Transposition or Translation? Fiction to Film in Doris Dörrie’s *Nobody Loves Me* and *Am I Beautiful?*

Director Doris Dörrie bases her screenplays on her own short stories; however, she plays remarkably fast and loose with the original texts. Dörrie’s 1994 film *Nobody Loves Me* (Keiner liebt mich), for example, is based on several stories in her collection *Für immer und ewig* (Forever and always; 1991). Although the main characters appear in Dörrie’s book, Dörrie rings far-reaching changes on them and their relationship to each other and to the world. The same collection inspires Dörrie’s 1998 film *Am I Beautiful?* (Bin ich schön?); thus stories dealing with the same cast of intertwined characters have been adapted into two completely unrelated films. Dörrie’s free adaptations of her own prose introduce wider social and political dimensions, particularly questions of post-reunification German identity, into her raw material. The relationship between Dörrie’s texts and her films is examined here in the light of Lawrence Venuti’s ideas of “foreignizing translation”.

Director Doris Dörrie first came to fame with her low-budget 1985 film *Männer* (*Men*), a “sleeper” comedy hit internationally as well as in Germany, where it attracted six million viewers in its first six months.\(^1\) With its critical but humorous view of (West) German society, sexual relationships and materialist ambitions, *Männer*, in Mathis Heybrock’s words, “seemed to rescue Germany from an *auteur* film that was being dismissed wholesale as boring, maudlin and brooding – as a matter of course, the long-awaited comedy provoked comparisons with Lubitsch and Wilder”.\(^2\) The film’s unexpected success catapulted Dörrie to the forefront of the German film industry, earning her the rare tribute – for a filmmaker – of a cover story in the newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*, which feted her as “Germany’s most successful [woman] director”\(^3\).

Attention is frequently drawn to Dörrie’s fondness for basing her screenplays on her own published short stories; although it has become a successful career

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\(^1\)Marcia Pally: Open Dorrie [sic]. In: *Film Comment* 22.5 (1996). P. 42.


in its own right, Dörrie’s prose writing originally served a utilitarian purpose, as part of her creative process:

Certain characters interest me. Usually it starts with the characters. And these characters, when I get to know them just enough in my head, then something happens to them that can happen only to them. Years ago already I got accustomed to always writing short stories about these figures first, in order to get to know them.\(^4\)

Yet Dörrie’s stories often seem to have only a tenuous connection to the films they inspire. In fact, her claim, “[…] then something happens to them that can happen only to them”, turns out to be somewhat ingenuous: when the formal or generic demands of film (or of a particular film) so necessitate, she simply changes the characters.

Thus far, however, there has been relatively little published critical discussion of Dörrie as an adaptor of her own texts; Mathis Heybrock is one of the few early critics who has explicitly drawn attention to the relationship between Dörrie’s fiction and her films, and that only within a small section of a three-page article.\(^5\)

As a means of writing about exactly this process of adaptation, this study appropriates some ideas from the translator and theorist Lawrence Venuti, who describes the translator as the perpetrator of “the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target-language reader. […] Whatever difference the translation conveys is now imprinted by the target-language culture, assimilated to its positions of intelligibility, its canons and taboos, its codes and ideologies”.\(^6\) In place of “foreign text” and “target language”, I substitute “prose fiction” and “film”, with the latter seen here specifically as the *mise en scène* of a screenplay.

A key term in Venuti’s analysis is his concept, adapted from Jean-Jacques Lecercle, of the *remainder*: the repressed functions of language, and the choices not made in any particular utterance, which simultaneously permit linguistic

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\(^5\)This lack has begun to be addressed to some degree in: *Straight Through the Heart: Doris Dörrie, German Filmmaker and Author*. Ed. by Franz A. Birgel and Klaus Phillips. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press 2004. See also Peter M. McIsaac: North-South, East-West: Mapping German Identities in Cinematic and Literary Versions of Doris Dörrie’s *Bin ich schön?* In: *German Quarterly* 77.3 (2004). Pp. 340–362.