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# Carousel of Consumerism: Austrian Filmmaker Barbara Albert's Critique of Contemporary Society in *Böse Zellen*

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### **Carousel of Consumerism: Austrian Filmmaker Barbara Albert's Critique of Contemporary Society in *Böse Zellen***

All of Austrian filmmaker Barbara Albert's three feature films, *Nordrand* (Northern Skirts) (1999), *Böse Zellen* (Free Radicals) (2003) and *Fallen* (Falling) (2006), portray human relationships in flux and depict people reacting to changes in the world. These films critique society obliquely as they present damaged figures in their attempts to shape a meaningful existence. Albert always manages to keep the viewer floating on the side of this latter point—that of looking for a meaningful existence, even though the social setting often appears so meaningless and commercialized. In *Böse Zellen* the building and opening of a new shopping mall play a role in bringing together the many characters' lives. This film from 2003 and its mall's offering of a carousel of consumer fantasy masks a sense of alienation in contemporary society; this alienation appears in all of Albert's films, but it provides specific anti-consumerist ideas in *Böse Zellen*—a film that successfully empties the promise of consumer happiness.

As several episodes in this film denounce a type of consumerism focused on shopping malls and lottery winnings, the film as a whole also echoes the complaints in the 2001 book by John de Graaf, Davin Wann and Thomas H. Naylor, *Affluenza*, with its eponymous definition: "affluenza, n. a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more" (de Graaf, et al 2). Barbara Albert illustrates how an unnamed Austrian community suffers from this ailment, which de Graaf et al show as an illness in the United States; but Albert importantly locates her dissection of this illness within the structure of interpersonal relationships, as she states in an interview:

“ [Es] gibt die strukturelle Ebene: Ich wollte ein System bauen, in dem andere Systeme vorkommen – die Familie, die Familienausstellung; dann gibt es auch gesellschaftliche Systeme wie das Kaufhaus und die Konsumgesellschaft – alles scheinbar mögliche Fluchtpunkte. (Albert in Kamalzadeh)

In the end Albert provides a glimpse of hope for change through the unlikely figure of the homeless and unemployed Gerlinde and her distinctly anti-consumerist role in the film.

A synopsis of this film reveals the main theme: how individuals manage personal loss and grief. Albert uses multiple story lines [1] in her illustration of how different people in a community live with varying types of loss, and consumerism and the building of a new shopping mall is a clear thread connecting them all. I group the story lines into four groups: the first forms around the figure of Manu—a woman who as a young adult was the lone survivor of a plane crash. Now, several years later, she is a wife and mother. Manu is a hopeful figure with dynamic girlfriends, but she is killed in a car crash, which is caused by members of the second main group in the film—a group of adolescents in school. The teenage driver, Kai, survives but his girlfriend, Gabi, is paralyzed. Kai, whose older brother was kidnapped as a child and remains missing, befriends Patricia, a pimply girl whose parents died in a murder/suicide. Manu's brother, Lukas, teaches science and has all of these teenagers in his classroom. Lukas becomes a link to a third group, as he meets a young woman of African descent, Sandra. Sandra and her shopaholic mother, Belinda, form this third grouping as each searches for happiness and affirmation. The fourth grouping centers on Manu's troubled sister, Gerlinde, whose anti-consumerist ranting make her an outsider in this portrait of a consumer society.

Focusing on this second feature film by Albert, I dissect the technical camera use with three marginal figures, show how the camera techniques used with these three figures—including Gerlinde—aid in displaying pointed critiques of consumer society, and discuss the contradictions of consumerism within the metaphor of a carousel. I identify the significance of three opposing shots: one of a static camera with a de-centered subject, one of an unstable, hand-held camera moving around a traffic roundabout, and one of a static camera on the child's carousel. Each of the three figures in these shots is marginal—marginal in the film and in the depicted society. I will show how the technical aspects around each of these three figures centralize the conflicts between consumer fantasy and reality and deconstruct the consumer carousel of society.

The saturation of consumerism in the film's many figures' lives provides connections amidst all of the story lines. A visual connection comes with Albert's recurring shots of the optimistic banner, "Wir machen Sie glücklich," next to the construction site for the new Shopping World and its lottery that has a new house as the grand prize.



These four recurring shots show the progressing construction of this new mall which is seen in the background and in the center of these images, and mark the passage of time in the film. The enclosed, all-weather shopping center and its indoor, high ceilinged, central area with a stage, create a quasi-public space where different classes congregate; in effect it takes the place of the traditional market place or other meeting point for various classes in a city. In an interview about *Böse Zellen*, Albert discusses her use of the shopping mall: "Orte wie die Shopping Malls, Shopping City [...] diese großen öffentlichen Räume, die alle mit Konsum zu tun haben [...] [schildern] de[n] öffentliche[n] Raum als Konsum, als Ausdruck vom Konsumdenken." (Albert in Zheng, 76). Albert also connects people to these large public spaces, as she says: "Die Shopping Mall ist für mich ein Ort, wo Menschen sehr verloren sind. [...] dass sich die Menschen darin verloren fühlen *auf Dauer*" [in Müller--emphasis mine]. The aimlessness of the consumer-shopping-carousel lies not only in the figures' constant search for new acquisitions, but also in the predominance of this repetitive and empty activity of shopping in Western society; shopping is the activity that turns the carousel. Albert's film warns against this and exhibits this proclamation from de Graaf et al: "When affluenza infects our communities it starts a vicious cycle. We begin to choose things over people, a choice that disconnects us from community life and causes even more consumption, and more disconnection" (67).

Of the many figures in this film, two adults, Belinda and Gerlinde, are shown from the margins of society. That is, as working-age adults [2] they have no job-identity, and in the few scenes we see them, they maintain only loose familial connections. For instance, Belinda has a darker-skinned adult daughter, Sandra, who visits her on occasion, but Belinda lives alone; and Gerlinde babysits for her young niece, Yvonne, but is not shown interacting with her adult sister, Manu, and appears with her adult brother, Lukas, and her brother-in-law, Andreas, only at Manu's funeral. Gerlinde appears to live with an older man who has only one leg, which can be observed when she is in his apartment. We never see Gerlinde in a residential space that is her own. In fact, her filling a suitcase when being kicked out of the older man's apartment becomes the image which seems to point to her situation.

Both of these marginal figures pursue personal happiness outside of what this consumer-centered society expects: Belinda's pursuit erupts surprisingly out of her consumer-centered identity; Gerlinde's pursuit appears distasteful, because of her anti-social behaviors. Because of their transgressions—Belinda's short-lived confession of feelings, and Gerlinde's public rant against the selfishness and myopia of shoppers—the camera treats them differently.

A static camera frames the figure of Belinda, and this framing differs in important scenes. Belinda is a consumer who accumulates things as correctives, and thus she appears to believe in the Shopping World's claim to consumer-driven happiness. We first know Belinda only through short scenes of little dialogue in her living room with her daughter, through close-ups of her singing at her choir practice, and through brief visits to the pub with the other choir members. Each of these scenes establish Belinda's life as void of intimacy: in the scenes in her living room, her scattered belongings visually fill up what we recognize to be

her emotional emptiness; the close-ups in the choir display her worthwhile attempts to fit in, but her position on the end of one side of the table in the pub marks her as marginal.

Yet while Belinda is successful at being a good consumer and collector, she is unsuccessful at finding the happiness that the Shopping World banner promises. The first meeting we have with this bargain shopper is in her small, crowded living room where the camera frames her within her clutter.



A medium shot with a static camera situates us into this scene with mother (on the left) and visiting adult daughter, Sandra (right). Various items, including sweets from the popular drug store Müller, where Sandra works, fill the disorderly coffee table in the foreground of the shot. The background includes other trinkets and trifles in a bookshelf—noticeably few books, a folding clothes dryer behind Belinda and one stuffed animal (only one that is visible) along the back of the couch behind Sandra.

With the relative closeness of the camera to Belinda and her daughter, we expect intimacy. But we get clutter and silence. As if to force the viewer into this and many other uncomfortable silences, Albert exclusively employs diegetic sound throughout this film. Both Belinda and Sandra gaze toward the messy coffee table—not toward each other and discuss only Belinda's purchases. We viewers do not find out anything about Sandra's father or why Sandra's skin is so much darker than Belinda's. Like the successful Turkish-German film director, Fatih Akin, Barbara Albert provides little information about a topic like race; she assumes one recognizes and accepts the changing face of contemporary, multicultural Austrian society. Sandra's process of self-discovery is one of the "mehrere Hauptstränge" in the film (Albert in Zheng, 77), yet how she pieces together her identity and her confidence portrays the opposite of her mother's more destructive process.

Contrary to her depressing countenance in the prior scene, Belinda does have moments of bliss, and in these moments the camera centers her in her brief delight. We find Belinda in a state of what seems to be happiness in one scene, and the static camera keeps her centered in the frame. This scene directly follows a markedly different story line of tragedy, so the cut to Belinda's pleasure appears as an intentional diversion from disaster to empty consumer-centered reality: from a girl lying in a hospital unable to breathe without machines after a car accident, to a close-up of Belinda in a wind closet in a promotional event for Goldbräu beer (figure 6).

The sixty second scene of Belinda in the wind tunnel begins with the noise of the wind machine turning on, and almost forty seconds later the machine is turned off. The camera remains outside of the wind closet, but stands closer than a casual observer and there is nothing else to see in this frame. Yet the slight sound of Belinda's labored breathing in the middle of the scene, as she tries to grab and then hold on to the lightweight pieces of paper—the beer labels, gives the viewers an intimacy with Belinda: we viewers are with her in the wind closet (figure 7).

As the loud wind machine blows and the papers fly around her, Belinda manages to hold onto thirty-eight beer labels (figure 8).



For her humiliating actions—i.e., she grabs at items flying around her and she looks comical in her efforts, she wins only a free t-shirt of the beer's logo. The bliss here is her free ride on the carousel: she is en route to get something for nothing or for little effort; she is part of the continuing, hopeful consumerism of marketing whimsy—here obtained through one's supposed luck—instead of through wealth or purchasing power. The camera is static and holds her centered in the frame because she has stayed on track in this product-driven world of chance.

This general concept of winning something for little cost or effort weaves throughout the film; the Shopping World's lottery for a new house provides another thematic and visual connection among several of the characters, as they fill in their game tickets after searching for lottery clues in free advertisements. Albert uses this house lottery as wish fulfillment to starkly contrast the reality of the fatal car accident that affects so many figures in the story. The car accident illustrates reality crashing in and breaking up the continual consumer carousel that the shopping mall promises. And indeed it is a significant figure, the widower Andreas, who wins the house in this film's supposed Happy End.

Although I have identified Belinda as limited to her consumer tendencies, Belinda looks for happiness elsewhere—beyond the wind closet of free things—but she fails; and at this point of failure, the static camera does not keep her centered in the frame. There are two attempts to find happiness beyond consumerism: in her participation in a church choir and in her friendship with a man in the choir, whom she invites for a drink one evening after the choir practice. In this potential scene of romance, again in her living room and focused on Belinda's couch and again using the static camera, the director utilizes Belinda's collected trifles as a frame. But a significant change happens causing a turning point: Belinda moves while the camera remains the same. To the left sits the male friend from Belinda's choir to whom she is attracted, and Belinda sits to the right. She spills wine onto the pieces of an unfinished puzzle; so she stands and clumsily crosses in front of him to get a towel (figures 9-11).



Figure 11



We notice how the stuffed animals along the back of the sofa act as sentinels of her fragile emotions, as the diegetic sound from off is of Belinda shuffling around the kitchen. When Belinda returns to clean the mess, she stands to the man's left (figure 12).

Figure 12



But the camera maintains its original shot; the camera does not follow her and thus does not center the two of them. Consequently Belinda's movement disrupts the shot's symmetry as she flirtatiously and optimistically squeezes her rather plump body into the space on the sofa—and in the shot—to the left of the man (figures 13, 14).

Figures  
13-14



Whereas we know her mainly through bargain hunting, Belinda finally does something other than consume; she takes a risk, she looks for human connection, and she moves herself closer to this man. In doing so, she tips the scales of visual balance: she moves away from the prescribed consumer-centered existence and toward interpersonal intimacy.

The stationary, yet unbalanced shot foreshadows the subsequent rejection and punishment for moving away from a consumer realm of happiness—like that which the shopping mall banner promises. The man finishes his wine in one gulp, rises to leave, at which point Belinda also stands and confesses her attraction to him with a flushed face. We see a close up of him, as he refutes her affection: "Aber Belinda, wir sind doch schon lange Freunde gewesen." A close-up of her follows and shows her disappointment as he says from off: "Vergiss es... Lass es so wie es ist." Leaving things as they are means prolonged loneliness for Belinda.

In an interview Barbara Albert describes the larger picture of this entire film: “We are buying things and pictures [but] we don’t find our way. [...] It’s hard to find our way. Capitalism uses its items to brainwash society” (in Horvath). Similarly we read in *Affluenza*:

“People need identity, community, challenge, acknowledgement, love and joy. To try to fill these needs with material things is to set up an unquenchable appetite for false solutions to real and never-satisfied problems. The resulting psychological emptiness is one of the major forces behind the desire for material growth. (Donella Meadows et al., *Beyond the Limits* (1992), and de Graaf, et al. 111).

Stepping away from this brainwashing and not finding the intimacy in her trinkets that she wants, Belinda hopes for a human connection as another way to find meaning outside of consuming and collecting, but she is rejected.

In her eventual response to this rejection Belinda once again appears out of a shot’s symmetry; she reacts to the emptiness of the consumer fantasy world through a suicide attempt, as she purposely falls in front of a train. Belinda is guilty of wanting more than the clutter and gimmicks of her eager consumption and recognizes the emptiness left to her outside of the cycle of shopping. I suggest her desire for intimacy is a crime against the Shopping World’s mantra: “Wir machen Sie glücklich.” And when consuming does not fulfill her, the best collector and consumer in the film, she again embraces the consumer-centered ideals and takes her punishment into her own hands on this train platform. Yet here—interestingly enough—the camera tries to keep her centered in the frame (figures 15-21).



As she punishes herself for her transgression against the Shopping World’s promise, the camera centers her throughout the fast frames, and we hear only the train and clips of others’ cell phone conversations from off. She closes her eyes and falls out of the shot and in front of the oncoming train: the frame remains unfocused and empty (without a subject) here, because the shot is still about the now absent Belinda and her emptiness. Yet Belinda survives; she “only” loses one leg.

The camera keeps Belinda centrally framed in her few remaining scenes, suggesting that she remains on the centralized consumer path. The choir director, Heinrich, has started to visit the convalescing Belinda. He brings his guitar, and they sing in her living room. The scene of his visit is shot from a different angle than we’ve seen previously of this space. This shot allows for natural light to enter and shine on her still cluttered coffee table—complete with unwashed dishes—in front of the television with the popular “Verzeih mir” program.[3] The camera centers them, hinting at a new beginning for Belinda. Despite this potentially fulfilling companionship with Heinrich, Belinda returns to her ways of collecting trinkets. Toward the end of the film at the mall’s grand opening, Belinda attends with her prosthetic right leg; she walks with her daughter to her left and with her crutch in her right hand, and Belinda asks for an extra of the free tchotchkes—the plastic, vulture-like creatures with yellow beaks and blue trousers (figure 22).



Figure 22  
Belinda and her daughter, Sandra



Her daughter, Sandra, holds a free flyer with the reflection that never looks back at her—a picture of a white woman's face; Sandra says goodbye to her mother, as she is going on a trip to Africa—one more of the film's partial story lines. But the last glimpse viewers receive of Belinda and her crutch is of her dancing closely with Heinrich near others at the mall's center stage as the band plays a synthesized pop ballad. The camera is distant though, and as so much else is happening in the scene and in the film in general, it is not clear how much of this depicted intimacy will remain for Belinda.

As I discuss how the camera does or does not center Belinda, I find it important that Albert forces us viewers into this camera's position; thus we viewers become advocates of a consumer-centered society: we (through the camera) hold Belinda central when she is following the consumerist path, and we do not refocus on her when she steps out of the frame with different, non-consumerist choices. Next we viewers are placed into a defensive position—when Gerlinde is the focus.

When this very different character, the unemployed and often dirty Gerlinde, appears, it becomes clear how the technical aspects surrounding this woman in a public or commercial space oppose those of the static, framing camera used with Belinda. I focus on several sequences in the middle of the film that depict Gerlinde's social isolation. It will become clear that Gerlinde functions as the voice of anti-consumerism, and from her marginal position she rebels against capitalism. The content of the two sequences I discuss show how through this, the most socially dysfunctional figure in the film—Gerlinde's character—we viewers eventually find our own potential criticisms of capitalism's emptiness. But initially we are disturbed by and technically distanced from this figure of Gerlinde.

Gerlinde is at once a marginal figure and the camera upholds her nonconformity. As the sister of the main figure, Manu, who dies in the first third of the film, Gerlinde has little stability in the film other than this identity of sister and thus of aunt to Manu's daughter, Yvonne. Gerlinde rarely appears with adults other than her two male lovers; only once—in her first scene at her sister's funeral—do we see Gerlinde with her brother, Lukas, and her brother-in-law and now widower, Andreas. She also appears in three scenes with her niece, Yvonne. These scenes, in which Gerlinde and her niece are alone, use a stable camera.

But first it is important to make the distinction between Gerlinde's scenes with Yvonne and Gerlinde's scenes in which she is alone and in public. It is in these latter scenes in which a hand-held, moving camera produces unstable images of Gerlinde. This camera use suggests erratic behavior and a disturbing instability and disorder. This erratic depiction of Gerlinde in public spaces shows the blurred and antagonistic view both Gerlinde has of the world around her, as well as the view the others in the film—including we viewers—have of Gerlinde. She embodies the voice of anti-consumerism.

As previously stated, both Belinda and Gerlinde do not have job identities—stark contrasts to other adult figures in this film, but Gerlinde is more extreme in this respect, because she refuses to participate in the economic exchange by earning money or even through purchasing things. Instead she barter her body for food and shelter. In fact her second scene displays her naked and shivering as she gets dressed in a messy but sunshine-filled bedroom, where her lover—an older man with only one leg—lies on the bed (Figure 23).



Figure 23. Gerlinde and her (first) lover.



Gerlinde then requests milk, which she states helps “gegen das Gift; [die Milch] reinigt mich von innen her.” Only later do we recognize that this man and this relationship might be the social stability that Gerlinde needs, but the blunt lighting and messiness alarm the senses, leading one to question the relationship. It is of note that in Gerlinde’s private scenes, i.e., with her lovers, the camera does remain stable and relentlessly shows the unpleasant minutiae of her life. Such an extreme realism is part of how Albert describes this film: “Eigentlich wollte ich einen Film machen, der [...] extrem realistisch ist—fast hyperrealistisch” (in Müller).

And not only does Gerlinde not participate in the world of employment, but she also is not a consumer. One sees an example of her eccentric anti-consumerist tendencies in this image of her picking flowers from a roundabout or traffic circle (figure 24).

Figure 24: Gerlinde on the traffic circle



The sequence at the traffic circle establishes two important elements: Gerlinde’s role as the asocial Other and the use of an unstable camera in this depiction. We viewers are behind the hand-held camera in a car that drives around the traffic circle outside the Shopping World; and thus we viewers are implicit in the camera’s view. Hearing only diegetic sounds of cars driving and of distant cars honking, we expectant consumers en route to the mall stare at this woman. The ironies in this scene are numerous. It’s a warm, sunny day, but Gerlinde wears her full length fur coat over a tiny sundress (figure 25).

Figure 25



She stands in dirt, but she wears high heel shoes; it’s a less than pedestrian-friendly space, but she contentedly picks these small red flowers and ignores the busy traffic around her. We see the large Euro symbol, and we question her actions (figure 26).

Figure 26



Despite the outward signifier of wealth—her long fur coat, she is not part of the united European economy: she is the Other, the opposite, the one who goes against rules, who barter or who simply takes things—instead of obeying regulations, working or purchasing packaged items.

Her otherness continues and intensifies, as this shot of a satisfied Gerlinde picking flowers outside cuts immediately to an impassioned, angry and possibly psychotic Gerlinde inside the mall (figure 27).

Figure 27



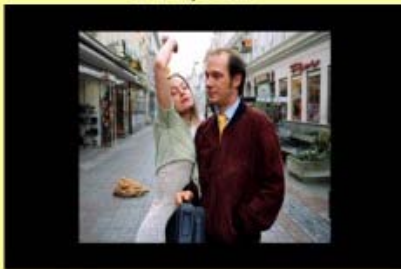
The continued use of the shaky hand-held camera exacerbates the intensification, as it follows Gerlinde walking after patrons and calling them names: “(Ihr, stinkende fette Menschen.” She is near an information table with brochures about charities, and she accuses the mall visitors of ignoring real tragedies—like those described in the leaflets, saying no one thinks about the real people who suffer: “Sie sterben! Sie verhungern! Sie verbluten! Sie werden verfolgt!” The camera follows her erratic movement’s and even gets jostled by a man who asks Gerlinde, “Bist du normal?” The people at the info tables do not want her “help” and they motion to her to leave. She storms off, and as she does, she repeats a phrase four or five times without a breath and in a high pitch: “Ich lasse es mir nicht mehr gefallen.” The camera remains near the table and becomes steadier as it films her departure. Like looking through the car window at the traffic circle, we viewers identify with the irritation and annoyance of the mall patrons through the unstable camera. And with Gerlinde’s retreat, a sense of order—order in the guise of technical stability and an unwavering camera—can now be restored. Visually and verbally she is the Other who remains out of the social norm, and the unsteady, vacillating camera reinforces her difference.

The subsequent three scenes—two in the mall and then in her second lover’s apartment—remain focused on Gerlinde, but depict her falling into a dangerous web of depraved consumerism. These scenes with Gerlinde and her second lover are similar to Belinda’s attempt at and desire for contact, and yet they depict a different danger in stepping away from the desired protocol of consumerism. This danger is that of being consumed and therein punished because one is a disposable good; this strays from Belinda’s decision to punish herself for mis-stepping and being dissatisfied. Gerlinde’s second male lover represents an aggressive and self-aggrandizing consumerism and capitalism. This lover is a vacuum cleaner salesman who works in the corridor of the shopping mall; reminiscent of a snake oil salesman, he appears confident, captivating and fluid as he moves around and engages passing shoppers to try his lightweight and user-friendly hand-held vacuum cleaner.[4] Gerlinde had just left one area of the mall in a rant, and the immediate scene cuts to Gerlinde elsewhere inside the mall, walking calmly to where we see and hear the

salesman's pitch for his product. She catches his eye and tries to look nonchalant and uninterested, but her successful play is shown in the subsequent cut: a close-up of Gerlinde eating at the mall's food court with the salesman sitting across from her. She ravenously shovels food into her mouth, while moaning and then talking with food in her mouth. Shot-reverse-shot close-ups of each of them and the one-sided conversation suggest that this is not the first such exchange between them, but perhaps that Gerlinde is trying to take the upper hand. Having found a stable companion in the older lover, she now has the confidence to refuse this younger man. She says with a full mouth: "Willst du mich nicht mehr? Ich dich auch nicht. Ich brauche einen mit einer Wohnung. Nicht einer so wie du." The salesman watches her with a look of aversion on his face, but doesn't speak. Then the film cuts abruptly to a close-up of a wall in his bedroom, and we hear their moaning during intercourse, and eventually we recognize this space as that of the salesman's prior rendezvous with Andrea—his apartment. The exchange is complete: He buys Gerlinde food and then ravages her body; he gets what he has paid for. And although she tries to hold her own in the bartering—denying that she wants the salesman's affections or attentions anymore, the man consumes her and Gerlinde has only her body to use as a commodity.

In a later scene with Gerlinde and this salesman we are reintroduced to both the public scene of the unpredictable figure of Gerlinde with the unstable camera, and Gerlinde's attempt to claim she does not need the salesman—although her repeated attempts to "run into him" show that she does want him. Returning to the events that followed this rough sex scene (above) with the vacuum salesman, Gerlinde returns to the apartment of her first lover, where a close-up shows her gulping milk—her internal cleansing agent—while kneeling in front of the refrigerator. The lover suddenly pushes her over, she retaliates by taking his crutch, so this man with one-leg falls on the kitchen floor; the camera in both is stable with medium shots of these two, as this is a private space and a stable camera frames Gerlinde in private spaces. The lover then gently says, "Nimm ein Bad." The topic of cleanliness provides the connection for the later scene with Gerlinde and the vacuum cleaner salesman. In this later scene, Gerlinde appears early one morning, freshly showered in her sundress, heels and the fur coat on a deserted downtown shopping street and struggles to keep up with the salesman who appears to be hurrying to work, his briefcase tightly in one hand, the other hand stuck into his jacket pocket. The camera is again hand-held for this public scene, and Gerlinde is upset when he silently dismisses her and walks quickly away. She yells her thin conquest: "Mir geht's so viel besser ohne dich. Soll ich dir zeigen, wie er mich versorgt? Rieche mal! [she takes off her coat and puts her armpit up to his face from behind] So ein gutes Schaumbad gibt's. Rieche mal!" (Figure 28).

Figure 28  
Gerlinde chasing down the vacuum salesman (her second lover)  
on his way to work.



Gerlinde shouts out that she has won in this exchange—she really does not need the salesman; but the salesman walks away, and she throws her shoes at him. He wants and gets only the exchange that benefits him: she gets food, which he buys for her; he gets sex from her. As she is only a commodity with a limited exchange-value, he does not see her as a person with whom he might communicate on the street. She is left to believe that her body is the only commodity she has to participate in the purpose of exchange in this society; and even this does not gain her the legitimacy she wants. She can only barter for private, illicit intercourse. And the unstable camera emphasizes her lack of power—defined in terms of consumer ability—in most of her public scenes.

In a rare public scene with a static camera at Manu's funeral, Gerlinde remains the Other and a social deviant (figures 29-31).

Figure 29. Gerlinde (second from right) with Yvonne in front of her.



Figure 30



Figure 31



Even here, without any markings of consumer society, Gerlinde is not seen as a full participant, and others ignore her. Gerlinde stands between her brother-in-law, Andreas, and her brother, Lukas; her niece, Yvonne, stands in front of her. But Gerlinde is passed by. The female mourner—like all the others—offers the widower Andreas a handshake in sympathy; and then this mourner offers her hand to Gerlinde's brother, Lucas.[5] No one shakes Gerlinde's hand; her lack of social stability through her lack of employment and housing and her behavioral differences, including her deficit in consumer status, exclude her from the community. And yet it seems that these mourners also overlook the guiltless child, Yvonne. This connection between Gerlinde and Yvonne becomes central at the end of the film, as both figures join together in a dance outside of the consumer-prescribed space of the mall.

It is this youngest figure in the film, Yvonne, in sequences that employ a stable camera and close-up or medium shots, who surprisingly also criticizes the social fabric of consumerism. (figure 32) Yvonne, as mentioned, is Gerlinde's niece and the daughter of the first main female figure, Manu, who has died. Before Manu's death, Yvonne innocently asked her mother what form Manu will take after death. This odd question only slightly foreshadows Manu's fate; it mostly establishes Yvonne as different. Her deviance is noticed by her classmates, who tell Yvonne that she colors bunny rabbits the 'wrong' colors, according to her classmate (figure 33).

Figure 32. Yvonne



Figure 33. Yvonne's picture of a (incorrectly colored) orange rabbit.



Figure 34. Yvonne on the carousel. Her father, the widower Andreas and his girlfriend, Andrea, watch.



Yvonne's physical difference becomes located in her poor health, and after Manu's death, Yvonne gets hospitalized and tested for what aunt Gerlinde tells her are the eponymous 'böse Zellen'—literally, mean cells, but also the free radicals or unstable molecules of the English title. Despite her separation from normal activities and good health and despite the tragedy of losing her mother, Yvonne must learn to ride the expected consumer carousel in more ways than one. One believes perhaps Yvonne is already on a consumer-centered path, when after Manu's death, we see a close-up of Yvonne with the sound of weeping from off. And the shot-reverse-shot reveals that instead of mourning her mother's death, young Yvonne is clicking a computer mouse to color a 2-D doll's accessories on her computer screen. However, I suggest that this scene implies a child's lack of understanding of this death more than her inculcation into consumerism.

A very brief sequence of Yvonne on a three-pony-carousel in the mall is the most obvious scene of society teaching Yvonne about consumer experience. This short sequence contains a vital critique of consumerism. Her father and his girlfriend, Andrea, [6] watch Yvonne on the carousel; both adults uphold their model roles as consumers with their shopping bags in hand (figure 34).

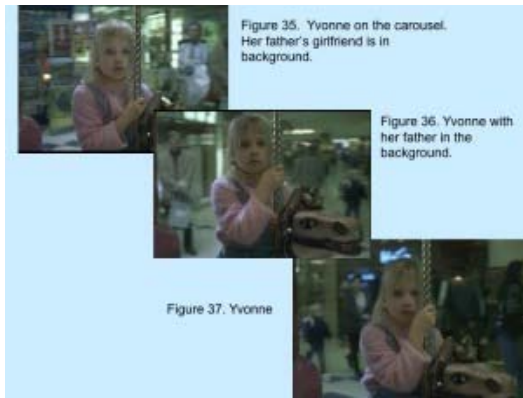
Figure 34. Yvonne on the carousel. Her father, the widower Andreas and his girlfriend, Andrea, watch.



The emptiness and the very lack of enjoyment for Yvonne in this rather meaningless twenty-nine second sequence of the carousel ride—with only the diegetic sound of the carousel music and muffled voices of talking shoppers in the background—exhibits the emptiness of consumerism: there is no pleasure, no joy, no energy, no action. Yvonne merely sits and holds on, she looks around; she looks bored, sickly and tired, similar to her expression as she clicked the colors on the computer screen. Yvonne is clearly supposed to be

the future consumer on this carousel: she can practice how to get started, hang on, and how to keep circling, and she should want to repeat it. She is not to question the limits of the ride, but rather enjoy it for what it is. Parents think all children want to ride such a carousel; like the Shopping World's advertising banners, it should make one happy. But on the carousel Yvonne appears alienated from everything—especially from consumerism itself.

Significantly Yvonne stares directly at the stable camera that is on the carousel with her, and in these still frames, we see her parents behind her. (figures 35-37)



She looks at us, and she knows that we—the film's viewers—see them behind her. They placed her here. But she stares at the viewers. I suggest that this scene reflects the continuation of Yvonne's social deviance—that which started with odd questions about life after death and rabbits in unrealistic colors. She recognizes that this ride goes nowhere and that such a ride is what others expect her to enjoy in life.

This brief scene of Yvonne on the merry-go-round alludes to a theme park, as it displays Yvonne's awareness of the false reality of consumerism all around her. Baz Kershaw's reference to theme parks, shopping malls, consumption and alienation overlaps with a level of the film here. Kershaw references Mikhail Bakhtin as he states, "contemporary cultural critics [link the carnivalesque] to the development of post-industrial consumerism, so that, for example, shopping malls [and] theme parks [...] are identified as sites of carnivalesque indulgence [...] (53)". The indulgences Barbara Albert's mall allows for remind one of the ubiquitous manifestations of enclosed shopping areas all over the world: fake trees, bright lights, captivating signs. Even without sword swallows, fortunetellers and an emcee, there are carnivalesque characteristics here, like the vacuum salesman's spurious performance of a snake oil salesman. Details from the film's anticlimactic final scenes of the mall's grand opening party further substantiate this: female employees wear colorful and suggestive outfits as they rollerblade and hand out free toys; freaks find and join other freaks (in this film, these freaks are groups of teenagers); instead of a burlesque revue on stage, the band plays tacky music with a synthetic flavor of "Heimat"; everyone becomes a juggler—at least all mall patrons, and we film viewers must juggle the onslaught of images designed to stoke the desire to purchase something. All combine to form a carnivalesque mess, which director Albert also shows as she holds a long shot on the cleaning women as they start their shift and clean up the mess from the party.

Similarly, Mike Featherstone draws on Jean Baudrillard and others, in arguing that consumers of such sites [shopping malls and theme parks] are aware that they are simply simulations and therefore [consumers] have the "capacity to open up to surface sensations [and] spectacular imagery, [...] without... nostalgia for the real" (in Kerschaw 53). Belinda does this—she embraces the "surface sensations" of her trinkets until she succumbs to her "nostalgia for the real" and almost dies; eccentric Gerlinde calls upon others to recognize the suffering of others and their own self-centeredness—themes that reverberate in varying ways throughout all of the film's figures' lives. And yet because of her Otherness, Gerlinde's rather sensible words go unheard—only her undesirable mannerisms are noted, as the unstable camera documents pushes her away from us. Yvonne rides the carousel paid for by her adult guardians, yet she expresses no fulfillment or pleasure from this "surface sensation." The director places each of us viewers onto this carousel ride of a film to expose the purposelessness and the alienation of contemporary consumer society's all-encompassing journey.

As we have seen, several technical aspects heighten the viewers' own experience of alienation, of

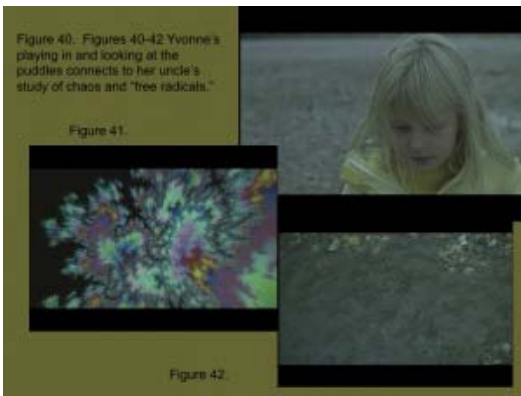


affluenza, and of the conflicts between consumer fantasy and reality. The erratic, hand held camera in Gerlinde's public scenes reflect how she, as an anti-consumer, is seen by many in society as deviant. The figure of the child, Yvonne, with her vacuous gaze at the camera or away onto fuzzy surroundings, and with the fixed camera placed on the carousel with her—display her lack of movement and lack of engagement; yet this time we viewers are included on this boring, lifeless ride. Thus this short scene of Yvonne on the carousel displays society's attempt to force Yvonne into the repetitive ride of being a consumer; yet she experiences no gratification in what simulates pleasure. And the camera (and thus we viewers) join her outside this sense of pleasure. We are depressed by all the empty shopping, the falseness and lack of real communication, and we recognize the infection of affluenza.

A better, and I suggest, life-affirming alternative becomes clear at the film's end: it is the only scene in which Yvonne exhibits energetic characteristics—such that are normal for a young child—as she plays in puddles with her aunt Gerlinde. At first the camera flies in from a high angle, referencing other shots in which we assume the camera is the perspective of the dead woman, Yvonne's mother, Manu. This high angle camera is also the technical means to connect the last scenes: the bird's eye view of the camera [7] leaves Andreas' (Yvonne's father's) newly won house (from the lottery), then flies over a distraught Andrea lying in the snow in the forest without a coat, and finally the camera hovers above the puddle-filled gravel parking lot where Yvonne and Gerlinde are running. Then the film cuts to a stable camera at ground level—at Yvonne's height—and follows Yvonne's actions: it holds her sharp on a gray misty day. This last puddle scene aestheticizes the everyday: Yvonne and Gerlinde play in puddles with only the diegetic sounds of rain, of Yvonne's boots splashing and of far-off laughter and singing from Gerlinde, as the scene becomes a type of dance routine. No longer with vacuous, lifeless eyes as she had in front of the computer or on the carousel, Yvonne looks lively as she runs and jumps around the gravel parking lot (figure 39).



The close-ups of her literally bring us viewers closer to her, and the shot-reverse-shot of the puddle, link her to her uncle Lukas' research on chaos and the 'free radicals' therein (figures 40-42).



She sees the random raindrops, and the rain gets faster and louder. We remember a previous scene in the film as Lukas's computer program moves further and further into ordered systems: what appears random really does have an order. Away from the mall, Yvonne finds order in the playful chaos around her, and so can the viewers.

Yvonne sees order in nature's chaos—in raindrops, and yet the prescribed social order of consumerism all around her continues to shape her life. Like the authors of *Affluenza* and their recommended treatment,

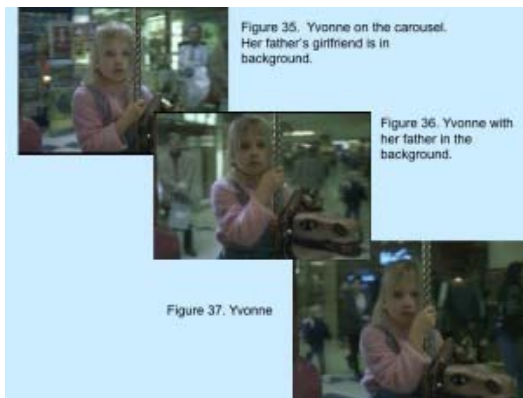


among other things, of more communication amongst neighbors and more fresh air instead of more shopping, this film looks to spread its remedy through consumer confusion; it speaks of the need to stay outside of the shopping mall. Beyond consumerism and empty desire is where real joy and pleasure exist—in us, not in our purchases. In the Kino Video distribution of this film for the US, Albert says in an interview in English, “This film also talks about solutions given by society. I’m not very happy with these solutions. We should think of new ways of building a new society [...] [We should] look at things and understand them. Then we can come up with visions [to change society]”(in Horvath).

It is significant that only two figures in this film break the fourth wall and thus directly acknowledge the viewers: this atypical and often sick child, Yvonne, and her aunt, Gerlinde, the social deviant, anti-consumer outsider. Gerlinde looks at the camera when she rises from her bath at the end of the longer sequence that began with the traffic roundabout, which included her rant at the mall and the subsequent evening with the salesman (figure 38).



Her (first) lover had told her to take a bath—clean up after being out all night (which we viewers know to have been her night of rough sex with the salesman; the first lover does not know this explicitly). Gerlinde rises up from the bath letting out a breath of air—as if she had been drowning, and says, “Ich lebe noch.” This similarity of Gerlinde’s and Yvonne’s direct gaze at the camera is important in this film.(figures 35-37)



They hold the camera’s and thus the viewers’ gaze, and in so doing they invite the viewers’ identification with their marginal positions. But unlike the direct gaze that breaks the fourth wall in fellow Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke’s provocative film *Funny Games*,<sup>[8]</sup> there is no specific narration to accompany these gazes. So instead of asking the spectators who will win or how else the audience can be entertained, as in *Funny Games*, Yvonne and Gerlinde silently bridge their own alienation to the viewers’ alienation; they connect the repetitive and meaningless consumerism all around them to our consumption of this (seemingly empty) film. The camera holds their gazes, and consequently both Yvonne’s and Gerlinde’s stares compel us to be reflective, to think about our own trips to the mall, our own relationships and the actual emptiness in such trips, in many relationships and in our consumer-driven society.

Although we are distanced from this erratic person, Gerlinde, through the unstable hand-held camera, her unpredictable movements, and her social “otherness” in her inappropriate behavior, it is she as the only adult who invites a direct identification for the viewer with her gaze from the bathtub. And although she appears mentally ill during the brief yelling sequence in the mall, her castigation of the self-centeredness of

shoppers are ideas with which the viewer may agree: "Ganz egal ist dir das!" She justifiably questions the accepted and expected consumerism all around her. In other words, some viewers may identify with Gerlinde's words but the camera, her appearance and her behavior separate her from us. The irony remains: she is one of very few figures in this film who finds active forms of pleasure—both in picking flowers, and in dancing in puddles with her niece. And she looks at us, she implicates us. We too would appear to be crazy if we were to criticize or question the consumerism all around us. Yvonne implicates us too: we too should recognize the lifeless, never-ending "ride" of consumer fantasy.

It is not the father—the disciplined consumer who wins the big lottery of the new house, but Gerlinde—the social deviant, who shows Yvonne a role that enlivens her. Gerlinde and Yvonne run, jump and play in the puddles and become active creators of experience even on a cold, gray day (figure 43).



From this "gloomy mosaic of everyday people" (Holden) and from the many figures and situations in this film that disturb us, one finds then that the film stimulates us viewers to think critically. We wish one were not so self-destructive like Belinda, and the camera also aids in this: holding Belinda in the middle of the frame despite her falling in front of a train. And we wish people were not so unstable and erratic, like Gerlinde; here the camera at times separates us from her, but then it pulls us to her through her direct gaze. The promise of happiness pervades the film's visual space through the Shopping World banners, but Albert suggests the emptiness in such a full space. The idea of forgiveness and hope also exist in this film, but mostly in the mediatized images of the disturbing TV talk-show called "Verzeih mir." So it seems that despondency and uncertainty prevail most in this "too clinically detached" film (Holden). Yet because the film ends with Gerlinde and Yvonne playing outside, the film formally privileges this scene and these two figures. This film can inspire in viewers a desire to fill our own lives with happiness that is not purchasable at the mall—and to remove a child from the empty carousel and let her play outside in a puddle, where the final images of the film leave us (figures 43-47).



Figure 44



Figure 45



Figure 46



Figure 47



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## Notes

1 The back cover of the Kino Video DVD quotes *Time Out New York* with its description of this film as an "Altmanesque" drama; there are many characters, overlapping stories and multiple points of view in *Böse Zellen*.

2 I mention "adult" and "working-age" here, because many other figures in the film are in high school and thus are not identified through a job.

3 I interpret Albert's use of this talk-show as a way to build human "connections"—in that one guest asks another guest for forgiveness; but in fact such an apology becomes one more item for empty consumption that only continues the cycle of a lack of real communication among people in consumer-centered society.

4 The busy consumer, Belinda, had already used one of these hand-held vacuum cleaners in the first scene in her living room. Even if we missed the connection to Belinda's story in the vacuum, we spectators recognize this salesman from a previous scene in the disco, in which he meets a drunken Andrea—the good friend of Manu. Such interweaving of figures' lives also provides a type of carousel with figures stepping on and off the ride.

5 Andreas and Lukas both hold jobs that provide a public identity. Andreas is the manager of the cinema in the mall, with the satirical name "Lollywood". Lukas is a high school science teacher.

6 To add to the interwoven social complexities and the carousel metaphor therein, Andrea, the girlfriend of Yvonne's recently widowed father is also Yvonne's teacher and her dead mother's, Manu's, good friend, who was with her at the disco/bar just before the fatal car accident. In one scene of the couple shortly after Manu's death, the film implies that their affair may have been going on before Manu's death. Guilt and issues of betrayal, not shared sorrow, becomes part of their coupling in the rest of the film.

7 If this bird's eye view camera is Manu, then she knows the empty success of Andreas' new winnings, the

hollowness Andrea feels from Andreas, and the consumerist indoctrination Yvonne has experienced.

8 Haneke's *Funny Games* first appeared in 1997, and he remade the film, *Funny Games US*, in English in 2007.

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