, Freud maintains, loss is conscious, while the mel-
ancholic does not consciously grasp what is lost. While both states lead to
depression, inhibited performance, lost interest in the outside world, and in-
ability to love, the melancholic also suffers from low self-esteem (205). He has
trouble functioning in the world and feels such extensive self-reproach for his
ambivalent feelings about the lost object that his ego and conscience split. As
Otto Kernberg recently observed, Freud’s observations on melancholia still
inform psychoanalysis (304). They also find their way into the representa-
tions of mourning in Tykwer’s film.

The warrior Polynices-Bodo is trapped in melancholia, generally fighting
with himself and everyone else. His world is overturned like Georg Baselitz’s
paintings; even the first shot of Bodo shows him upside down and suicidal, leaning over a highway bridge. He rejects Sissi, redirecting his self-aggressive violence toward her and at the same time transferring to her the anger he feels toward his wife. Finally, in an extreme display of relocated self-approach, he demolishes the television set that has just broadcast the news of his brother’s death. Similarly, feeling that he has lost Sissi’s affection, blind Otto turns his rage inward and attempts suicide by eating glass from a lamp. Steini, in contrast, acts out feelings of violent jealousy toward Bodo. Although no one suspects Steini, often mistaken as Sissi’s father, of having murdered her mother, he begins to reenact his crime immediately after seeing the newscast of the bank robbery. Bodo refuses the role of victim, catches the toaster before it lands in the water, and in a powerful gesture tosses the guilt back to Steini. When Bodo tells Sissi about the incident, she concludes that Steini murdered her mother in a similar way. In the revolutionary leap from the asylum roof, she begins to work through her trauma and life of confinement.

Sissi is also able to help Bodo overcome the losses of his wife and his brother. The day after Sissi and Bodo jump from the roof and drive away from Birkenhof, they need to stop for gas, and turn in, by chance perhaps, at the gas station where Bodo’s wife died. Here, with the help of digital filmmaking techniques, his personality suddenly manifests itself as two identical figures. A tearful Bodo gets behind the wheel, and a cautiously self-assured Bodo climbs into the back seat. The newly composed Bodo soon stops the teary driver, takes the driver’s seat, and leaves his alter ego behind. With Sissi’s help, Bodo revisits and works through his trauma, and he is able to process the vivid memories of these two violent deaths.

Although to my knowledge Tykwer has not discussed the film’s implications of personal trauma and mourning, it has subliminal connections with trauma on a national level. The institution’s name, Birkenhof, uncannily resembles Birkenau, also known as Auschwitz II, and the film does not obfuscate associations to large-scale euthanasia of the supposedly mentally handicapped, for example at the infamous institution of Hartheim Castle in Upper Austria, a building that incidentally resembles the one chosen to represent Birkenhof. Patient Kramer’s name obliquely summons up Joseph Kramer, notorious overseer of the gas chambers in Birkenau. Bodo wakes up after Sissi has hidden him at the asylum after the bank robbery, and asks a patient where he is. This patient announces «Krematorium,» and later, «Wir werden alle sterben.»

As the film’s characters try to interpret events by choosing certain narrative paradigms, Tykwer suggests that we tend to select from a variety of structures to fashion chains of events into stories with particular types of closure, on
personal and national scales. In this way, the film evokes Hayden White’s notions of storytelling in history (24). Although Tykwer’s film displays little interest in moralizing, it does concern itself with modes of acting out and working through trauma. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between «writing about» trauma, a process that aims to reconstruct the past with absolute objectivity, and «writing trauma,» or working through trauma by giving it a voice in various cultural and aesthetic media such as writing and film (186–87). On a meta-level, *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* suggests dealing with trauma in a way that breaks with traditional narrative structures and similar strategies of cultural memory, namely by rewriting previously constructed narratives.

In the film’s diegesis, Bodo visualizes the story of his wife’s death as two different narratives in nightmares and flashbacks, tragedy and fairy tale. In the tragedy, events are inevitable. In a recurring fairy-tale dream, he imagines his wife as a witch-like woman who casts a spell on him. The hallucination routinely ends when Walter wakes up and discovers him holding the warm, womb-like oven in his arms. Near the end of the film, when he acknowledges that the fire followed an argument with his wife, the blame he takes for her death casts doubt onto the first stories. He trusts Sissi in their jump from the roof, and later abandons his obsessively traumatized self in an event that only he seems to witness at the gas station. With the help of Sissi’s confidence in him, he is able to revisit and rethink his explanatory models, and to work through his trauma, leaving the melancholic Bodo behind.

The oblique references to the Third Reich and the recurrence of Bodo’s personal trauma, the violent fiery explosion, point together to many kinds of national and global trauma, ranging from survivorship of the Holocaust, now passing from second to third generation, to smaller-scale RAF terrorism of the 1970s in Germany, to the disaster and aftermath of the international trauma of 9/11. Sissi and Bodo come to terms with their trauma in a process of recognition, and achieve a level of awareness. LaCapra connects this act with the possibility of ethical and political agency (144). Distancing himself from therapeutic objectives of psychoanalysis, he sees the forces of acting out and working through as interdependent processes constitutive of agency:

In working through, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future. To put the point in drastically oversimplified terms: for the victim, this means the ability to say to oneself: «Yes, that happened to me back then. It was distressing, overwhelming, perhaps I can’t entirely disengage myself from it, but I’m existing here and now, and this is different from back then.» (143–44)
Working through trauma, LaCapra argues, enables victims to form and maintain relationships. In Tykwer’s film, Bodo is able to approach Sissi cautiously and the storyline seems to promise they will reach an understanding and be able to interact meaningfully with mutual trust.

In 1962, the New German Cinema was founded in Oberhausen as an act of resistance and recognition that film needed to enter a new era cognizant of the need to mourn: «The old cinema is dead. We believe in the new» (qtd. in Elsaesser 21). Critical film artists resolved to challenge the type of filmmaking that produced films such as the Sissi trilogy. After RAF terrorist activities of the 1970s culminated in the murder of ex-Nazi and Daimler-Benz executive Hanns Martin Schleyer, a large group of young filmmakers released their critical assessment of the government’s selective mourning in Germany in Autumn (1978). The film includes news footage of two provocatively different funerals in 1977. Schleyer’s ceremony is a state event, while the burial of three members of the RAF is a simple affair that takes place under heavy police surveillance. One section of this film shows clips from a proposed version of Antigone (with Angela Winkler) that is deemed too incendiary for broadcast on television because it is too easy to connect the story with the supposed suicides of the three RAF members (Elsaesser 111). Several years earlier and also relevant to Antigone, Tykwer’s film, and the topic of mourning the dead, Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum (1975) had ended with the prison «entombment» of Katharina Blum (Angela Winkler), an Antigone-like figure who mourns over many losses, and violently resists the sexual advances of the journalist who has destroyed her existence by shooting him. At the journalist’s elaborate funeral, similar to the ceremony for Schleyer in Deutschland im Herbst, the Creon-like head of «the» newspaper, a clear allusion to the tabloid Bild Zeitung, pleads for freedom of speech.

Tykwer’s film raises many of the questions of Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum and Deutschland im Herbst, but it also points to newly relevant issues ten years after German reunification. In an interview with Sight & Sound (2006), Tykwer comments, «Unification had a much deeper impact than we ever imagined […] We have the same conflicts as most other western societies but in a very specific way because we have a reunited country that has to reinvent an identity» (Grosskopf et al. 30). By the end of the 1980s, the New German Cinema had itself become somewhat of an institution that strongly influenced themes and modes of German filmmaking. In this sense, Tykwer’s film, released ten years after reunification, expresses a need to move on from the recurrent themes of the Nazi past evident in so many of the New German Cinema films. The new perspective does not ask us to forget, but instead to incorporate the past in facing new problems, social awareness, and agency.
Arriving at Meike’s seaside house, Tykwer’s couple faces a problematic situation, but they look to the future. As Heidi Schlipphacke points out, Tykwer both repeats and reassesses the New German Cinema’s obsessive critique of the Nazi past (128).

To sum up the argument so far, Der Krieger und die Kaiserin retells Antigone in terms of German history, reflecting on death and strategies of mourning as do many films of the New German Cinema, founded largely in response to the postwar fairy tales of the Heimatfilm. However, in recalling these two groups of films, Tykwer suggests that it is time to reassess both eras of filmmaking and take a new direction that neither denies nor erases the past, nor sees the Holocaust as a predestined endpoint, but opens itself to the problematic present of reunified Germany with its pressing issues. Moreover, he sees in 2006 an overarching need to rethink and redefine identity: «We have the same conflicts as most other western societies but in a very specific way because we have a reunited country that has to reinvent an identity. I think this has been a big influence on film-makers’ desire to express the reality we live in» (Grosskopf et al. 30). Der Krieger und die Kaiserin clears the way, and while Tykwer does not address ethnic conflict, right-wing extremism, and new notions of a multicultural Heimat in this film, a number of more recent post-Wall films do center on these concerns, to name a few, Gegen die Wand (Head-On, Fatih Akin, 2003), Alles auf Zucker (Go for Zucker, Dani Levy, 2004); Kombat Sechzehn (Mirko Borscht, 2005); Kebab Connection (Anno Saul, 2005), and Knallhart (Detlev Buck, 2006). One step in reinventing German identity is to look skeptically at its narrations and the ways stories are told. As suggested, in this particular film Tykwer critically reconsiders the modes of tragedy and fairy tale.

In questioning narrative structures that characters and spectators fabricate to deal with an accumulation of events, Der Krieger und die Kaiserin asks whether one can legitimately interpret incidents such as Sissi’s traffic accident, her mother’s electrocution, and Bodo’s wife’s death as predestined conclusions. As the film revises the storyline of the Antigone tragedy, it lures spectators into joining its characters in hoping for the fairy tale endings of Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty. Tykwer’s film anticipates and disappoints the hermeneutic directions of both tragedy and fairy tale by refashioning both Sophocles’ tragedy of burying the dead and fairy tale’s rescues and true love, and in this way prompts spectators to reflect on the notion of cause.

The process of shaping a story from the events on screen suggests a related urge to organize events into a causally connected, narratable series of happenings on a larger scale. The film’s play with and disappointment of anticipa-
tions keeps reminding us of our inclination to respond to the viewing process by arranging events into beginning and end. Because Tykwer unsettles these mechanisms, we are led at least to question, if not resist, the kinds of conventional structures of storytelling outlined in Frank Kermode’s work on narrative, *The Sense of an Ending* (45). If we continue to tell stories of trauma in particular on either personal or national scales, Tykwer prompts us to wonder what narrative techniques or frames they might call for. And if we choose to imagine events with the structures of fairy tales, Jack Zipes also asks us to consider how these stories will be interpreted and by whom (190).

As an option to the causal linearity of classical tragedy and fairy tales, Tykwer inquires whether any of the filmic incidents might even be unrelated or randomly connected. We are not likely to wonder how the story of *Cinderella* unfolds so that she can attend the balls where she attracts the prince’s attention, loses her slipper, and can become his bride. Looking at the death of Cinderella’s mother, we are led to believe that she is destined to die so that the events of the story can take place. Whether the coordinating force is understood as a fairy godmother in Perrault’s tale, or a white dove as an agent of the dead mother in the Grimms’ version, the intervention is conventionally understood as destiny. But one could also ask if Cinderella’s mother just happens to die, leading to her father’s remarriage, and if Cinderella’s shoe merely slips off her foot by accident. On a similar note, one could question whether it is destiny or coincidence that the princess in Grimms’ *Sleeping Beauty* spends her critical fifteenth birthday unattended and free to discover the witch-like woman in the tower with the spinning wheel.

Anticipating how filmic events might be represented in ways that differ from causally structured and unchangeable sequences, the film teases spectators into unraveling what takes place before Sissi embarks on her search for Bodo. Tykwer inquires if one can also read the storyline, and by extension fairy tales as well, as a series of randomly connected coincidences. Although at first the film’s characters interpret events as fate, a number of clues destabilize the notion of destiny. Some incidents, for example do not seem to make any difference in the narrative, while others appear to initiate involved chains of events. To hide from his pursuers, Bodo suddenly dives under the truck that has just run over Sissi on her way to the bank, and this action significantly influences the next events. Similarly, Sissi’s accident occurs exactly at the moment he flees from his pursuers, and Bodo loses a button. Are these events to be read as fate? Conversely, he gets a job at the cemetery burying Meike’s mother, but it does not change the storyline. He simply recognizes her photo on the locket Sissi has retrieved from the bank. Does he help bury Meike’s mother merely by chance? Along these lines, one also needs to ask if the ex-
plosion at the gas station is actually an accident, and unrelated to his behavior, or if his wife commits suicide.

In addition to these notions of randomness and destiny, a third element comes into play in reading events, namely the role of choice and accountability. Sissi’s story is also readable as a chain of unrelated events that interweaves personal decisions and coincidence. Tykwer not only unsettles our inclination to give events certain structures instead of considering them as chance occurrences, but also inquires to what extent one should consider agency. When Bodo finds Sissi, he decides to emerge from under the truck, although he needs to hide to save himself after his theft. Nevertheless, he grabs a straw from Otto who stands nearby, and can save her with his knife. Are these acts to be interpreted as choice? If we construct a predetermined fairy tale as Sissi does for much of the film, she appears to be destined to help Bodo escape from the bank because he saved her first, but this case excludes agency. We reach a similar conclusion if we accept Bodo’s fairy-tale image of his wife as a witch. When Sissi and Bodo interpret their lives as tragedy, they are also immobilized. She lives life-as-death in the asylum, and he is entrapped in the trauma of his wife’s death. As in Sissi’s dream, «both» characters believe in «both» modes of interpretation, sometimes reading events as fairy tale and at other times as tragedy. The ways in which they assess their situations reflect onto spectators.

Der Krieger und die Kaiserin is not the only one of Tykwer’s films to examine the ways his characters understand what is happening, and how spectators connect events. Tykwer’s cult film Lola rennt also famously examines fate, chance, and choice. This story in triplicate teased viewers in 1998 by providing three alternative storylines: two tragedies and one fairy tale. As Maurice Yacowar points out, Lola rewrites her own script (556). From the perspective of pop culture, Jamie Skye Bianco calls the film a posthumanist programmed game that is rebooted three times (Bianco 377). The three versions are clearly defined. In the first, Lola fails to find the necessary money to save her partner Manni (Moritz Bleibtreu) from his crime bosses in Berlin, and she is killed. In the second, she gets the money, but Manni dies. Lola rejects these two tragic endings, and launches a third possibility, a fairy tale in which they both get the required money. It seems that they will live happily ever after, since even after Manni turns over his bag of money, they still have the cash Lola managed to win for him at a casino. In a study that connects Run Lola Run with Jean-Pierre Jenet’s Le fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulain (2001), Guido Rings calls both films modern fairy tales (197). Because Lola rennt experiments with the genres of fairy tale and tragedy, Tykwer’s viewing public is prepared two years later for the open-endedness of Der Krieger und die Kaiserin.
Even though *Lola rennt* and *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* both simulate happy ends, they tackle the concept of timing from two different angles. Of course timing crucially influences the succession of events, and how we interpret cause and effect, particularly in accidents. Ingeborg Majer O’Sickey notes that in each of the three storylines, Lola needs to take instantaneous action in the breathtaking span of twenty minutes (123). Each of the first two versions ends with a traffic accident, a metaphorical stand-in for the infinite possibility of chance events. But whereas *Lola rennt* compresses time in a frantically fast-forwarded pace, *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* stretches it to the breaking point of extreme slow motion, and in their slowness, everyday events appear with an air of miracle. Sissi’s captivity in a passionless life of drudgery at the mental asylum is cinematically exaggerated by slow-moving scenes and long pauses until it seems to stop after she is hit by the truck. Despite these two conceptualizations of time, chance occurrences are key factors, and Tykwer’s films overflow with intersections of events that trigger other significant sequences. The relation between timing and accident dominates Tykwer’s work, and even an early film, *Winterschläfer* (*Winter Sleepers*, 1997), begins with an automobile collision on a snowy road in the Alps. Two years after *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin*, in *Heaven* (2002) a bomb accidentally detonates in an elevator, not as anticipated in a police executive’s office, and the film explores the notion of randomness until its end suggests escape in a helicopter that happens to be at hand.

Tykwer joins a number of other post-Wall filmmakers in playing with spectator expectations. Fatih Akin’s *Im Juli* (*In July*, 2000), for instance confuses coincidence, destiny, and agency. One never knows whether lead character Juli (Christiane Paul) ensnares the man she desires by writing her own myth, or whether one can attribute the events in the storyline to chance. Tykwer coaxes us to consider that timing and coincidence can sometimes provoke choice, and that working through trauma creates the possibility for agency and ethical responsibility. When Bodo decides to stop reading his past as fairy tale, and overcomes the images of his deceased wife as a haunting witch, he is able to abandon his melancholic self. Instead of seeing himself as victim of a tragedy, he keeps the promise he made to his brother Walter shortly before he died, and finally steps «heraus aus dem Klo.» He gets off the «toilet» of acting out, in other words using the same explanatory structures to replay traumatic scenarios.

Are Tykwer’s viewers able to relinquish urges to stay on the «toilet» of fashioning events into structured narratives with beginnings and ends that particularly privilege the notion of destiny? *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* questions both of its alternative closures. When Bodo and Sissi leap from the
Princess Antigone, or Fairy Tale, Tragedy, Chance, and Choice ...

roof of the asylum building, the film prepares the viewer for the first ending, a tragic double suicide that hints of Romeo and Juliet. However, the rooftop jump actually enables Sissi and Bodo to rewrite their stories of victimhood. As Antigone, she defies the institution holding her back. She survives with her Bodo-Polynices-Haemon. Both Sissi and Bodo are able to bury their dead, captive selves, and when they land, perhaps by chance, in a deep pool and surface after an enormous splash, their supposed deaths turn into a new start that frustrates any residual urges we might have to look for rigid, one-directional causal structure. Although the film seems to refashion the potential tragedy into a fairy tale, in which Bodo and Sissi arrive at what looks like a magical castle, we suspect that at some point they might still have to deal with the law of the state. Similar to the closing sequence of De Sica’s Italian neorealism Miracolo a Milano, the final scene of Der Krieger und die Kaiserin subverts expectations for a conventional fairy tale ending. However we imagine their story continuing, as tragedy, fairy tale, or a combination of accident and individual choice, we may now be aware to what extent our underlying interpretive inclinations frame our narratives, and sense that it is time to move on.

Works Cited


