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## WHAT GOES UP MUST COME DOWN: MARIE KREUTZER'S 'THE GROUND BENEATH MY FEET' – BERLINALE

“She’s not fit for this life,” says Lola to a doctor as they stand together beside her sister’s hospital bed. Her voice is casual but her smile is hard and bright. The doctor flinches and draws back a little. Lola, the protagonist of Marie Kreutzer’s latest feature, *The Ground Beneath My Feet* (*Der Boden unter den Füßen*), has missed her flight out of Vienna

following what the medical staff tell her is a suicide attempt, although she dismisses the idea – it's more likely that Conny miscalculated the dosage of her medications, or, rather, because 'calculation' is a word that already we do not associate with her paranoid, easily confused older sister, that she forgot she had already taken them, or took the pills on an empty stomach. It's easy to see that Lola wants to leave and return to Rostock, where the consultancy firm she works for is out on an assignment. The doctor shifts his weight from one foot to another and looks down at Conny, whose eyes are closed. It's difficult for him to accept Lola's seeming lack of concern, the obviousness of her desire to be elsewhere, because family, as Lola's lover will later tell her explicitly, is important.

There is no place for her sister or her illness in the streamlined corporate architecture of Lola's life. As the camera follows Lola from one perfectly curated segment of time to another, across the managed spaces of the office, the gym, or the restaurant, it becomes clear why. The clean and empty hotel room where Lola sleeps is a pseudo-domestic parallel to the sanitised office building in which she lives, the opposite of her sister's messy apartment, where the clutter of the personal masses and multiplies and broods. For Lola and her co-workers sickness is weakness and it leads to repulsion. Kreutzer makes this point several times. A homeless woman follows Lola to the door of her expensive hotel and from the set of her shoulders we can tell that she is disturbed, not sympathetic. When a single mother confronts her about the possibility of losing her job, Lola replies that they cannot take the particular situations of individuals into account when saving and restructuring a company. Decisions, however hard, must be made. Someone is always the loser. The bloody plastic pens that Lola finds stashed away in Conny's drawer are a brutal metaphor: while one sister

manipulates the external world to her benefit, the other turns the tools she has been given on the material of herself, which can never be cut into the correct shape. What does *The Ground Beneath My Feet* have to say about the rhythms of contemporary life? That work is endless and desire must be contained. It's this that the doctor doesn't understand.

Lola, working late, calls another office in the early hours of the morning. Shaun, another disembodied voice, tells her "You're crazy, you know?" Corporate space is paranoid too. The hallucinatory, maybe-not-real phone calls that Lola receives from her sister, who, we are told, neither has a phone nor access to one, are pure externalisation, as everything that the relentless movement of capital has supposedly banished comes back to haunt it. Elise, Lola's boss and lover, treats her with increasing distance following the revelation of her sister's illness. "Does it run in the family?" she asks without asking, although Lola assures her that they have nothing in common. Like Elise, the camera is always spiralling away. Kreutzer is interested in sisters, twins, doubles. *The Ground Beneath My Feet* is dead-on with its note of family fear, the reciprocal sickness it summons. Lola isn't necessarily wrong to want to get rid of it. When she visits Conny in a psychiatric institution, her sister leans forward and whispers that her apartment isn't safe. But nowhere is safe, no matter how purified or sanctified by money. In dark office interiors, late-night conspiracies abound, and the strange, ghostly presence of her absent sister finds a purchase that the physical self cannot. Lola is being stalked by *something*, but it's not at all clear that it's Conny.

Profit is always made at the expense of something or someone else. It is no coincidence that as her sister's condition improves, Lola's worsens,

and in the film's final moments Kreutzer literalises this logic; the simple, reductive moment of ascent and descent. What goes up must come down – or must it, if there's another person who can take the fall? Although Lola loves her sister, she cannot save her. She can buy her the shape of a life but she cannot make her live in it. The management consultants pull 48-hour shifts; they keep on going. Breakdown is averted. When Lola rifles through Elise's bag, looking for aspirin, she finds a trove of medications. "You take all these?" she wonders. Elise, who is often at the window, her eyes on the future, looks back at her and smiles. She tells Lola that the secret to avoiding disaster is to notice it in time. Through her play of asymmetries Kreutzer seems to suggest otherwise.

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