in no way mechanizable labor of giving birth and pregnancy means an escape from bodily alienation (…). In the child, one is naturally confronted with the refusal of the exchange principle […]. But whoever complains about the one-sidedness, who sees the mother only as giver, as sufferer, is wrong – hardly another person has more courage to give in to their feelings, to give without having the equivalent value in mind […]. Only mothers experience the total reversal of societal values on their own body. (Brockmann-Völker, cited in Hagemann-White, 1986[1979], pp. 65–6)

For Brockmann-Völker, mothers accordingly enjoy a privileged access to an experiential realm that imbues them, and only them, with a unique revolutionary potential. Inaccessible to non-mothers, the specific nature of this experience as one outside the logic of exchange turns the maternal into a locus for societal rebirth, a space from which a genuine form of intersubjectivity can be enacted. While to some extent critically discussing these theses and arguing that ‘the real experience of maternal power, maternal creativity and unalienated productive work is only selectively possible,’ Hagemann-White nonetheless also conceded that this experience is characterized by such ‘an explosive power in the face of the existing conditions’ that it can only be subdued by massive misogyny (1986[1979], p. 66).

The concrete practice of this ideal utopian mother–child relationship was often discussed in explicitly somatic, even sexualized terms and focused on the bodily experience of the maternal. The prominent psychoanalyst, publicist, and scholar Bernd Nitzschke, who was associated with the New Left and cofounded the West Berlin-based psychoanalytic journal Luzifer-Amor in 1988, emphatically stressed the need for a mutual corporal coordination between mother and child that would enable a rhythmic harmony between the two bodies in the maternal experience. Invoking Donald Winnicott’s notion of ‘primary maternal pre-occupation,’ Nitzschke maintained that the mother achieves the primary bond with the child with ‘instinctual certainty’ as she, already in pregnancy, experiences a regression toward a state of irrationality, dominated by emotions (Nitzschke, 1985a, pp. 172–3). This primary bond between mother and child, according to Nitzschke, is of a decidedly sexual nature: ‘The notion of a “pure” (non-sexual) mother-love belongs to the most successful self-delusions or screen-memories of occidental culture’ (p. 173).

And indeed, in the 1980s there seemed to be no doubt among German-speaking analysts about the exceptionally erotic character of the mother–child relation. From the sexually gratifying sensations experienced while breastfeeding through the idea of ‘Fruchtbarkeitslust’ (voluptuous delight in one’s fertility) to the perception of semen as mother-milk in the sexual play between man and woman, pregnancy and early motherhood both were now perceived as belonging to the sensual and sexual realm. Across the psychoanalytic community, female reproductive ability moved to center stage in the mid-1980s, with the Giessen-based journal psychosozial (founded in 1978 by the family therapy pioneer Horst-Eberhard Richter) running an issue on ‘Female Fertility’ in 1984 and prominent psychoanalytic scholars as well as practitioners becoming fascinated with the pleasure potential of the early mother–child relationship.