Across the broad continent of a woman’s life falls the shadow of a sword. On one side all is correct, definite, orderly; the paths are straight, the trees regular, the sun shaded; escorted by gentlemen, protected by policemen, wedded and buried by clergymen, she has only to walk demurely from cradle to grave and no one will touch a hair of her head. But on the other side all is confusion. Nothing follows a regular course. The paths wind between bogs and precipices; the trees roar and rock and fall in ruin.

– Virginia Woolf (1986: 254)

Virginia Woolf’s famous rumination on the lives of women within a patriarchal order and outside of one does not elaborate on the dangers and abuses of the former existence, nor on the rewards of the latter. Woolf remains observational and thought-provoking, yet her irony comes through in the juxtaposition between the orderly side and the confusion side, as well as in the way she describes the former in detail, while the latter remains vague. Her juxta-
position stands as an invitation to want to choose confusion over being escorted by men ‘from cradle to grave’, without living a life of one’s own. But her indirect question remains most pertinent and timeless: once the traditionally prescribed and restricted roles of wife, mother, care-giver, homemaker, etc. have been lifted, women find themselves restlessly soul-searching for meaning while constructing their own identities, their own homes, and their own lives. Perhaps the most challenging question for all women remains whether and how it is possible to have everything we want in life, without compromising our sense of self, our needs, our ambitions and our dreams, while simultaneously knowing how to choose wisely without missing out on opportunities in life. Beatrice Möller takes up this quest in her documentary film Everything We Want (Alles was wir wollen, 2013), which premiered at the Achtung Berlin Film Festival in April 2013. The film follows three female protagonists and their mothers, living in Berlin and Leipzig, as the former transition from their twenties into their thirties.

The central motif of the film centres on discussions between the mothers (whose choices were limited and heavily dependent on men, but who feel content with their lives) and the daughters (who have seemingly endless choices, possibilities and freedoms, but feel more restless). Yet as we discover from the intimate portraits of the daughters over the course of several years, all that freedom comes with completely new, and also the same old, challenges, such as financial insecurity, health problems, relationship challenges, existential fears, biological clocks, etc. Simultaneously, the mothers reveal their experiences and challenges within and outside of patriarchal marriages. Together, these personal narratives provide one of the most compelling examinations of the female experience of German, middle-class, heterosexual, educated, professional women since Helke Sander’s 1977 film The All-Around Reduced Personality (Die Allseitig reduzierte Persönlichkeit – Redupers), in which the freelance photographer and single parent Edda Chiemnyjewski, played by Sander herself, exposes the challenges she and her generation faced in a male-dominated culture and professional world, as well as their efforts to raise political consciousness about sexism and repression in West Berlin. As Lisa Katzman noted, Sander’s film exposed the ‘limitations of traditional male-dominated narrative practices, which generally only touch upon such exigencies’ outer perimeters’ (1984: 60). Moreover, Katzman found that ‘by having Edda question her existence in such a way, Sander is holding up a mirror to the audience, inviting us to ask similar questions about the film’ (62).

By foregrounding female protagonists’ own stories of personal struggles, fears, hopes and vulnerabilities, Möller’s film pushes narrative limits beyond superficial perimeters and practices to get at the core of female experiences, decision-making and identity construction, and simultaneously allowing the audience to reflect on and question their own personal quests.

Everything We Want opens with one of the three female protagonists, Marie-Sarah Linke, who is driving her car while doing enunciation exercises for actors. Then Möller cuts to her apartment, where Marie-Sarah explains, ’By age 35 people expect you to have something to your name, job-wise. This definitely isn’t the case for me.’ Right from the start we get a personal and intimate portrayal of the protagonists, who are filmed in their homes, in their cars and in their places of work, as well as their personal statements and reflections on themselves and their lives. The second protagonist, Claudia Euen is introduced at a concert in a bar, and then in her apartment, where she notes,

My experiences over the last ten years are really different from those my mother made in her days. And this leads to this lack of understanding. To say you can do so much today and everything is possible, that is only partially true.

Here we are presented with the two main themes of the film – the relationships between the mothers and daughters, and the main difference they all observe in their daughters’ lives, namely that they have freedoms and possibilities that the previous generations did not. And finally the third protagonist, Mona Katawi, is introduced in the U-Bahn, and in her apartment, remarking.

For instance, if somebody asks what is your job, are you married, do you have children, I always think I feel much too young for all that. There is a moment when I realized that I have reached an age, where my life could be different. I still find it hard to identify with all that.
The final main theme of the film is thus summed up, as we are invited to observe the protagonists’ search, understanding and presentation of their own identities, carved out of the seemingly endless possibilities available to them. All three women are then shown in front of mirrors in their apartments, trying on different hats and accessories – an intimate glimpse at their self-fashioning in an intimate space – as the opening title is displayed.

Möller retains the (self-)reflective portrayal by employing the observational documentary technique throughout the film, allowing the women to present themselves and their stories without the intrusions of the interviewer or an overarching voice-over narration, as for example in Marco Wilms’s Comrade Couture (2009). From the opening sequence, we are invited to join the film-maker and the protagonists on a quest of self-discovery. The film and the process of its making are part of a journey, and the film’s observational style and aesthetics highlight the explorational nature of the endeavour. As Katha Pollitt noted in her foreword to Carolyn G. Heilbrun’s Writing a Woman’s Life (1988),

Storylessness, after all, has been women’s big problem. The erotic narrative to which they have been confined by literature and common cultural understanding ideally leads to the altar and ends soon after with a house and babies and, theoretically, bland contentment. This story not only fails to fill a lifetime, it puts the plotline in the hands of others, the men who do or do not admire, love, offer marriage, and make full female adulthood possible. For women who step outside this narrative, ‘the price is high, the anxiety is intense, because there is no script to follow, no story portraying how one is to act, let alone any alternative stories’ [Heilbrun 2008 (1988): 39]. What women need, Heilbrun realizes, is to reframe their lives as quest plots – narratives framed around ambition and achievement, which is how man’s lives are organized. Questing is what makes a woman a heroine of her own life. (Pollitt 2008 [1988]: xvi)

In the film, Möller captures precisely this endeavour of questing and constructing ‘alternative stories’ and one’s own life independently and creatively, even when it differs greatly from the paths laid out by our mothers and previous generations. Möller provides both a space and a medium for self-examination and self-expression for the mothers and the daughters, and thus expands and reframes the female experience beyond the ‘erotic narra-
tive' towards a more creative, ambitious and heroic narrative of self-discovery and self-actualization. While we can witness the heroism and courage of the daughters’ daily struggles, the film unfortunately does not place as much focus on the mothers’ struggles to overcome their confinement within the patriarchal order of ‘erotic narratives’ and ‘storylessness’. We only get small glimpses into the creative lives of some of the mothers. Their primary function in the film is constructed to provide a visible contrast to the lives of the daughters, which may be interpreted as a narrative device, rather than an oversight. Furthermore, while Möller includes a Muslim protagonist, the film does not address issues of other cultural or racial minorities: underprivileged women, young mothers, single mothers, queer women or women without educational opportunities. All three protagonists enjoy certain privileges, freedoms and education that German society provides to its middle-class, socially integrated, German-speaking citizens. Moreover, the film does not offer any political or historical context about the sociopolitical reality of German women today. The film purposefully retains focus on personal experiences, but it also leaves us with many unanswered questions about women’s greater social issues, such as wage parity, reproductive rights, parental benefits, gender and sexual violence, political representation, poverty and homelessness, etc. The film-maker emphasizes the micro-level and personal representation of three young women and their quests for self-actualization. While Möller’s film is not overtly political and feminist, as Sander’s film for example, it does, nonetheless, invite us to contemplate many feminist issues.

In the next sequence the three protagonists are presented in their neighbourhoods and places of work. Claudia is the chief editor of the Leipzig city magazine Kreuzer, and is shown in her office working on the magazine layout. Later, she is presented in her Leipzig apartment, talking about her career as a journalist, the need for financial security and eventually wanting to have a family. We see Mona at a Middle Eastern grocery store in Berlin, speaking Arabic with the vendor about growing up in the West Bank. She works at a translation agency as a project manager, and tells us what it is like to be a Muslim from Palestine living in Berlin. Career-wise, she feels that she is not yet fulfilled and continues to search for what she wants, while making a living. Later in the film she explains,

We want to have as many open doors as possible. That’s good, but it can also make you feel trapped. You feel tied down and...
benefits of having a supportive partner, wife and homemaker that is enjoyed by men. The glimpses into the protagonists’ professional lives are important in setting the context before introducing their mothers, all of whom have worked, but only some of whom achieved economic self-sufficiency independently of their husbands.

Claudia drives to visit her parents in Gera and tells us that her mother works as an accountant in the company she created with her husband who is an architect, but gave up working in her own field as an engineer after she had children. At her parents’ house the two women are shown cooking together in their big kitchen, where her mother, Sabine Euen, explains, ‘We graduated from school, we studied, learned a profession, and then we started a family. That’s how it was in our days. But you guys don’t want that.’ Claudia replies, ‘But mom, we are not that different. I have a normal job and my routine. I simply don’t have children yet. Today that happens later. But that’s not a problem.’ Her mother responds, ‘No it’s not, but you guys can’t decide.’ Claudia’s father comes into the kitchen to open a bottle of wine and to make a comment about efficiency and not wasting time in life. Claudia seems to disagree with his insistence on efficiency as the primary motivation in life. In the short glimpse that we get into Claudia’s family, we see a traditional division of gender roles and expectations, as well as some impatience on her parents’ part about her ‘indecisiveness’ or her being ‘unsettled’. In general, society places little real value on the process of self-discovery and searching for one’s path in life, especially when it is done by women, whose time is considered better spent on having a family and making a living to support it. The segment concludes with Claudia showing us an old barn she used to play and hide in as a child – a solitary place of refuge that she now revisits in the wintery landscape.

In her work on mother–daughter relations and female subjectivity, Alison Stone emphasizes the ‘disempowerment of mothers and representatives of the maternal position’ within social relations, because they ‘exert such emotional power within early mother–child relations that children tend to react in fear and hostility against maternal and female power, and hence come to support and maintain patriarchy’ (Stone 2011: 169). Within the patriarchal order, Stone notes,

subjects should break away from their dependency on their mothers, and achieve autonomy and separateness by committing psychical ‘matricide’, as Kristeva puts it. This ideal privileges the (traditionally) male subject position. Female subjects can-
not break from their mothers as sons can, because daughters must continue to identify with their mothers to assume a female identity, as they are expected to do. Measured against the matricidal ideal, female subjects remain immured in dependency on their mothers as sons do not. Correspondingly, too, female subjects remain embroiled in a lifelong and irresolvable struggle for autonomy, ever preoccupied with conflict with and reliance upon their mothers, whereas sons move on. Even some feminist theorists subscribe to this model, seeing mother–daughter relations as the crucible of female subordination, as making women unduly dependent on their mothers (and on others in turn) and unable to steer the course of their own lives. (Stone 2011: 169–70)

The protagonists in Möller’s film, however, are shown in friendly interactions with their mothers, and fully independent. They meet, as friends do, to have dinner or coffee together and talk about meaningful personal issues in their lives. When we meet Marie-Sarah’s mother, Patricia Conrad, the two women are shown shopping together at the weekly outdoor market at Maybachufer in Kreuzkölln and speaking French. Over coffee in Marie-Sarah’s kitchen, her mother remarks, ‘Having so much freedom and these enormous materialistic choices makes it difficult for you guys to come to a decision, without the fear of missing out on something.’ Marie-Sarah adds, ‘It’s the panic that once you decide, you have to stick to it till the end of your life.’ Her mother explains,

I don’t know that fear. In the past, when I did something, I was happy and content. I never thought I was missing anything. I simply lived what I did. I thought my time was wonderful. I don’t want to be 30 nowadays. With all the opportunities, and you are fed with so much information. It can drive you to despair.

Marie-Sarah responds,

In your time, you simply lived your lives, dealing with what was there. Perhaps there were some existential things from war times. Since the possibilities were limited that meant you took the offers that were available and you felt satisfied. Today you are surrounded by so many options. You really have to pick out what’s yours. And I see it as a great chance to say: OK, we have so many possibilities, we can be in New York in six hours, we can buy things online, make movies with very little money – we can do everything we want. So, what do I want?

Here we get to the main theme of the film that also contributed to the film’s title – the paradox of seemingly endless choices and freedoms, and the restless searching that accompanies it. The mothers claim that they had no time to think about whether they were happy and what made them happy when they were younger. They were busy raising kids, getting their degrees, working, and providing for their husbands and families. That is a different existence from that of their daughters. Originally, Möller filmed an interview with her own mother, Lisa Möller, who made an important observation about the choices available to the younger generation. This footage is still included in the film’s trailer, and inspired Möller’s decision to interview the other protagonists’ mothers as well (personal communication).² Filmed in her painting studio, her mother notes, ‘The world is so open, and the richness you have in your lives is something no other generation has experienced before. I find that enviable!’ This emphasis on the seeming abundance of choices that the previous generation simply did not have comes through in all the discussions between the mothers and daughters. Yet, even though the mothers have a clear admiration of their daughters’ courage, ambition, creativity, persistence and resilience, there is, nonetheless, a gap in the value systems between the different generations. What the daughters have in common is a very strong emphasis on women’s self-actualization against all odds and above other priorities and others’ needs – which is still almost incomprehensible to the mothers’ generation. This sums up the essential challenge of the contemporary feminist struggle, and what bell hooks termed the ‘de-colonialization’ of our minds and imaginations (hooks 1994: 5), and our collective thinking, in which it is still considered acceptable to socially and economically subordinate women (hooks 2000: 2) to the needs, priorities and personal quests of others.
The final encounter is between Mona and her mother, Helena Azevedo da Rocha, whose Portuguese parents came to Germany as Gastarbeiter (foreign workers) when she was little, and who married a Palestinian. As the two women prepare dinner together in Mona’s kitchen, her mother explains,

When I was 20 or 21, I met my husband in Heidelberg. A Palestinian who had just received his Ph.D. Later he was informed that a university should be founded in Nablus, Palestine. He was asked to help establish the university. Everything was still in the early stages there. At first I didn’t know any Arabic, and for me that was really hard. I remember sitting in the kitchen and crying because I felt so exploited. The people didn’t really want to help me. They came to visit my mother in law. I was only expected to rush around and do house work. There was no sympathy or understanding for the women. I was only there to function, to serve, to cook and clean. That was all. When I was unhappy and said I can’t stand this any longer, and that I want to leave, my husband told me straight out: you can go, but the children stay. That is the Islamic law.

The exploitation and disrespect her mother experienced in her patriarchal marriage influenced Mona’s own view of relationships. Mona explains that she is currently in a type of long-distance relationship with a man who travels all the time, and that it suits her because she enjoys having her own space. The segment concludes as the two women discuss relationships and independence, and the idea of living separately from their partners like Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. By contrast, we find out that Claudia is looking for a new apartment to move in with her boyfriend. Later she is shown installing a kitchen sink with the help of her boyfriend, and giving us a tour of their new apartment. Both Claudia and her boyfriend express how nice it is to come home at the end of a work day and find someone there, and are shown cooking together. All the protagonists have a clear, honest, demystified view on relationships and what they want in life. Having learned from the experiences of the mothers’ generation, the greatest challenge for women now is finding fulfilling and loving relationships with non-patriarchal men; to avoid patriarchal marriages; and to foster feminist, equal gender roles and partnerships.

Along with career choices, paths of self-discovery and life’s challenges, relationships are the other main concern of the film’s protagonists, and in fact, all these concerns are interconnected and often reach boiling point when women are in their thirties. In Writing a Woman’s Life, Heilbrun articulated just how recent the critical awareness about the female experience has been, explaining that ‘only in the last third of the twentieth century have women broken through to a realization of the narratives that have been controlling their lives’ (2008 [1988]: 60). By having a platform to express their needs, desires and visions for their lives, the three parallel narratives allow us to observe the protagonists overcome their challenges, fears and problems and become the women they are. Mona reveals that after her operation to remove an ovarian tumor, she began to think about her life and relationships in a different way:
I’ve been thinking about relationships and I realized I’m dealing with them completely differently because of my background. I grew up with a different tradition and culture. So my ideas and expectations were different. When I was 18 or 19 and arrived in Germany I still thought I could meet a traditional Muslim, get engaged, get married to the perfect husband. Living the ideal of a happy life. It took me some time before I realized that this is neither the life I desire nor is it good for me. I want to liberate myself and follow a different path.

Möller captured her protagonists in that critical transition between having come to an awareness of wanting a different life and narrative for themselves than the one traditionally prescribed, and searching for ways to construct and actualize it, which brings with it new kinds of challenges and the confusion that Virginia Woolf described in witnessing this quest. In one of the iconic scenes of the film, Marie-Sarah is shown standing at the edge of Lake Wannsee in Potsdam – a symbolic image of someone solitary, but not necessarily lonely, that many women can identify with. The image reminds us of Caspar David Friedrich’s painting Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (1818) – traditionally, both literal and metaphorical wanderers and adventurers have always been represented as male, and Möller deliberately breaks with this tradition. She chose this image as the film poster, the DVD cover and for the film’s homepage. We then observe Marie-Sarah in the woods, reciting a monologue in fluent English from her performance at a theatre in New York:

You never asked me anything. You never bought me anything. All that mattered was you becoming a great pianist and so that you could become a great pianist I had to wash dishes and scrub floors. But it’s over. I support myself now. I live the way I like. If something amuses me, I laugh without worrying whether you think it’s funny, or start to sob as soon as we get home. You never know, my darling, how uncomplicated life can be – without you.

Her monologue speaks to the universal disappointment of all women, of all generations, who find themselves in patriarchal relationships, where their needs and desires are subordinated, under-valued and disrespected. But unlike the mothers’ generation, the daughters have learned to recognize this injustice earlier in life, demanding equality and respect, and not settling for unequal partnerships. Yet, often the price for that liberation is solitude, if not loneliness, another patriarchal injustice that men seldom experience within the patriarchal order, considering how many women are still willing to compromise their own lives for the sake of being in a relationship. Marie-Sarah adds,
Of course there are times when I feel lonely because I’m not constantly out socializing. So my life is a bit solitary but I don’t necessarily feel lonely. As before, I concentrate on dancing and acting. If my career works out, then I’ll be more ready for a relationship, I think. If I follow my own path a bit more and therefore feel more complete, then I wouldn’t need my value to come from someone else. I want to develop this self-esteem on my own first.

This insight into the nature of self-esteem and not needing to depend on anyone else for the recognition of one’s own value corresponds to bell hooks’s idea that women ‘could never be liberated if we did not develop healthy self-esteem and self-love’ (hooks 2000: 31). By focusing first on her career – and thus her personal and creative quest of self-discovery and self-actualization – she reframes the traditional, restrictive narrative of searching for fulfilment only in relationships. Möller juxtaposes Marie-Sarah’s choices for herself with those her mother had made at that age. Patricia Conrad explains,

With 30 I became a mother, I wasn’t happy with my marriage, but I felt beautiful outside and inside. My spirit was very much alive. I wanted to be married because I was fed up with being alone or moving from one boyfriend to the next. I wanted to get married to a father figure. That was important to me. I wanted protection and to feel secure. In earlier days we were dependent on a man’s wage. Nowadays you stand on your own two feet, earning your money yourself. That’s something quite different. You guys are emancipated. You have a career. But you often have commitment issues. This was easier in my days. If we had a problem, we solved it by discussing it. Nowadays when there are problems, these young couples just separate and live alone or try to find a new partner.

From her testimony, it becomes apparent that women’s needs and desires have not changed all that much from one generation to the next. Everyone wants relationships that provide secure attachment and support. But what has changed is the willingness of the daughters’ generation to remain in unfulfilling or unequal relationships. As bell hooks suggests, in order to foster fulfilling relationships and marriages, we need to collectively construct a vision of masculinity where self-esteem and self-love of one’s unique being form the basis of identity. Cultures of domination at-
‘Cultures of domination attack self-esteem, replacing it with a notion that we derive our sense of being from domination over another.’

Constructing a more universal vision of feminist masculinity is essential, yet very few examples of it exist in mainstream media. The film does not provide more clues about the nature of Claudia’s relationship with her boyfriend; we only see their initial excitement as they embark on a life together. In the next scenes, while Claudia and her boyfriend are painting the spare room to convert it into a baby-room/office, and inform us that Claudia is pregnant, Marie-Sarah is looking for an apartment in Munich, where she got a consulting job, and is shown packing. In the film trailer, Marie-Sarah asks, standing by the lake: ‘If you don’t fit in job-wise or relationship-wise, and you don’t really live up to any of the definitions society provides, then you will eventually ask yourself, who...’
am I then? What is left?’ These questions are at the core of the contemporary feminist quest.

In the final segments of the film, Mona is reassured that she is healthy and cancer-free, and is excited to embark on the rest of her life. Claudia had a baby-girl and is shown breastfeeding her in her living room. She explains the challenges of integrating motherhood into her life,

I think babies are made so cute so that you get through this process. You can’t imagine it beforehand. You have a vague idea what it will be like, and when the baby is born everything is much more intense. To become a human being is really hard work. First you are squished in the belly, then you are born and nothing is ready, everything hurts, you don’t understand anything. It takes years before you become independent, and then, you’re 30, and you are still not able to pay your rent. That really sucks.

Just as with careers and independent lifestyles, the film-maker and the protagonist present a realistic view of motherhood, rather than a romanticized, polished version of it. Just as everything else in life, motherhood is hard work with great challenges, inequalities and insecurities. By presenting Claudia alone, nursing her daughter, we are again reminded of the traditional division of gender roles, where women are expected to be primary care-givers and men earn the living. As Alison Stone emphasizes, to this day it remains very largely women and not men who are the principal child-carers. In the majority of families mothers retain the primary responsibility for children, and paid child-carers remain almost entirely female. Mothers may now participate more fully in paid work outside the home, but in most households family care has not become equally shared between women and men. [...] Mothers are increasingly expected to devote themselves exclusively to their children, at a time when fewer mothers are in a position to fulfill this expectation. (Stone 2014: 298)

In this scene, with Claudia and her baby, we see ‘the daughters’ become ‘the mothers’ themselves, and as Claudia points out, it often happens even before achieving economic self-sufficiency or completing the journey of self-actualization. After observing Claudia in a generational opposition with her own parents, we now see her as a mother herself. This dualistic role of daughter-mother is particularly important because, as Stone points out, ‘our cultural tradition casts unified, individual self-hood in opposition to the realm of maternal bodily relations’, and thus renders ‘being a subject and a mother [as] problematic’, because ‘to be a subject one must not only have or live through experience, one must also author the meaning of that experience, and one must exercise some autonomy in doing so’ (Stone 2014: 297). In short, the patriarchal interpretation of subjectivity, individuality or self-actualization is in opposition with taking on a maternal role. Claudia’s empathy with and care of her child, and her self-ironizing comment about not feeling economically self-sufficient, demonstrate that she has very much retained her subjectivity and authors meaning from her experience. She has thus integrated parenthood into her personal quest. The film ends as Marie-Sarah drives off to Munich in her car with only two small suitcases. We leave the protagonists embarking on various new adventures in their lives, with an open ending – just as it should be, since their quest narratives do not end and cannot be neatly summed up nor concluded. They simply continue on their individual paths.

Originally, the film was conceptualized with the title Restless (Rastlos), yet in the process of filming,
Möller discovered that it was more than just restlessness that characterized the daughters’ generation and their personal narratives and quests. Möller explained her decision to change the title as follows,

In the end, the old title seemed no longer fitting for the film. In a way, it limited the theme and did not expand it. It was about so much more than just being restless. The title is the result of a long journey with this narrative. It was the initial idea; then came the long journey, and in the end it was back to the original idea. (personal communication, my translation)

Möller began making her film when she was 28, and it took her five years to film it, fund it, edit it and market it. The result is an independent film that touches on several cultural nerves. Möller specializes in observation documentaries that provide special insight into the subject’s personal experiences and perspectives. The reception of *Everything We Want* at film festivals and screenings worldwide has been overwhelmingly positive. Möller described many people coming up to her after the screening in different parts of the world and thanking her for her film, which depicts experiences that they very much identify with (personal communication).

She discovered that many men are able to identify with the portrayed struggles of the female protagonists too. What started out as a project to document a female experience, turned out, especially in the reception of the film, not to be limited to women, which demonstrates that the patriarchal distinctions between genders are no longer useful nor accurate. One of the main values of feminist observational film-making is the ability to universalize the female experience and to demonstrate that the personal is indeed political. As Judith Mayne noted in her 1982 review of Helke Sander’s *The All-Around Reduced Personality*,

‘Patriarchal masculinity teaches men that their sense of self and identity, their reason for being, resides in their capacity to dominate others.’

Feminist theorists have always stressed that the division of life between the realms of private and public existence is a false dichotomy. Traditionally and historically, women’s sphere has been the private, the realm of family, home, and personal relations. And men’s sphere has been the public sphere of official work and production. But women have always worked, and men have always had a private sphere, and ‘private’ and ‘public’ are the ideological divisions
Below Film-maker Beatrice Möller.

which mask profound links. Once we understand that the private and public spheres are not so easily separated, there remains a difference in how the relations of the two realms are perceived. (Mayne 1982: 160)

With her film, Möller demonstrated that the struggles women face today are not merely the problem of indecisiveness or restlessness among an abundance of choices, it is an existential struggle for self-determination, and as such is not merely restricted to women. Neither is it an individualistic struggle because so many people identify with it, and it is not restricted to gender, class or race, and therefore includes a political struggle for human rights, justice, equality and respect. While it is still rare to see an all-female documentary film that deals with real concerns of women today, issues such as financial instability, constant job searches, constantly moving around in an attempt to establish a career and to find oneself, and establishing one’s sense of self apart from one’s family of origin, are universal, and allow wide audiences to identify with the questions the film raises, and to examine their own personal quests more critically. This critical consciousness-raising project is in line with feminist politics. While the film and its protagonists do not explicitly state their relationship to feminist ideology, politics or the women’s movement in Germany, they are presented as independent and self-actualizing women who perhaps take women’s equality for granted, as many post-feminists do. Nonetheless, the film does foster greater awareness and discourse related to global feminism. While women’s experiences are pluralistic, and it is important to be mindful of essentialism when we attempt to represent women’s experiences, it may be helpful to interpret Möller’s representations of her protagonists within a ‘genealogy’ that entails a specific historical context. As Alison Stone explains,

women always acquire femininity by appropriating and reworking existing cultural interpretations of femininity, so that all women become situated within a history of overlapping chains of interpretation. Because all women are located within this complex history, they are identifiable as belonging to a determinate social group, despite sharing no common understanding or experience of femininity. The idea that women have a genealogy thus reconciles anti-essentialism with feminist politics. (Stone 2004: 135)

By situating the protagonists within the genealogies of their families, Möller allows us to observe, experience and identify with the three women’s attempt to construct their own lives and the difficulties they face along the way.
What lies on the other side of the shadow of the sword, i.e. on the other side of the patriarchal order, is a profoundly creative experience. It is creative in all senses of the word; it does not exist by default – it has to be created into being by each individual for herself, and as such, fosters creativity. Thus, feminism is a creative experience. As bell hooks explains, ‘Feminists are made, not born. One does not become an advocate of feminist politics simply by having the privilege of having been born female. Like all political positions one becomes a believer in feminist politics through choice and action’ (hooks 2000: 7). Woolf demonstrated this with her life’s work, while Möller and her protagonists seem to understand this intuitively, and reflect on it with the choices they make in their daily lives. Creativity entails a myriad of other essential human experiences – courage, vulnerability, failures, triumphs, uncertainty, hope, passion, connection and identity construction. As bell hooks notes,

Most people in our society do not have a basic understanding of feminism; they cannot acquire that understanding from a wealth of diverse material […] because this material does not exist. We must create it if we are to rebuild a feminist movement that is truly for everyone. (hooks 2000: 112)

Reframing feminism as a creative and heroic quest may allow more people to identify their own place within feminism and allow for more equality in relationships, careers and parenthood. Möller’s exploration in her film inspires us to embark on our own quests, to discover and to achieve everything we want.

Contributor’s details

References


Endnotes

1. As Lisa Katzman (1984) noted, the phrase ‘All-Around Reduced Personality’ provides a western twist on the ‘all-around realized socialist personality’ promoted by the East Berlin radio station that Edda listens to.
2. Beatrice Möller, e-mail to the author, 22 December 2014.


5. Born in 1979 in Düsseldorf and raised in Pretoria, South Africa, Möller completed her first documentary film entitled Omulaule Means Black (Omulaule heißt Schwarz) in 2003, followed by Shalom Salam in 2006, and Shosholoza Express in 2010, which documented a train ride through South Africa and the different experiences and narratives of apartheid of the people on the train.
