

Review: 'The Ground Beneath My Feet' tracks a woman's tightly wound world falling apart

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At times throughout Austrian filmmaker Marie Kreutzer's arresting psychological character study "The Ground Beneath My Feet," high-powered business consultant Lola (Valerie Pachner) is shown jolted by something we don't notice, but which she clearly senses. Whether speedily walking to a meeting or jogging in the early morning or even sleeping, she'll be triggered into looking around her, then keep going, as if fearful of something that wants to catch up to her or break her concentration.

It's the kind of terrifically small, even missable character touch — the human equivalent of a sports car's clunky shifting of gears or a streaming video hiccupped by buffering — that speaks to this quietly intense gem of a movie's larger story of contemporary ambition disrupted by the distractingly personal. Talented and ambitious, Lola, played with vibrating intelligence by Pachner, needs to compartmentalize her life — her driving ambition, a relationship with her boss, a mentally ill family member — into organized pockets of independence and secretiveness. But what happens when the contents of those pockets spill into the open?

When we meet Lola, who lives in Vienna but commutes to the north coast of Germany as part of a team helping restructure a struggling company, she's at the airport when her paranoid schizophrenic older sister, Conny (Pia Hierzegger), tries to commit suicide. Lola's colleagues believe her to be an orphan, deliberately single and solely focused on work. They know nothing about Conny, but Lola's deception goes both ways — though

always on hand for emergencies and brief visits, Lola pretends not to realize the extent of her sister's inability to care for herself. (Lola dismisses the suicide attempt, an overdose of 120 pills, as a dosage mishap.)

On the job, meanwhile, Lola is a put-together dynamo, readily capable of a "48" — two days' work without sleep — and deft about handling an inconvenient Conny phone call during an office confab. She's convinced of an upcoming promotion, and not just because she and her superior Elise (Mavie Hörbiger) share hotel room time together naked. Lola is great at what she does, but when Elise learns of Conny — after a reality-bending breakdown of Lola's that Kreutzer cagily handles like a diversion into Polanski-circa-"Repulsion" territory — the information colors the pair's relationship. Does it run in the family? Should Lola work less and care for her loved one more? Is Elise looking out for Lola, or thinking about what's best for her staff?

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Kreutzer, who wrote the screenplay, proves especially adept, in conjunction with editor Ulrike Kofler, at the natural suspense of ping-pong between Lola's professional and personal lives, and where the vulnerabilities in one bleed into the other. It's a steady tension that's greatly enhanced by Kreutzer's spatially conscious visual style, reminiscent of classic paranoid thrillers, in which her protagonist's placement within an antiseptic interior or exterior long shot carries subjective pointedness. The narrative isn't always tight, its cringeworthy setbacks and epiphanies more reflective of modern life's seesawing than any determined story arc. But throughout, Kreutzer's direction is a confident, measured, clear-eyed compassion for the desire of any strong-minded woman in today's highly scrutinized, treachery-filled business environment to handle problems and make progress while keeping head, heart and identity in some kind of manageable balance.

To that end, "The Ground Beneath My Feet" is like the pressed, polished companion piece to German writer-director Maren Ade's masterfully eccentric and brilliant 2016 film "Toni Erdmann," which also empathetically dissected a gung-ho female corporate consultant dealing with intrusive family issues. As with that film, the central performance is key, and Pachner — who also stars in Terence Malick's latest, the Cannes-debuted "A Hidden Life" — fully embodies the contradictions and complexities in Lola, whether taking charge of a close-up or relying on the physicality needed for a group scene or wide shot. She makes every expression, each bold move and smoothed-over glitch, part of the whole woman, the light and the dark, the workaholic and the guilt-ridden sister, the performance and the reality. It's as 21st century as portrayals get, and it's a knockout.

'The Ground Beneath My Feet'

In German with English subtitles

Not rated

Running time: 1 hour, 48 minutes

Playing: Starts Aug. 2, Laemmle Monica Film Center, NoHo 7, Playhouse 7