

Seeing the Body in Karen Duve's *This Is Not a Love Song*

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Abstract

Karen Duve's novel This Is Not a Love Song is named after a song by Public Image Ltd whose lead singer was Johnny Rotten. It develops intertextual elements related to canonical literature as well as popular culture. The final scene in the novel where Anne and Peter stare at each other in Peter's home is based on a scene from Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774). Duve's novel describes this literary scene in connection with the 1996 UEFA European Football Championship in which the English footballer Gareth Southgate famously missed a penalty¹. This is an example of the way in which the novel is constructed of a mosaic of high and low cultural citations². The aim of this literary structure is to overcome a gendered dichotomy. This literary approach shows the influence of Leslie A. Fiedler's essay Cross the Border—Close the Gap³ (1972), which had a big impact on contemporary literature of the 21st century in Germany. The present study analyzes Karen Duve's novel, focusing on the aspect of considering gender gaps from post-feminist critical discussions of "bodies and seeing." It should be asked how the image of Anne's body is created and in which ways female subjectivity is established in the novel. In this context, it should be especially pointed out that Duve's novel describes this condition from a humorous literary perspective, in contrast to Goethe's Werther that has a tragic ending. The humorous aspect of Duve's novel is of particular importance to this study.

Introduction

Karen Duve is a well-known, contemporary German writer born in 1961 in Hamburg. She was initially known as a leader of the literary group of young German female authors called "Fräuleinwunder" in the late 20th and early 21st century. The name of this literary group is a reference to the German supermodel Susanne Erichsen who was active after World War 2 in Berlin and New York⁴. The other prominent members of this literary group were Julia Franck, Judith Hermann, Mariana Leky, Alexa Hennig von Lange, Zoë Jenny, Juli Zeh, Ricarda Junge and Silvia Szymanski.

This is Not a Love Song is Karen Duve's second novel, published in 2002. It became a bestseller in Germany, where it was on *Der Spiegel's* bestseller list and has been translated into fourteen languages.

The protagonist of the novel is 30-year-old Anne Strelau. She recalls her school days, fumbling through adolescence, spending time with her friends. Although she reminisces about their times together, her thoughts tend to turn to her old lover Peter Hemstedt, who is now working in London. In the novel, there are several themes that influence the characterization of the protagonist, such as friends, family, school, social surroundings, and psychotherapy. This study mainly discusses aspects of the relationship between Anne and Peter. The structure of the novel is built around Anne's trip to London to visit Peter, which runs in parallel with her obsession about her weight and physical shape. On the flight, she recalls her school time with Peter and obsesses about her "ideal" weight. During the stay in London, however, she begins to accept the fact that she is overweight and affirms her subjectivity.

Anne is conditioned to believe that a woman's appeal lies in her shape and weight. This conditioning is represented in the novel's cover published by Goldmann Verlag in Munich⁵. It depicts four images of a woman in a bikini who has a different body shape at each of four different weights: 49 kg, 56 kg, 82.5 kg, and 108 kg. The thinnest at 49 kg and the most overweight at 108 kg show the woman with a straight faced, serious expression, whereas in the images at 56 kg and 82.5 kg she is smiling. The woman at 82.5 kg holds a telephone receiver that may symbolize her confidence and willingness to communicate—an "ideal" body weight is that which promotes a feeling of self-confidence. The four different pictures show us how the image of a woman's body is created when she is "looked at," as discussed in John Berger's book on aesthetics, *Ways of Seeing*⁶.

The Created Body Image

Berger writes that “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.”⁷ “Every image embodies a way of seeing”⁸ and has an impact on how people perceive appearance. An enduring image of a person may be derived from their past appearance; however, that may no longer be the way they look now, “something that was absent”⁹ is still there in the images and “all images are man-made.”¹⁰

To understand how the two genders, construct their self-image, it is important to consider how they perceive themselves. According to Berger, a man’s social presence, whether great or small, is based on the promise of his embodied power in society¹¹. A man creates his promise of power and social presence by himself. A woman, on the other hand, must continually see herself as how she thinks others perceive her and is “almost continually accompanied by her own image”¹² because she is constantly under pressure in the social space. Therefore, a woman’s image is created by men, as men look at her and she watches herself being looked at.¹³

Duve’s protagonist lives in a modern and trendy world. From the beginning of the novel, the modernity of the society is emphasized: “All the people I knew bought watches with digital displays and swapped their flares for tight jeans or tapered pants.” (LS, 1) Anne thinks that other women have many friends and good careers so they must enjoy their lives. However, there is no description of Anne’s occupation itself, let alone her career. She struggles with her image, as she recalls her lonely adolescence and thinks about the upcoming romantic reunion with her old lover Peter.

It wasn’t so bad being alone. Being alone was okay in itself. I just didn’t want anyone to know how lonely I was, so I made out I was busy all the time. While the others were still chatting before the next lesson began, I was doing homework from the last one reading a book. (LS, 42)

Anne is a sensitive and bookish person. The novel makes a connection between the serious philosophical and bookish side of Anne and the superficiality of dieting culture. Chocolate consumption is the totem by which the novel frequently references Anne’s weight as well as the state of her health. The following quote shows one of the ways in which Duve establishes humor. The juxtaposition of “books” and “sweets” creates a humorous effect, as the reader’s thinking deviates from the norms of association.¹⁴

A steady intake of chocolate and wine gums helped to carry me away into oblivion. Just reading wasn’t enough. I felt the same about the sweets as about the books—quantity mattered more than quality. [...] I often thought I ought to give up chocolate and eat nothing at all. I wasn’t really fat, not fat enough to be teased for it. (LS, 46)

Her body image is the central concern for Anne when she is in her adolescence. She is one of the tallest girls in her school class at 180 centimeters: “... I was taller than all the other girls in my class anyway, and only four of the boys outstripped me.” (LS, 76) Her height does not align with her image of what a woman should look like, and she imagines that somehow, she will be able to shrink by eight centimeters and then her real life will begin. Her weight is also a concern as she compares herself with an idealized girlfriend of Peter who is “handsome, athletic, successful.” (LS, 237).

My weight had increased along with my height. It now swung between sixty-five and sixty-eight kilos. If I could manage not to eat or drink for several days running, I weighed sixty-four kilos, but I just couldn’t get below the magic sixty kilo mark. Fifty-nine, or even better fifty-seven kilos would have been my ideal weight. Every morning I got on the scales, every morning I was too fat. Sometimes I weighed myself in the afternoon or evening too. Then I was really too fat. And too tall as well. (LS, 80)

Anne sees herself in relation to Peter as “a fat woman without any self-confidence” (LS, 237), while making Peter a subjective observer of her body. In this regard, Anne’s struggle to develop as an individual ought to be recognized.

Women painted in the tradition of the European Masters, as well as modern images such as the examples in Berger’s book (such as Bronzino, Ingres, and Manet), are created for the male gaze. Men

are the spectator-owners of these images of the displayed, female body, and women are the objects of men's sexuality. In this gender structure of spectator-owner and object, "the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight."¹⁵ The spectator-owner holds the power.

Anne believes that the reason for her unhappiness lies in her appearance. Therefore, the idealized visibility of her body, and not her personality, becomes her main concern: "I so much want to go to him and touch him, but the weight of my body keeps me where I am, heavy as lead. That body is the reason for everything I never did. I lean against the wall." (LS, 238) This male-female power dynamic is turned over at the end of the novel when Anne acts for herself and decides to accept her subjective self-image. The ending scene is based on Goethe's epistolary novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in which the protagonist recognizes the romantic relationship ends tragically.¹⁶ Goethe's Werther commits suicide at the end of the novel as he realizes that he is not able to marry Lotte because she is already engaged to Albert. As compared to Werther, Anne acknowledges that she cannot hold onto a love that is not based on reciprocity, and she leaves Peter's apartment. Anne's activity embodies a feminist thought.

Literary Humor as A Strategy of Closing the Gap

Whereas Werther meets a tragic end by committing suicide¹⁷, Duve's novel describes the difficulties of women's development within society. Although this issue is multifarious, Anne resolves to choose the path of accepting her subjectivity. The strength of Anne's decision is expressed with comical sentences. As Henri Bergson writes, laughter is possible when the comic is connected with humans: "The first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*."¹⁸ In addition, the human cannot laugh when the person who is the object of the humor evokes sentimental feelings in us. Hence, it is "the *absence of feeling* which usually accompanies laughter".¹⁹

*I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity. [...] To produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple.*²⁰

Anne is focused on making her image appropriate for the romantic partnership with Peter. However, these situations are described from a distanced perspective so that her acts bring the reader to laughter. Anne comments on how the sentimentality of Goethe's Werther causes him to interpret every situation he experiences through the lens of his "feelings.

But Goethe isn't criticizing society. Goethe thinks he's wonderful, that's his problem. His Werther is always being moved by himself and the intensity of his feelings and the nobility of his actions, getting on well with children, talking kindly and naturally to people beneath his own station in life. [...] Honestly, Werther—what a priggish, conceited idiot! But all the same, when he started on about his love and his unhappiness I felt as if I were looking into my own heart. It's so clear and true and sad. I know exactly Goethe means. (LS, 138-139)

Even if Anne's relationship to Peter ends in failure, the scenes are narrated in a comical way, especially in respect of her diet and body. The repeated mentions of "chocolate" are a significant example of the way Duve establishes the comic aspects of the novel. The repetition of a word creates a comic effect: "It makes us laugh only because it symbolizes a special play of moral elements, this play itself being the symbol of an altogether material diversion."²¹ The liveliness of Anne's character is based not only on the obsession with her body image, but also on the pleasure of eating chocolate. Chocolate is personified at the climax of the novel and is given a human expression. When Anne visits her psychotherapy workshops, chocolate begins to symbolize her moral principles.

If I put my mind to it I can consume five chocolate bars and follow them up with a sixth, and then I can eat a bag of crisps and a packet of biscuits, and finish it off with four cheese sandwiches. After that second workshop I gave up not just therapy but any attempt to diet. I've reached a point where I don't believe in anything and anyone except a chocolate bar. It's like an intoxication, you're falling and you can't stop, and naturally I get fatter and fatter. (LS, 229)

Although the existence of Peter plays a significant role in this novel, Anne's feelings towards him are not narrated intensively. Moreover, her story is constructed through the principles of humor.

Conclusion

This study has discussed the idea of body image from the perspective of the novel's protagonist, Anne Strelau. A woman's image is not created by herself but by the male spectator, according to Berger, as seen in everything from art historical paintings all the way through to modern advertising. Anne subordinates her own perceived image of her body when she sees how Peter views her. This novel describes the difficulty of a woman's development as an individual, which the author links directly to Goethe's *Werther*. Both Werther and Anne are unlucky in love, they experience misfortune with regards to their intended partners. However, in contrast to the emotional romanticism of Goethe, Duve composed her novel from a distanced and humorous perspective. Anne's feministic strength in accepting her own subjectivity at the end of the novel is structured through the composition of the comical effects.

References

- ¹Duve, Karen. 2005. *This is Not a Love Song*. London: Bloomsbury, p. 243. According to Heike Bartel (2006), the final scene in the novel has an intertextual construction where Duve's Peter and Anne can be associated with the romantic relationship of Goethe's Werther and Lotte. The former rewrites the scene using popular culture when Anne says instead of "Klopstock", the name of the English footballer "Southgate." "Later Hemstedt gets up to put another CD on. Then he goes to the window and looks out. I prop myself on my elbows. There's a thunderous noise to one side, because the speakers are on the floor, and a sad man's voice sings, 'Don't try so hard to be different'. 'Southgate', I say. Southgate's fate doesn't have very much to do with the text of the song, but all the same Peter immediately understands what I mean." (p. 243) Gareth Southgate is mentioned in the book because the events take place during the 1996 European Football Championship, and the game is on the television while Peter and Anne talk. Southgate is known as a great footballer, however, he missed his penalty during the penalty shoot-out between England vs. Germany at the 1996 UEFA European Football Championship. This dramatic shoot-out, in which England lost, symbolizes Southgate's failure. When Anne says the name "Southgate", Peter understands that their relationship cannot be sustained. "Southgate doesn't shoot as he had intended. Southgate shoots left. Left is a mistake. [...] Southgate feels nothing. Southgate feels nothing yet. Only now is the despair slowly seeping into him, he mechanically mutters something, presumably something like 'Shit', and he realizes that he is the unluckiest man in the whole world and even his own mother will shun him." (pp. 234-235) The citations from this novel are subsequently marked as "LS."
- ²Bartel, Heike. 2006. "Von Jonny Rotten bis Werther: Karen Duves Dies ist kein Liebeslied zwischen Popliteratur und Bildungsroman," in: Bartel, Heike/ Boa, Elizabeth. *Pushing at Boundaries: Approaches to Contemporary German Woman Writers from Karen Duve to Jenny Erpenbeck*, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, p. 89.
- ³Fiedler, Leslie A. 1972. *Cross the Border—Close the Gap*, New York: Stein and Day.
- ⁴Erichsen, Susanne/ Hansen, Dorothee. 2003. *Ein Nerz und eine Krone. Die Lebenserinnerungen des deutschen Fräuleinwunders*, Munich: Econ.
- ⁵Duve, Karen. 2004. *Dies ist kein Liebeslied*. Munich: Goldmann, 8. Aufl.
- ⁶Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*, London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books.
- ⁷Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 7.
- ⁸Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 10.
- ⁹Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 10.
- ¹⁰Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 9.
- ¹¹Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 45.
- ¹²Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 46.
- ¹³Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 47.
- ¹⁴Bergson, Henri. 2005. *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. New York: Dover Publications, p. 10.
- ¹⁵Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 47.
- ¹⁶Bartel, "Von Jonny Rotten bis Werther: Karen Duves Dies ist kein Liebeslied zwischen Popliteratur und Bildungsroman", pp. 91-92.
- ¹⁷The cosmos and the meaning of committing suicide is considered philosophically by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), who represents his thoughts on this theme in parallel with Goethe. Schopenhauer, Arthur. 2015. "On Suicide", in: Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 276-280.
- ¹⁸Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, p. 2.
- ¹⁹Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, p. 2.
- ²⁰Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, pp. 2-3.
- ²¹Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, p. 36.