

TOP GIRL or La déformation professionnelle

Part two of Tatjana Turanskyj's trilogy on women and work

Julia Hummer plays lead for the character of Helena/Jacky, with RP Kahl as David

Synopsis

This second part of Tatjana Turanskyj's trilogy on women and work is concerned with prostitution as a profession and contemporary service industry. Julia Hummer plays 29 year-old Helena, mother of 11 year-old Xenia (JoJo Pohl), herself the daughter of an intrusive and over-anxious mother (Susanne Bredehöft) and TV soap opera actress. Helena hates dependencies of any sort. While her official work primarily consists of futile castings and being kept on hold, her real acting skills are much on demand with her sideline: To maintain her desired standard of living Helena has set herself up as self-employed sex worker Jacky, working from a shared bordello flat and as an escort. It's where the real drama takes place, whose scenarios are determined by herself. Catwoman and cracking whips. The brothel as a stage. Two of her loyal clients, David (RP Kahl) and Freddy (Simon Will), help her in her endeavour, and rather than leaving, the protagonist eventually rises to unexpected heights. Turanskyj's analysis of the commodification of women's bodies climaxes in a hunt performance served as a new sexual taunt, which Helena, now the agency boss, has devised for particularly deserving work colleagues.

Content

This second part of the trilogy investigates sex work as a contemporary service industry with particular view to the complete commodification of the human body in the 21st century. The film tells the story of 29 year-old Helena, who gradually transforms herself into sex worker Jacky. Not earning enough as a professional actress, she opens up a sideline in prostitution. Here, she is in charge of directing and design. What began as an escape from the daily grind soon becomes routine. Male fantasy and her clients' confessionals are in stark contrast with the sex worker's common sensical approach. Her relation to her clients is quite removed from her own pleasure or desire.

Furthermore. the subject of prostitution in TOP GIRL serves to investigate mother-daughter relationships beyond their idealised version in glossy magazines. Whilst Helena's working life is banal (waiting for clients, cleaning sex aids, waiting for acting jobs etc.), her private life is one problem zone of balancing the demands made by her own daughter as well as by her intrusive mother Lotte. The unease between Lotte and Helena hinges principally around how to bring up young Xenia, and diverging concepts about the goals in life between two different generations of women. The film demonstrates how role models are passed on, and how other models of female self-fulfilment are generated. What appears like a radical departure in a successor generation often simply conceals deeply rooted similarities.

For Lotte, Helena represents the betrayal of an (apparent) confident sexual liberation, of the women's movement, a betrayal of emancipation. At the same time she engages in a weird sort of competition with her daughter. Lotte, too, has her secrets, and is trying to re-invent her own sex life. Where Lotte defends her progressive, emancipatory stance rooted in nineteen-seventies west German society, her daughter Helena pursues individualism garnished with post feminist and neo-liberal elements. Helena perfectly embodies the image of contemporary modern woman as expounded by today's media: flexible, consumerist, perfect looking, with a high-income. These images combine freedom, sex and consumption and sell them as emancipation with the promise of social participation. Deep down Helena is aware of needing to free herself from her mother, but she is unable to do so for emotional as well as pragmatic (child minding) reasons.

TOP GIRL is a foray into the complex body and gender politics of the 21st century, into female self-optimising strategies, sexuality, functional universes and modern service industries. Turanskyj has a plastic surgeon character (Nina Kronjäger) explain our brave new world, and mingle the achievements of women's lib with scientific medical progress in vicious post-feminist rhetoric. Physical self-enhancement as a liberating experience.

Tatjana Turanskyj reveals the structural violence inherent in sex work without resorting to the "usual" images, clichés and demonstrations of violent physical abuse. And the film ends in a performance art-like hunt scene, a new sexual taunt of Helena's own invention.

Background

Ask women today, aged between 25 and 35, if they think a new women's movement is needed to achieve economic and political equality, and you will be met by look of incredulity. The very question seems outmoded. Can't you see how liberated we are? Free to choose your sex partner, consumption, and a reasonably interesting job. They embody how the ideal of the liberated woman today exists within an asymmetric gender hierarchy, which the former further consolidates. TOP GIRL, a narrative essay or an essayist fiction film represents an attempt to deal with this contradiction and simultaneously cast a contemporary glance into the controversial field of prostitution. Accepting the commodification of the body, and of sexuality as a market service is part of that system.

Social scientist Silvia Kontos remarkably concludes: "Elevating the exchange of sex for money to the status of a normal contractual engagement also equips (German) women's sexuality with the status of a freely negotiable market subject, merely selling just another service. Just as neo-liberal labour market policy strives to eradicate differentiation between male and female work forces, inequality and power in gender relations are deliberately shifted out of focus or reduced to market forces. This reduction is repeatedly used to declare liberation and emancipation as fully achieved. An indication of this new-found inner peace can be found in the sexual arrangements amongst genders, which now includes unrestricted dealings in sexual services." (in: *Öffnung der Sperrbezirke*; p.347)

Interview with the Director Tatjana Turanskyj

by Birgit Kohler, part of the selection committee of Berlinale Forum, January 2014

*After Eine flexible Frau, **Top Girl oder la déformation professionnelle** is the second part of your 'Frauen und Arbeit' trilogy. It, too, consists of moments captured from a contemporary, fractured female occupational biography, this time in the field of sex work or prostitution. What interested you about this scene?*

After the 'flexible woman', I wanted to continue working on the topic of precarious, flexible female work. Devoting the second part of the trilogy to prostitution/sex work seemed to suggest itself. When I began work on the film four years ago, prostitution was not a current topic, but for several months now, prostitution has been debated in the press and on talk shows. One can sign appeals for or against sex work; the positions seem incompatible. The con faction says prostitution is always abuse. The pro faction, to which the sex workers belong, don't want to be branded victims, but rather, and rightly, respected. I'm curious to see how my film fits into the current discussion.

My central question was not whether sex work can be a profession, but what its contradictions are. I consciously chose the character of an actress with little success who works in relative self-determination as a German sex worker; in this way, I could depict ambivalences, fantasies and economies of the body with the greatest possible dramatic fall. Along with this psychological profile, I also wanted to keep in mind that today many sex workers are self-employed, networked and self-confident, but that despite this emancipation the men in the background – apartment owners and bordello managers – earn the lion's share in this growing economic sector. The Ergo insurance company scandal, in which the agents celebrated their success with sex workers in Budapest and marked them with a stamp on their lower arms, showed once more the degree to which prostitution is normality as long as it is negotiated and remains among men. I wanted to investigate this implicitness in my film, as well. On the other hand, de-romanticising and de-stigmatising the 'whore' was important to me. I wanted to show a perfectly normal woman, with a private life, everyday worries and love life problems. I was also interested in the inexorable acceptance of the commodification of female sexuality and the body.

*In **Top Girl oder la déformation professionnelle**, images of the body are central, visually as well as discursively. Many bodies can be seen, naked, costumed and more or less primed up. And people speak about bodies. So it's about staging bodies, the economies of bodies and the discourse of the body. What significance does this focus on the body have for you?*

The view of the body is undergoing fundamental change: one can manipulate, alter, dope or operate on the body – everything is possible. Society's imperative to optimise oneself is carried out in particular on the body. Corporeality as we know it will disappear. And the older body doesn't appear in pictures at all anymore. In this context, it's important to me to show how Lotte, Helena's mother, shaves her pubic hair; she has her own sexuality. Beyond that, I asked myself how to deal with the naked body in a way that doesn't immediately serve every cliché (SEX!). That's why the sex workers in the bordello have normal, everyday clothing or cardigans on. So: dressed sex workers and naked men – not only because one seldom sees that depicted; I also showed the johns naked to display their vulnerability and neediness. But that shouldn't distract the viewer from the fact that they don't deal with Helena especially respectfully. It's different with the naked girls at the end of the film: the war against women, as it is waged all around the world, is perverted here into a game and pastime.

An important scene in the context of the body is a businesswoman's lecture on age and cosmetic surgery in relation to the emancipation resulting from the women's movement. Can we say that your post-feminist film undertakes a revision of feminism and the women's movement against the backdrop of the discourse on the body?

The lecture is a promotional event that works with an obnoxious rhetoric: the plastic surgeon uses the achievements of the women's movement and the keyword self-empowerment, historicising them and interlocking them with medical progress. She thereby comes to the perfidious equation that everything that can be done also should be done, if it serves a woman's individual freedom. I wanted to depict this post-feminist rhetoric in particular. The cosmetic surgeon is the sister of the self-determined sex worker. Both are representatives of an affirmative service culture in which the commodification of the body, of fantasy and of sex is completely accepted and even becomes a fetish. Whether it's sex, a new girlish pussy, new breasts, young ovaries, surrogate motherhood, sperm, a girl from Romania to care for the house/children/old people – everything is possible and okay because it can be purchased, voluntarily of course. This 'anything goes' is the surrogate for an emancipatory idea: it is a pseudo-emancipation that supports the existing gender hierarchy, which no longer oppresses women ('old school'), but continues to exclude them structurally.

Your film and its analysis of the commodified character of the female body culminate in a hunting scene: men hunt down and slay naked women in a forest. It is a new sexual service Helena has thought up that a boss can award the men as a bonus. What is the background of this scene?

That hunting scene was my inspiration for this film in the first place. Twenty years ago, I read Alain Robbe-Grillet's book *Angélique ou L'enchantement*, a kind of fictional autobiography. One anecdote in it is the recollection of a hunt for girls. Such hunts were apparently staged by former First World War soldiers, including Germans, in Uruguay. These men bought 'virgins' from the natives and then hunted them to death. In the middle ages, too, such hunts were common, if hidden practices; the song 'Ein Jäger aus Kurpfalz', which the hunters in *Top Girl oder la déformation professionnelle* sing, is about them, among other things. So the hunting sequence is definitely seriously meant, even if it is a 'game' within the rules of prostitution. For me, this hunt is the image of the structural violence that I see as inherent in prostitution, although I don't thereby use the usual images, clichés and depictions of violence or beatings. I wanted to find different pictures and translations and an unambiguous stance – after all the ambivalence surrounding the film. Which is to say that the individual prostitution relationship is not per se without pleasure or violent, but prostitution always reflects the asymmetrical, thoroughly sexist relations between the sexes – very directly and without mediation. The women in this game are two things: on the one hand, they appear on the screen as part of the performance and game that Helena has thought up. That means they 'seduce' within the game; they do their job. But in the end they are all shot down and for the men they were nothing more than objects, 'sluts'.

Helena invented this 'game'. She thereby achieves career advancement and becomes a boss. How do you view her 'promotion'?

Helena's career advancement in the field of sex work is central to me for the film. She takes on the role of the outsider women; she is a sex worker who has managed to use the profession of prostitution for herself. The price of her advancement is affirmation and the betrayal of her sex. I thereby want to pose the question of whether prostitution

can break open the existing gender hierarchy – in the sense of a different, freer approach to sexuality – or whether prostitution doesn't rather reinforce the existing situation and bolster sexism. Self-determined sex work is reserved for a very few women. To generalise: is individual emancipation possible at all without society changing the existing relationship between the sexes? Everyone has to answer this question herself or himself.

The brief moments from the life of the sex worker Helena are interlocked with her fairly tense relationship with her mother Lotte and Lotte's story. In what way is this mother-daughter relationship important to you?

Beyond Helena's special profession, ***Top Girl oder la déformation professionnelle*** is also about a typical mother-daughter relationship in our time. I want to use the conflicted relationship between Lotte and Helena to show how roles are passed on from generation to generation and how models of female self-realisation develop. The seeming emancipation of the generation following the parents usually conceals in its sometimes-radical opposition only deeply rooted similarities. And Lotte and Helena embody two different feminisms: while Lotte experienced her conscious socialisation in the 1970s in the old, still-divided West Germany and advocates a corresponding 'progressive-emancipated' stance, her daughter Helena adheres to a post-feminist individualism garnished with bits of neoliberalism. Lotte sees Helena as the epitome of betrayal of a – seemingly – consciously enlightened sexuality, of the women's movement and of emancipation. At the same time, she is in a peculiar competition with her daughter. And she is not free of our current age's idea of perfection and its obsession with optimising the body.

Basically, it's about three generations of women, because Helena's 11-year-old daughter Xenia also plays a role. What were your thoughts about this constellation?

Xenia is very important for the film. After all, I wanted to de-romanticise and de-stigmatise the 'whore'. And part of that is simply that she has a child, because statistically that's true of the majority of sex workers in Germany. Beyond that, Xenia has a dramaturgic function in the film. Helena depends on her mother as babysitter. I wanted a plausible reason why Helena is dependent on her mother. Helena's whole life was to consist of various situations of emotional and economic dependency: it is tied down between her customer Freddy, who pays her rent, her mother, her daughter and her own will to be free.

*Like the first part of your trilogy, ***Top Girl oder la déformation professionnelle*** also works with anti-illusionistic appearances and performance scenes: Helena's daughter recites Heine's poem 'Die Welt ist so schön' and the sex workers in the bordello recite quotations directly into the camera. What was the idea?*

In *Eine flexible Frau*, the performative aspects were already in the script. With ***Top Girl oder la déformation professionnelle***, the process was different. Here the script with its story had been worked out to the last details. But at the rehearsals I realised that the 'story' did not suffice to do justice to the complexity of the theme and that I need something other than a 'story' to express my thoughts. Luckily, before we shot the film, it occurred to me to place the sex workers on a kind of stage, to turn the bordello into a stage, a projection screen. I became aware that I don't want to assert that this is a 'bordello' and these are 'whores'. Rather, I wanted to play through the experimental

setup of a self-determined sex work/prostitution, the contradictions it involves and the price that Helena, too, pays for it all. You could call this a strategy of avoiding clichés, but I definitely wanted my 'story' to arrive on a different level. That's why I had the sex workers speak these sometimes-cryptic lines. They aim at the viewer as a potential customer, they convey or play with peculiar knowledge and they are also a commentary on Helena's situation.

Top Girl oder la déformation professionnelle can be placed in a long line of films concerned with prostitution, starting with Godard's *Vivre sa vie* from 1962. What references were important to you while working on this film?

Top Girl oder la déformation professionnelle was inspired by these prostitution films that have to do with perfectly normal women: Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre sa vie*, Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielmann, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1018 Bruxelles* and Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls*. I wanted to elaborate the aspect that Helena is a perfectly normal woman who lives in a precarious situation and at the same time struggles for independence. In this context, I read many, many scholarly books, essays and volumes of interviews on various feminist theses and theories. I also spoke with former sex workers and a social worker and attended a range of events on the topic. But the most important sources of inspiration for this film are the visual artist, writer and theatre man Einar Schleaf and the American writer Kathy Acker. Her book *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream* was my bible.

CAST (in order of appearance)

Helena/Jacky – Julia Hummer
Freddy, Putzhund und Wohnungsbesitzer – Simon Will
David, Versicherungsvertreter – RP Kahl
Louise, Sexarbeiterin – Ilil Land-Boss
Maria, Sexarbeiterin – Samia Dauenhauer
Eva, Sexarbeiterin – Janina Rudenska
Heiner, Freier – Niels Bormann
Lotte – Susanne Bredehöft
Xenia – Jojo Pohl
Castingchefin – Franziska Dick
Castingassistentin – Andina Weiler
Suse, Bordellchefin – Mira Partecke
John, Gesangsschüler – Thorsten Heidel
Hansi, Bordellchef – Mario Pokatzky
Stefan, Freier – Florian Feigl
Anja, Staubsaugerverkäuferin – Ludmila Skripkina
Dr. Nina Schreiber, eine Schönheitschirurgin – Nina Kronjäger
Holly, eine Aussteigerin – Anna Eger
Lorely, Sexarbeiterin – Susanne Strach
Jenny, Sexarbeiterin – Ayse Gül Var
Nadja, Sexarbeiterin – Sarah Grether
Boss der Versicherungsvertreter und Jäger – Stefan Mehren
Billy Bully, sein Assistent – Karim Cherif
Wolf – Daniel Krauss
Rolf – Sven Seeger

DIRECTOR

Tatjana Turanskyj

PRODUCERS

Jan Ahlrichs, Tatjana Turanskyj

CUT

Stephanie Kloss, Ricarda Zinke

LIGHT

Nicolai Mehring

COSTUMES

Ingken Benesch

MAKE UP

Liu Pei Min head of Elaine ø Dècor

Daniela Blaschke

Sabrina Höhne (ZUSATZ)

MUSIC

Niels Lorenz

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