

Between Heteronormativity and Horizontal Homosociality — Alzheimer's and Masculinity in Alternative German Cinema: *Nicht schon wieder Rudi!* (2015)

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Given the difference in the representation of constructions of hegemonic masculinity and homosociality promoted in 'mainstream cinema' on the one hand and in 'alternative cinema' on the other, this article examines how *Nicht schon wieder Rudi!* (*Oh No, Not Rudi Again!*) innovatively conceives of and intertwines masculinity, homosociality and Alzheimer's, and how the film handles the homosocial-homosexual conundrum. We suggest that films, in particular, create imaginary spaces in which a ludic, creative and experimental (re)thinking of real-life issues becomes possible. Differentiating between vertical and horizontal homosociality, this article argues that *Nicht schon wieder Rudi!* not only questions prevalent dogmas and discourses, but also produces a specific knowledge about alternative models of care and understandings of dementia and masculinity; understandings of masculinity that are less conceived of as phallic and hierarchical but as interdependent dynamic configurations, ranging from care and affection to love and desire. Although the homosocial and especially the homosexual dimension is ultimately contained and almost revoked towards the end of the film, the homosocial relationships displayed still serve to deconstruct homophobia and question or even queer heterosexual male friendships.

NICK: He's told me he loved me last night.

SARAH: He's always loved you. But now he can say it.

(01:11:45-01:11:52)

Towards the end in both, the German and the US version of Til Schweiger's comedy films *Honig im Kopf* (2014)/*Head Full of Honey* (2018), father and son are only able to voice their love when language and memory are about to fail: "Don't you remember anything anymore?" the son asks, "No, it's all gone, there is just a hole in there", the father responds (01:03:44-01:03:55, transl. SH). In tears, father and son embrace, as if dementia finally allows them to break through the carapaces of their masculinity.

In Schweiger's movies, it is a disease affecting language and memory, and the erosion of the symbolic order that—paradoxically—enables men to voice their innermost feelings of love. This depiction is also characteristic of several European comedies such as *La Finale* (2018), *Welcome to Verona* (2006) or *Vater Morgana* (2010), which focus on Alzheimer's disease and masculinity.¹ In *Vater Morgana*, to give another example, it is only towards the very end of the film, when the father disappears in a submarine to South America, that he and his son can openly express their feelings, express their love.²

Apparently, hegemonic models of masculinity—to which these protagonists still aspire—do not allow the expression of emotions, and even less so if these emotions are directed towards another man. One notable exception to this 'rule' is Oona-Devi Liebich and Ismail Sahin's niche production *Nicht schon wieder Rudi!* (2015); a comedy film in which the relation between masculinity, emotions, friendship and dementia is notably different. Here, one of the protagonists is completely at ease calling his best male friend his 'second wife',

¹ As has been the case in other works on Alzheimer's disease and dementia, we need to address two points here: On the one hand, even if Alzheimer's disease and dementia do not refer to the same illness, we follow most scholars here and use the terms interchangeably. This is because, among various forms of dementia, Alzheimer's disease is the most common form and that the lines between the set of symptoms that constitute Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia are not clear-cut as "boundaries [...] are indistinct and mixed forms often co-exist" (WHO).

² It is only then that the father openly states: "I love you, my son" ('Ich liebe Dich, mein Sohn'), to which the son replies "I love you too, Dad" ('Ich liebe Dich auch, Papa') (01:19:45-01:20:00; transl. SH).

commenting that “If I were allowed to have a second wife by my side, it would be you. Satisfied?” (01:03:30, transl. SH), and assuring him of his feelings of love and care: “I won’t leave you alone. I’ll always be by your side, you don’t need to be afraid.” (01:22:06-01:22:10; transl. SH).

Given the difference between the socially accepted and for the audience ‘palatable’ concepts of hegemonic masculinity and homosociality promoted in most mainstream films on the one hand and *Nicht schon wieder Rudi!* on the other, this article examines two guiding motives of the film: How can masculinity, homosociality and Alzheimer’s innovatively be conceived of and intertwined? And how is the homosocial-homosexual conundrum handled in Liebich and Sahin’s production? Though *Rudi*³ might not have received much attention in the public sphere, we argue that it still corresponds to an increasing trend of experimenting with portraying alternative models of care, and new and different conceptions of masculinity. The assumptions underlying our analysis are that art, and in this case film, can actively shape our concepts of reality, expose as well as delineate “ideologies, opening the web of power relations for inspection,” and constitute a space “in which shared anxieties and tensions are articulated and symbolically addressed” (Matus 7). This consideration of film as well as its link to activist movements and politics—be it of care, of age, or of gender identity—is of special importance since our analysis tries to demonstrate how film can create imaginary spaces in which ludic, creative and experimental thinking becomes possible. Such spaces offer alternatives that is, “other images, other roles, other options for men and masculinity” (Murphy 1), so that in interaction with the audience, a film comedy such as *Rudi* creates new ways of understanding, imagining and rewriting social norms of heteronormativity and hegemony.

The Power of Film and the Potential of Niche Comedy

Similarly to Raymond Ruyer (1950), we argue that due to its special, indirect and ‘artistic’ relation to reality, film, akin to literature, possesses a *mode utopique* and makes playful and experimental thought possible by creating the freedom

³ Here and in the following, the title of the film is shortened to *Rudi*.

to address and conceive of ‘lateral possibilities’ of reality. By doing so, film—and in this case *Rudi*—not only questions prevalent dogmas and discourses but potentially produces what Roland Barthes has called *savoir littéraire*. Film can thus be understood as a ‘transitional space’ that manifests the liminal and gives voice to precarious and insurgent knowledges that evade conscious perception, that we usually either deny or do not have access to, but which it is important to embrace “in the apprehension of otherness and in the demands it makes” (Attridge 131). This kind of knowledge is potentially driven by subconscious and unconscious fears and wishes (Horlacher, *Überlegungen* 208-212), such as our fear of aging, dementia, loss of self and autonomy, helplessness, and finally death.⁴ Regarding hegemonic masculinity, this would also include fears of losing one’s relational position and one’s agency, but also fear of femininity, effemination, and homosexuality.

There is a marked difference in the way mainstream cinema and niche films handle aging, masculinity and dementia as well as in the kind of knowledge created. Raquel Medina suggests that mainstream cinema “aims to reach the widest audience possible to make a profit; that is, the goal is to please as many viewers as possible, thus avoiding alienating groups of people” (34). Consequently, youth and health have become central to its ideological framework, while age and dementia are often marginalized or heavily stereotyped. Narratives of aging are, for instance, frequently made more acceptable by promoting representations of successful aging, particularly among heteronormative, white middle-class people. Hence, if the film has to cater to a wider mainstream audience, its very popularity may be a hindrance to alternative representations since cultural goods lose their “distinctive value as the number of consumers inclined and able to appropriate them grows. Popularization devalues” (Bourdieu, *Sociology* 114).

Niche productions, which cater to smaller, more specialized audiences, often offer, both narratively and aesthetically unique perspectives that go beyond traditional representations of dementia (and aging and masculinity). While mainstream films tend to take an outside view and tell their stories from the

⁴ If the “object of writing is a suppressed object, negative, interesting, which I cannot know—I will exclude it—but I cannot not know—because it insists” (Grivel 22; transl. SH).

perspective of a family member or caregiver, alternative cinema more frequently presents narratives from the perspective of individuals living with dementia. Consequently, mainstream narratives elicit sympathy for the challenges faced by those supporting the person with dementia, rather than centering on the experiences of the person living with the condition (Swinnen qtd. in Medina 35). Though *Rudi*, at times, seems to take the perspective of the carer, it just as much tells the story from the afflicted person's point of view and thus runs counter conventional narratives of dementia. The film's departure from convention is also highlighted aesthetically: *Rudi* features soft lighting, a warm and saturated color palette, and upbeat string music that permeates the entire film. Additionally, it displaces its protagonists not merely to a location outside of the city, but to spaces imbued with dream-like qualities throughout the narrative: From the small, nearly deserted village in which Klaus' rapid, momentary decline is not policed but rather accepted, to the house at the lake which is surrounded by sun-dappled woods. These not only carry a relational hybridity but serve as a backdrop against which "cultural fears [and anxieties] about the loss of [...] rationality, individuality and autonomy" can be (re)enacted (Gardenour-Walter 349). Instead of conveying "the tragedy of a dreadful disease" (Medina 35) both audio-visually, through harsh lighting, darker or colder color-palettes, or somber music, and narratively by outlining the various symptoms, deficits and burdens of the disease, *Rudi* never explicitly diagnoses Klaus and couches dementia in a style reminiscent of a feel-good movie. This helps to tell a more ambiguous story outside of the bio-medical decline narrative that is often present in both films about age and films about dementia.

Nicht schon wieder Rudi!

Nicht schon wieder Rudi! was released in 2015 and has grossed approximately 600,000€ worldwide (IMDB). Precise box office numbers are hard to come by, as neither relevant German film databases nor IMDB have recorded viewing numbers. However, there are other indicators that speak to the (financially limited) success of *Rudi* such as reviews or the fact that its directors Ismail Sahin

and Oona-Devi Liebich were nominated for the New Faces Award in 2016.

The film follows a group of four friends—Bernd (Matthias Brenner), Klaus (Oliver Marlo), Peter (Frank Auerback) and Murat (Ismail Sahin)—on a weekend trip to the countryside during which Klaus’ deteriorating Alzheimer’s affliction is revealed. Although critics praised the film for its absurdity, slapstick humor, and chamber play-like quality (Horn; Günther), emphasizing that not explicitly mentioning Alzheimer’s or dementia provided a novel and comical, though controversial approach to the disease, reviews were mixed: While the acting was regarded as largely solid, with the characters seen as likeable, some critics touched upon the conventionality of the film, noting that *Rudi* “lacks dramaturgical concentration and visual ideas” (Zeckau, transl. FR) and was, narratively and visually, “cramped [...] and too much of a feel-good movie” (cinema, transl. FR) that “beats its jokes to death” (cinema).

Klaus, the protagonist of *Rudi*, is in his late forties or early fifties and therefore relatively young when he falls sick, thereby questioning important traditional markers between the young and the old. In the beginning, Klaus is presented as forgetful but ‘functioning’. This state rapidly deteriorates after he is hit on the head during their weekend trip. Soon, he is seen wandering about, getting lost and forgetting the death of Rudi, his dog, whose name he is calling again and again.

While such a rapid decline might, in part, be attributed to Klaus being removed from his typical routine and familiar environment, it is doubtful whether this stage of the illness could have really gone unnoticed by his friends for a longer period. *Rudi* presents only a few Alzheimer’s symptoms and does not explore the later stages of the illness. Hence, Klaus may face short-term memory and (partially at least) long-term memory loss, lacks the ability to dress appropriately and tends to get lost. However, the film shies away from showing Klaus’ complete loss of memory, a symptom which may occur in later stages of the disease and is often accompanied by “changes in physical abilities, including the ability to walk, sit and, eventually, swallow” (Alzheimer’s Association), or troubles in communication. With this, the disease remains both (largely) unmentioned, and retains an almost metaphorical quality.

All the audience knows about Klaus is that he lives with his wife Christa, has a daughter, and is best friends with Bernd and Peter, two brothers who don't always see eye to eye. Together with Murat, who had an affair with Klaus' daughter and broke her heart, they form a peer group which is not free from homoerotic undertones. However, *Rudi* makes no mention of sexual behavior on the part of its protagonist Klaus, rather choosing to depict "sexuality in terms of happily married and/or sexually satisfied heterosexual couples" (Hurd-Clarke et al. 31).

From Hegemonic Masculinity to Horizontal Homosociality

According to Raewyn Connell, hegemony plays a particularly important role as a "historically mobile relation" (77) which controls the relationships not only between men and women but also among individual groups of men. Hegemonic masculinity, then, is the "form of masculinity that is culturally dominant in a given setting" and "can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 77). If we combine this concept with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', the mechanism Sahin and Liebich's film 'stages' and criticizes becomes even clearer: Bourdieu emphasizes two related aspects, that is, the competitive structure of masculinity and the homosocial character of the social spheres in which men compete with each other. Competition, here, not only separates the rivals, leading to a hierarchy—it also links the rivals and is a means of creating community. Because of these interwoven homo- and heterosocial aspects of masculinity, Bourdieu argues that masculinity itself can be understood as a relational concept which creates a community among men and is directed most of all against femininity (*Domination* 53).

At first sight and on the most general level, the society portrayed in *Rudi* is patriarchal and heteronormative. If we take a closer look, however, we see that for most of the film, masculinity is not constructed along the lines of sexual prowess or virility. Rather, the film constructs masculinity in the microcosm of

a weekend outing in relation to other men of the same age and status. At first glance, this seems to correspond to Bourdieu's and Connell's concepts, including the often concomitant concept of homosociality which traditionally "maintains hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy, acting to institutionally and interpersonally segregate men and women, and to suppress nonhegemonic masculinities" (Hammarén and Johansson 6). The problem with this common use of the concept—which refers to how men, through their relations to other men, uphold and maintain patriarchy in terms of emotional detachment, competitiveness, homophobia, and sexual objectification of women—[is that it] tends to reduce homosociality exclusively to a heteronormative, androcentric, and hierarchical term used to show how heterosexual men bond and defend their privileges and positions (Hammarén and Johansson 6).

Thus, this definition proves to be far too limited and one-sided to grasp the subtlety of the specific masculinities presented in *Rudi*. Though relational masculinities always involve hierarchies (as do all forms of hetero- and homosociality), albeit to different degrees, this is not what is foregrounded in *Rudi*. While Klaus is afflicted by dementia, he is not portrayed along the lines of healthy-unhealthy or able bodied-disabled binaries. Even if Klaus is presented in relation to other masculinities such as Murat's, a younger, somewhat hypermasculine man, and Peter's, whose non-hegemonic masculinity is emphasized both by his conflicted sexuality and his portrayal as effeminate, Klaus is first and foremost seen as a man of equal status in an all-male peer-group. The film thereby demonstrates that homosocial processes can also "contribute to the gradual deconstruction and reconstruction of gendered power structures" (Haywood et al. 57). This is particularly evident when it comes to intimacy. While homosocial relationships have often been characterized as lacking in intimacy, Chris Haywood et al. and Thomas Thurnell-Read note that there are also homosocial groups that strive for "group cohesion, togetherness, and intimacy rather than interpersonal competition and the creation of male hierarchies", thereby conceptualizing a "more sensitive and intimate masculinity" (Haywood et al. 62). To better understand these differences within homosociality, Nils Hammarén and Thomas Johansson

distinguish between traditional, i.e. hierarchical or vertical homosociality, and what they call ‘horizontal homosociality’. The latter, partly reminiscent of the way female homosociality is often conceptualized, has been likened to the concept of bromance (Hammarén and Johansson 6-7; Chen 248-249) and denotes “more inclusive relations between [...] men that are based on emotional closeness, intimacy, and a non-profitable form of friendship” (Hammarén and Johansson 5).

The Continuum Between Homosociality and Homosexuality

In the following, we will argue that in a double movement, *Rudi* deals with an entire spectrum of masculinity and homosociality, only to make clear that though there is a strong fascination with homosexuality, ultimately a queer relationship is not a possibility. Still, the topic is almost omnipresent. Bernd not only openly accuses his brother Peter of being sexually attracted to Murat, Peter is also shown in the position of a voyeur watching the naked Murat take a shower (see fig.1 and fig. 2).



Figure 1: Peter watching Murat (00:32:50) – Still from Rudi of Peter watching Murat from his room. The room is partially visible around him.



Figure 2: Murat from Peter's point of view (00:32:32) – Still from *Rudi* showing Murat showering outdoors at night under a makeshift shower. The shower is positioned next to a large tree, and a simple bamboo fence surrounds the bathing area.

Moreover, there are sequences such as on the back seat of their car when Peter very clearly enjoys Murat's bodily nearness, or later when he is happy to share a room with Murat and openly reflects on the attraction Murat holds for him. However, this is cut short by Peter stating that he loves his wife. Whether this is a true insight, the consequence of being told off by his brother Bernd, or part of the ideological subtext of the film itself is left open, but the film clearly suggests that Peter's fascination with male bodies has been latent and is not something new.

In addition to this homosexual theme of same-sex-desire which is temporarily resolved by Peter going home to his wife and Murat falling in love with Sophie (Oona Devi Liebich), *Rudi* is also characterized by a strong horizontal homosocial dimension in the sense of male friendships that are founded in emotional closeness and intimacy. In *Rudi*, this becomes evident in mostly funny scenes where friends care for one another, try to help each other, share a bed or run around in their underwear (see fig. 3).



Figure 3: Breakfast (00:47:13) – Still from *Rudi*. The group of friends, with Klaus in the center wearing a white tank top, are gathered in a rustic kitchen, enjoying breakfast.

Within this peer group, Klaus is repeatedly shown to be confused and forgetful but also aggressive and bossy. It is not made clear whether this is his normal character or a change affected by his illness. As far as his status in his peer-group is concerned, there is a certain ambivalence between loving and caring behavior on the one hand, and incompetence or pure absurdity on the other, when, in order to heal him, his friends hit him on the head twice and consider hitting him once more (to reverse the effect), but never manage to take him to a doctor. This caring ineptitude of Klaus' male friends turns masculinity itself into a laughingstock. However, with its enormous width of aspects ranging from irresponsibility and absurdity to homosexual desire, empathy and selfless love, *Rudi* is a strong, if not totally serious, testimony to male friendship:

BERND: Ich glaube du bist krank. Du vergisst alles, kannst dich an nichts mehr erinnern. Wir sollten einen Arzt aufsuchen. Verstehst du, was ich dir sagen will? Klaus, ich weiß nicht, was es ist, aber ich lass' dich nicht alleine. Ich werde immer an deiner Seite sein, du brauchst keine Angst zu haben.
(I think you're ill. You forget everything, you cannot remember anything. We should see a doctor. Do you understand what I am trying to say? Klaus, I do not know what it is, but I will not leave you alone. I will always be at your side, there is no need to

be scared.)

KLAUS: Ich hab' keine Angst, Bernd. Du hast welche.

(I am not scared, Bernd. You are)

BERND: Du hast Recht. Ich hab' ne scheiß Angst.

(You are right. This is scaring the living daylights out of me.)

(01:21:40-01:23:01)

Given this broad spectrum of homosocial and (disavowed) homosexual relations represented by the dynamic interrelation between the different masculinities or masculine subject positions, *Rudi* exemplifies Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick's hypothesis of a "potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted" (1-2). As Hammarén and Johansson argue:

The discontinuity between male homosociality and homosexuality results in male homosocial relationships being a form of "male bonding", which is characterized by homosocial desire and intimacy, as well as homosexual panic. Homosocial desire refers to men turning their attention to other men, and homosexual panic refers to the fear of this attention gliding over into homosexual desire. (2)

If Michael Flood contends that homosociality refers first and foremost to nonsexual and same-sex bonds, which often involve high degrees of homophobia (3-6), it is nevertheless "also possible to read and understand this [...] homophobia as a sign of underlying homoerotic desires" (Hammarén and Johansson 2). This is reminiscent of what Todd Reeser calls "the queerness within heterosexual masculinity" (Reeser 30) as well as of Judith Butler's hypothesis that "[g]ender itself might be understood in part as the 'acting out' of unresolved grief" (Butler 146) and that "heterosexuality naturalizes itself by insisting on the radical otherness of homosexuality" (Butler 139). From this perspective,

[h]eterosexual identity is purchased through a melancholic incorporation of the love that it disavows: the man who insists on the coherence of his heterosexuality will claim that he never loved another man and thus never lost another man. And that love, that attachment, becomes subject to a double disavowal: a never-having-loved, and a never-having-lost. This ‘never-never’ thus founds the heterosexual subject, as it were; this is an identity based on the refusal to avow an attachment and, hence, the refusal to grieve. (Butler 139-40)

From this it follows that ‘natural’ male heterosexuality would not be ‘natural’ but based on the double disavowal contained in the phrase “I never loved him and I never lost him” (Horlacher, *Masculinity Studies* 62). In *Rudi*, at least at first glance, Bernd and Murat represent traditional heteronormative and phallic concepts of masculinity. Bernd openly berates his brother Peter for feeling attracted to Murat, and Murat is presented as an archetypal seducer and womanizer. At second glance, however, it is Bernd himself who shares a bed with Klaus (see fig. 4) and translates his close relationship to Klaus in terms of heterosexual love when he tells his friend:

BERND: Wenn ich eine zweite Frau an meiner Seite haben dürfte,
dann wärst du das. Zufrieden?
(If I were allowed to have a second wife by my side, it would
be you. Satisfied?)
(01:03:30)



Figure 4: Klaus and Bernd sharing a bed (00:34:00) – Still from *Rudi*, with Klaus, on the left, sleeping next to Bernd on the right.

Even Murat, who knows that Klaus has been seeking revenge for him jilting his daughter, joins this homosocial harmony by bringing Klaus a little dog (they claim it's Rudi) and by exchanging Rudi's photo in Klaus' wallet, so that he does not realize that he is being tricked.

Though *Rudi* does not allow for a homosexual relationship between Peter and Murat, Bernd and Klaus or anyone else, the film thematicizes it repeatedly and displays a homosocial-homosexual continuum in which masculinity appears to be polyvalent and flexible. But this brief questioning of the normative hetero-homosexual divide remains a utopian perspective since ultimately, on the surface structure, i.e. the level of the plot, only heterosexual relationships are affirmed: Murat decides to stay with Sophie, who is pregnant from another man, and Klaus and Peter are returned to their wives. Moreover, whenever homosexuality threatens to become dominant, the film uses the comic and the absurd as safeguards and defenses so that the potentially homoerotic situation dissolves in laughter. What is also striking, especially in comparison to other films which focus on men afflicted with dementia, is the fact that Klaus, though he appears aggressive at times, remains completely desexualized, happily running around in his old-fashioned underwear (see fig. 5).



Figure 5: Klaus waiting for his friends (00:56:45) – Still from *Rudi*, Klaus (sitting on a ledge on the right, clad in white underwear), waits for his friends who are approaching on the left side of the image. A town and vegetation is visible in the background.

From the perspective of hegemonic masculinity and hierarchical or vertical homosociality, Klaus will remain part of his group of male friends but his position in the internal hierarchy will be weakened since at the end of the film everybody realizes that he has to be treated differently and needs medical care. At times, he almost seems like a defiant but lost child that needs to be taken by the hand. On the other hand, the film leaves no doubt that Klaus will remain a member of the peer group; a group of friends that is dominated less by competition and hierarchy than by relations characterized by affection, friendship, care and love (interspersed with erotic attraction and disavowed desire).

Conclusion

If Alzheimer's undermines "the traditional equation of masculinity with phallic prowess", it simultaneously demonstrates the need for "alternative models of being a man" (Armengol 364). This might be experienced as a challenge, but can also be seen as a unique opportunity for individuals living with Alzheimer's disease "to rethink themselves as men" (Armengol 364), or, as Richard Ward and Elizabeth Price argue: "the experience of dementia may actually generate an emancipatory space in which to explore hidden, forgotten, or quite new aspects of self and identity in ways that may not previously have

been possible” (67).⁵

However, *Rudi* is not as optimistic as that. At first, its main protagonist Klaus is shown to conform to notions of autonomy, trying to retain most of his capabilities in the face of the illness. Simultaneously, he serves as an example of how the neurodegenerative impacts of Alzheimer’s disease “constitute a direct threat to male identities underpinned by the value placed on independence and instrumental competence” (Tolhurst and Weicht 35). Some scholars note that people affected by Alzheimer’s disease often “compensate for their perceived loss of manhood by emphasizing other dimensions of that traditional role” (Coston and Kimmel 195), which could explain Klaus’s bossiness and his short temper when dealing with his close friends. It could also be read as an expression of overcompensation which ultimately covers a lack he is only subconsciously aware of. Though Klaus lives in a heterosexual relationship, he comes across as desexualized. Moreover, though he is part of a caring homosocial network of friends, his illness renders him lost and childlike towards the end of the film. Klaus does not really understand how his illness is impacting him but seems to intuit these dynamics and changes, probably also concerning his loosening grip on reality. It is this insecurity which increasingly manifests itself in his aggressiveness which, however, remains entirely verbal.

Throughout *Rudi*, heteronormative structures firmly remain in place. Klaus and Peter rejoin their wives, Murat had a relationship with Klaus’ daughter and falls in love with Sophie, and Bernd strongly admonishes his brother for secretly watching the naked Murat, and thus functions as the guardian of heteronormativity; an ambivalent guardian, though, in an ambivalent microcosm of masculinity. As we have discussed with reference to Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Reeser and Flood, in Western culture the “indistinctness that marks homosociality” is anxiety-ridden and fragile, so that “continuous boundary work” has to be undertaken in order “to uphold and defend the heterosexual order” (Hammarén and Johansson 4). Thus, Bernd’s metaphorical ‘Thou shalt not’ addressed to his brother ogling the naked Murat can be seen as the expression of this kind of boundary work by which the “underlying stream of

⁵ Parts of the following paragraph are based on Horlacher and Röber (2022).

homosocial desire” is continuously “suppress[ed] and rein[ed] in [...] in the heterosexual and normative order” (Hammarén and Johansson 4). This expression of reproof and disruption puts a halt to Peter’s same-sex-desire and ultimately proves Kosofsky-Sedgwick’s hypothesis of the “potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual” (1) as well as the danger it harbors for heteronormativity.

Ironically, this becomes even more obvious if we keep in mind that it is none other than Bernd who translates his close relationship and friendship to Klaus in terms of heterosexual love and thus serves as an example of what Toni Tholen has called a “dialogical subjectivity” in which a caring masculinity is grounded “that would have itself first and foremost in need—in dialogue, in love, in care for oneself and for others” (13, transl. SH). This plasticity and fluidity of masculinity which *Rudi* conceives of as the result of a dynamic of interacting masculine subject positions is fundamentally different from what we see in other comedies on Alzheimer’s. While Bernd is at ease calling his best male friend his ‘second wife,’ the (theoretically much closer) father-and-son pair in *Honig im Kopf/Honey in the Head* of Niko/Nick and Amandus/Amadeus, to come back to the films mentioned in the beginning, are only able to acknowledge their feelings when the last stages of Alzheimer’s have eroded the symbolic order for the Alzheimer’s patient. Thus, the horizontal homosocial network in *Rudi* is in stark contrast to the hierarchical homophobic network in *Honig im Kopf/Honey in the Head*.

Not surprisingly for comedies, Liebich and Sahin’s movie does not take the risk of inviting the audience to adopt a ‘laughing-with’ and as its consequence a ‘suffering-with position’. Though the audience is kept at a distance and never allowed to enter Klaus’ thoughts or to become part of his suffering, he does not become a laughingstock because absurdity and dark slapstick elements are not turned against the protagonist but finely balanced with care, affection and humaneness. What is more important, however, is that masculinity is less conceived of as phallic and hierarchical but as an interdependent dynamic configuration, as relational but—most importantly—as flexible, oscillating and ranging from care and affection to love and desire. This same flexibility is also

attributed to Klaus' mental state which, as has been shown, is never clearly defined; he remains different and ambiguous but is never categorized or medicalized by his friends or the film in its totality. Thus, the relational but inclusive structure characteristic of masculinity is extended towards Klaus's state of health: he is different but not explicitly othered or stigmatized, and dementia is not presented as a medical fact to be diagnosed but retains a metaphorical quality that questions all too simple binaries such as those between male/female, hetero/homo, sane/insane or symbolic/semiotic. From this perspective, *Rudi* clearly exploits some of the liberties of alternative cinema, differs from mainstream comedies, and does offer new and different ways of thinking about Alzheimer's, masculinity, same-sex friendship, and age.

However, there is also a serious double bind: It is certainly true that the homosocial relationships in the film can serve as a "starting point for deconstructing homophobia and represent a queering of heterosexual male friendship" (Hammarén and Johansson 27). But the fact that *Rudi* has the potential to dismantle compulsory heterosexuality does not mean that the film exploits its full potential. On the formal level, this might in part be due to the rather conservative genre conventions of comedy itself. On the level of content, however, the homosocial and especially the homosexual dimension is strictly contained, and Klaus's friends are clearly disqualified as caretakers. Klaus is infantilized and delivered back to his wife Christa as the only appropriate caretaker and mother substitute; a wife, who has never been visually present in the film. This solution of marginalizing femininity only to finally fall back on traditional structures of female care does not completely revoke the alternative concepts of masculinity or the non-medicalized, in a positive way ambiguous position of Alzheimer's shown in the film. What it does, however, is to close the door on serious alternatives of being different, to contain them effectively in a temporally and spatially secluded weekend heterotopia and to remain deeply rooted in the traditional family structures of heteronormative society, female care and—if we accept Klaus' childlike qualities towards the end of the film—the return to the 'mother'. Or, in Klaus's words: "Bernd, I want to go home. I want to be with Christa" (1:23:01; transl. SH).

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