

Part 2 and conclusion of the overview of the portrayal of the dental profession in German feature films

Dentists in German motion pictures



Fig. 4: Stadtgespräch ("Talk of the Town", 1995), still image. Originally a TV production (ZDF). Directed by Rainer Kaufmann, with August Zirner as a dentist. © Buena Vista International. Courtesy of Herbert Klemens, Filmbild Fundus.

West and East Germany (1964–1989)

In the mid-1960s, cinema and dentistry were moving in different directions. Dentistry broke new ground with technical innovations such as turbines (about 1965), laser instruments (after 1970) and surgical microscopes (after 1975) [Strübig, 1979]. The film industry had to cope with an increasing number of theatre closures. TV, while not the only culprit, played a major role in this development on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The two Ger-

man states employed different strategies to support the film industry [Faulstich, 2005; Müller, 2016].

Nevertheless, the incidence of dentist characters in films – about one per year – remained unchanged in this quarter-century period. But especially West German cinema experienced a serious decline in respectability for the dentist characters depicted. Dentists were almost always featured in B pictures, soft porn and nonsense thrillers – dentists as slapstick figures incarnate. A welcome relief

| No. | Title | Year | Director |
|------|---|------|----------------------|
| 4-1 | Und sowas muss um acht ins Bett ("In Bed By Eight") | 1964 | Werner Jacobs |
| 4-2 | Alfons Zitterbacke (DEFA) ("Alfons Zitterbacke"; DEFA) | 1966 | Konrad Petzold |
| 4-3 | Kinderarzt Dr. Fröhlich ("Dr Fröhlich, Paediatrician") | 1971 | Kurt Nachmann |
| 4-4 | Wenn die prallen Möpfe hüpfen ("When plump boobs bounce") | 1973 | Ernst Hofbauer |
| 4-5 | Eva und Adam (DEFA) ("Eve and Adam"; DEFA) | 1973 | Horst E. Brandt |
| 4-6 | Nelken in Aspik (DEFA) ("Carnations in Jelly"; DEFA) | 1976 | Günter Reisch |
| 4-7 | Der kleine Zauberer (DEFA) ("The Little Magician"; DEFA)† | 1977 | Erwin Stranka |
| 4-8 | Einer muß die Leiche sein (DEFA) ("Someone Has to Be the Body"; DEFA) | 1978 | Iris Gusner |
| 4-9 | Deutschland bleiche Mutter ("Germany Pale Mother")† | 1979 | Helma Sanders-Brahms |
| 4-10 | Nicki* (DEFA) ("Nicki"; DEFA)*† | 1979 | Günther Scholz |
| 4-11 | Aber Doktor (DEFA) ("Well, Well, Doctor"; DEFA) | 1980 | Oldrich Lipský |
| 4-12 | Der Keiler von Keilsberg (DEFA) ("The Boar of Keilsberg"; DEFA) | 1980 | Peter Hill |
| 4-13 | Die Pinups und ein heißer Typ ("The Pinups and a Hot Guy") | 1981 | Yoel Silberg |
| 4-14 | Gemischter Salat – French Dressing (verschollen) ("Mixed Salad – French Dressing"; film has been lost) | 1981 | Erwin Kneihsl |
| 4-15 | Frevel (verschollen) ("Mischief"; film has been lost)† | 1981 | Peter Fleischmann |
| 4-16 | Die Olympiasiegerin ("The Olympic-Winning Lady")† | 1983 | Herbert Achternbusch |
| 4-17 | Super ("Super") | 1983 | Adolf Winkelmann |
| 4-18 | Die lieben Luder (DEFA) ("Dear Sluts"; DEFA) | 1983 | Helmut Krätzig |

Table 4: Feature films with dentist motif (1964–1989).

DEFA = Deutsche Film AG, East Germany
 * Featured dentist is a woman
 † Film appears to actually have shown in English under this title [translator's note]

from this depressing state of affairs was the West German drama film *Deutschland bleiche Mutter* ("Germany Pale Mother", 1980) by Helma Sanders-Brahms; the film title alludes to a poem of the same name by Bertolt Brecht with the famous line "What have your sons done to you?" This retrospective recounts the tragic love story of Lene and Hans, who married and had a child shortly before the start of World War II. By the time Hans finally returns from captivity, self-confident Lene is no longer the "little wifey" he thought he left. But Lene cannot win the ensuing relationship struggle and "loses her face", cinematically expressed by the appearance of facial paresis. To prevent the

progression of the supposedly odontogenic paralysis, all her teeth are expertly removed in infiltration anaesthesia in a depressingly protracted scene. Scholars of film history interpret the female lead as an allegory of a Germany violated by the Nazi era and the war [Sanders-Brahms, 1981]. The tooth extraction scene represents the frightening climax of an emancipation drama – a documentary image of the time, personifying an strong-willed woman symbolically silenced by mutilating her dentition, with the (male) dentist acting as a vicarious agent of a patriarchal society.

The role of the dentist found an interesting niche in East German cinema. No fewer than three chil-

| No. | Title | Year | Director |
|------|---|------|-----------------------|
| 5-1 | Der Streit um des Esels Schatten (DEFA) ("The Dispute About the Donkey's Shadow"; DEFA)† | 1990 | Walter Beck |
| 5-2 | Schramm ("Schramm: Into the Mind of a Serial Killer")† | 1993 | Jörg Buttgereit |
| 5-3 | Stadtgespräch ("Talk of the Town") | 1995 | Rainer Kaufmann |
| 5-4 | Die Apothekerin ("The Pharmacist")† | 1997 | Rainer Kaufmann |
| 5-5 | Zurück auf Los* ("Return to Go")† | 2000 | Pierre Sanoussi-Bliss |
| 5-6 | Suck my Dick* ("Suck my Dick")*† | 2001 | Oskar Roehler |
| 5-7 | Mutti – der Film* ("MoM – The Movie")* | 2002 | Klaus Purkart et al. |
| 5-8 | Halbe Treppe ("Grill Point")† | 2002 | Andreas Dresen |
| 5-9 | Frau fährt, Mann schläft* ("Woman Driving, Man Sleeping")*† | 2004 | Rudolf Thome |
| 5-10 | Mädchen Mädchen 2 – Loft oder Liebe ("Girls on Top 2")*† | 2004 | Peter Gersina |
| 5-11 | Glück auf halber Treppe ("Halfway Landing Happiness") | 2005 | Thomas Jacob |
| 5-12 | Check it out (verschollen) ("Check It Out"; film has been lost) | 2005 | Michael Stelzer |

Table 5: Feature films with dentist motif (1990–2005).

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dren's films presented a dentist character, and an even female dentist appears in Nicki ("Nicki", 1979) [Schenk, 1994].

Quite a few films from this period are still accessible films, but their overall characterisation can be brief. Any dentists shown almost always play only a supporting part, designed mainly to entertain the audience. The dentist character is generally marginalised, and it is hardly possible to make any general statements about the film's authenticity, implicated character types, or dramaturgical functions. Strikingly, whereas more than 20 per cent of real-world dentists in West Germany and more than 50 per cent in East Germany were female at the time [Groß, 2019], the female dentist in Nicki remains the only representative of its gender.

Germany after reunification (1990–2005)

After the pivotal fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), screen heroes increasingly appeared on digital media rather than on celluloid. Like all of East Germany, the country's only film company, DEFA, had become history. Film theatres adapted to growing

competition from VHS tapes, DVD discs and other electronic media by presenting new architectural ventures and globalised offerings [Trümper, 2006]. At the same time, the digital transformation made for radical changes within the practice of dentistry [Davidowitz/Kotick, 2011]. Basic research became paramount, while patients' needs, the range of dental specialties, and the overall economic framework also changed significantly.

But dentist parts continued to be sidelined in social satires, family tragedies, thrillers, and even a horror film (Table 5). However, a new level of realism had set in to replace earlier aberrations (Fig. 4), and the cliché of the (supposedly) wealthy dentist began to crumble. The "quota" of close to one dentist character per year remained constant as the female share increased somewhat. Out of thirteen relevant productions one featured a female dental student and four featured a female dentist, with Hannelore Elsner, Ulrike Folkerts and Doris Dörrie (Fig. 5) among the most prominent actors. These female dentists were shown as urban, professional and empathetic and almost invariably worked with an assistant – just like their male colleagues, who were mostly cast in supporting roles. Tooth extrac-

tion also experienced a cinematic renaissance, now under perfect hygienic and anaesthetic conditions. In a world of hepatitis B and AIDS infections [Hardie, 1983; Modarresi-Tehrani, 2000], face masks, gloves and protective eyewear had become as much a standard part of the dental attire in films as the back-closure gown had once been. Directors now actively sought to document for audiences the dental standards that had been achieved. However, both male and female screen characters had long been overshadowed by their television competitors. More than twenty dentists were depicted in TV films and series of the same period [Petzke, 2009].

The 21st century (2006–2018)

The new millennium offered cinema dentists less and less room on the big screen (Table 6).

This is partly due to the continuing popularity of their TV counterparts. But the previously stable theatrical “quota” of one dentist character per year dropped significantly (4 in 15 years). There were also gender fluctuations; while the first five years still featured an astonishingly high proportion of female dentists (5 out of 8) (Fig. 6), their male colleagues again dominated the cinematic scene again in the following years (3 out of 4), although the only film depicting a female dentist at least showed her in the lead role.

The majority of more recent productions belonged to the drama genre; the rest had a mostly humorous tone. The dental profession itself was rarely the focus of dramatic entanglements. Only in *Was bleibt* (“What Remains”, 2012) did the financial venture of opening a dental practice fuel the overarching conflict. In the other four recent productions, dentists’ activities were characteristically stigma-



Fig. 5: Zurück auf Los! (“Return to Go”, 2000), still image. ö Filmproduktion GmbH in cooperation with ZDF. Directed by Pierre Sanoussi-Bliss, with Doris Dörrie as a dentist. © Pro-Fun. Courtesy of Herbert Klemens, Filmbild Fundus.

| No. | Title | Year | Director |
|-----|--|------|--------------------------------------|
| 6-1 | Was bleibt* ("What Remains")* | 2012 | Hans-Christian Schmid |
| 6-2 | Lügen und andere Wahrheiten ("Lies and Other Truths") | 2014 | Vanessa Jopp |
| 6-3 | Schneeflöckchen ("Snow Flake")† | 2017 | Adolfo J. Kolmerer, William James |
| 6-4 | So viel Zeit ("Comeback")† | 2018 | Philipp Kadelbach |

Table 6: Feature films with dentist motif (2006–2018).

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tised – as a rather oppressive daily routine, part of a mundane life better left behind, or the essence of a petrified life to break away from. In *Lügen und andere Wahrheiten* ("Lies and Other Truths", 2014), dissatisfied patients torment an already stressed dentist to the point where treatment incidents occur (a slip of her drill). The dentist suffers a nervous breakdown due to her mishap and has to be calmed down by a paramedic.

Dentist in films thus did not seem to lead much of a fulfilling professional life, feeding a negative connotation; moreover, filmmakers readily and repeatedly exploited the pain and fear component associated with dental treatment for dramaturgical purposes. Unsurprisingly, it was mostly the dental drill that became an object of fear. *Schneeflöckchen* ("Snow Flake"), went so far as to show the dentist being tortured with his own instrument by two crooks who had barged into his practice. And in *So viel Zeit* ("Comeback", 2018), the dentist character even intimidates an adversary by threatening extraction: "[or else] ... I'll pull out all your teeth one at a time without anaesthesia." This intentional staging of dental treatment as a moment of fear seems to have been borrowed from the US cinema tradition [Mariño, 2017] that had hesitantly found its way into the German cinematic landscape.

Nevertheless, the fictional dentists, their treatment rooms and their instrument are still portrayed in an authentic light, with attention to detail and proper hygiene. The treatments themselves are not accorded much space. The audience sees two short sequences with caries treatments, and once a prosthetic procedure is hinted at as a crown is being adjusted. Finally, in *Schneeflöckchen* ("Snowflake", 2017) a patient sits in the waiting room with a circular lip and cheek retractor in place, in anticipation of professional tooth cleaning.

The last 15 years have once again transformed the image of dentists and dentistry on the screen. The significant decline in extant productions, in addition to competition from TV movies, is owed to the emergence of increasingly elaborate TV and streaming series. The earlier minor boom in screen dentists seems to be fading. However, given the limited number of films produced, this may be a historical blip and may well change again.

Conclusion

Across more than a century of cinema history, dentists have been and continue to be present on the screen. Famous and less famous directors devoted themselves to the character or role, represented by quite a few famous actors. Across all cinematic incarnations – including German TV productions – more than 100 of these characters were created. Both male and female dentists appeared in almost all genres, with comedies their preferred screen biotope, even though dental activities and treatments per se contain no exhilarating elements – the silent film era excepted. Screen dentists generally acted in supporting roles and were often shown in the exercise of their profession. The role of dentist has been put to versatile dramaturgical uses, and it is probably no overstatement to say that dentists play "the most important supporting role in German cinema history".

Advances in dentistry are certainly reflected in those fictional representations, if rarely without considerable delay. Throughout the period considered, conservative and surgical treatments were more or less equally prominent while prosthodontics and prophylaxis were marginalised and orthodontics and oral surgery were ignored altogether – not least because the inherent rules of the screen film prevailed over the experience of dental practice.



Fig. 6: Mädchen, Mädchen 2 – Loft oder Liebe ("Girls on Top 2", 2004), still image. Directed by Peter Gersina, with Karoline Herfurth as an aspiring dentist. © Constantin Film. Courtesy of Herbert Klemens, Filmbild Fundus.

With few exceptions, screenwriters and directors long denied female dentists a cinematic presence, whether in the Nazi era or in the postwar period, whether the West or the East, all the while their share of practising dentists has been steadily increasing in real life. Only since the mid-1990s have female film dentists become part of the norm. Motion pictures not only reflect specific aspects of reality; they also create their own reality. By virtue of their powerful images and stories, they shape the image of a professional group. All in all, the fictional treatment providers appear professional and authentic – and are still appreciated by audiences today.

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