

Erin Brockovich (2000)

Sarah Marak

dir. Steven Soderbergh; prod. Danny DeVito; screenplay Susannah Grant; photography Edward Lachman; music Thomas Newman. 35mm, color, 131 min. Universal Pictures, distrib. Universal Pictures.

With its David and Goliath story and rags-to-riches theme, *Erin Brockovich* has been described as an »American Fairytale« (Penning). Starring Julia Roberts as Erin Brockovich, the film was a major box office success for director Steven Soderbergh. The director also released his film *Traffic* in the same year and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Director for both films—ultimately winning the award for *Erin Brockovich*. Star actress Roberts won both an Oscar and Golden Globe for her performance as the hard-working legal assistant and single mother. The biopic is based on true events in the life of Erin Brockovich, who later became a real-world TV personality, author, and motivational speaker. The film relies on »victimhood’s capacity to induce sympathy« (Loren and Metelmann 10), focusing on the protagonist’s efforts to bring justice to the community of Hinkley, California, where Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E), a large corporation, has knowingly poisoned the local water. Erin and her own former lawyer, Ed Masry (played by Albert Finney), take on the energy giant from their relatively minor office. In the end, they land an unlikely victory in court—with PG&E paying a record sum of \$333 million to the plaintiffs—which turns the once destitute Brockovich into a millionaire.

Early on, Erin is established as a melodramatic heroine *par excellence*: Broke and still jobless after a series of unsuccessful job interviews, we see her in a car accident and involved in the subsequent legal trial against the accident’s perpetrator. The audience, unlike the jury, knows Erin is not at fault, as the film previously shows how the car hits Erin at an intersection. During the trial, however, the defense attorney insinuates that Erin—single mother of three children from two divorced husbands—provoked the accident due to the other driver’s expensive car and his status as a doctor,



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precisely because she wants monetary compensation. The jury denies her this compensation and, as Bingham writes, »Erin is at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder [...] victimized on all sides in the *female* biopic tradition« (337). These first scenes depict Erin as the morally righteous protagonist so characteristic for melodrama, despite her coarse manners and loose mouth—according to Bingham, characteristics usually found in the »male biopic tradition« (338)—which inspires »sympathetic allegiance toward the suffering protagonist« (Weik von Mossner 297).

Even though she is portrayed as a victim—and specifically one of the legal system—Erin is determined to not give up and will instead soon climb the social ladder through her hard-work, dedication, and personal sacrifice. Always wearing high heels, short skirts, and slinky tops, she demonstrates her tenaciousness for the first time when she basically forces Ed Masry, the lawyer who lost her accident case, to hire her as a paralegal, with no work experience or relevant education. When Erin discovers that PG&E pays for the doctor's appointments of people whose properties the company wants to buy, she decides to further investigate and soon uncovers that the water in the town of Hinkley has for years been contaminated with carcinogenic hexavalent chromium. Despite her ensuing work for those who seem even more disenfranchised than she is, Erin also develops self-esteem and earns the respect of others along the way. *Erin Brockovich* thus displays a narrative that is perfectly in line with what Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann have termed »the contemporary culture of victimhood,« that »has developed on the one hand in struggles against hegemonic power structures, and on the other as a form of social legitimation« (10).

The »villain« of the narrative, PG&E, is visually almost absent from the film. Yet, *Erin Brockovich* sketches the traditional Manichean conflict of the melodramatic tradition. With pollution and toxicity at the heart of the story and »the representative of big business« (Ingram 3) as its villain, Soderbergh's film can be categorized as an environmental melodrama with »the tendency [...] to construct environmental issues as individualized [...] simplif[y]ing the complex, often ambiguous allocation of blame and responsibility in such matters« (Ingram 2). The audience learns of the contamination in Hinkley through the testimonies of personal suffering related to Erin by the small desert town's inhabitants. The consequences of industrial pollution are thus shown in domestic spaces—backyards, living rooms, bedrooms. In a scene in which Erin insinuates to Donna Jensen (played by Marg Helgenberger), who has already developed several tumors, that her water might be contaminated, the film develops its affective force. Jensen's horror-stricken face as she realizes that her kids are playing in a pool possibly full of invisible toxicity in the backyard prompts »viewers [...] to feel strongly with and for a mother who tries to protect her children from harm« (Weik von Mossner 301). Later in the film, before it is revealed that Donna has developed yet another tumor, this time malignant, we see her husband, at night, standing in front of the PG&E plant, crying in despair. Emblematic for the unequal power structures in the seemingly hopeless fight against »big business,« he starts hurling rocks at the building.

With her open and cordial manner, and wearing her heart on her sleeve, Erin manages to connect to the inhabitants of Hinkley, who suffer from various cancers and other health issues likely caused by the chromium contamination. The people she visits—most importantly Donna Jensen and Annabelle Daniels (Kristina Malota), a young girl suffering from a brain tumor—trust Erin, the film suggests, precisely because she is *not* a lawyer. When asked if she was a lawyer herself, Erin replies: »Hell, no. I

hate lawyers. I just work for them.« While the people of Hinkley open their doors to Erin, they refuse to talk to Theresa Dallavalle (Veanne Cox), a female lawyer who is supposed to support Masry with the case. Dallavalle represents the exact opposite of Erin: She is a professional lawyer, dressed in formal attire, wears her hair neatly pinned up, and asks the inhabitants of Hinkley to spare her the »sentimental« details of their suffering. As Elaine Roth writes, »as part of her lack of femininity, Dallavalle [...] possesses none of the sentimental resources that aid Brockovich« (56). While Dallavalle holds the necessary legal education, Brockovich has her heart in the right place (»Herzens-Bildung« [Penning 224]). This contrast highlights the film's complex gender politics. While Erin is a working single mother, whose later budding relationship with biker George (Aaron Eckhardt) subverts traditional gender roles—he takes care of her children at home while she works long hours—other working women are depicted as heartless careerists, which weakens the film's progressive message. Within the film's gender logics, Brockovich, who often struggles to find a babysitter and sometimes takes her children with her to work, is allowed to sacrifice personal time with her children because she speaks up for the disenfranchised and suffering children of Hinkley—and it is specifically the story of young Annabelle that leads Erin's son to accept her long hours away. Bingham even suggests that the inhabitants of Hinkley, many of whom were employed and thus »provided for« by PG&E, are her metaphorical children: She thus »becomes the avenger of these ›children‹ who have been poisoned and deceived by their guardian« (346).

It is only through Erin's compassion and the plaintiffs' trust in her that the hundreds of signatures needed to bring the lawsuit forward are secured. In the end, her hard work and dedication are rewarded with a win in court and a record payment of \$333 million. Even her romantic relationship with George seems to be repaired when she takes him to Hinkley to show the reason for her frequent absence. They meet Donna Jensen—again, in a domestic setting, not in a court or an office but on her veranda—to deliver the good news. When informed that she will be awarded several million dollars in compensation, Donna begins to cry. Her tears, however, cannot be read simply as tears of joy. The conversation with Erin makes clear that they are rather tears of relief in the face of immense medical bills. *Erin Brockovich*, therefore, does not conform with formulaic endings of environmental melodrama, »when the hero resolves the narrative problem through decisive action [and it] may appear too pat and glib a response to environmental crises which, in the real world outside the cinema, do not have their loose ends neatly tied up« (Ingram 2). One aspect that is neatly resolved, however, is that of Erin's own story of upward mobility. Not only does she continue working for Masry. She is also awarded a \$2 million check.

References

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