

MONIKA TREUT: AN OUTLAW AT HOME

Colin Richardson

Monika Treut has a fondness for hyenas: you could almost call it a fellow feeling. After all, in hyena society, the female is dominant and, moreover, these are beasts which survive by scavenging for scraps, fearlessly standing up to larger predators for a share of the spoils. Such is the life of an independent film maker. When, in 1984, Treut and Elfi Mikesch, one of Germany's leading cinematographers and directors, decided to set up their own film production company, what else could they call it but 'Hyena Films'?

In truth, though Treut has a fearsome reputation, she hasn't quite grown a full set of canine teeth. Indeed, she is much more the survivor than the tearer of flesh. For ten years, she has worked to the point of exhaustion to carve out a niche as an international film maker, writing and directing all her films, raising the production finance herself, editing, promoting and even, on occasion, distributing the finished product. As a result, she is perhaps the only lesbian film maker whose work has crossed over from art house to the mainstream while consistently dealing with the more controversial and 'incorrect' aspects of female sexuality—what Treut refers to as 'female misbehaviour'. Treut's women are often confused about their sexual orientation but they are united in their search for unconventional, unexpected, often confrontational and 'difficult' ways of being a woman. The title of her very first feature film (co-directed and written with Elfi Mikesch and with Mikesch as cinematographer) seems to say it all: *Seduction: The Cruel Woman*.¹

Released in 1985, *Seduction* tells the story of Wanda, a dominatrix who runs a waterfront gallery in Hamburg where audiences pay to watch the enactment of various sado-masochistic fantasies. Wanda also delights in playing games with her entourage of female and male lovers. At the film's heart is the humiliation of the man who first encouraged Wanda to express her 'cruelty', only to lose control of his creation. It also includes two scenes which have at times got the film into all kinds of trouble. In one, a male journalist grovels at Wanda's



16 Female to Male: Monika Treut (Elfi Mikesch, 1990)

feet, begging her to use him as her toilet. Then there is a short fantasy scene in which one of Wanda's lovers, the shoe fetishist Caren, imagines tying one of her customers up and forcing her to watch her 12-year-old daughter pose like a pin-up girl.

Seduction has been compared by Richard Dyer to *Querelle*² which is not entirely surprising since, apart from being German films, both are set on the waterfront, both examine power and role-playing in sexual relationships and both are beautifully lit and shot, prompting Marcia Pally of *Film Comment* to remark: '*Seduction* is a stunner. This is s/m by Avedon, outfits by Dior.' However, as Dyer points out, where *Querelle* is a hellish red, *Seduction's* primary colour is an icy blue.

Three years after this striking debut, Treut (again with Mikesch on camera) followed up with *Virgin Machine (Die Jungfrauenmaschine)* in which journalist, Dorothee Müller, to quote the official synopsis,

leaves Germany for the Oz of San Francisco, searching for her long-lost mother and a cure to the malady of love. Installed in the Tenderloin, she peeps in on neighbours' bizarre sex rituals, as well as doing sight-seeing of a more traditional kind. But encounters with male impersonator Ramona, charming Hungarian bohemian Dominique and Susie Sexpert, barker for



17 'Here's one I prepared earlier.' Susie Sexpert (Susie Bright) shows Dorothee (Ina Blum) her dildo collection in *Virgin Machine* (Monika Treut, 1988, © Hyena Films)

an all-girl strip show, lead to exploratory adventures of self-discovery and fun. When Dorothee surfaces like a dazzled tourist on the wilder shore of the city's lesbian community, she's discovered her true sexuality. And left some illusions behind.

Filmed this time in black and white, *Virgin Machine* expresses Treut's disdain for the notion of romantic love and her delight in discovering the United States. The first half of the film, set in Hamburg, has a brooding, melancholic, dissatisfied quality, harking back to German expressionist cinema. But when Dorothee hits San Francisco, the atmosphere lightens and the film becomes funnier, if rougher around the edges. Some of the American scenes were clearly shot on the run in one take to save money, giving them an almost documentary feel.

Treut's third feature, released in 1991, was shot entirely in New York. *My Father Is Coming*—working title, *Success*—marked a return to colour and is perhaps Treut's most conventional film in terms of form. A sweet, 'polysexual comedy of manners', it takes up the story of Vicky, a sexually confused German at large in the Big Apple. Struggling to hold down a job as a waitress, she dreams of becoming an actress yet fails even an audition for a commercial where she is

required to play a German tourist. When her father arrives from small town Germany, lured by her tales of success, she desperately tries to live up to expectations. Naturally, things soon spin out of control when papa discovers his daughter in bed with another woman. However, the interventions variously of a transsexual, a porn queen and a fakir who is heavily into body piercing and mysticism ultimately effect a reconciliation.

Treut's films are low budget films but, unlike Norma Desmond's, they are getting bigger. In early 1993, Treut was approached by Group 1 Films in Los Angeles to contribute to their new project, *Erotique*, a package of four short films by women directors from around the world.³ *Taboo Parlour* was shot in Hamburg, Treut's adopted home town, in August 1993 with an international cast, and completed by the end of September.⁴ Though only half an hour long, it is Treut's biggest budget film to date, costing around DM600,000 (about £240,000). However, even this will soon be surpassed when she returns to a project she has been working on for some years—a film based on Robert Merle's futuristic novel, *The Virility Factor*, which will have a budget in excess of \$3 million.

As well as Fassbinder, Monika Treut has been compared to Jean-Luc Godard and John Waters,⁵ among others. New York's *Village Voice* magazine has called her 'an agile, intelligent director' and an 'art film outlaw' while *The Mirror/The Entertainer* in Toronto commented, 'Treut is her own woman in an industry dominated by men and her films reflect that independent sensibility. The next German Cinema Wave might just look to her for inspiration.'⁶ In a round-up of cult directors from around the world, Jonathan Romney wrote in the British national newspaper, the *Guardian*: 'In Europe, where cult independent work seems largely to be a male preserve, Monika Treut stands out for her films combining lesbian sex-pol with Teutonic jollity.... Even Almodovar⁷ fans find her a touch too risqué.'

Monika Treut is also a friend. I got to know her when I worked for Out on a Limb⁸, the lesbian and gay film and video distribution company which distributes her films in the UK. She agreed to write an essay for this book but then *Taboo Parlour* got in the way. So instead, I interviewed her at her home in Hamburg in February 1993, immediately following the Berlin Film Festival where she launched her two documentary shorts, *Max* and *Dr Paglia*.⁹

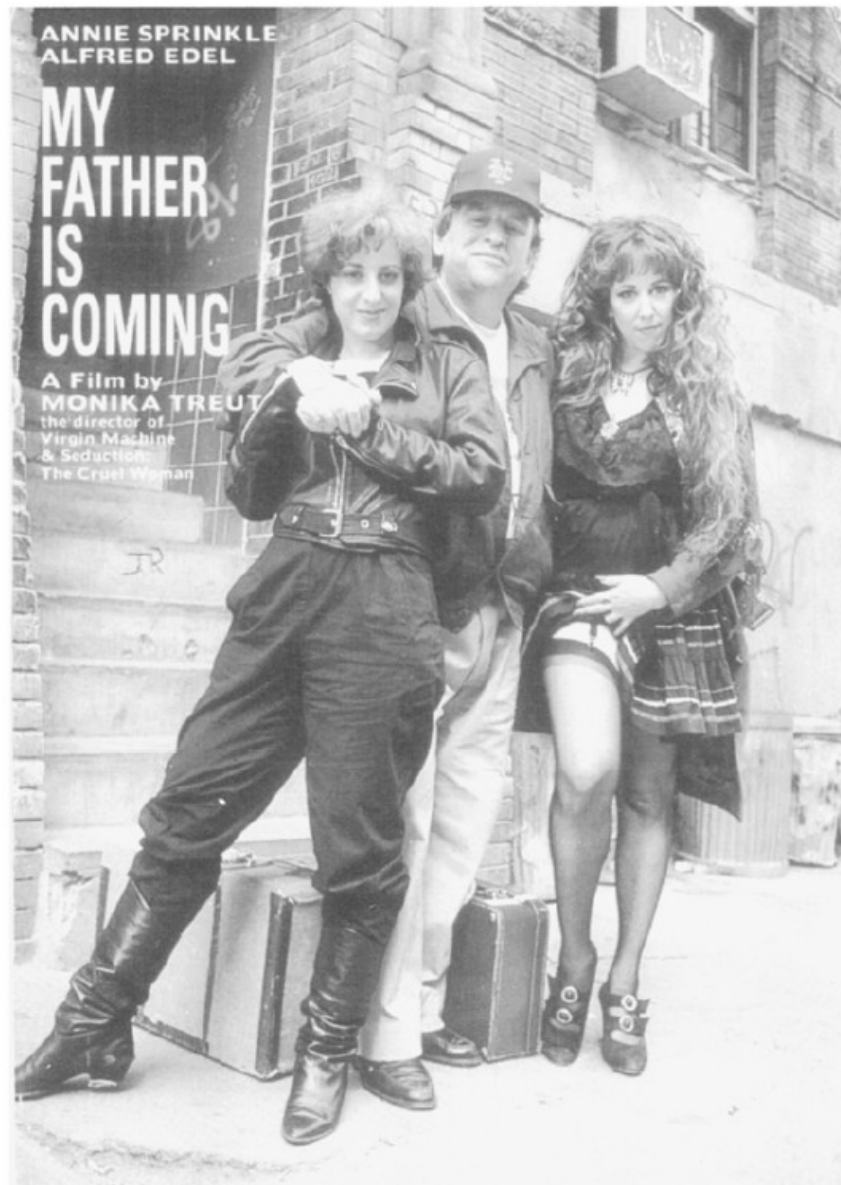
Monika Treut was born in Monchengladbach in 1954. She became a filmmaker by accident. In 1972 when she went to university in Marburg/Lahn to study German literature, 'I had no idea of ever becoming a film-maker.' However, Marburg is a small town 'in the middle of nowhere' and the only entertainment was going to see films.



18 Publicity for *Virgin Machine* (Monika Treut, 1988, © Hyena Films)

'So I sometimes went to see two movies a day.' Later, when she and her friends began to organise screenings of European art house films she had, by her own admission, become a 'movie maniac'.

While a student, Treut began to make super 8 films. Then, when the first video equipment came out, she trained herself to use it and taught herself how to edit. When she graduated, in 1978, she could not face the prospect of becoming a teacher so, instead, she went to work in a media centre in Berlin: 'It was all men and I had problems; I



19 Publicity for *My Father Is Coming* (Monika Treut, 1990, © Hyena Films)

just could not get along with these macho media types.' In 1979, therefore, she accepted an invitation to work in a new women's media centre in Hamburg.¹⁰

'We worked as a collective of ten women. We had a photo lab, a video library, video equipment, and a small movie theatre. I was in charge of organising screenings of 16mm films made by women and I also made a few video documentaries. It was the time of hard-core lesbian feminism in Germany and I was enjoying my period of



20 The art of the soundbite—Camille Paglia shows how (*Dr Paglia*, part of *Female Misbehaviour*, Monika Treut, 1992, © Hyena Films)

separatism then. But since I'm not an ideal group person, I didn't last more than a year and a half there.'

In 1980, Treut returned to academic work to take a Ph.D. 'I had this thing in my mind that I wanted to do something about evil women, I was always interested in evil women and women who broke the rules. I called it *The Cruel Woman* and I just tried to research the image of the cruel woman in films made by women but I only found bits and pieces here and there so then after researching all kinds of movies I thought, ach!, I had better go back to the real sources, go back to de Sade¹¹ and I'll go back to Sacher-Masoch.¹²

'I still worked a little in the media centre but then I used to take all my books in the car and go to Italy and stay there for three months to write a chapter of my thesis. I had funny experiences on the way because at the German/Italian border they said, "What are all these books?" So I had to get every single book out and put it on the street, on the road at the border. So, imagine having a street full of Marquis de Sade because they thought I was bringing pornography into Italy. I had to explain to them that this was a scientific project, for the university, but I don't think they believed me.'



21 How to win friends and influence people (*Female Misbehaviour*, Monika Treut, 1992, © Hyena Films)

Then the accident happened—Monika met Elfi Mikesch and found herself becoming a full-time film-maker. ‘I met Elfi whose work I adored. She was—and still is—my favourite German film-maker and cinematographer. When I told her about this book¹³ I was writing, this thesis, Elfi got really interested in it and she said she would love to make a movie about sado-masochism. So I sent her chapters of the thesis and over the years we became very friendly and finally became lovers.’

In 1983, Mikesch and Treut wrote the screenplay which was to become *Seduction: The Cruel Woman*. Though it was ahead of its time in its depiction of sado-masochism from a female perspective, the script was none the less well received by the (then) West German government film funding panel, composed of fellow film-makers and artists, and at the end of 1983 an award of a quarter of a million marks was made. But then the politicians stepped in. Within months the money was withdrawn on the orders of the new, and far right, Minister of the Interior, Friedrich Zimmermann. Apparently, he objected to the ‘I want to be your toilet’ scene.

But all was not lost. Indeed, the publicity generated by the Minister’s decision backfired when the social democratic regional government of North Rhine-Westphalia and the film house in

Hamburg stepped into the breach and together came up with 400,000 German marks, more than had been lost. However, all this pre-publicity was not entirely welcomed by Treut and Mikesch 'because the film was already in the papers before we even shot one frame. You know how that is for artists and everybody had expectations beforehand—this cruel, hot movie made by two women. We shot the movie in the harbour at Hamburg in late Fall, 1984. Because the budget was very tight, we had to be fast. Almost on the day we got the first print back from the lab, we went to the Berlin Film Festival [in February 1985] to premiere it there and we ran into the next scandal. So my welcoming into the film community was by two wonderful scandals...'

The Berlin screening was packed with people expecting to be shocked, hoping to be outraged. Some walked out before the end but most stayed for the discussion with Treut, Mikesch and two of the leading actors. As Treut describes it, men queued up to denounce the film. She was enraged and, much to the discomfort of the festival director, harangued back. Only Elfi stayed calm. When someone asked her about the two nuns who appear at the end of the film, she quietly said with a wry smile, 'Oh, they represent the women's movement.'

The film is based on Sacher-Masoch's novel, *Venus in Furs* (*Venus im Pelz*). 'It's one of his most kitschy novels from the late nineteenth century. It's a very basic story about an aristocrat (Gregor) who one day sees a woman (Wanda) and falls for her. She's just an ordinary woman and in the course of the novel he educates her to become a dominatrix and to fulfil his dreams. The most interesting parts of the novel are the descriptions of architecture, interior design, costumes, colours and so on. The masochistic mind needs to over-indulge in the history of the art that's as important as the dominatrix herself. Parts of the novel are almost written like a screenplay. We did change one important thing, though: we changed the roles. We made Wanda much stronger from the very beginning. In the novel it takes her almost two years to take over and turn Gregor into her slave.'

Of the two—de Sade and Sacher-Masoch—the Marquis is probably the better known. Can you explain a little about Masoch and his attitude towards women?

'People have named this behaviour masochistic after Sacher-Masoch which is a weird thing to do when you research his life. Because in life he was not a masochist at all, he was a macho man. Also, he wrote more than a hundred novels between 1860 and 1892—two or three a year—and the way he describes masochism in these novels is very boring. His style is very kitschy and artsy. He always talks about the same phenomenon which is a strong, dominating woman and a man

who looks up to her, a man who wishes to be dominated by this woman. But the interesting thing with Sacher-Masoch is that his masochism, his so-called masochism, in his books as well as in his life, is a trick. The masochistic man in fact dominates the woman because he acts like a director on stage, he tells the woman exactly what to do. So the woman is not a dominating woman by herself she just *looks* dominating and the man is the one who gives her all the attributes of being a dominant woman—he asks her to wear boots and fur and leather and whips and everything.’

So she’s only powerful as long as he allows her to be: he can take it away?

‘Yes, exactly. I found that very, very interesting because we see that a lot in this society—that women are not powerful by themselves but they just stand on a pedestal somewhere which only makes them powerful for a second, it’s just a glimpse of what they could be but it could be taken away quite easily. I began to see the masochistic universe as a very different universe to the de Sade universe because I think de Sade has a much more avant-garde mind, is much more feminist than Sacher-Masoch who just pretended. Also Masoch was sentimental and I do not like sentimental people; he’s a dreamer, forever dreaming about ancient matriarchal societies yet he is pretty much aware that he is the dominant person even being the masochistic male, that he still holds the power. Whereas de Sade is really interested in transforming the rules of society and is really an anarchist in that he really analyses *this* is the structure of society and *this* is the way the women can escape. Masoch, on the other hand, just holds them in this double bind situation of being mothers and lovers and slaves but giving them for a moment a chance to dominate.’

Despite the initial reaction to *Seduction*, Monika and Elfi continued to attend screenings. At the Montreal Film Festival, they began to have fun. Elfi and I greeted the audience before the screening and then went and sat outside the theatre. After ten minutes a woman came out, screaming at us, “You are the makers of this movie, this is the worst movie I’ve seen in my life...” She was hysterical, a woman film critic, and I just said OK why don’t you just sit here and calm down, what is this, what is bothering you? And then she said, all of a sudden it burst out of her, “That film is my life, that is how I feel” and all her life, her psychological problems came out. We talked to her for a bit which made her change her mind completely about the movie. She grabbed our hands, thanking us, and rushed right back into the movie. I love it when people have such strong reactions, I love it.’
[Laughs]

Then, through the summer of 1985, the whole circuit of West Coast US festivals: 'I really enjoyed it: the lesbian and gay festivals were the most pleasurable. In Los Angeles we had a wonderful audience response despite the fact that they began by screening it at the wrong ratio: I remember because Wanda's (Mechtild Grossmann) head was cut off and I had to throw a fit and the projectionist almost broke his leg running up and down the stairs in the theatre.¹⁴

'But the audience still enjoyed it and afterwards people came up to me to tell me so. An SM couple came up to me and said, "This film is amazing, it's just like our marriage." I met a woman park ranger from California, a lesbian, who adored it and offered me hundreds of dollars for a video cassette. Leather guys offered me their handkerchiefs which I really loved, it was very personal. In fact, the whole gay SM community loved *Seduction*.

'At the San Francisco lesbian and gay festival, I was a bit worried at first since some European producers had warned me about audience expectations there. Like Dieter Schidor, the producer of Fassbinder's *Querelle*, who had said to me: "Monika be careful, San Francisco gay people do not appreciate art, they booed and hissed at *Querelle*."

I remember experiencing a kind of culture shock at first in San Francisco. On the opening night of the festival, the audience seemed to enjoy most sentimental films with lesbian or gay heroes so I was ready to take the print and run. But then I met all these exciting women at the opening night party: Susie Bright, Nan Kinney and Debi Sundahl, the publishers of *On Our Backs*,¹⁵ the lesbian SM scene and the Hungarian sisters, Dominique and Flora.¹⁶ Finally, *Seduction* itself was well received.

'During this first visit to San Francisco, I stayed in the *On Our Backs* office and my new friends took me to lesbian strip shows and I was in wonderland. That's when I had the idea to turn my experiences into a script which later became *Virgin Machine*.

'Then in the Fall were the Canadian festivals. In Toronto, *Seduction* got banned by the board of censorship, the only film out of the 180 that were screened that year. Apparently, the board objected to the scene where the 12-year-old girl is dressed up like a pin-up girl and her mother is forced to watch her pose—this was accused of being the exhibition of a minor in a sexual context. The members of the board were mostly housewives.

'Elfi and I were shocked by this decision because we considered our movie to be relatively timid: no genitals, no sexual intercourse, everything in it probably a fantasy, happening in the minds of the spectators. The festival seized the opportunity to fight the board's decision. Kay Armatage, one of the programmers, a professor of film and a film-maker herself, wrote what was almost a thesis in defence

of *Seduction*. So the board had a second screening and finally, reluctantly, allowed it to be screened in the festival. Elfi and I got so much publicity out of this that the festival was able to get rid of the board altogether.

I spent the rest of the year working on getting distributors for *Seduction* and doing publicity for the openings. In 1986 I worked on the script for *Virgin Machine* and I went back to San Francisco to scout for locations. But it was not until 1987 that I got the financing going. Germany is thought of as being a place where it is relatively easy for film makers to get funding—but it's a different story in my case. The agencies here think that I am this man-hating SM lesbian with scissors in her pants, ready to cut off their penises—the majority of funders are male in Germany. The agencies in Hamburg, my home town, and one television producer for NDR¹⁷ are the only exceptions. These two sources combined still only make for small budgets but this is pretty much all I can rely on.

'And so we shot *Virgin Machine* in 1987 in the summer, first in Hamburg then in San Francisco for another ridiculous budget. We had two different crews, a German crew and an American crew. Then we came back from San Francisco in early November to edit the film.

I had a sneak preview at the Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in San Francisco. Industry people tell you never have a world premiere at a gay film festival because then it is marked and branded, just look for like a big film festival first and so I thought, ach!, I don't give a shit, San Francisco helped me to make the movie, I mean the lesbian and gay community, and I used all kinds of bars and I had connections through the community. This film was my way of saying thank you.

It was a very interesting screening, I could tell by the way the audience reacted very directly, spontaneously that they didn't like the parts where the main character, Dorothee, is in touch with her big boyfriend or when the Pope was on screen they would hiss—every time some hateful object appears on screen they hissed like in the Punch and Judy show. So I could tell exactly what parts they had problems with and they effectively wrote a script for another movie, you know by reacting, a script for a film they would have loved. This one, they had to work to get along with but in the end they liked it so that was fine.'

You said that you could have rewritten the film from the audience reaction into the film they would have liked. Tell me about what kind of reactions you've had to your work, particularly from lesbians, as to what they expect from you as a lesbian director, what they expect from a lesbian film?

That is my ongoing discussion with lesbian audiences, especially the San Francisco lesbian audience. They are very explicit in what

they want to see, though it's changed a bit since the mid-1980s. My nasty take on it is this: they want to see lesbian love scenes on screen, they want to see attractive girls on screen, they want to see girl meets girl, girl has romance with another girl, girl has wonderful sex with another girl and maybe the highlight would be at the end mom and dad approve and they all live happily ever after.'

In *My Father Is Coming* and even in *Virgin Machine* the main character is uncertain about her identity to start with. Do you think the lesbian audience wants all the lesbian characters to be lesbians through and through and there never to be any doubt?

'It's not only that. A huge part of the lesbian audience wants to see some kind of a heroine, somebody who is bigger than they are, bigger than life which, for me, is a kind of a caricature thing. *Virgin Machine* and *My Father Is Coming* are about real people and real experiences and real life situations and when I make a film like that I just tend to portray people as they are in real life. That girl, Vicky, in *My Father Is Coming* was a typical person of the time, just somebody who does not really know who she is.

'I do not believe in these identity concepts—that people can completely tell you this is what I am, this is what I want to become, these are the people I want to meet, this is the career I want and this is how it will go for me— ten years from now I will be there and will have done this and this work and whatever. I don't see people that way, I see that people in the late twentieth century are creatures very much influenced by their time, by their surroundings, by their jobs, by their friends, by their economic situation, by lots and lots of things and to say *this is my identity* to me is just a lie or it's a dream or a nightmare.

'I see the chance for people to accept that there is not just one core source of identity but that you can have different identities at the same time. That's probably something that puts me in opposition to the queer or lesbian and gay self-consciousness, whatever, because I'm also an artist and that also puts me directly in opposition to all kinds of movements or politically correct concepts because I have to play several different roles in my life all the time. When I'm with actors and actresses, I have to be the ringmaster, the mother, the shrink, the dominatrix. When I'm talking to money people, to funders, I'm a different person—not that I'm a different person but I do have to play different music. I'm a business person with funders or co-producers and, say, half an hour later I'm playing the "mother" with actors, playing the partner with editors and so on. And even that can change—I can be a good mother, I can be an evil mother. I'm a different person with lovers and with friends and, of course, I'm another person

when I'm by myself writing a script: I just feel like a machine driven by my hormones. So it just depends on what you do. I always doubt it when people have the urge to present themselves as the same kind of being everywhere in every situation—I don't think it is possible.'

So do you feel that lesbians and gay men who are out, who are part of a movement and have acquired this identity, this lesbian or gay identity, are expecting from you to reflect that identity in a fairly unproblematic way but nothing else? That they want you to show the kind of people that they think of themselves as being in a kind of fixed and yet positive and fully formed way? Is it because partly we want to see reflected back at ourselves what we feel about ourselves, to be reinforced? Is it also because we're thinking about straight people who watch these films and we want them to think well of us when they see them. Do you think that is part of it?

'Darling, I have to say that I deeply hate this expectation. Who are we as poor, struggling lesbian or gay film makers to reassure lesbian and gay identities? Of course, cerebrally, I can understand these wishes; but I think the screen gets abused as a shrink and eight bucks is not enough to get the full treatment. One goes to a shrink to hear—oh you're a good person, I love you and your one and only problem is that your parents didn't love you and therefore you have to get a new perception of yourself and you have to love yourself. This is basically what therapy is about—many years and thousands of pounds or dollars or marks later, you come to accept yourself no matter whether you are gay or lesbian or whatever.

'I'm not in favour of the old habit of using the screen as an ersatz shrink— psychoanalysis for poor people which is indeed an historic concept of cinema in the early part of the twentieth century. People went to the movies to feel good about themselves, to identify with the huge hero or heroine on screen in order to reassure themselves.'

What do you think of the idea of the male gaze, the notion that mainstream Hollywood cinema assumes that the spectator is male so that the object of a film is a woman, the woman represents sex and so the female spectator has no easy way in?

'I don't think that's true. We had actresses like Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Barbara Stanwyck and so on in the 1930s and 1940s, playing absolutely strong female characters, *femmes fatales*, in the *film noir*— lots of female characters for straight and lesbian women to identify with.'

But you've had that thrown at you—that your films somehow fail to cater to the female spectator and to legitimate the female gaze...

'Well, I do question this whole theory about the so-called female gaze. When I see a movie I never identify with a female victim. If I

identify at all, I identify with the character I like and that can be a man or a woman or an animal. Lots of female friends of mine share the same experience. Also, I don't think this is thrown at me—my experience is that lots of women are indeed amused about the adventures of Dorothee Müller in *Virgin Machine* or Vicky in *My Father Is Coming*'

There was an item on the British lesbian and gay TV series, *Out*, in 1991 which suggested that one of the most popular films with lesbians was *Aliens*¹⁸ where Sigourney Weaver totes a gun throughout but she's also the mother to the little girl.

'So phallic but motherly. The mother with a phallus, isn't that what we're all looking for?'

Do you feel that you have an expectation upon you that a lot of women and maybe some lesbian women come to your films with the expectation that the women in your films will fulfil that heroic role? And even if you do feel that how do you respond to them?

'Well I'm glad that there are films out like *Aliens* so they can fulfil their wishes. I myself am unable to cater to these expectations. It's all about fulfilling the Hollywood studio formula. I don't see cinema, as I tried to point out earlier, as a representative or stand-in for real life experiences.

'My movies do not consciously set out to create a big following, they're just original pieces. But I'm not trying to torture audiences, unlike other independent film makers. I try to make it fun to watch my films. But then the audience also gets to see things that they have to combine in their heads and work a little.'

What is your kind of cinema then?

'I like challenge in movies, I like challenge a lot. Again, I cannot say my taste is in one drawer. I do like experimental movies a lot for example, I love Kenneth Anger's¹⁹ films and Maya Deren's²⁰ work. But then at the same time I adore ancient Hollywood movies like Billy Wilder's work. He's my favourite Hollywood director of all time. Then, of course, as a German I adore Fassbinder. For me, he's the most interesting German film maker after World War II. Though I don't really relate to his melodramatic touch, his films have been and still are a *big* source of inspiration to me.'

Do you think films can make the world a better place?

'No!'

In 1992 after a screening of *Virgin Machine* at the Goethe-Institut in London, you were talking to Julia Knight²¹ and what you basically said was, 'I make my

films, they're released, I say bye, bye, in terms of what they mean. That's it I've said it. It's up to the audience what they make of it.' Do you really feel that or do you actively try and shape people's interpretations of your films?

'My story is: after a film is finished, I have to come to terms with it and this has always been like making peace with it. I know that I did my best under the specific circumstances—the budget, the time, etc. Then when we do the sound mix, I always get goose pimples, meaning I love this movie, no matter what. But of course it's a never-ending learning experience. I know exactly what we could have done better on each movie but that's another story to remember for the next one.'

But you don't care if somebody reads it differently from you—you know, there is some huge cultural study of it, reinterpreting what you meant. You don't care if people get completely the wrong idea?

'I'm amused when I read such things. After I've given birth to a movie, it's no longer mine and people can do with it whatever they please.

'This is not the smart American way of promoting your work but I'm sick and tired of pushing my own films. That is the work of distributors and agents, publicists and so on. I'm probably a stupid person because most of the other film-makers put as much effort into promoting their films as making them but that's not really my cup of tea. When I've finished one movie, I'm already thinking of the next one and that is pretty much the end of the love affair.'

Many directors get very upset if people 'misunderstand' their films.

'I don't. I like strong reactions.'

What if people don't talk about your films a lot, they don't talk about them at all—that must be the worst part?

'Luckily enough I've never experienced that. If they don't talk about my work in one country, they do in another. So I have never suffered from not enough feedback. Of course, feedback is important to me when it is smart—it helps you for your next movie.'

One of the favoured strategies in marketing is to categorise a film within a particular genre—something which is not particularly easy with your work.

One of the genres that's come under particular study in our book is the vampire film and there has been a lot of interest in that lately with Coppola's *Dracula*²² coming out and ideas of vampires being a *fin de siècle* phenomenon and so on. Have you any particular interest in expressing any ideas through any genre?

No. I've never been very much attracted to the vampire genre because to me it's all about repressed sexuality—very bourgeois. There's the yuppie person on the outside and then comes the night

and they fall victim to something or turn into a monster. To me, it's a dated, Victorian fantasy which is alien to me. It's a nice fairy tale but I cannot relate to it emotionally.

'Or, the same thing, I could never relate to that lesbian movie *Mädchen in Uniform*²³ which is another repressed thing—I see millions of lesbians crying at this movie: "I had a teacher like that and I was in love with her..." It's repressed sexuality to me. I've seen it twice out of historical interest, this typical teacher/pupil story, but that was it and so I analysed it—fine, but I could not watch it with a bunch of lesbian girlfriends and go, like, "my mathematics teacher, I fell for her when I was in 3rd grade..."

But if genre is not the way to express yourself..

'I'm a marketing failure!' [Laughs]

... . If critics have a problem fitting you into a genre then they try to compare your work with another film or film-maker. So, for example, you may be compared with Percy Adlon, with *My Father Is Coming* being compared to *Baghdad Cafe*. Both of you are German, both films are a German take on America and, of course, Adlon also has lesbianism involved in an unlikely way. How do you respond to comparisons of your films with other sort of films like that?

'I don't give a shit!'

It's a question that you were asked by Jenni Murray on the *Woman's Hour*²⁴ interview—you were asked about whether you saw yourself as a German film-maker, as a woman film-maker—she didn't actually say it but the subtext was as a lesbian film-maker. Do you think in those terms yourself?

'Of course I'm all of that. But as I tried to express earlier in my pidgin English, I am not too fond of these labels. As a film-maker I see myself as a loner, an outlaw. Whether it is the art film community, whether it is the lesbian and gay film community, or the commercial film community or the B-movie, trash film community.

'Sometimes, of course, I do have this human desire to look around for relatives in this cruel world of movie-making. And then I see that the people I like are all either busy or unable to communicate. To name a few—Jean-Luc Godard who has been in splendid isolation for many years now; or Liliana Cavani²⁵ whose work I really love. *The Night Porter*²⁶ is still one of my favourite movies. I feel close to her though I've never met her. She does documentaries as well as features and she loves to touch taboo subjects: sadomasochism in combination with the Nazi Terror. But I have little hope that there will be a meeting soon of all the loners in this business.

'I am everywhere and nowhere with my work and as long as I can raise enough money to make my next film, I'm happy.'

NOTES

- 1 *Verführung: Die Grausame Frau*, Monika Treut/Elfi Mikesch, Germany, 1985.
- 2 *Querelle* (1982), based on Jean Genet's 1947 novel, *Querelle of Brest*, was the last film of the German director, Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1944–82).
- 3 The other directors are Lizzie Borden (USA), Clara Law (Hong Kong) and Ana Maria Magalhaes (Brazil).
- 4 *Taboo Parlour* includes in its cast, Marianne Sagebrecht, a leading German actress and star of, among others, *Baghdad Cafe* (Percy Adlon, Germany/USA, 1987), and features songs from British singer-songwriter, Tanita Tikaram.
- 5 Jean-Luc Godard (b.1930), French director associated with *nouvelle vague* (new wave) of French cinema (films include *A Bout de Souffle*, *Vivre Sa Vie*); John Waters (b.1946), cult US director, self-styled 'Pope of Trash', famed for his films starring Divine (including *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, *Desperate Living*).
- 6 For more about Treut's relationship to German cinema, see Julia Knight, *Women and the New German Cinema*, Verso, London, 1992.
- 7 Pedro Almodóvar (b.1951), Spanish film-director and writer. Films include the explicitly gay *Law of Desire* and camp cult classics such as *Matador*, *What Have I Done To Deserve This?*, *Pepi, Luci, Bom...*, and *Women on the Edge of a Nervous Breakdown*.
- 8 Out on a Limb, Britain's first exclusively lesbian and gay film and video distribution company, was set up in June 1991 by Val Martin. I worked there from the beginning until October 1993.
- 9 *Max*, a portrait of a native American, female-to-male transsexual, and *Dr Paglia*, a barely controlled explosion occasioned by the trenchantly outspoken US academic, Camille Paglia, form part of a feature-length collection of Treut's documentaries which span the years 1983 to 1992 and which rejoices in the title, *Female Misbehaviour*.
- 10 The Bildweschel—which is still active today.
- 11 Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade (1740–1814), French aristocrat, soldier, writer, debaucher and debauchee.
- 12 Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1835–95), Austrian writer.
- 13 Monika completed her thesis—becoming Dr Treut in the process—in 1982. It was published in book form in Germany in 1984 with the title, *Die Grausame Frau (The Cruel Woman)*, and it is now in its second edition. An English edition will be published in the UK and the USA in 1994, funnily enough by Routledge.
- 14 The screening ratio determines the dimensions of the rectangle of light projected onto the screen—obviously, if this differs from the ratio adopted when the film was made, parts of the image will be cut off. Monika Treut uses the ratio 1:1.37 when shooting her films, a ratio which has gone out of fashion somewhat. It is closer to a square than the most commonly used modern ratios—for example, wide screen

movies adopt a ratio of 1:2.35 which produces a wide, but narrow strip. If the projectionist does not check, then incidents similar to that described here will occur: the top and bottom of the image will be cut off. In fact, I've seen it happen myself at a London screening of *Virgin Machine*. On this occasion, I was the one making the projectionist run up and down stairs until heads were restored.

- 15 *On Our Backs* is a US lesbian sex magazine which has attracted much criticism, particularly from lesbian feminist anti-pornography campaigners some of whom have launched a direct action campaign against the magazine. Susie Bright, aka Susie Sexpert, writer, sex educator, performer and editor of *On Our Backs*, plays a leading role in *Virgin Machine*.
- 16 Dominique and Flora Caspar. Dominique is in *Virgin Machine*; both sisters feature in *My Father Is Coming*.
- 17 The NDR (Nord Deutscher Rundfunk) is a North German TV station, a subdivision of the First Programme.
- 18 *Aliens* (James Cameron, USA, 1986), second film in the *Alien* trilogy.
- 19 Kenneth Anger (b.1929), US underground film-maker, celebrated for the homoerotic appeal of his work. Author of the *Hollywood Babylon* books which dished the dirt on numerous Hollywood stars.
- 20 Maya Deren (1908–61), Russian-born US film-maker (films include *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *Meditation on Violence*).
- 21 In June 1992, the Goethe-Institut in London organised a season of screenings, entitled *Women and the New German Cinema*, to coincide with the publication of Julia Knight's book of the same title (op. cit.). Following a screening of *Virgin Machine*, Treut talked to Knight and answered questions from the audience.
- 22 *Bram Stoker's 'Dracula'* (Francis Ford Coppola, USA, 1998).
- 23 *Mädchen in Uniform (Maidens in Uniform)* (Leontine Sagan, Germany, 1931)— described by *Time Out* as: 'A key early German talkie: a powerful melodrama about life in a Prussian boarding school for the daughters of the bourgeoisie—a bastion of the ideology of "strength through suffering".'
- 24 Jenni Murray interviewed Monika Treut and Julia Knight for the BBC Radio 4 programme, *Woman's Hour*. The interview, which was broadcast on 11 June 1992, coincided with the publication of Knight's book, *Women and the New German Cinema*, op. cit.
- 25 Liliana Cavani (b.1937), Italian film-maker.
- 26 *The Night Porter (Il Portiere di None)* (Liliana Cavani, Italy, 1973)— Dirk Bogarde and Charlotte Rampling star as, respectively, a former SS guard and a one-time child inmate of his concentration camp who, years later, meet in a hotel to take up sexually where they left off.