

# Historicising Consent in Postwar Germany: Feminist Readings of Rape and Redemption in *Ku'damm 56*

## Historizando el consentimiento en la Alemania de posguerra: Lecturas feministas sobre violación y redención en *Ku'damm 56*

Paula Garay González  
Universidad de Oviedo  
paulapaula@uniovi.es  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3822-2808>

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### Abstract:

This article examines the depiction of rape in the German historical drama *Ku'damm 56* (2016), situating its narrative between historical fidelity and contemporary feminist critique. While the series accurately portrays postwar West Germany's culture of silence and patriarchal control, its treatment of trauma and the rapist's redemption undermines its critical potential. Drawing on scene analysis and feminist media theory in the context of post-#MeToo discourse, the article explores how the series uses aesthetic tools to convey sexual violence while failing to offer meaningful narrative accountability. The study warns against the normalisation of coercion when violence is depicted without consequence and advocates for greater ethical responsibility in screen representations of rape.

**Keywords:** Sexual violence representation, German media culture, Feminist Media Studies, #MeToo and screen narratives, postwar Germany

### Resumen:

Este artículo analiza la representación de la violación en la serie de televisión histórica alemana *Ku'damm 56* (2016), situando su narrativa entre la fidelidad histórica y la crítica feminista contemporánea. Aunque la serie recrea con acierto el contexto sociocultural de la RFA en los años 50 —marcado por el silencio, la impunidad y la dominación patriarcal—, su tratamiento del trauma y la redención del agresor compromete su potencial crítico. A través del análisis filmico y el marco teórico del post-#MeToo, se explora cómo la serie combina sensibilidad estética con ambivalencia narrativa. El estudio advierte del riesgo de normalizar la violencia cuando esta se representa sin consecuencias y plantea la necesidad de una responsabilidad ética en las narrativas audiovisuales que abordan la violencia sexual.

**Palabras clave:** : Representación de la violencia sexual; Cultura mediática alemana; Estudios feministas de los medios; #MeToo y narrativas audiovisuales; Alemania de posguerra

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ince its premiere in 2016 on German public broadcaster ZDF, *Ku'damm 56* has received significant attention for its portrayal of postwar society in 1950s West Berlin. Set around a conservative mother and her three daughters, the series follows the Schöllack family as they navigate rigid gender roles, sexual repression, and the cultural shifts of the time. Caterina Schöllack, the matriarch, runs the dance school »Galant« and expects her daughters—Helga, Monika, and Eva—to secure their future through marriage and respectability.

Yet each daughter begins to resist in her own way, with Monika in particular embracing rock 'n' roll music and challenging social conventions. Marketed as a period drama centred on women's coming-of-age in a patriarchal society, the series explores themes such as generational conflict, sexual autonomy, motherhood, and trauma. However, among these topics, the depiction of sexual violence—specifically, rape—stands out for its aesthetic sensitivity and troubling narrative implications.

This article proposes a critical reading of *Ku'damm 56* from a feminist perspective, with a particular focus on the representation of consent and the narrative redemption of the aggressor. Rather than analysing the series as a failed or successful representation of rape *per se*, I aim to interrogate the ethical and aesthetic choices surrounding this pivotal storyline, and how these choices reflect wider cultural tensions between historical fidelity and contemporary feminist critique.

Series creator Annette Hess has described *Ku'damm* as a »Cinderella story« (*Aschenbrödel*) featuring a »witch-like« mother figure, designed to immediately resonate with viewers through familiar emotional structures (Krauß 2020). This strategy—which she describes as »popular framing« (Krauß 2020: 209) aimed at empathy and recognisability—signals the show's intention to combine accessible narrative tropes with more complex social themes. However, this very framing raises questions about whether its engagement with issues like sexual violence remains subordinated to the demands of audience appeal.

Recent scholarship has also begun to engage with *Ku'damm 56* in relation to gender and violence. For instance, Störmer's work (2023) analyses how the series reproduces or challenges common rape myths.

My own approach builds upon and diverges from this line of inquiry by foregrounding the tension between trauma depiction and narrative resolution, and by highlighting how the absence of justice—legal, social, or symbolic—for the victim compromises the series' feminist potential.

This reading is situated within a broader conversation about the ethical responsibilities of historical fiction in the post-#MeToo era. By analysing *Ku'damm 56* not only as a cultural product but also as a historical narrative, I argue that the series ultimately undermines its own emancipatory promise by romanticising the rapist and silencing the consequences of sexual violence. At stake here is not only the representation of trauma, but the ability of fiction to serve—or betray—feminist modes of storytelling.

Finally, my analysis positions *Ku'damm 56* as a significant text within contemporary German cultural studies. Its intersection of postwar memory, gender politics, and media aesthetics makes it a relevant object of inquiry for feminist scholarship, especially in the field of *Germanistik*, where discussions of culpability, conformity, and resistance remain central. In parallel, the #MeToo movement has foregrounded the urgency of naming and addressing sexual violence in both public and cultural arenas. Launched in 2006 by activist Tarana Burke and propelled into global consciousness in 2017, the movement has amplified survivor voices and demanded accountability across institutions. #MeToo is not only about personal disclosure, but about fostering collective responsibility and structural change—including in how we tell stories (Murphy 2019).<sup>1</sup> Revisiting this series almost a decade after its release allows to reframe its legacy in light of ongoing feminist debates, and to ask: what kinds of narratives are possible—and necessary—when representing rape in historical drama?

## 1. Rape, Representation and Feminist Ethics

In order to critically analyse the depiction of rape in *Ku'damm 56*, it is essential to frame the discussion within the concept of rape culture and its implications in mediated representations. The term »rape culture« does not simply refer to isolated incidents of sexual violence, but to a broader social framework in which

(1) In Murphy's words: »The movement encourages women to speak up about experiences of sexual harassment and abuse, seeks to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions, and provides survivors with support. The #MeToo movement gained more traction and publicity after Harvey Weinstein was accused of sexual harassment and abuse by several actresses over several decades. The movement has inspired many survivors of harassment to give voice to their stories, often for the first time ever. Survivors are finding solidarity in sharing their experiences and, in some cases, pursuing legal action to hold harassers accountable. (2019: 63).

such acts are normalised, minimised, and even aestheticised. As Debra Ferreday argues, rape must be understood as »a complex social phenomenon that is not limited to discrete criminal acts perpetrated by a few violent individuals but is the product of gendered, raced and classed social relations that are central to patriarchal and heterosexist culture« (2015: 22).

This entrenchment of rape in cultural norms is precisely what led feminists in the 1990s and early 2000s to focus on the way media narratives construct, replicate, or challenge myths surrounding sexual violence. For Sarah Projansky, this issue lies at the heart of a »feminist paradox« that haunts much contemporary visual culture: the simultaneous need to end rape and the discursive necessity to represent it in order to critique it (2001: 19). As she writes, »all representations of rape contribute to a cultural assault on women, regardless of a text's more general ideological position« (Projansky, 2001: 94). The paradox is intensified when representations, despite their apparent critical intent, reproduce gendered scripts of punishment and reward that ultimately reaffirm patriarchal values.

Such representations often fall into recognisable narrative patterns: women who are punished for their independence, or whose vulnerability becomes a pathway to romantic or moral redemption. In many cases, narratives resolve the tension between female agency and victimhood by incorporating the woman into a »stable heterosexual family setting« (Projansky, 2001: 30), often involving the very man who assaulted her. This motif is particularly relevant to *Ku'damm 56*, where the aggressor becomes the victim's eventual partner and is narratively »cleansed« of guilt without any form of justice. Moreover, the act of representing rape is not innocent in itself. Representations of sexual violence often aesthetically amplify the very dynamics they seek to condemn. This phenomenon is not unique to rape: similar effects occur in anti-war films that rely on graphic violence, or in anti-racist media that reproduce racist imagery (Projansky, 2001: 96). The key question, then, is how—or whether—media can represent rape without reinforcing the structures it critiques.

Feminist legal theorist Catharine MacKinnon (1989) offers a sobering perspective on this difficulty. According to her, rape is not an exception to women's condition, but rather a constituent part of their social experience: »If sexuality is central to women's definition

and forced sex is central to sexuality, rape is indigenous, not exceptional, to women's social condition« (MacKinnon, 1989: 172). Under this framework, the law itself—and by extension, the narrative conventions it influences—is complicit in interpreting coercion as consent, particularly when women's resistance is coded as ambivalent, emotional, or even seductive. In her words, »resistance may be misinterpreted as enthusiastic cooperation [...] protestations of pain, a spur to more ardent lovemaking« (1989: 182). These distortions are not only legal but cultural, and media have often echoed them uncritically.

Therefore, analysing a rape scene within a historical drama such as *Ku'damm 56* requires attentiveness to both its formal aesthetic strategies and its narrative outcomes. While the series visually constructs the rape as a traumatic, violent and ethically condemnable event, it simultaneously allows the aggressor to occupy a space of emotional complexity and eventual redemption. This tension exemplifies the »feminist paradox« (Projansky 2001) at the heart of many contemporary texts: a desire to reveal and confront rape culture while unconsciously reinscribing its myths.

Ultimately, the ethics of representation demand more than sensitivity in tone or realism in detail. As Karen Boyle argues (2005), media must be accountable not only for what they depict but for the positions they invite viewers to take, the emotional alignments they build, and the ideological closures they offer. When rape is shown but not processed, named but not condemned, it risks becoming a device of narrative tension or character development, rather than a critique of systemic violence. In this regard, feminist storytelling often requires disrupting familiar narrative arcs and resisting audience expectations—especially when justice and comfort are in conflict.

## 2. Historicising Consent: 1950s Germany and *Ku'damm 56*

The representation of sexual violence in *Ku'damm 56* takes place within the fictional universe of 1950s West Germany, a time marked by social conservatism, legal ambiguity regarding gender-based violence, and a widespread culture of silence. Understanding the historical context of the series is essential to evaluate not only the realism of its depiction, but also the extent to which it engages—or fails to engage—with the ethical responsibilities of narrating rape in period

drama.

In the early postwar years, the Federal Republic of Germany was in the process of rebuilding not only its infrastructure and economy, but also its moral and social foundations. In some areas of law—particularly sexual offences—National Socialist values persisted into the 1950s. Although efforts toward liberalisation had begun under the Weimar Republic, they were interrupted by the Nazi regime and not resumed until much later (Vormbaum, 2014: 234). This emphasis on stability was closely tied to the »male breadwinner model«, in which women were primarily defined as wives and mothers, economically dependent and socially subordinate (Zippel, 2006: 129). According to sociologist Susanne Zippel, until well into the 1970s, West German law and social norms largely upheld a patriarchal understanding of female sexuality, where sexual autonomy was subordinated to male control and female chastity was idealised.<sup>2</sup> In this context, legal definitions of rape were extremely narrow, requiring prosecutors to prove the use of physical force. As Zippel observes, »merely to say no was not sufficient« (2006: 137).

One of the most striking features of *Ku'damm 56* is that the rape scene between Monika, the protagonist, and Joachim is presented with visual clarity and emotional impact, but without any legal or social consequences. The event is never publicly named as rape, nor is the aggressor confronted or held accountable in any formal way. Instead, Joachim is integrated into Monika's life as a romantic partner and eventual husband—a narrative arc that echoes the cultural norms of the time, when marriage was often considered a solution or a form of »reparation« after sexual transgression, regardless of consent.

Such narrative decisions reflect a delicate balance—or a dangerous conflation—between historical accuracy and contemporary narrative responsibility. While the series arguably strives for fidelity in representing the social norms of 1950s West Germany—including the silence surrounding sexual violence and the use of marriage as a mechanism of moral repair—it simultaneously faces the ethical challenge of presenting these realities to a present-day audience.

Historical accuracy concerns itself with the factual recreation of past conditions, ensuring that events, settings, and behaviours align with the norms and constraints of a given era. Contemporary narrative

(2) This structural disciplining of female bodies is also illustrated in *Ku'damm 56* through the subplot involving Monika's sister Eva, who witnesses the administration of electroconvulsive therapy to female patients diagnosed with »hysteria«. The attending male psychiatrist frames the treatment as »nur eine kleine Unannehmlichkeit mit einer grossen heilenden Wirkung [ein] Gerät [um die] Dämonen [zu] vertreiben« (EIS1), reinforcing a vision of femininity rooted in submission and medicalised control of their minds and bodies.

responsibility, by contrast, foregrounds the ethical implications of storytelling: how past injustices are framed, what perspectives are highlighted or obscured, and how the retelling of historical events might shape modern understandings of gender, power, and violence. In short, the former seeks to »get the facts right«, while the latter seeks to engage the past critically and responsibly, especially when dealing with trauma and structural harm.

As Temin and Dahl argue in their reflection on political memory and justice:

Thus, our concern is not with getting our narratives »right« but with exploring how different historical narratives differently constrict or enable certain political approaches to historical injustice. Changing our narratives does not resolve the problem of historical injustice, but it does allow a polity to conceive of the problem to which it addresses itself in a different way (2017: 2).

## The »feminist paradox«: the simultaneous need to end rape and the discursive necessity to represent it.

In the case of *Ku'damm 56*, the choice not to name the rape, not to provide any legal or social consequences for the aggressor, and to end the storyline with a reconciliatory romance, may align with the historical silence of the 1950s—but it also raises critical questions about the series' present-day framing. Is the audience being asked to empathise with the victim's trauma, or to forgive and rehabilitate the rapist? Does the narrative replicate patriarchal myths under the guise of period authenticity? These are questions that emerge precisely at the intersection of historical representation and contemporary ethical demands.

The series chooses to depict a historically plausible scenario—a rape that is not named as such, a victim

who internalises guilt, and a perpetrator who is gradually »redeemed«— yet it does so without offering any narrative framing that might disrupt or critically interrogate these patterns. This absence of ethical commentary is particularly problematic in light of the series' otherwise modern tone and emotional intelligence. Viewers are left to navigate this storyline without clear moral anchors, and the risk of normalising coercion as miscommunication or romantic tension is considerable.

By historicising consent—that is, by situating notions of willingness, obligation, and sexual agency within their specific cultural and legal context—we can better understand how *Ku'damm 56* mirrors, but also potentially perpetuates, the invisibility of rape in postwar Germany. At the same time, we must ask what responsibilities lie with contemporary creators when revisiting such historical silences. A faithful depiction of systemic violence is not in itself a feminist act; it is the critical framing of that depiction that determines its ethical and political significance. These tensions remind that historical fidelity and feminist critique need not be mutually exclusive but require careful mediation when constructing fictional accounts of trauma.

### 3. The Rape Scene: Aesthetic Strategies and Narrative Silence

One of the most visually and emotionally charged sequences in *Ku'damm 56* is the rape scene, which is constructed with notable aesthetic sensitivity and a deliberate avoidance of graphic sensationalism, which initially suggests a critical stance towards the violence it portrays. However, a closer examination of the scene's visual and sonic strategies reveals a complex interplay between empathy, ambiguity, and narrative silence.

The sequence is characterised by minimal dialogue, dim lighting, and a notable absence of non-diegetic music—all of which contribute to an atmosphere of emotional discomfort. It is the only scene in the episode to use near-desaturated tones, and the *mise-en-scène* reinforces the symbolic opposition between victim and perpetrator: Monika is dressed in soft pastel colours, while Joachim appears entirely in black clothing.<sup>3</sup> The visual contrast extends to movement as well: Joachim is active and forceful, Monika is physically static and emotionally paralysed.

Sound plays a critical role in framing the scene.

(3) Joachim's appearance throughout the season visually codes him as an ominous, almost spectral presence—a stark contrast to Monika's soft pastel palette. The aestheticisation of his darkness, couched with his undeniable physical allure, contributes to a dangerous romanticisation of predatory masculinity.

The only diegetic sounds are the rustling of clothing and brief moans, which are amplified in the absence of dialogue. A low, ominous non-diegetic soundtrack emerges subtly towards the end of the encounter, generating a sense of unease and emotional rupture—a musical motif that reappears when Joachim leaves the scene, reinforcing its traumatic charge. The silence that dominates the exchange is not neutral: it becomes a narrative device that enhances the horror while simultaneously muting the victim's experience.

The dialogue further intensifies the violence.

By historicising consent we can better understand how *Ku'damm 56* mirrors the invisibility of rape in postwar Germany.

When Monika resists and says, »Ich möchte das nicht« (E1S1),<sup>4</sup> Joachim answers coldly: »Keine Frau will das. Und? Alle tun es« (E1S1). These lines—coupled with visual cues such as Joachim's hand around Monika's neck and her expression of fear—leave no doubt about the non-consensual nature of the act. The subtitles reinforce this reading: *bedrohliche Klänge* (threatening sounds), *ängstvolles Schluchzen* (fearful sobbing), and *düstere Klänge* (dark sounds) accompany the assault. The return of *beschwingte Musik* (lively music) shortly afterwards highlights the disturbing narrative minimisation of the trauma.

What is particularly striking is the narrative economy of the scene. It is brief, almost abrupt, and is not followed by any direct verbal acknowledgement of what occurred. The series makes no effort to depict Monika in the immediate aftermath of the rape, nor does it offer her space to reflect or process the experience. Instead, the next scenes present Joachim in a state of emotional distress—he drinks, isolates himself, and expresses remorse. In contrast, Monika remains largely silent, and her storyline quickly shifts to other plotlines, leaving the audience with little opportunity to witness or understand the long-term

(4) Monika also repeats »Nein« several times and resists unsuccessfully, trying to escape from Joachim's grasp as he tries to strangle her.

effects of the violence.

This narrative displacement is compounded by the reactions of surrounding characters. The rape is never named as such. Monika's mother, Caterina, attributes the incident to Monika's own behaviour and moral weakness. Her response to Monika's distress is chillingly dismissive: »Monika, bitte reiß dich zusammen. Das, was dir passiert ist, ist zigtausenden Frauen passiert, man überlebt das« (E1S1). Rather than offering support, she normalises the violence by framing it as a common, survivable misfortune —a typical generational silencing mechanism rooted in postwar gender politics. The scenes that reference the event take place in closed, private spaces, with dialogue whispered or barely audible —a sonic register that mirrors shame, secrecy, and social complicity. There is no confrontation, no legal action, no support network. When Caterina attempts to seek accountability, Joachim's father terminates the discussion with bureaucratic finality: »Damit steht Aussage gegen Aussage und Ihre Anzeige ist wohl hinfällig. Einverstanden?« (E1S1). The scene frames male discourse as law, and the absence of institutional support becomes an extension of the narrative's silencing. The absence of justice —both narratively and socially— is thus doubled: first through the aggressor's redemption, and second through the community's silence. Later, Caterina whispers another form of violence disguised as pragmatism: »Wenn da was nistet [...] muss er dich heiraten« (E1S1). Marriage is framed not as justice, but as reparation —a mechanism for preserving honour, not protecting the victim.<sup>5</sup>

These aesthetic and narrative choices reveal the paradoxical stance of the series. While it visually represents rape in a way that avoids gratuitous spectacle, it also fails to provide any structural or emotional space for the victim's experience to be acknowledged or validated. The trauma is shown but not processed, and the violence is made visible but left uninterpreted. This ambivalence weakens the critical potential of the scene and contributes to the broader pattern of representational contradiction that runs through the series —a pattern encapsulated in Caterina's stark declaration: »Eigene Bedürfnisse haben Frauen nicht« (E3S1).<sup>6</sup> Shortly thereafter, Monika attempts suicide by placing heavy stones in a suitcase and walking into a lake. This desperate act of self-erasure

is visually framed in silence and stillness, underlining the psychological toll of the assault and her isolation. She is ultimately rescued by her sisters, Helga and Eva, and Fritz Assmann, a family friend, but the incident is never openly addressed —a further testament to the narrative's silencing of trauma.

#### 4. Ambiguity and Redemption: The Rise of the Rapist

One of the most ethically troubling aspects of *Ku'damm 56* is the narrative arc that grants Joachim a path to redemption after the rape. Instead of being held accountable, he is gradually reinserted into the story as a sympathetic figure —a man torn between remorse and repression. The assault is never legally addressed nor socially condemned, and the storyline progressively invites the viewer to empathise with his emotional turmoil rather than with Monika's trauma. This displacement is evident in the post-assault interrogation, where Joachim downplays the incident: »Also von Zwang kann keine Rede sein [...] Ihre Tochter hat sich mir regelrecht angeboten. Sie war zügellos« (E1S1). His denial, framed as rational and controlled, contrasts with Monika's silence and reinforces a narrative of male credibility over female victimhood.

This redemptive arc is constructed through multiple narrative mechanisms:<sup>7</sup> the displacement of guilt from the act itself to the aggressor's psychological aftermath; the normalisation of coercion via silence and euphemism; and the symbolic erasure of the victim's suffering. The series shows Joachim isolated, drinking, emotionally shattered —a classic device that externalises inner conflict and suggests vulnerability. Meanwhile, Monika's pain remains unspoken and largely invisible. As Angelika Treibel (2014) notes, public narratives of sexual violence often operate to minimise or justify the aggressor's actions, relying on sexist myths and traditional gender roles that shift responsibility to the victim.

This tendency is reinforced through the use of the romantic narrative structure, as analysed by Temin and Dahl (2017). In this structure, violence is not framed as an irredeemable rupture, but as a moment of crisis that ultimately leads to moral transcendence. The plot moves toward reconciliation and redemption, producing what the authors call a »politics of exculpation« (2017: 5), i.e. a framing that acknowledges injustice but redirects

(5) The phrase »Wenn da was nistet...« refers to the possibility of a pregnancy following the rape. Rather than seeking justice, Caterina focuses on preserving family reputation, suggesting marriage as the proper »solution« —a common societal response to sexual violence in mid-century Germany.

(6) This quote appears in episode 3 of the first season. In the sequel, *Ku'damm 59* —so titled after the family's move to a new address on the same street—the same rhetoric of female self-effacement continues, particularly in the character arc of Monika's sister Eva.

(7) There is a contradiction between the stated intention and the final result. The screenwriter claims not to aestheticize or trivialize rape: »Die Darstellung einer Vergewaltigung ist keine Bagatelle. [...] Ich sehe unsere Verantwortung darin, diese Szene so darzustellen, dass man sie weder erotisieren noch konsumieren kann« (Benutzer 2024). However, the script ultimately redeems the aggressor and silences the aftermath.

the audience's emotional investment toward closure and forward-looking unity. When applied to rape, this structure risks aestheticising violence and reinforcing existing hierarchies instead of challenging them.

The danger lies not in historical accuracy, but in the lack of contemporary narrative responsibility.

German media scholar Hedwig Wagner (2015) has described this as a fundamental dilemma: whether it is even possible to depict sexualised violence in fiction without reproducing harmful stereotypes or reinforcing patriarchal norms. If the narrative fails to provide space for reflection and critique, Wagner warns, it risks portraying such violence as a cultural »normal state«. In *Ku'damm 56*, this danger becomes palpable. By returning Joachim to Monika's life without any explicit reckoning, the series does not merely omit justice —it offers a romanticised form of atonement that bypasses accountability.

As Dominique Russell (2010) succinctly puts it: »Rape [...] has the combined forces of sex and violence, and two competing stories: depending on which wins out, the crime itself can disappear, leaving only traces of seduction and feminine misunderstanding«. In *Ku'damm 56*, that disappearance is not a narrative oversight but a structural choice —one that compromises the feminist potential of the series and reinscribes the very silence it seeks to portray.

### 5. Between Consent and Desire: Female Agency in Tension

While *Ku'damm 56* has been largely discussed in terms of repression, trauma, and silence, it also offers moments of embodied resistance. One of the most consistent visual motifs in the series is Monika's dancing. Unlike other narrative instances in which her voice is dismissed, her body in movement becomes a site of affective self-

expression and symbolic agency. As Sara Ahmed notes, »living a feminist life« often requires moving against dominant currents (2017); Monika's dancing does not offer triumphant liberation, but it signals a quiet, embodied refusal to remain still —a gesture of defiance that bypasses words and confronts constraint through rhythm.

Female agency refers to women's ability to act on their own will and make choices free from coercion or structural constraint (Gender Equality Toolbox 2025). While *Ku'damm 56* portrays a social environment hostile to such autonomy, it also presents Monika's passion for dance as a subtle form of self-determination. Her moments of greatest joy and release occur while dancing —during Helga's wedding reception, while listening to Elvis in secret, or in her solos. Particularly striking is the flashback to Monika's dancing in the rain at the *Hauswirtschaftsschule*. There, she undresses almost completely and moves barefoot in a moment of pure, sensual abandon. This scene stands in stark contrast to the control and constraint of her everyday life, suggesting a bodily autonomy that is both fleeting and transgressive. Altogether, these representations suggest a temporary suspension of societal expectations and an emergence of personal desire.

Susan Banes (1998) has examined how choreographic structures can articulate female agency on stage. In the context of *Ku'damm 56*, dance serves not only as an aesthetic expression but also as a narrative counterpoint to violence. Whereas the rape is silenced and erased, dancing insists on presence, rhythm, and movement —a way of occupying space without asking for permission. Even Monika's act of revenge, when she stabs Joachim in the cinema (E1S1), can be read as a desperate assertion of bodily autonomy: a moment of violent, yet lucid, self-assertion can be read as a desperate assertion of bodily autonomy: a moment of violent, yet lucid, self-assertion. Significantly, the act is premeditated —Monika rehearses smiling phrases before a mirror and hides the knife in her handbag (E1S1)— suggesting not emotional instability, but deliberate resistance masked by social performance.

However, this agency is never fully stable. The series continuously oscillates between depictions of consent and coercion, freedom and fear. Monika's movements are shaped not only by her own will, but also by the gaze of others —her mother, her lovers, the audience. Her dance remains within the frame of patriarchal structures, but it gestures beyond them. In this sense, *Ku'damm 56* leaves us with an unresolved tension: the dance of a

woman who cannot escape domination but still dares to improvise within its rhythm.

## Conclusion

*Ku'damm 56* presents itself —both in promotional discourse and in public reception— as a progressive, feminist revisit of Germany's post-war era. The series has been praised for »telling contemporary stories through historical settings« and for portraying »women on their path to sexual autonomy and equality« (ZDF Presseportale 2015). Yet the narrative arc explored in this article paints a more ambivalent picture.

The series does engage with the structural repression of women's sexuality in 1950s West Germany. Nevertheless, as Hedwig Wagner (2015) has noted, fictional representations of sexual violence always risk reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes if they are not accompanied by critical framing —a risk *Ku'damm 56* does not entirely avoid. The rape scene is aesthetically restrained but narratively undermined; the aggressor is not punished but redeemed; and the victim's trauma is neither named nor processed. Rather than centring the female perspective, the story shifts toward emotional reconciliation —a move that echoes what Ferreday (2015) describes as the persistent tension between challenging rape culture and reproducing its narrative structures.

The danger lies not in historical accuracy, but in the lack of contemporary narrative responsibility. When sexual violence is treated as a narrative device rather than a site of ethical engagement, the risk is not only that trauma is minimised, but also that audiences are led to sympathise with redemption over justice.<sup>8</sup> As Ferreday reminds, feminist critique must seek »new possibilities for challenging rape culture and producing new, more emancipatory feminist interventions« (2015: 23) —possibilities that are compromised when violence is aestheticised without consequence. Even if *Ku'damm 56* captures the silence and stigma of its historical moment, it misses the opportunity to disrupt them meaningfully.

This tension between affective storytelling and ethical engagement also finds an echo in the production context itself. In a 2020 interview, series creator Annette Hess acknowledged the use of »high event density« in *Ku'damm 56* as a deliberate strategy to prevent audience disengagement —a technique she admits has

(8) This narrative dynamic has been problematised by feminist film critics, who identify a recurring trope of »happy rape« in popular media —stories in which sexual violence is either reframed as seduction or »resolved« through romance. *FilmLöwin*, a platform dedicated to feminist film critique, refers to this as »die Happy-Vergewaltigung«, noting that in *Ku'damm 56*, »eine der Hauptfiguren ihren Vergewaltiger heiratet« (Rieger 2017). This aesthetic of reconciliation risks trivialising sexual violence by embedding it within romantic structures, and aligns *Ku'damm 56* with a broader tendency to aestheticise harm while eliding accountability.

been criticised (Krauß 2020: 209). Her self-declared fear of »boring the viewer« (Krauß, 2020: 209) reveals the pressures of balancing entertainment with social critique, particularly when representing trauma. While this approach may succeed in attracting viewership, it also raises the question of whether the series' ambiguity around rape and redemption stems from narrative complexity or from a reluctance to fully confront the implications of sexual violence.

The representational ambivalence continues into the sequel, *Ku'damm 59*, where the rape remains unnamed and unresolved. Although Monika's social status improves and her professional success increases, the traumatic event is effectively written out of her storyline. This erasure raises questions about whether the series' ongoing narrative arc is one of emancipation or of aestheticised conformity. This ideological tension is voiced most starkly by Eva, Monika's sister, who asks: »Müssen wir Frauen uns alles gefallen lassen, nur weil wir Frauen sind?« (E2S2). To which Caterina replies: »Die Frau hat sich dem Mann unterzuordnen. Alles andere ist gegen die Natur« (E2S2). Her words encapsulate the normative logic that frames female submission as natural, and resistance as deviant.<sup>9</sup>

Still, *Ku'damm 56* offers glimpses of resistance. As discussed earlier, Monika's dancing emerges as a recurring visual metaphor for female agency —a space where voice is replaced by movement, and social constraint by bodily expression. It is not a triumphant liberation, but a rhythmic insistence on presence and selfhood. Even within a narrative that falters ethically, these embodied moments carry a subversive potential. They do not rewrite the story, but they complicate its resolution. They do not overcome patriarchy, but they trace its fractures. In that sense, the series leaves the audience with a quietly subversive image of feminine subjectivity: one that does not escape patriarchy, but dares to move within it, dancing on its edge —a final, flickering image of resistance in motion. This ulterior image encapsulates the unresolved tension between oppression and autonomy, constraint and expression. It does not offer closure, but it gestures toward the possibility of inhabiting even patriarchal space with defiant grace.

To Deanna Coleman

(9) This scene of rhetorical resignation is echoed visually in Eva's storyline, where her husband exerts sexual control over her within marriage. After one such act, Eva retreats to the bathroom and applies an antiseptic vaginal solution, visibly in pain. The scene gestures toward marital rape, but once again, the violation remains unnamed —its representation muted by propriety.

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