Sympathy for the Devil: Volatile Masculinities in Recent German and American Literatures

by

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Date: March 1, 2011

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of German in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This study investigates how an ambivalence surrounding men and masculinity has been expressed and exploited in Pop literature since the late 1980s, focusing on works by German-speaking authors Christian Kracht and Benjamin Lebert and American author Bret Easton Ellis. I compare works from the United States with German and Swiss novels in an attempt to reveal the scope – as well as the national particularities – of these troubled gender identities and what it means in the context of recent debates about a “crisis” in masculinity in Western societies. My comparative work will also highlight the ways in which these particular literatures and cultures intersect, invade, and influence each other.

In this examination, I demonstrate the complexity and success of the critical projects subsumed in the works of three authors too often underestimated by intellectual communities. At the same time, I reveal the very structure and language of these critical projects as a safe haven for “male fantasies” of gender difference and identity formation long relegated to the distant past, fantasies that continue to lurk within our cultural currencies.
Dedication

for Don and Marilyn Knight and Jan van Treeck
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Introduction

On the back inside cover of the 1999 short story collection *Mesopotamia: Ernst* Geschichten am Ende des Jahrtausends (Serious Stories at the End of the Millennium) is a snapshot of the editor, author Christian Kracht. It is sundown, and a storm gathers on the horizon; Kracht stands in what appears to be a rice field, holding an AK-47 across his body. He is slight and androgynous, with a childlike face and fine blond hair, and he stands awkwardly in a disheveled polo shirt and field jacket with an uncertain grip on the gun. Holding this brutal weapon in a threatening, foreign scene, Kracht nonetheless manages to look harmless, even lost.

The photo echoes the collection’s front cover image, a 1985 painting by Norwegian artist Odd Nerdrum entitled *Water Protectors*, in which three men clad in animal skins and carrying weapons similar to Kracht’s are gathered in front of a similarly ominous landscape. The men exist out of time – perhaps in an apocalyptic future – and are realistically rendered with neo-Baroque clarity that defies modern artistic conventions. They appear hairless, their skin smooth, and the one whose face is turned toward the viewer has a large-eyed, gentle expression that clashes with the brute force implied by the men’s guns. These appear to be M1 carbines, iconic World-War-II-era semi-automatic weapons. Thus, whereas Kracht carries the gun associated with unresolved conflicts of the late twentieth century, the men in the painting bear the arms of a previous generation’s global war.

Both images deliberately present contradictory conceptions of masculinity within the context of a turbulent time. There exists in each portrait both fragility – the potential for
victimhood – and aggression that could quickly engender violent action. This tension pervades the pages between the covers as well, and its ramifications are the subject of this dissertation.

This study investigates how an ambivalence surrounding men and masculinity has been expressed and exploited in Pop literature since the late 1980s, focusing on works by German-speaking authors Christian Kracht and Benjamin Lebert and American author Bret Easton Ellis. I compare works from the United States with German and Swiss novels in an attempt to reveal the scope – as well as the national particularities – of these troubled gender identities and what it means in the context of recent debates about a “crisis” in masculinity in Western societies. My comparative work will also highlight the ways in which these particular literatures (and by extension, their cultures) intersect, invade, and influence each other.

My goal in this examination is twofold: I aim to demonstrate the complexity and success of the critical projects subsumed in the works of three authors too often underestimated by intellectual communities. At the same time, I wish to reveal the very structure and language of these critical projects as a safe haven for “male fantasies” of gender difference and identity formation long relegated to the distant past, fantasies that continue to lurk within our cultural currencies and ultimately prove destructive for men and women alike.

The masculine identities of protagonists in the novels in question are somehow “damaged” or negated, and yet these characters repeatedly lash out at women and other perceived feminine forces. Each novel presents us with a young man who is lost, confused,
broken, and impotent in the midst of a chaotic time and place, be it Manhattan in the late 1980s, the upper echelons of German youth culture in the early 1990s, or even just the tumultuous experience of adolescence as an outsider. Each narrative, told from the young man’s perspective, leads the reader to conclude that the protagonist’s cruel, superficial, and materialist world is ultimately responsible for his angst, fear, and frustration. Thus, the protagonist becomes a victim, and any misogynist violence he perpetrates, whether physical or rhetorical, can be excused as the side effect of a greater evil.

The male fantasies at work in these novels are focused on the victimized young man’s fears and desires, which ultimately turn out to be one and the same: he simultaneously longs for and is terrified of the loss of his tenuous identity through merging with another person emotionally or physically. The merging of individuals into an indefinable, indiscriminate mass, in this negative formulation, is inherently feminine within the structure of the narrative; thus, a woman (or feminine element) is always to blame for the panic, frustration, and failure that follow when a protagonist ventures outside of his shell. Femininity comes to represent all that is dark, wild, seductive, and threatening, whereas masculinity struggles to define itself as a distinct and opposite force: well-ordered, impenetrable, and asexual.

Of course, these misogynist symbols and narrative structures are by no means new. Camille Paglia demonstrated in her controversial study *Sexual Personae* that at the very least, the characterization of femininity as a wild, all-consuming threat to orderly masculine identities is as old as the struggle to create civilization in the midst of uncontrollable nature. Certainly this dichotomy is present in Pythagoras’s Table of Opposites, and its influence is
felt throughout Western literature and culture. Familiar, too, is the character of the effete man possessed by ennui. It is not without reason that the protagonists of Kracht and Ellis have been compared to the dandy of the nineteenth century. What may be surprising is the presence of these archetypes in fictions that are supposedly so new, fresh, and anti-establishment, at a time when the cultural rhetoric has been so thoroughly saturated with feminist political correctness that we have begun to assume gender equality.

The authors I have chosen for my study may all be classified as “Pop” authors; that is to say, they have been included in Pop literary movements in Germany and the United States. I capitalize Pop to distinguish this meaning from its general usage as an abbreviation of “popular,” applied to any work produced for mass consumption. The Pop literature which is the subject of this dissertation enjoyed its peak in the 1980s and 90s, but ultimately its lineage can be traced back as far as the interwar era in central Europe to the birth of Dada. Disillusioned by World War I and believing that high art could no longer express meaning in this new age of destroyed values and uncertainty, fragmentariness and social upheaval, the Dadaists mocked high art by placing its opposites on the pedestal, for example, Hugo Ball’s nonsensical poetry. This reversal was thought to have a greater effect than traditional media. Thus, Dada was fed by the fundamental tenets of Modernism. In turn, Dada’s introduction to the New York art scene paved the way for the advent of Pop Art in the 1950s; thus, from its inception, Pop involved a transatlantic exchange.

Pop Art, with its iconic representatives Andy Warhol, Roy Liechtenstein, and Jasper Johns, is perhaps the best-known and most accessible Pop movement of the twentieth
century. Deliberately anti-intellectual and accessible to the masses, Pop Art presented images and artifacts from popular culture as high art, both revealing art’s status as a commodity product, and also distancing the viewer from the object or image to allow for contemplation of it. Thus the movement made heavy use of irony – in its simplest form, the distance between what is said or shown and what is meant. This is, in a way, the purest version of Pop as a movement across the decades: low culture used as the building materials for high art, and simultaneously commenting on “art” and on popular culture. This tenuous relationship between the work of art and the culture from which it is fashioned is an important factor in the understanding of contemporary Pop literature.

The first Pop literary movement in the United States began just after World War II, when the Beats (Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, etc.) began to write rebellious, often angry poetry and prose as a response to the stagnation, complacency, and conservatism that settled over America in the late 1940s and 50s. Beat works reference free love, drug use, and slang or obscene language as a protest against American conservatism and ignorance. Their focus on youth culture as the seat of revolution was tremendously influential in Germany, though it took some time for Pop to take root in the aftermath of the Frankfurt School’s indictment of the Kulturindustrie (culture industry) as complicit in fascism. Günter Grass, Heinrich Böll, and the rest of the Gruppe 47 dominated the scene with their re-constituted literary humanism. It was not until the 1960s that Rolf Dieter Brinkmann established German Pop literature along with a group of like-minded poets and authors like Hubert Fichte. As in Pop Art and Beat poetry, Brinkmann and his peers use popular culture (music, film, advertising) as raw material, though these early German Pop
writers are more overtly critical of their culture as a whole, in particular the destructive and unrealistic ideals promoted by the media and the injustice of the social structure. This activist side of Pop came to fruition as the 1960s progressed: Leslie Fiedler coined both the terms “postmodernism” and “pop literature” as the first postmodern theories developed in France.

But by the 1980s, Pop had ascended into the intellectualized high art form it initially sought to bring down. Soon intellectual celebrators of Pop such as Diedrich Diedrichsen in Germany voiced concerns that Pop no longer had any revolutionary potential. The hype surrounding the term Pop – which was especially chic in Germany, where literature was still widely expected to promote social change – began to broaden its usage, such that “Pop” came to describe any book by and about the young and hip. When Christian Kracht and his wealthy, well-styled peers arrived on the scene, they bore very little resemblance indeed to Pop of the 1960s. What once had been the revolutionary voice of the outsider, now seemed to be the reactionary voice of the young elite. Critics like Thomas Ernst and Diedrichsen have dismissed 1990s “New Wave” Pop literature as a commercial event rather than a literary movement. I hope to demonstrate in this dissertation that, while the message of Pop may have changed, there is still a social critique present in the “New Wave.”

There are a variety of authors to choose from who exhibit the “male fantasies” discussed above, in the United States and Germany as well as England and France. I have chosen to focus on three authors whose work played a major role in defining the Pop literary
landscape in the 1990s in the United States and Germany: Bret Easton Ellis, Christian Kracht, and Benjamin Lebert.

American author Bret Easton Ellis first caused a stir in 1985 upon the publication of his debut novel, *Less Than Zero*, while he was still a college student. Ellis quickly became the poster child for the “Literary Brat Pack,” a cohort of young and flamboyant Pop authors whose prose was thought, for better or worse, to depict the dizzying realities of youth in 1980s America. Yet Ellis transcends this straightforward reflection of his own demographic in his third novel, *American Psycho*, a controversial satire of consumerism and superficiality. His use of troubled gender binaries in service to his satirical goals marked him as a literary *enfant terrible*, a reputation which has followed him into the present day.

I include Ellis in this study, which has its origins in German literature, theory, and culture, for two reasons. The most concrete of these is that his work had an apparent and substantive influence on Christian Kracht, whose first two novels, *Faserland* and *1979*, are central subjects of my analyses. A comparison between Ellis and Kracht is fruitful to the study of both authors and helps to reveal the pattern of gender symbolism I seek to expose. But perhaps more importantly, Ellis’s inclusion opens the discussion into the realm of transnational literature and culture. Pop as a movement is inherently transnational, born of rapid cultural exchange between Western Europe and the United States. In this era of instantaneous data transfer across a variety of media, we can no longer be said to deal entirely in one national tradition – for what is contemporary German studies without a consideration of American influences, and vice versa? The culture in which we live is to some extent a shared one, across national boundaries. Both Lebert and Kracht, for example,
have spent considerable time in the United States; Swiss-born Kracht has lived all over the
world, to the point that he may well have spent more time in Asia than in Europe. In this
sense, the “new German literature” so sought after in the feuilletons may not be entirely
“German” after all. That said, there is still much to be discovered about German (and
American) experiences in the work of native authors. I will seek to point out national
differences where they are relevant, of interest, or key to understanding the import of the
issues at hand.

Ellis’s work had an obvious impact on young Swiss-German writer Christian Kracht,
who with his timely debut novel Faserland became the face of “New Wave” Pop literature in
1995. Like Ellis, Kracht was singled out to represent a generation of young writers who
wrote about the experience of youth in Germany, both the often grim realities and the
possibilities for revolutionary social change. Also like Ellis, Kracht made for an uneasy
spokesman, reluctant to accept the role or associate with a movement largely defined by the
media. Still, Kracht stood out as a writer of literary Pop and a flamboyant public figure,
remaining in the spotlight through a series of timely publications, including the ensemble
“manifesto” Tristesse Royale, a tongue-in-cheek treatise on the lifestyle aesthetic of the post-
Wall generation. I’ve selected Kracht not only for his centrality to the “New Wave” Pop
phenomenon in Germany, but also for his unmatched complexity among the authors of his
cohort and the striking linkage of gender and social critique in his texts.

The work of Benjamin Lebert also exists within the realm of 1990s German Pop
literature, yet entirely parallel to and separate from that of Kracht. Lebert represents the
increasingly broad and commercialized use of the “Pop” label to describe a young, hip
author with a direct prose style and marketable biography. Aside from sharing an editor with Kracht – the masterful promoter Kerstin Gleba of Kiepenheuer & Witsch – Lebert at first appears to have little in common with Kracht, particularly when one compares the darkly humorous Faserland to Lebert’s light, wistful coming-of-age story, Crazy. Yet just beneath the surface, both authors’ novels share a vision of gendered violence at the hands of an oppressive, feminized society, a conception borrowed from Ellis’s work from years before. Like Ellis, Lebert has crossed the Atlantic with meaningful results, spending time as a lecturer at New York University and enjoying a warm reception in the American press for the English translation of Crazy. The youngest and least controversial of the three authors in question, Lebert begins to demonstrate the range of the patterns I will expose across a long generation from the early 1980s into the late 90s.

Klaus Theweleit’s Männerphantasien (Male Fantasies) provides the theoretical backbone of my study. Theweleit’s psychoanalytical take on masculine identity formation and misogyny in interwar Germany is broad and ambitious. Even as he focuses on a handful of memoirs and novels by members of the Freikorps after World War I – a group of men who would become top-ranking Nazis – Theweleit encourages extrapolations of his theories. The fantasies of male fascists exist in all men: the fears and desires bound up in the struggle to define the self against an increasingly chaotic world. This essentially Modernist dilemma reemerges with striking intensity in the cacophonous 1980s and 90s. The comparison between Theweleit’s authors and my own across the distance of several decades only enhances the ubiquity of these so-called fantasies.
Whenever helpful, I also bring in the work of several theorists who made a great impact on feminist studies in the 1980s and early 90s, in particular Judith Butler, Camille Paglia, and Eve K. Sedgwick. Indeed, it is difficult to approach contemporary gender studies without the inclusion of Butler’s *Gender Trouble* of 1990. Butler’s theory of gender performativity revolutionized the field, and her ideas have been co-opted into everyday discourse, making it possible to understand gender characteristics as choices, be they personal or artistic, rather than innate fact.

Camille Paglia’s *Sexual Personae* appeared in the same year as Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, and in its own way caused just as much controversy. Paglia was celebrated in some circles and vilified in others for suggesting that some elemental truth exists behind the dichotomous gender “performances” reiterated in Western art and literature since time immemorial. For my purposes, it is not this radical assertion which is useful, but rather her explanations of Western gender archetypes. It is possible to allow for Butler’s performativity while acknowledging the incredible scope of our ingrained cultural belief in sexual stereotypes, and I have attempted to do this.

Finally, Eve K. Sedgwick’s 1985 study *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* has provided me with a language for analyzing non-sexual relationships between men in literature, as well as the use of a woman as a vessel through which men may connect with each other. While none of these theorists is new and current, they have been tremendously influential, even beyond the academy. Furthermore, their work arose from the same cultural climate that produced the novels I discuss and drew from the same
ambivalence that began to spread as popular feminism reached its apex and then began to decline. In this sense, their work is particularly appropriate for my study.

With one or two notable exceptions, there was been precious little gender critique of Pop literature in both the United States and Germany. Those few articles that do focus on gender tend to emphasize the positive possibilities of gender “trouble” – a new lack of clear gender roles, a purposeful postmodern androgyny that would indicate the abandonment of the tired old gender performances we know so well. In the case of Bret Easton Ellis, American critics who take up the subject have spent most of their allotted space defending American Psycho against the initial wrath of feminist political groups. I do not set out to argue with these assessments, but rather to demonstrate that misogyny can still exist where gender is “troubled” in the Butlerian sense and that it is in fact compatible with contemporary social satire.

At least since the time of American Psycho’s publication at the start of the 1990s, both political and intellectual modes of feminism have struggled against first backlash, then apathy. After years of saturation in the media and the classroom, audiences and scholars began to close their ears to battle cries against the patriarchy. Feminism, and by extension gender studies, is a victim of its own undoubtedly qualified success.

In Who Stole Feminism?, Christina Hoff Sommers notes a 1992 Time/CNN poll which found that over half of female respondents did not consider themselves feminists, even though most of them acknowledged the need for a women’s movement. She credits what
she calls “gender feminism” – an angry, reactionary faction influenced by the likes of Gloria Steinem and Catharine MacKinnon – with causing the public to view feminism as extreme.

In these texts of the early 1990s, the tone is often bombastic and urgent. In recent years, however, this sense of urgency has all but faded from the debate, if a debate can even be said to still exist. There is widespread usage of the term “post-feminist” to describe our era, indicating that feminism has somehow “succeeded” and has now been relegated to the history books in the same uneasy way as the civil rights movements of the 1960s. The call for gender equality, like that for racial equality between blacks and whites, has become an artificially moot point. This is what comedian and satirist Stephen Colbert is critiquing when he claims not to “see color,” shutting down any discussion of race before it begins on his popular television show.

Indeed, public expressions of concern regarding gender equality have begun to focus on the heterosexual man as potential victim of discrimination. From CNN to The Today Show, talk-news segments question whether young men have been harmed or neglected by the advance of the feminist agenda. Some experts argue that girls’ outperformance of boys at every level of the educational system is a result of decades-long focusing on girls’ needs as a way to “level the playing field.” Christina Hoff Sommers even wrote a book on the subject, aptly titled The War Against Boys (2000), in which she blames the widely publicized “crisis in masculinity” on a societal failure to address the unique needs of boys as they develop.¹

Others fear that our allegedly pro-feminist culture has turned the very concept of masculinity into a politically incorrect taboo. Sociologist Lionel Tiger has led this charge, publishing such studies as *The Decline of Males* well in advance of public interest in the thesis. In recent months, he has appeared unchallenged as a commentator on CNN (discussing the renewed interest in “men’s men” in connection with such television series as AMC’s 1960s period drama *Mad Men*). He also serves on the Board of Advisors of the Foundation for Male Studies, an interdisciplinary group designed to bring together scientists and scholars intent on inspiring respect and appreciation of masculinity as separate from a female-biased “gender studies” model (hence the “male studies” moniker, as “men’s studies” is simply the complement to women’s studies, and thus supports the perceived privileging of feminist viewpoints). The Foundation’s second annual conference will be held in April 2011.

In Germany, young female authors Jana Hensel and Elisabeth Raether recently released a compendium of essays called *Neue deutsche Mädchen* (New German Girls), which explores the two women’s experiences in a supposedly liberated Germany. In her introductory chapter, Hensel criticizes German feminist icon Alice Schwarzer, whose magazine *Emma* shaped the popular women’s movement in that country from its founding in 1977. These days, much to Hensel and Raether’s distress, Schwarzer’s projects are focused on more dramatic issues, such as prostitution, or female circumcision in Africa; a worthy goal, the authors admit, but one does get the impression that Schwarzer feels complacent regarding the completion of her mission on the home front. Hensel quotes Schwarzer with disbelief: “Wir sind doch heute in einer wunderbaren Situation, über die
Karriere von Frauen überhaupt reden zu können! (After all, we are in a wonderful situation that we are able to talk about women’s careers at all!)” (Hensel and Raether 12).

Meanwhile, Hensel and Raether find their noses pressed against a glass ceiling that has only been raised a story or two. They conclude that “Schwarzer und ihre Frauen sind Historie geworden (Schwarzer and her women have become history)” in their acceptance of a perpetual inequality between the sexes, and state their vision for a new feminism that “markiert die Gegenwart als Beginn und nicht als das Ende eines Prozesses (marks the present day as the beginning and not the end of a process)” (Hensel and Raether 15).

Thus, the notion that Western culture is “post-feminist” does not hold up under scrutiny, for the issue of gender equality continues to circulate, rearranged and re-defined. As feminist concerns drift further afield to more urgent problems abroad, concerns about the oppression of men seem to increase. From the academy to the television screen, there is the sense that we have said all that can be said about misogyny, to the point that the very mention of the word does harm to our perception of gender. To do so would be to pick an unnecessary fight, even to vilify masculinity itself.

This climate of exhaustion with feminism – even wariness of it – has coincided with a boom in popular novels by and about men, many of them also part of the wave of Pop literature that began in the 1980s in the United States and quickly spread to Western Europe through the 1990s. These are stories of young (usually privileged, usually white) men’s struggles to define themselves in a postmodern, “post-feminist” world: adrift in a sea of meaningless simulacra and marketing hype, unsure of the ever-changing definitions of
“man” and “woman”, unable to forge meaningful connections with other people irrespective of gender. It is a landscape already familiar to us from Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*: ominous, desolate, absurd. The gravity of the situation varies greatly depending on the author.

But this is a new generation; unlike DeLillo, the new Pop authors have no firsthand experience of an alternative existence, and their narratives are born from the “white noise” of the 70s, 80s, and 90s. I will argue that exhaustion with feminism allows these novels to express anxieties about masculine identities via symbols and narrative structures that are inherently misogynistic, often following time-worn archetypes, largely unnoticed by critics and scholars up to this point. An analysis of this phenomenon is relevant not just to the study of our recent literary and cultural past, but to our present day. The gender portrayals and symbolic structures I discuss continue to be a dominant motif in current literature, film, and television on both sides of the Atlantic. Our interest in violent male victims has proven insatiable, manifesting itself as an obsession with ever more likable serial killers and vampires. This ambivalent portrait of contemporary masculinity remains an unresolved issue and warrants an ongoing examination.
Figure 1: Christian Kracht, *Mesopotamia* (1999). Photo by Joachim Bessing.
Figure 2: *Water Protectors* by Odd Nerdrum, 1985.
Blank Check: Inner Emptiness as Strategy in *Faserland* and *Less Than Zero*

It is a slippery term which no one seems able to put a finger on: What exactly is the “innere Leere (inner emptiness)” which characterizes Pop literature of the 1980s and 90s in the United States and Germany? In his controversial literary history *Lichtjahre*, Volker Weidermann uses the phrase in his entry on author Christian Kracht, but never quite manages to explain it:

"Er [Kracht's narrator] geht auf Partys, feiert, beobachtet, trinkt unaufhörlich und ekelt sich vor einer Welt der Körpergier und Drogensucht, vor einer Welt des Markenfetischismus und der Reichtumsregeln, die die große innere Leere kaum noch zu verbergen vermag, und vor allem vor sich selbst" (Weidermann 302).¹

Weidermann can only offer other vague phrases to help describe this zeitgeist and Kracht’s role in it: “Es beginnt mit einem leichten Unwohlsein (301)…Es wird langsam unheimlich…So ohne Zentrum stürzt er weiter (302)…[Kracht findet] über den radikal subjektiven Blick eine Wahrheit und eine Welt, wie wir sie noch nicht kannten (304).”²

There is a feeling of unease and disorientation, but then a strange and previously unknown truth, an unexpected enlightenment: an apt description, but not a concrete one.

James Annesley, in his study of the American counterparts to Kracht, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture, and the Contemporary American Novel*, begins by acknowledging the indescribability of “blank fiction” and the cultural phenomena which contextualize it:

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¹ “He (Kracht) goes to parties, celebrates, observes, drinks continuously and is disgusted by a world of bodily lust and drug addiction, by a world of brand fetishism and rules of wealth, that can barely conceal the great inner emptiness, and above all by himself.”

² “It begins with a slight malaise…it slowly becomes uncanny…so, without a center, he stumbles onward…[Kracht finds] via a radically subjective viewpoint a truth and a world as we did not yet know it.”
You might not be sure what it is, but you can be sure that it’s out there. Turn on the TV and it’s there….Flick through a rack of CDs and you’ll find it…You must have seen it, even if you’re unable to name it. It’s found in the images of excess and indulgence…tangled up in the violence…part of confessional biographies…You can hear it when Beck sings ‘I’m a loser baby…why don’t you kill me?’ Common sets of themes are being articulated. There’s an emphasis on the extreme, the marginal and the violent. There’s a sense of indifference and indolence. The limits of the human body seem indistinct, blurred by cosmetics, narcotics, disease and brutality…Identifying this culture is one thing, but defining it or explaining it is quite another. It’s easy to recognize this scene, but harder to read it. (Annesley 1)

Annesley concludes the study much as he began it, noting that in this context the term 'blank' seems fitting, offering as it does a 'non-definition', a definition that in the very emptiness of the terminology appears to speak of the problematic nature of the attempt to bring these writers together. 'Blank fictions' thus seems suitable, articulating as it does both reservations about the nature of literary categories while, at the same time, offering a label for a loose affiliation of writers who are engaged in the production of a kind of modern fiction that is flat, ambiguous and problematically blank. (Annesley 137)

The implication of both Anneseley and Weidermann is that the fictions in question can be characterized by vacuity, be it of message, meaning, or moral direction. The blank fiction is a funhouse Hall of Mirrors, simultaneously reflecting and distorting the authors’ world without commentary or discretion in a problematic way. The concept of “innere Leere,” then, is already a judgment about the author himself, and not just the characters and their text. Annesley, for example, takes care to distinguish the authors of blank fiction (among them Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney) from authors generally seen as postmodern – Don Delillo and Thomas Pynchon are his examples. Though he doesn’t make it explicit, his characterization of Ellis and McInerney suggests an ambivalence –
“blank and uncommitted” is his phrase – regarding any sort of “project,” be it social commentary or some more radical politics.

Annesley’s contribution to the discussion of so-called blank fiction is his acknowledgment of the complexities behind this authorial ambivalence, rather than the more common decision to simplify and immediately pass judgment on works which are, “on paper,” as it were, deceptively simple. In this chapter, I will investigate the “innere Leere” within two works of blank fiction, Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less Than Zero* (1985) and Christian Kracht’s *Faserland* (1995). After attempting to formulate a more concrete definition of this internal emptiness (at least that which is present in the work of Ellis and Kracht), I will consider the possibility that “innere Leere” is actually a literary strategy, a pose which links the author’s public persona to the narrator of his text, and which allows both text and author to elude moral judgment.

In 1995, Christian Kracht published a novel that would fan the flames of a decade-long debate in the German feuilletons about the compatibility of literature and “Pop,” that mercurial force which has troubled scholars and critics for most of a century. Though Kracht himself has never identified himself as a Pop author – in fact, he claims not to know what the term means (Philippi & Schmidt) – the media heralded his debut, *Faserland*, as the second coming of German *Popliteratur*, the “New Wave” of youth-driven fiction that ruled the national literary scene for the rest of the 1990s.

*Faserland*’s success and the publicity surrounding its publication must be due in part to the literary atmosphere into which it was born. The reunification of Germany sparked
discussions as to the future, purpose, and identity of a unified German literature. Some post-war generation intellectuals like Maxim Biller and Uwe Wittstock insisted on the need for a sea change, denouncing German literature produced between 1945 and 1989 as predominantly academic, elitist, and unappealing to the average citizen. Biller makes the case for a new focus on broad appeal and entertainment value:

Es gibt keine Literatur mehr. Das, was in Deutschland so heißt, wird von niemandem gekauft und gelesen, außer von Lektoren und Rezensenten, den Autoren selbst und einigen letzten, versprengten Bildungsbürgern…Ich glaube, man kann die Literatur retten…[indem] es wieder anständige Romane gibt. Romane…Die man liebt, die man genauso atemlos und gebannt durchlebt wie eine gute Reportage, einen prima Film. (Biller, qtd. in Ernst 67)

Others balked at this line of thinking, arguing that such a conception of new German literature effectively destroyed the aesthetic possibilities of literary fiction without creating new ones, as did Dada, for example. This call for literature to compete with film, television, and other new media would only degrade literature and perhaps even render it obsolete, removing those qualities which make it unique and adding in elements of the “niveaulosen Medienkultur (standard-less media culture)” (Ernst 68). Suhrkamp editor Christian Döring responded in 1995 with a compendium of work by more traditional contemporary authors. Even the blurb on the inside cover of the book draws a battle line:


3 “There is no literature anymore. What is called that in Germany isn’t bought or read by anyone, aside from editors and reviewers, the authors themselves and a few last, scattered Bildungsbürger (educated citizens)...I believe that one can save literature...(if) there are decent novels again. Novels...That you love, that you live through just as breathlessly as a good news report, an excellent film.”
suhrkamp-Ensemble…vereint sich über die Generationen hinweg zu einem besonderen »Buch« Literaturgeschichte. (Döring Lesen 2, emphasis in original)⁴

Between the lines of this advertisement for Suhrkamp’s publishing projects is an attempt to distinguish Suhrkamp and its authors from the other contemporary German literature, namely **Popliteratur** and its direct antecedents, which unlike Suhrkamp’s offerings are quite welcome in newspapers and on television, not to mention at other publishing houses, most notably Kiepenheuer & Witsch. The reference to a unified, cross-generational history of literature assumedly distances Suhrkamp’s volume from literature that engages with, or borrows from, the aforementioned media culture. Döring underlined this message by editing another volume that same year, this one a collection of essays entitled **Deutschsprachige Gegenwartsliteratur: Wider ihre Verächter** (German-Speaking Contemporary Literature: Against Its Opponents), in which critics address the “crisis” in German literature.

Once again, the inside front cover distills the message:

> In den Debatten um moralische und politische Ansprüche an Literatur, in den Streitereien um eine zeitgemässe Ästhetik des Schreibens zwischen »Realismus« und »Avantgarde«, »Unterhaltung« und »Langeweile« und in der Neubewertung des Buches macht sich auch die veränderte gesellschaftliche Grundstimmung Deutschlands bemerkbar – aber mit ästhetischen und kritischen Kategorien gestritten wird immer weniger. (Döring Gegenwartsliteratur 2)⁵

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⁴ “The place allocated to contemporary literature in the programs of German-speaking publishers, on the shelves of book stores or in the programming on television and the folds of the feuilletons – it is disappearing. The **edition suhrkamp** has opened this space for literature from the beginning – it protects it and accepts that which hasn’t for a long time found a place anywhere else…The many-faceted and many-voiced edition suhrkamp ensemble unites across the generations for a special “book” of literary history.”

⁵ “In the debates over moral and political demands on literature, in the squabbling over a timely aesthetic of writing between “realism” and “avant-garde,” “entertainment” and “boredom” and in the re-valuing of the book, the fundamentally changed social mood of Germany makes itself known – but there is less and less of a fight over aesthetic and critical categories.”
Döring’s valid critique of the literary debate, then, is that the aesthetic and critical aspects of contemporary literature – those categories which traditionally lent a work of art value – are ignored in the midst of an abstract argument over Literature itself’s face and function in German society. Yet his criteria inherently privilege the traditional over the cutting-edge, and the intellectual over the mainstream, as he suggests that these aesthetic and critical aspects are no longer present in literature that might be described as “entertaining” or “avant-garde.”

The question is whether the work of Christian Kracht and his fellow “New Wave” writers can challenge Döring’s assertion. Pop, as its origins in Dada, Pop Art, and Beat poetry show, has long been driven by aesthetic concerns as well as the need for social critique. It is not just for publicity that Rainald Goetz slashes his forehead with a razor blade at his reading for the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize in 1983, after alluding to Günter Grass as the “Chefpeinsack (chief idiot)” in the “Peinsackpolonaise (idiot conga line)” that is German high culture in the 70s and 80s. Goetz cuts a hole into his head – literally and figuratively – in hopes of forgetting the kinds of concerns expressed in canonical German literature after the Second World War. It is an act of protest.

The literature that is labeled “Pop” in Germany in the 1990s for the most part does not approach Goetz’s targeted anger; instead, an indefinite malaise – the “inner emptiness” – pervades the increasingly inflated genre, leading critics like Thomas Ernst to dismiss the whole group as aimless and ineffectual, pure fluff marketed as revolutionary by profit-hungry publishing houses. There is no doubt plenty of truth in this assessment; as Ernst explains, once the media got hold of the world “Pop,” any book that was young, hip, and connected
to other media (music, journalism, etc.) became Pop literature. However, both debates – on the definition of Pop as well as the fate of contemporary German literature – tend to ignore the possibility of a subtle, meaningful Pop novel. Thus, when one appeared – Christian Kracht’s *Faserland* – critics on both sides largely missed the critical project of Kracht’s work, and focused instead on its cultural significance as a book about young, hip elites in the “Berlin Republic.” It was for this representation of a generation in transition that *Faserland* was drawn into the spotlight.

Ten years earlier in the United States, Bret Easton Ellis began his literary career with a similar impact. *Less Than Zero*, released in 1985, came to represent for critics the generation that was coming of age at the time, and more generally the hedonistic spirit of the decade, a conflation strengthened by the release of a star-studded film version only two years later. Ellis and his cohort of young authors were grouped into a “Literary Brat Pack” parallel to the ensemble of young actors who dominated the box offices in films like *The Breakfast Club*. These are the authors who produce Annesley’s blank fictions, and their reception is predictable: embraced by younger readers and frowned upon by older critics.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the most descriptive references to a blank internal landscape in the fiction of Kracht, Ellis, and their contemporaries have come in the form of criticism, if not downright accusation. The spare prose and careful attention to brand names; the unflinching (and perhaps uncritical) portrayals of violence, drug abuse, and casual sex; a general lack of direction on the part of the youthful narrator coupled with a sense of
impending doom⁶: all of this has raised critics’ eyebrows on both sides of the Atlantic.

David Clarke notes that *Faserland* “has been regarded by many as a novel of ‘Affirmation statt Kritik (affirmation instead of criticism)’ (Freund 12), exalting a self-indulgent consumer lifestyle.” Kracht, he says, was initially “accused of producing the literary equivalent of a ‘Hochglanz-Magazin (glossy magazine)’ (Piepgras). Such was the offence [sic] caused by the novel, one reviewer reports, that some salespeople even refused to market it to bookshops (Gross, ‘Aus dem Leben’)” (Clarke 36).

There seems to have been less politicized outrage, and more head-shaking dismissal, over Bret Easton Ellis’s debut in the US media. Nicki Sahlin summarizes the reception of *Less Than Zero* in newspapers and magazines from *Newsweek* to *The New York Times*: “Ellis’s writing is most often viewed as a kind of effortless self-indulgence… [one reviewer] claims that *Less Than Zero* ‘…ends up feeling more like a “60 Minutes” documentary on desperate youth than a full-fledged novel.’ A critic less responsive to the inherent interest of Ellis’ material characterizes the novel as ‘a rather juvenile attempt to capture the sense of purposelessness that seems to afflict so many young people these days’” (Sahlin 24). Youth, consumerism, purposelessness, self-indulgence: the charge is that these texts – and by implication, their authors as well – are empty in the sense that they are artistically worthless, amoral, thoughtless, immature. I find evidence which contradicts the notion that either novel was a thoughtless endeavor. To the contrary, I find the portrayal of blank, directionless characters to be a carefully executed strategy on the part of the authors.

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⁶ James Annesley discusses this “apocalyptic” trend in his chapter called “Decadence” (Annesley 108-10).
I am certainly not the first, by far, to give Kracht and Ellis more credit than some of their initial reviewers; for example, Clarke goes on to say that “in the few intervening years, both reviewers and critics have ventured to correct this initial reception,” while Sahlin defends Less Than Zero as “stylistically accomplished, carefully crafted, close to the bone in its use of telling detail” (Clarke 36, Sahlin 24). Annesley deals with Ellis as part of the “hierarchy of American literature,” and indeed his works, particularly American Psycho, are well-established objects of scholarly debate; a search in the MLA International Bibliography for “Bret Easton Ellis” turns up 91 entries.7

In any discussion of Kracht and Ellis, I think it is important to remember that, no matter how dependent their work is on popular and youth culture, Pop is an intentional literary style. Both are highly educated in the liberal arts – Kracht at elite international boarding schools and Sarah Lawrence College, Ellis at Bennington College – and their artful, allusive prose descends from the likes of Joan Didion (Ellis’s mentor). Their similarly spare, accessible language and subject matter are conscious artistic choices, rather than signs of limitation or (purely) the desire to sell books. Thus, I will pursue my exploration of the “inner emptiness” as a conscious choice, not just a cultural side-effect or “sign of the times” in the era of America’s Generation X, Germany’s Generation Golf8. In fact, this view of “inner emptiness” as a cultural inevitability naturalizes a phenomenon that warrants examination.

7 As of April 19, 2009.
8 The term “Generation Golf” comes from a Volkswagen ad campaign, and was used by Florian Illies as the title of his 2000 essay/memoir, which describes his generation of disaffected, materialistic West Germans and their shared cultural memories.
A discussion of the importance of these patterns is, I think, aided by a discussion of the authors themselves, or rather, their public personae. It is quite common for the author to cast a large shadow over his work in contemporary fiction; in the age of 24-hour media and internet access, it is not unusual to see an author’s face and hear his voice before ever picking up his book. This phenomenon extends far beyond blank fiction – Toni Morrison and Stephen King, Bernhard Schlink and Günter Grass are just as recognizable, if not more, to their respective publics – but to their own readership, Kracht and Ellis loom particularly large in the experience of their work.

Torsten Liesegang describes the late-nineties German scene of which Kracht was a part: “The Popliterat became a pop star, promoted as a young and flexible media worker involved in different sectors of cultural production: as gag writer for late-night comedy shows, as music promoter, as journalist for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, or even as DJ” (Liesegang 262). Weidermann takes this appraisal one step further, nearly equating Kracht with Faserland’s narrator and devoting more time to the understanding of Kracht’s persona than that of his characters: “die Vermutung liegt nahe, dass der Autor damit auch sich selbst beschrieben haben könnte (the suspicion is always at hand, that the author could have described himself)” (Weidermann 303). Of course, this is a particularly strong temptation with Kracht in retrospect, since much of his more recent work is presented as non-fiction travel reportage, with himself as the narrator.

Similarly, James Annesley describes the “blank scene” cultivated by writers Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney, whose common experience in New York City “provided the material for their bratpack novels,” which were marketed together by a network of
publishers and media outlets (Annesley 3). Sahlin notes that indeed, before the publication of *American Psycho*, “Ellis’s fiction is not generally regarded as a genuinely fictional, or even fictitious creation” (Sahlin 24). The assumption so often made by the everyday reader of Kracht or Ellis, at least in regard to their earlier novels, is that the authors themselves are narrating their fictions. This elision is prevalent and, I believe, intentional. Kracht operates within a commercialized popular literature that capitalizes on the personae of authors and the popular readers’ identification of the author with his protagonist (other examples of this phenomenon include Benamin Lebert and Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre). Barthes’s “death of the author” may still hold water for some intellectuals, but not for the average reader of bestselling novels. Finally, as Camille Paglia contends, “[b]ehind every book is a certain person with a certain history. I can never know too much about that person and that history. Personality is western reality” (Paglia 34). With this in mind, a closer look at the public personae of these two authors – that is, the person and history they present for us readers to see – will bring us closer to an understanding of the potential functions of “inner emptiness” as a pose in the novels in question.

The official website of Bret Easton Ellis’s recent novel, *Lunar Park*, advertises without actually mentioning the novel’s name. A stylized image of Ellis’s face, split down the middle and shadowed on one side, looms up from the bottom of the screen, between two columns of biographical data for two men named Bret Easton Ellis (see Fig. 4). There are small differences between the two Ellises; one weighs fifty pounds more, is divorced and has a child, while the other is slimmer and single. One went to Bennington College, the
other to Camden College. An avid Ellis fan will be able to pick out which one is the real Ellis, and which one is the protagonist of *Lunar Park* (Ellis is single and went to Bennington; Camden is a fictional college often featured in his novels), but the effect is somewhat uncanny (Rabb).

Ellis’s career, like that of his German contemporary, Christian Kracht, has followed a trajectory that began with coming-of-age novels which have been described as “eher populär als widerständisch”9 (Möckel 12); Ellis’s first novel, *Less Than Zero*, is touted on the back cover as “Catcher in the Rye for the MTV generation.” Damaged young men stumble through the wasteland of their modern world and narrate their journey in a spare, desolate style. It was initially easy to associate these authors with their characters; but it is essential not to forget, as Ellis reminds us on his website, that author and narrator, while connected, should not be equated with each other. In a way, the authors’ public personae can be seen as an extension of their artistic creation (the narrator); or, conversely, the narrator is a kind of extended persona we might attribute to the author – a partial and deliberately controlled expression of his personality.

If anything, Kracht exceeds his role model in his creation of a stylized public persona which rivals even his best written work. It is, significant that Kracht is the son of Axel Springer’s right-hand man and himself a lifestyle journalist, and thus an experienced student of the popular press.10 Kracht did a television interview with Harald Schmidt after his second novel’s release; he appeared in an ad campaign for upscale clothing store Peek &

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9 “more popular than oppositional”
10 See Clarke 36, Liesegang 262, Möckel 7-9, Weidermann 300-01.
Cloppenburg with fellow writer/phenomenon Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre, for which the
two were interviewed in *Die Zeit*. But Kracht isn’t a media hog; rather, he appears quite
infrequently, just often enough to sustain his image as elite and mysterious. On the other
hand, he has an easily accessible MySpace page (the page features a picture of Kracht
pointing a gun at the camera while standing in a traditional Bavarian-style “Stube” (Fig. 3),
has a pink background, and includes the likes of Werner Herzog, Allen Ginsberg, and Slavoj
Zizek in his “top forty”), not to mention his own website, christiankracht.com.

Indeed, christiankracht.com reads like an extended and highly specialized
advertisement for Kracht himself as much as for his books, aimed at lovers of the exotic,
decadent, materialistic, and cool. Notable are the unattributed and out-of-context quotes
which appear on the site’s homepage, a new one every time the page is loaded: sometimes
they are literary or philosophical quotations, and other times they are snippets from esoteric
instruction manuals or cookbooks, the point being presumably that all texts are created
equal, or equally meaningful (i.e., meaningless).

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11 “Herr Kracht, Sie geben normalerweise keine Interviews. Warum nicht? (Mr. Kracht, you don’t normally give
interviews. Why not?)
Stuckrad-Barre: Weil es ihn langweilt. (Because it bores him.)
Kracht: Und ich bin ja sehr reich.” (And I’m really rich, after all.) From “Wir tragen Größe 46.”
12For example: “Frosting: 2 1/2 cups confectioner’s sugar
1/8 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
1 stick soy margarine, softened
In a medium bowl, combine the sugar, cocoa powder, and margarine. Mix until creamy.”

Or: “The selfsame sport that crowns the day
Of many a Syrian shepherd’s son,
Beguiles the little lads at play
By night in stately Babylon”
[from Eugene Field’s poem “Hi-Spy”]

Perhaps Kracht’s most telling performance is his role in the “Popkulturelles Quintett,” comprised of Kracht, Joachim Bessing, Eckhart Nickel, Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre, and Alexander von Schönburg. The five authors apparently spent several days together in the Hotel Adlon, where they recorded and transcribed their conversations on popular culture and the state of their generation. The transcription, which Bessing edited, was published as Tristesse Royale: Ein Manifest in 1999. Of course, the authenticity of this “transcription” is beyond questionable, but the aura which the manuscript projects around the five participants – and Kracht in particular – seems to have had a true effect on public perception of them.\(^\text{13}\) Indeed, at the time there were reviews of Tristesse in all the major German feuilletons, some celebratory, many critical, even prompting Joachim Bessing to publish a defense of his volume called “Alles am Dandy ist müde (Everything About the Dandy Is Tired)” in Welt (Kittlaus).

The most provocative remarks in Tristesse come from Alexander von Schönburg, who asserts, for example, that the crippling boredom and inauthenticity of his cohort might only be cured by the excitement of world war: “Wäre das hier Cambridge und nicht Berlin, und wäre es jetzt der Herbst des Jahres 1914 und nicht der Frühling des Jahres 1999, wären wir die ersten, die sich freiwillig meldeten” (Bessing 138).\(^\text{14}\) Kracht, by contrast, says relatively little in Tristesse in comparison to the others, but the comments he does make are nearly all ironic to the point of meaninglessness. For example, his exchange with Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre about the status of marriage in their generation:

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\(^\text{13}\) Literary critics also cite Tristesse as a means of interpreting the intentions of Kracht and his cohort: Clarke 37f., Liesegang 267-8.

\(^\text{14}\) “If this were Cambridge and not Berlin, and if it were the fall of the year 1914 and not the spring of the year 1999, then we’d be the first to volunteer.”
BENJAMIN V. STUCKRAD-BARRE Aber an und für sich kommt die Heirat heute auch als Rebellion gegen die Rebellion in Frage (But marriage today comes up as a rebellion against rebellion).

CHRISTIAN KRACHT Die Rebellion gegen die Rebellion wäre eine Reaktion. Also ist das Heiraten ein reaktionärer Akt (The rebellion against rebellion would be a reaction. So marriage is a reactionary act).

BENJAMIN V. STUCKRAD-BARRE Absolut (Absolutely).

CHRISTIAN KRACHT Also ein konservativer Akt (So, a conservative act).

BENJAMIN V. STUCKRAD-BARRE Stimmt genau (Exactly right).

CHRISTIAN KRACHT Aber dass heiraten konservativ ist, das wissen wir doch nun schon länger (But we've known that marriage is conservative for a while now). (48)

Twice he reads from magazine articles, as if channeling the uncomfortable comedy routines of Andy Kaufman. Once he reads from a few pages of Stern which he has been using to soak up sweat in his expensive shoes (Bessing 94). The second reading is from an advertising blurb about the Galeries Lafayette department store, essentially a numbing list of departments and their descriptions (Bessing 124). All this amounts to a kind of performance art, a collage of creative writing, interview quotes, photography, internet expression, and the occasional public appearance, all of which come together to form Kracht’s public persona.

A “Pop” author shunned by the Popkulturelles Quintett, Benjamin Lebert appears to parody Kracht’s larger-than-life persona in his 2006 novel Kannst du, in which the protagonist, himself a writer, encounters a flamboyantly weird Swiss author at a writers’ retreat. This egotistical author, Jean Greveiller, keeps a young girl as a kind of sinister concubine and occasionally wields a saber, when he isn’t making pronouncements about the virtues of the Kashmir region or about the service in obscure luxury hotels. Even the physical description of Greveiller sounds like Kracht:

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15 Kaufman was famous for pushing his audience’s tolerance for irony, putting them on until they couldn’t tell what was a joke anymore and what was real: for example, his own extended, deadpan reading from The Great Gatsby. Kaufman also played with the possibilities of his public persona, developing an all-too-realistic obsession with “Inter-Gender Wrestling” and a public feud with wrestler Jerry Lawler that played out on Late Night with David Letterman.

Lebert’s protagonist resents Greveiller and eventually snaps, attacking Greveiller and destroying his fine possessions with a relish one might imagine the author shares: “Nochmal trat ich ihn! Noch mal! Und ein weiteres Mal! Seine Lippen entfuhr ein kaum wahrnehmbares Stöhnen (I kicked him again! Again! And another time! A barely perceptible moan escaped his lips)” (Lebert 199).

It appears that Kracht himself is the ultimate poseur, a modern dandyish public figure to rival Oscar Wilde. Indeed, Camille Paglia’s comments about Wilde could just as well describe Kracht: “Arrogantly turning life into public theater,” he is “a master of mass media” who “project[s] himself internationally as the ultimate aesthete” (Paglia 512). David Clarke picks up on this analogy, claiming that the Popkulturelles Quintett “recall the dandies of the nineteenth century in England and France, who sought to distinguish themselves from the rest of society…by means of a stylistic ‘signature’” (Clarke 38). That this similarity is an intentional pose, however, seems to escape Clarke, who further notes that

Joachim Bessing has defended *Tristesse Royale* against the charge of dandyism on the grounds that those involved do not resemble these historical dandies in their choice of attire. After all, he argues, he and his friends do not wear ruffs, Parma violets in their button holes, or extravagant jewellery (“Alles am Dandy”). However, this defence merely confuses one historical permutation of dandyism with the general strategy that lies at its heart. (Clarke 38)

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16 “He had on a beige linen suit and a white shirt. A thin brown scarf was slung loosely around his neck. He was short, quite thin and delicate…and even so he beamed something enormously attractive. Wealth, elegance. Also something from a bygone era. And then there was something boorish, wild in his blue eyes. He read the newspaper with his legs crossed.”
In fact, this “defense” actually seems like a mockery of those who would try in vain to take the Quintett seriously and at face value: Bessing deliberately misunderstands the charge of dandyism as a literal reincarnation of Wilde and his fellows. The very point, that appearance and aesthetics are of utmost importance, is intentionally on display in Bessing’s comment. The authors’ ironic insistence on their own blank superficiality provides a kind of guide for decoding “inner emptiness” as an ironic pose.

Perhaps Volker Weidermann sheds the most light on Kracht’s persona – and its relationship to his blank fiction – in his characterization of the author. “‘Klein und weich,’ hat Christian Kracht geschrieben, als er in einem Fragebogen erklären sollte, wie ihn seine Freunde beschreiben würden. Klein und weich (Small and soft, wrote Christian Kracht, when asked to explain in a questionnaire how his friends might describe him. Small and soft)” (Weidermann 300). After describing Kracht’s purportedly wealthy background, he notes that “[kann] aber auch sein, dass das nicht stimmt, denn Christian Kracht ist der wohl komplizierteste Ironiker der deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur. Was wahr ist und was nicht, weiß nur er selbst. Und auch das scheint manchmal nicht sicher.”17 Then a bit later comes a thoughtful interjection, Weidermann’s first impression upon meeting Kracht: “Merkwürdiger Typ. Sehr blond, sehr klein, verkleidet als Popper, als es schon lange keine mehr gab (Strange guy. Very blond, very small, disguised as a Popper when there hadn’t been any for a long time)” (Weidermann 301). Notice that Kracht is described as “disguised” – as if his “Popper” image, i.e. “small and soft,” were a kind of costume, a deception, a pose.

17 “It could also be that this isn’t true, because Christian Kracht is probably the most complicated ironist in contemporary German literature. What is true and what isn’t, only he knows. And even that sometimes seems unsure.”
Weidermann sees something suspicious about that “small and soft,” as he repeats it; and his assertion in the next breath that Kracht is German literature’s “most complicated ironist” might lead one to believe that the pose of superficial, melancholic “Popper,” the assurance that Kracht is “small and soft,” is all an ironic ruse. Especially considering that, as Weidermann mentions, the “Popper” style is well out of date by the time Kracht begins his literary career. After all, he is ten years later than Ellis, and the entire “youth” scene conjured by the Popkulturelles Quintett seems to be directed at the authors’ contemporaries, most of whom are well on their way to middle age by 1999. If Kracht’s narrator may be taken as a similar ironic construction, then his own “inner emptiness” – which, as we have seen, is more accurately described as an external pose of emptiness – may also carry an ironic connotation of “small and soft” harmlessness. Under this construction, it would be possible for any sort of potentially harmful personality force to be lurking underneath the surface -- in my model, for example, Theweleit’s “soldier male.”

*Faserland* represents a complex, sensitive, and ultimately effective attempt in a German text to establish the “innere Leere” as a self-reflexive cultural pose. Indeed, the author seems unusually aware of emptiness as pose, as his protagonist’s now trademark vacuity overlays a teeming core of fear, anger, and desire which Kracht reveals with subtle intentionality. Though Kracht’s strategy borrows heavily from Bret Easton Ellis’s early work
as I will demonstrate with my reading of Less Than Zero – he ultimately surpasses Ellis with a uniquely German “argument” for his narrator.\(^\text{18}\)

While Volker Weidermann is the first to seize on the term’s significance in Lichtjahre, it is Faserland’s nameless protagonist who first utters the words “innere Leere” as a means of describing his friend Rollo’s family: “Es liegt in Rollos Familie, dass sie diese innere Leere haben, die daher kommt, dass alle das Beste wollen und sich dann irgendwo festfahren…Da kommt keiner mehr heraus, aus diesem Zwang” (Kracht 144).\(^\text{19}\) Thus, Kracht’s narrator establishes the “innere Leere” as a tragic condition, a burden upon a sensitive, young, wealthy trendsetter like Rollo, who will soon drown himself like a Romantic hero for whom this superficial world has proven “einfach zuviel (simply too much)” (Kracht 145).

Of course, the irony of this comment lies in the fact that no figure in Faserland is emptier – or, we are led to conclude, more tragic – than the narrator himself. After all, he too will perhaps commit himself to a watery grave, after a successful escape into Switzerland and a failed attempt to heal his German self at the burial site of that simultaneous practitioner and critic of decadence, Thomas Mann. It is this narrator’s thoughts to which we are listening; his perception which has led us on a tour of Germany and of his own absurd existence. No matter how unsympathetic he is, it is an uphill struggle not to sympathize with a first-person narrator, especially after learning his vulnerabilities, his childhood traumas, his dreams. Of course, this kind of emotional background, as well as the

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\(^{18}\) It is a generally accepted assertion that Kracht looks to Ellis as a role model in both style and content; Magret Möckel mentions this in her volume on Faserland (Möckel 17), and Kracht acknowledges it in an interview for Welt Online (Poschardt). One critic for the Frankfurter Rundschau has even suggested (quite unfairly, I believe) that Kracht’s similarity to Ellis borders on plagiarism (Hartwig).

\(^{19}\) “It runs in Rollo’s family, that they have this inner emptiness, that comes from the fact that they all want the best and then get stuck somewhere…nobody can ever get out of this restraint.”
tragic and ultimately sentimental gesture of suicide by drowning, hints at a turmoil beneath
the glassy surface, the “too much” hidden somewhere in the blank internal landscape we are
encouraged to accept as the protagonist’s inescapable fate.

Even before the first chapter begins, we see evidence of this duality. Kracht
introduces his novel with two epigrams: the first quotes Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnameable:*
“…und schon findest du dich machtlos, überhaupt je wieder etwas tun zu können (and
already your find yourself powerless to do anything at all ever again).” The second is a line
from a song by 1980s indie-pop group The Would-Be-Goods: “Give me, give me – pronto –
Amaretto” (Kracht 11). Already, we are presented with a hint that some unnamed but
seemingly tragic internal struggle eats at the protagonist beneath a surface of hedonistic
superficiality.

On the one hand, the narrator’s emptiness is apparent, excessive, and even
thematized by Kracht in the text. The young man’s superficiality, his careful attention to and
reverence of certain brand names, is perhaps his most defining feature, at least according to
the *Königerläuterungen* of the novel and to the majority of reviews and debates concerning
*Faserland’s* value (or potential toxicity). According to David Clarke, the narrator’s identity is
“defined in terms of a consumer *habitus,* by claiming to observe such integrity and
distinctiveness in the consumer lifestyles of others. In the Lacanian model of narcissism, the
subject uses others as a mirror in which he or she can reassure himself or herself of his or
her own wholeness” (Clarke 42). The narrator and his peers are judged and described based
on their accessories and brand loyalties: lower-level businessmen are insulted as wearers of
“Swatch-Understatement Uhren, die sie…im Dutyfree in Bangkok gekauft haben (Swatch
understatement watches that they bought in the duty-free store in Bangkok)” (Kracht 64), while the protagonist feels compelled to tell us he wears Brooks Brothers shirts rather than Ralph Lauren. Clarke calls this “the practice of distinction through modes of consumption,” a practice which, coupled with a fastidious attention to detail, marks the narrator as a sort of modern-day Dandy, as Clarke has shown (Clarke 38).²⁰

Anke Biendarra describes this narrator as a postmodern flaneur, a wandering spectator searching for some image or experience to complete his fractured self (Biendarra 167). This would explain the narrator’s inner emptiness as a literary strategy, and indeed, the incompleteness of the narrator’s identity is evident in the text. His head is a half-empty jumble of brand names, slogans and TV jingles which are tangled up in his thought processes. Any other fact is bound to be misremembered, exemplified by the narrator’s belief that Walther von der Vogelweide is a painter and his vague memories of great German novels read in school. Even more pronounced is his apparent inability to judge character or intentions in social interactions. Repeatedly he runs into acquaintances he remembers fondly, but who don’t seem to recognize him at all. Most notably, Alexander, supposedly a very close friend, enters the Frankfurt bar where the narrator has been sitting and does not notice him. “Vielleicht habe ich mich so verändert, daß er mich nicht erkennt, vielleicht liegt es daran (Maybe I’ve changed so much that he doesn’t recognize me, maybe that’s it)” (Kracht 81). This calls the sincerity of his friendships with Nigel, Alexander and Rollo into question, but the narrator seems completely unaware of a possible discrepancy between his perceptions and those of the other person.

²⁰ See also Liesegang 267-8
Empty, too, is the narrator’s heart, or so it seems at first; he loses interest in women as soon as they open their mouths (i.e., when Karin speaks he never pays attention), and his only abiding love is for a completely fictitious, imagined version of Isabella Rossellini. Even this is more of a fixation on her surfaces: her nose, the one imperfect tooth. “Und dann würde ich mit meinen Händen Isas Beine anfassen und ihren Bauch und ihre Nase” (Kracht 57). The narrator keeps this daydream, too, at a distance: “ich denke nicht direkt an sie, sondern lasse sie am Rand meiner Gedanken auftauchen, ohne ihr näherzutreten oder mit ihr zu sprechen, ohne sie anzusehen” (Kracht 58). He steals from his friends – Alexander’s Barbour jacket, Rollo’s car – and ultimately betrays Rollo by leaving him on the dock, depressed and overdosing on Valium.

A general lack of regard for – or failure to notice – the inner lives of others characterizes the narrator, as does his inability to understand his own emotional states. Twice the narrator fights back tears without pausing to figure out why, except for some vague nostalgia that to him does not seem worth explaining until the very end of the novel. When he discovers that Rollo is dead (and, surely, that he could have prevented it), all he can think about is Rollo’s car, and how long it might sit at the airport where he left it.

But what of those tears? A truly empty person wouldn’t fight back tears at the memory of his childhood summers on Sylt, would he? Rollo, too, was weeping as the narrator walked away from him on the dock. Rollo’s pain is apparent, he drowns himself

\[21\] Of course, being completely self-unaware, the narrator believes that this isn’t a pattern. In regards to another woman he can’t/won’t listen to, Varna: “Ich habe ihr nie zugehört, obwohl ich sonst eigentlich allen zuhöre, weil ja alles irgendwie interessant ist” (Kracht 73).

\[22\] “And then I would touch Isa’s legs and her belly and her nose with my hands”

\[23\] “I don’t think about her directly, but rather let her surface on the edge of my thoughts, without coming closer to her or speaking to her, without looking at her’’
after all, and yet the narrator sees in him an “inner emptiness.” Clearly, there are thoughts and emotions somewhere beneath the glossy surface: intense, unwanted, and threatening, just barely controlled by a carapace of coolness and superficiality. Perhaps the inner emptiness isn’t internal at all.

Klaus Theweleit, in his ambitious two-volume study Männerphantasien (Male Fantasies), outlines a strikingly similar mechanism of control for a certain class of men he labels “soldatische Männer (soldier males),” mostly members of the Freikorps who later became high-ranking Nazis. Theweleit’s soldier males are incapable of deep relationships with other people – and ultimately develop violent, sociopathic tendencies – because of their inability to cope with their simultaneous desire for closeness and fear of dissolution and identity loss. Theweleit seems to implicate by extension these men’s entire generation (and beyond); indeed, Barbara Ehrenreich notes in her foreword to the English edition of the second volume, that “Theweleit forces us to acknowledge [that] these acts of fascist terror spring from irreducible human desire” (Ehrenreich xi-xii). Thus, I believe it is appropriate to apply his model of deadly, failed masculinity to a contemporary subject; as Ehrenreich rightly mentions, fascism is not the only system in which “soldier males” exist; indeed, they hold positions of power in the here and now. I would argue that the soldier male is even more prevalent than that; he doesn’t need fame or power to thrive, just a (sub)culture that is organized to support his patterns of behavior.

Paradoxically, it seems that the constructed “innere Leere” in blank fiction is actually an ideal complement to Theweleit’s soldier-male model of inner turmoil. Indeed, this construction exemplifies the duality Kracht hints at throughout Faserland: the blankness is
actually not internal, but rather the exoskeleton which holds in the desire for closeness, the fear of identity loss, and the rejection of feminine nature that form a molten core always threatening to explode.

This conception of the masculine persona is not unique to Theweleit; Camille Paglia describes a similar model in which men are threatened with dissolution and identity loss in the face of female sexuality and other engulfing forces; in her model, men are Apollonian, women Dionysian. “Melting and union are Dionysian; separation and individuation, Apollonian” (Paglia 30). She also connects material culture to a kind of Apollonian (read: masculine) exoskeleton: “The teeming multiplicity of capitalist products is an Apollonian correction of nature. Brand names are territorial cells of western identity. Our shiny chrome automobiles, like our armies of grocery boxes and cans, are extrapolations of hard, impenetrable western personality” (Paglia 37). Hence, a Barbour jacket, a Triumph car, a pair of Rayban sunglasses with reflective lenses – all are part of the “blank male” exoskeleton.

The protagonist of Faserland fits Theweleit’s model astonishingly well in several key aspects. The man Theweleit describes is obsessed with maintaining the boundary between himself and others, and between himself and the outside world – a serious manifestation of the supposedly German insistence that “Ordnung muss sein.” Theweleit describes a kind of exoskeleton or body armor erected as a makeshift defense against anything perceived as invasive, uncontrolled, or feminine (which is associated with flowing, messiness, boundary

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24 Clarke attributes a similar construct, in which consumer goods are used as the only means of setting up an illusory identity, to Baudrillard (Clarke 40); and indeed, this basic concept of identity construction through material things is a major tenet of postmodernist thought.
25 “There must be order”
transgressions). The exoskeleton keeps these forces, which both seduce and repulse the man, at bay, while simultaneously holding in the seething mush of his own insides, the flood of emotions and desires that also threaten his well-controlled world internally. Letting out this turmoil is dangerous, both for the man and for those around him; as Theweleit says, “wenn der Mann selber fühlt…dann ist alles andere vernichtet (Whenever a man begins to feel…all else is destroyed)” (Theweleit I 207, emphasis in original).26

Our protagonist is certainly no soldier; he has not been through brutal training, and indeed his physical prowess and the likelihood of his picking up a weapon seem quite low. But he does seem to share the very same simultaneous fear and desire: to connect with others, to lose his carefully-forged external identity, to let out the mess inside of him. Instead of soldierly rigidity, his exoskeleton is a Popper’s mask of cool composure, carefully chosen ensemble and helmet of gelled-back hair.

This armor, like that of the “soldier male,” lends the narrator a sense of belonging: everyone around him is enveloped in a Barbour jacket, a Triumph or Porsche, a well-tailored suit. Everyone has a set list of conversation topics based on a shared history: the boarding school Salem, certain clubs and bars like Traxx and Odin, the same music, the same fashion designers. So in a way, the system in which our narrator has developed is just as rigid as a military academy: break ranks and suffer the consequences.

It may seem strange at first to suggest that desire threatens to dissolve this armor; after all, the narrator seems to want for very little, and he lives in a culture of unchecked and

26 English translations of Theweleit are all taken from the University of Minnesota Press editions translated by Stephen Conway, Erica Carter, and Chris Turner.
constantly fulfilled desires. However, the narrative slowly reveals that our protagonist does not really have access to this fulfillment. For material desires – for clothing, cars, fancy apartments – are not the issue here. Instead, the thwarted desire is for connections with other people: intimacy, essentially. This might be possible for the narrator if it weren’t for his socially constructed armor; intimacy of any kind, though coveted, threatens to breach this barrier of coolness and superficial perfection, and so it becomes not only a torturing desire but also the root of the narrator’s greatest fear: the dissolution of his armor and thus of his very identity.

Take the narrator’s extreme reaction to his discovery of Nigel, his assumed friend and fellow “soldier,” taking part in a drug-fed orgy that includes a woman and another man (who is, tellingly, committing a fashion sin by wearing a Stüssy cap at a funny angle):


His fear and disgust intensify when he is invited to join them. But why does he rip open the door without knocking, after seeing discarded clothing on the floor and hearing a woman’s giggle, if he doesn’t want to see? Why does he describe their sex act as carefully as any

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27 “The whole thing is somehow unbelievable, I mean, I’m really bowled over. It just can’t be true…the woman still looks at me and smiles, and I run a hand through my hair and fumble around for a cigarette, and then she says, she really says this: Hey baby, why don’t you come over and join us, huh? And then this twirly-beard, who’s stark naked, smiles…without saying anything, I pull the door closed behind me and take my suitcase…on the way I notice that my hands are shaking…on the way out of the city, just before the airport, I start to cry.”
voyeur, searching for a cigarette in a classic movie—gesture of sexual satisfaction before turning to leave? Perhaps his flight away from the scene is the only alternative to another, secretly desired action: a flight into the many arms of the tangled mass on the bed, in which it is difficult to tell where one person ends and another begins.

The shaking hands, the tears, all are symptomatic of the breakdown he suffers as his armor-identity is threatened directly, as described by Theweleit: the man “entzieht sich…einer ihm unerträglich werdenden Situation…Alles wird irreal, seine sonstige Realität, seine Körpergrenzen, seine Wahrnehmungen verschwimmen, lösen sich auf, werden unzuverlässig” (Theweleit II 52). This seems to effect a release of anything that can flow from inside to outside, a kind of controlled flowing of the boiling mass within that manages to keep the body armor intact.

Scenes involving blackouts and bodily fluids play out repeatedly in Faserland. The narrator recalls an incident from puberty in which he visits his chaste ballerina girlfriend at her parents’ house; he drinks too much at dinner, and they offer him their guest bedroom. When he awakes in the middle of the night, he discovers he has both vomited and defecated in his sleep: “In diesem Moment wird alles dunkel…ich habe mich ausgezogen und bin rausgerannt…und auf der Strasse habe ich dann geheult vor Scham” (Kracht 33). The shame of his “accident” is unbearable (as, admittedly, it would be to almost anyone), and his response is, understandably, flight and tears. Seen metaphorically, though, this scene is typical of the narrator’s inability to sustain a connection with others: horrified by the

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28 “appears to withdraw from an increasingly unbearable situation…Everything becomes unreal: his habitual reality, his bodily boundaries, his perceptions grow hazy and unreliable; they begin dissolving.”

29 “In this moment everything goes dark…I put on my clothes and ran out…and then on the street I cried for shame.”
emergence of his turbulent (literal) insides, his humanity and the confusion of his fragile
internal identity, his only recourse is to black out the occurrence, flee, and thus cut the
person to whom he has revealed himself out of his life.

This process happens all over again when the narrator “accidentally” calls his
estranged friend Alexander from his hotel room, presumably out of a repressed wish to
invite him back into his life:

Meine Hand, die den Telefonhörer hält, zittert, und unter meinen Achseln läuft so
ein dünner Schweißtropfen bis zur Hüfte…Ich ziehe an meiner Zigarette, und
Alexander sagt: Hallo, wer ist da, und auf einmal wird alles schummrig in meinem
Gehirn. Ich habe das Gefühl, als ob ich nach hinten kippe. Ich sehe so schwarz und
gelbe Dinge…Hallo, kommt noch einmal aus dem Hörer, aber von ganz weit weg
über mir oder von hinten…Ich stehe auf, und der Hörer fällt mir aus der
Hand…und dann muß ich mich übergeben. (Kracht 74-5)³⁰

Shortly afterward, the narrator blacks out in the bathtub for several hours. The possibility of
a true closeness with someone, male or female, makes him physically sick, causes him to shut
down mentally and physically, melting into bodily fluids, dissolving in bath water.

Missed or ruined connections dominate both the plot and the narrator’s memories.
He recalls the friendly pilots of Alitalia letting him “fly” the plane as a child, but the memory
is somewhat dampened by the adult realization that the plane was on autopilot, and their
generosity was somehow false (Kracht 52). He is bothered by the same sense of falsity when

³⁰ My hand, which holds the telephone, trembles…and under my armpit runs a thin drop of sweat down to my hip…I pull
on my cigarette, and then Alexander says, hello, who’s there, and all at once it gets dim in my head. I feel like I’m tipping
backwards. I see these black and yellow things…hello, comes out of the phone again, but from very far away, above or
behind me…I stand up and the phone falls out of my hand…and then I have to vomit.”
the model friend of Nigel’s strokes his hair: “das Ganze ist so unwirklich und irgendwie auch nicht echt und deswegen peinlich…[und] nur wie gespielt” (Kracht 41).31

Somehow, though, the narrator holds out hope that someone – indeed, a woman – will fulfill his desire for connection without exposing him. Of course, this never happens, as over and over again, the woman who will be his savior, his “everything,” turns into a threatening nothing. Twice he connects with girls at parties who seem to accept his armored identity. The first, who it seems “alles verstanden hat, was es zu verstehen gibt (has understood everything there is to understand),” ruins this fantasy by vomiting a literal red flood into the bathtub (Kracht 45-6). The violent flowing and bloody color is, according to Theweleit as well as tradition, a powerful symbol of feminine threat, what Paglia might call chthonian cruelty. Theweleit’s “red flood” is “threatening, but also attractive” (230); the color red initially represents communism to the soldier males, but according to Theweleit’s reading also comes to connote menstruation and bloodshed. The flood is, of course, a threat of engulfment by the feminine force of nature. Paglia similarly allies femininity with the Dionysian or “chthonian” (to use her word), a force which is both nature-based and carelessly cruel. “Woman is temenos of her own dark mysteries. Genitally, man has a little thing that he must keep dipping in Dionysian dissolution – a risky business!” (Paglia 30).

Similarly, Nadja, also met at a party, promises some connection but then disappears into the basement, where the narrator finds her with a needle in her ankle, apparently taking drugs with Nigel (Kracht 105-6). It is telling, furthermore, that the narrator does not once mention his mother. His father comes up once, and Bina the housekeeper, but his mother

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31 “The whole thing is so surreal and somehow not sincere and therefore embarrassing…and just an act.”
seems not to exist, and thus cannot “save” him. The same is true of Rollo’s mother, whom he never mentions and who turns out to be institutionalized. Feminine redemption, though hoped for, never comes.

Of course, it is the narrator himself who prevents his “redemption,” though he doesn’t see it that way. At one point he nearly has a moment of clarity about his armored existence: “es gibt so bestimmte, völlig ineinander verschachtelte Muster, die ich anwenden muß, um mit Menschen umzugehen. Na ja, Muster ist vielleicht nicht das richtige Wort. Ich kann nicht genau beschreiben, was ich meine” (Kracht 101). Surely one of these patterns is his practice of keeping male friends at a certain distance, perhaps for fear of coming way too close, of commingling in a way that doesn’t include women or blood sport. The opportunity for two men to help each other out of isolation, to penetrate each other’s armor without violence and dissolution, proves “simply too much,” and so the narrator flees one final time from Rollo’s side, leaving him to his own tears beside a tranquil body of water (Kracht 145).

A similar scenario plays out in Bret Easton Ellis’s first novel. Less Than Zero is a first person account of affluent college freshman Clay’s first trip home to Los Angeles for Christmas after spending a semester at an elite New England school. It is unclear at first if Clay himself is empty, but the world to which he returns is an absolute vacuum. Clay’s friends’ and family’s lives revolve around drugs, parties, and aimless pleasure-seeking. Identities are nebulous and vague, as evidenced by constant confusion over people’s names

32 “There are these certain patterns, completely packed within each other, that I have to use in order to deal with people. Well, pattern maybe isn’t the right word. I can’t exactly describe what I mean.”
and faces; in one instance, someone mistakes a black man for an anorexic white female friend (Ellis 21). Just as in Faserland, functional human connections are hard to come by. Clay’s girlfriend Blair and best friend Julian seem to barely know him, and his family only comes together because it looks good. Indeed, the novel’s first words, which are repeated a number of times throughout the text in moments of crisis, are “People are afraid to merge” (Ellis 9). “People” may well be everyone in Los Angeles, as Clay tells us, but in fact his own fear and disgust of those around him is our only hard evidence of this. After all, Blair seems to want a real relationship with him – but he can’t quite say he loves her, or ever did, can’t quite prove that he is anything other than a “beautiful boy” (Ellis 204), an empty vessel.

We readers, though, recognize that in fact Clay is as full as Kracht’s narrator, an armored “blank male” in his own right. His fear of dissolution is explicit as he is haunted by a billboard slogan throughout his narrative: “All it says is ‘Disappear Here’ and even though it’s probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little…and I keep looking into the rearview mirror, getting this strange feeling that someone’s following me” (Ellis 38).

Throughout the first half of the novel, Clay’s acquaintances repeatedly mention that he looks pale (ex. Ellis 17). The culprit, they speculate, must be his time in the East, and they are right, but Clay’s transformation must not have stopped at paleness. His is the story, we begin to realize, of a beach boy who went off to college and has returned as a pale, sweater-vest-wearing dandy with higher standards and a new control over himself and his fears and desires.

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33 It may be interesting to note that Paglia calls her dandyish archetype “the beautiful boy as destroyer.”
Now Clay, too, needs rigidity, an exoskeleton to keep him contained and identified; and when he doesn’t find it upon returning to Los Angeles, he begins to judge his own culture, opening the door for the reader to do the same (and thus implicitly ally himself with Clay). Our impression of rich LA natives as vacuous, superficial and amoral is entirely at Clay’s suggestion. His description of his own family as they drive home from the mall is as brutal as any in the novel. His younger sisters, whom he has a hard time distinguishing from each other, are yelling at their mother about a video game they want for Christmas, and then complain that Clay keeps his room locked.

I still don’t say anything. I consider grabbing one of the bags from MGA or Camp Beverly Hills or a box of shoes from Privilege and flinging them out the window. “Mom, tell him to answer me. Why do you lock your door, Clay?” I turn around. “Because you both stole a quarter gram of cocaine from me the last time I left my door open. That’s why.” My sisters don’t say anything. “Teenage Enema Nurses in Bondage” by a group called Killer Pussy comes on the radio, and my mother asks if we have to listen to this and my sisters tell her to turn it up, and no one says anything else until the song’s over. When we get home, my younger sister finally tells me, out by the pool, “That’s bullshit. I can get my own cocaine.” (Ellis 25)

The same can be said of Faserland: the narrator makes the initial judgment about his society’s ills. Sometimes this judgment is implicit in his descriptions of the people around him, such as his discomfort when Nigel and his friends take drugs: “der blöde Ziegenbart, der übrigens ziemlich häßlich ist, fängt an zu kichern, so ein tuntiges, völlig unkontrolliertes Kichern, das wahnsinnig unecht klingt (the stupid goat-beard, who by the way is pretty ugly, begins to giggle, this campy, completely uncontrolled giggle, that sounds extremely unreal)” (Kracht 41). Kracht also offers a more explicit judgment late in the book, when his narrator imagines the way he will explain Germany to his future children:
Ich würde ihnen von Deutschland erzählen, von dem groß Land in Norden, von der großen Maschine, die sich selbst baut…Und von den Menschen…die gute Autos fahren müssen und gute Drogen nehmen und guten Alkohol trinken und gute Musik hören müssen, während um sie herum alle dasselbe tun, nur eben ein ganz klein bißchen schlechter. Und daß die Auserwählten nur durch den Glauben weiter leben können, sie würden es ein bißchen besser tun, ein bißchen härter, ein bißchen stilvoller. (Kracht 153)

Clay’s judgments reach a crescendo as his friends’ quest for fun grows ever darker and more outrageous. They watch violent pornography in which people seem to be mutilated; they find a dead homeless man and take other friends to see him; they drug and then rape a pubescent girl. And yet Clay does nothing other than feel sickened and describe the scene with stark realism. Is it possible that Clay objects to these amoral games not because of their disrespect for and abuse of human life, but because they are simply barbaric, trashy, ugly? Is this a dandy’s objection to an aesthetic offense, a soldier male’s disgust for intemperance and merging human flesh – or is Clay really disturbed by the implications of the actions? His final description of the city is apocalyptic but somehow metaphorical and abstract, based on a song called “Los Angeles” he hears during his stay: “Images of parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled that they ate their own children. Images of people, teenagers my own age, looking up from the asphalt and being blinded by the sun…Images so violent and malicious that they seemed to be my only point of reference for a long time afterwards” (Ellis 208). “Malicious,” he calls them, but the malice seems to come from the

34 “I would tell them about Germany, the great country in the north, the great machine that builds itself…and from the people…who must drive good car and take good drugs and drink good alcohol and listen to good music, while everyone around them does the same thing, only just a very little bit worse. And that the chosen ones can only live through the belief that they were doing things a little bit better, a bit harder, with a bit more style.”
city, not its people, and is directed at Clay’s senses, not his emotions. Like *Faserland*’s narrator, he turns his back on his people and runs away.

There is a tension between the nascent social critique presented and the “emptiness” of the narrator’s response in both novels. Yet the narrators’ coldness, their focus on the aesthetic rather than emotional affronts of their troubled societies, stops short of undermining the critique altogether. Instead, this narratorial “blankness” allows for ambivalence, an ambiguity of message that hints at satirizing consumer culture without having to suggest a viable alternative. Because the narrator is trapped in the “system,” so too is the reader. In a way, this intensifies the experience of the societal sickness, i.e., we cannot escape the excess and cruelty via the hope of an alternative future. Both novels end in escape, but there is nothingness on the other side, and as in a nightmare, the journey will repeat itself. Like the narrators secretly roiling with fear and desire on the inside while presenting a calm, impassive exterior, the novels themselves keep secrets that threaten to escape and cause destruction. Both a symptom and a strategy of recent Pop literature, the pose of “inner emptiness” serves to shield both narrator and his fiction from the critical eye while allowing both to criticize without leaving the diseased system of which they disapprove.
Figure 3: Photo from Christian Kracht’s MySpace page (2009).

Figure 4: Screen capture from Bret Easton Ellis’s website (2009).
Mistaken Identities: Misogyny and Cultural Critique in *Faserland* and *Crazy*

When Volker Weidermann describes Christian Kracht as “klein und weich… verkleidet als Popper, als es schon lange keine mehr gab (small and soft…disguised as a Popper, when they hadn’t existed for a long time),” he might just as well have been referring to Kracht’s best-known narrator, the unnamed protagonist of *Faserland*.¹ It would not be the first time, in fact, that a critic or journalist has (mis)taken Kracht for a real-life version of his character; as discussed in the previous chapter, Kracht’s public persona is easily confused with his *Faserland* protagonist. The narrator’s characterization of himself as rather unmanly, or “small and soft” – emotional, appearance-obsessed, and ambivalent about women – calls into question both his sexuality and his sexual identity. This chapter will explore such an ambiguous persona’s potential for misogyny.

In the previous chapter, I explicated the male protagonist’s “blankness” as a kind of effeminacy or un-manliness which ultimately exculpates him from violence. Various critical interpretations of *Faserland*, including those by Clarke, Kahnke, and Langston, have focused on the narrator’s ambiguous sexual identity, and the instability of identity itself in the novel’s microcosm, as we will see in the ensuing pages. The implication of all these arguments is that the narrator shares a general “problem” of identity formation with the other characters in the book – or even with a real-life milieu upon which the novel is based. Indeed, extant gendered analyses of the novel serve as a testament to the fact that sex is a serious and

¹ Weidermann baldly speculates that “der Autor damit auch sich selbst beschrieben haben könnte (the author could have been describing himself with that as well)” (303).
complex problem for Faserland’s narrator: what ultimately repels, attracts, and defines him is not easily described with a straightforward label – Hetero, Homo, Dandy, Androgyne. Judith Butler’s characterization of gender as “permanently problematic,” a site of complexity and confusion, has never been more apt.

But upon closer inspection, there is a less obvious order to Kracht’s portrayals of men and women. In Faserland, gender “trouble” is used metaphorically to support the author’s critique of contemporary culture. In service to a satirical goal, Kracht’s male narrator comes to represent the victim who has been annihilated by superficiality, hypocrisy and decadence; Kracht’s women, then, are allied with the very threat of self-dissolution this society poses. This pattern is repeated – and complicated – in Benjamin Lebert’s 1998 novel Crazy, where a teenage boy learns that growing up involves a dangerous mission into the realm of feminine sexuality. Borders must be tested and transgressed in order to temper them into the permanent, rigid barriers of an exoskeleton.

Gendered readings of Faserland have generally focused on the Butlerian ambiguity surrounding the narrator and his own sexual identity. Corinna Kahnke has argued that the narrator’s gender is not actually clear in the novel until he chooses the toilet with the blue door, rather than the pink one, on the train ride to Hamburg, setting the stage for a meditation on gender performativity (Kahnke). In Kahnke’s interpretation, Faserland actually works to break down the traditional gender binary and expose gender as performance; the rejection of conventional sexual personae causes characters’ identities to crumble, and so they resort to other means of creating a new self – designer clothing, for example. This
reading casts Kracht’s book as a gauge for current issues in German culture; it reflects the contemporary identity crisis which plays out again and again in Pop literature (and its criticism). Such a portrayal expresses “frustration about the current state of identity, sexuality and performance”; Kahnke concludes that instances of violence in Pop texts, including Faserland, are enactments of this frustration, not geared at any one person or gender identity but at “Gender” itself, or else at the society which has upheld binary notions of gender (Kahnke).

Kracht himself, in his typical enigmatic language, manages to both confirm and call into question Kahnke’s general reading during an interview with Ulf Poschardt for Welt Online. On one hand, he describes his first novel as portraying the character’s “Abgrenzungsversuch (attempt at drawing borders)” or “tragikomische Diskunktionsversuche (tragicomic attempt at distinction).” This is to explain the litany of name brands and apparent superficiality of the text; all was an intentional portrait of a certain milieu at a certain time in Germany – what Kracht calls the “leere Zeit (empty time)” (Poschardt 3-4). Thus, it seems that Kracht would also portray his work as a description of frustrated attempts at identity formation in a confused social system. Kracht then presents his work as a portrait of young middle-to-upper-class West Germans which he claims is neither provocative in its negative portrayals, as Poschardt tries to suggest in his questioning, nor unquestioningly celebratory, as some critics have worried.

Yet Kracht must know that such a portrait must provide some commentary on its subject, since he notes his protagonist’s unreflective and vacuous nature. Furthermore, he mentions his debt to Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho, an unquestionably satirical book:
Kracht says, “So eine Mise-en-abyme wollte ich schreiben, so ein Spiegelkabinett erschaffen (I wanted to write such a mise-en-abyme, to create just such a hall of mirrors)” (Poschardt 2). Thus, Kracht openly intends to reflect an aspect of contemporary German culture and in this respect seems to support Kahnke’s reading of the novel’s function.

But what of Kracht’s indirect claim of satire? Kracht also notes that Bret Easton Ellis is a “Trickster,” along with his other literary role models (among them Abbie Hoffman, infamous author of *Steal This Book*). When asked whether *Faserland* was intended to outrage those who believe that literature should improve the world, Kracht answers, “Aber Literatur ist doch tatsächlich das Organ der Weltverbesserung! Wer sollte denn sonst die Welt verbessern? Frank-Walter Steinmeier? Die chinesische Regierung? Rem Koolhaas? Die PDS? (Who else should improve the world? Frank-Walter Steinmeier? The Chinese government? Rem Koolhaas? The Democratic Socialist Party?)” (Poschardt 2). Indeed, the interview itself is titled, “Wer sonst soll die Welt verbessern?” Kracht’s answer is both obscure and ironic – in short, the response of a Trickster, one whose motives are uncertain and whose statements cannot be taken at face value. On the one hand, Kracht insists that *Faserland* is a portrait of his milieu in the late 1980s and early 90s, of the struggle for identity in a world of slippery simulacra and superficiality, similar to Richard Langston’s reading of the novel in his article “Escape from Germany.” This characterization positions the book for an alliance with satire, which aims not just to reflect but also to criticize.

Yet Kracht ultimately backs away from a traditional satirical stance because he refuses to assert a stable viewpoint on any issue, much less the merits and shortcomings of his own society. In a way, this is a deft and delicate method of allowing his work to stand on
its own and retain its literary complexity; *Faserland* remains irreducible to one flat message or theme. I argue that remaining in this liminal state between satire and earnest fiction also allows Kracht to complete only half of the project with which Kahnke credits him: while he may begin to subvert traditional gender binaries in his text, this subversion ultimately ends up reinforcing a well-worn misogynist paradigm. It seems to me that the author did not set out to express anything about gender in this work – he sought to engage with a cultural problem often seen as tangential to gender “trouble,” the issue of identity formation. If this is the case, then the real question is what the implications are if such a cultural critique is aired via the symbolic overcoming of a dangerous femininity, literally written on the bodies of female (and homosexual male) characters.

**Homosexuality.**

Mathias Mertens and Moritz Baßler are more specific than Kahnke, reading *Faserland* as a “verpaßtes Coming-out (missed coming out)” story in which the narrator fails to come to terms with his homosexual attraction to his friends Nigel and Rollo (Baßler 113). The textual evidence for this argument is indeed compelling. Kracht’s narrator seems unusually possessive of his male friends, and much of his antagonistic feelings toward women could be explained by jealousy and sexual frustration. The peaceful feeling which overtakes him at a gay beach in Mykonos further strengthens the argument. It may also be that he protests too much when Eugen, a young man who has essentially picked him up at a bar in Heidelberg, “suddenly” comes on to him; in fact, Eugen’s advances have come as a surprise to no one
but the narrator himself, and his horror is disproportionate, lending credence to a reading of
the character as a closeted homosexual.

The various allusions to Thomas Mann’s *Der Tod in Venedig (Death in Venice)* are also
compelling: the narrator travels from north to south like the protagonist of Mann’s novella,
and his obsession with his appearance is another parallel. Further, the narrator’s ultimately
unreached destination is Thomas Mann’s grave in Zurich. The narrator recalls reading Mann
in school, and that his books were “fun”; indeed, it is amazing that he would remember a
detail like the location of Mann’s grave, given his miserable track record with the recollection
of facts. Since the discovery of the contents of his private journals, Mann has come to
represent closeted homosexuality in the German literary canon, an aspect definitively
examined by Heinrich Detering in *Das offene Geheimnis*; thus, identification with him and
perhaps his most overtly homoerotic novel inevitably suggests that we should see Faserland’s
narrator’s struggle as analogous to Aschenbach’s, or to Mann’s own.

In his article on homosexuality and Dandyism in the works of Christian Kracht,
David Clarke concludes that the narrator’s sexual (mis)identification – being “mistaken” for
a gay man on several occasions, even though he may actually be one, as well as his own
inability to tell whether others are interested in him – ultimately “calls into question the
adequacy of any means of identity formation that relies on the visibility of the individual’s
consumer choices” and “unsettl[es] the performance of [those] identities in consumer
society” (Clarke 48, 51). Homosexuality, expressed as a Dandyish mode of identity

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2 The standard example of this is his mention of Walter von der Vogelweide and Bernard von Clairvaux,
whom he thinks are painters.
3 For an authoritative account of Mann’s life and struggles with his sexuality, see Anthony Heilbut, *Thomas Mann: Eros and
formation, becomes a symbol in the text for the unreliability of commercialized identities of every kind. In other words, Clarke, like Kahnke, sees sexuality as part of the symbolic language Kracht uses to critique contemporary culture’s attempt to reduce identity to a matter of superficial appearances and “distinction through modes of consumption” (Clarke 38).

Indeed, this seems to be the case. Yet such use of homosexuality as motif should already be a warning sign that Kracht is no disciple of Butler; to use a sexual identity as a stand-in for a negative element of society does not problematize gender in the way for which Butler argues. It also carries considerably more cultural baggage than Kahnke’s generous depiction of Kracht as an advocate for the dissolution of gender binaries. After all, as Clarke has noticed, the narrator’s confusion and frustration appear to be negative side-effects of living in his milieu, not part of a positive process of social re-definition. Clarke eventually concludes that Kracht’s second novel, 1979, is actually a homophobic text, despite having a homosexual protagonist, because it uses homosexuality to represent Western capitalist decadence. The seeds of this portrayal are sown in Faserland; though not as clearly as in 1979, Kracht’s first novel uses sexual identity – particularly an ambiguous mix of homosexuality and femininity – as a metaphor for a troubled society.

Let us return to the scene with Eugen, where others (Baßler, Mertens) have seen the narrator’s frantic rejection of Eugen’s advances as an expression of his own repressed homosexuality. For now, let us set aside this reading. It is impossible to definitively explain the narrator’s motivations, or the reasons why he sees things the way he does – he is, after all, a literary figure whose author has not chosen to provide clear reasons for his state of
mind – and in any case, the more important question for my purposes here is what the narrator sees, and thus shows the reader. Whatever his reasons, the narrator sees Eugen as monstrous and repulsive the moment he identifies himself as a homosexual. At first, when he meets Eugen and his entourage at the Max Bar, the narrator has a very positive impression of him: he notices that Eugen’s friends hang on his every word, and the narrator is pleased to have met someone “der in Ordnung zu sein scheint (who seems to be alright).” Of course, “in Ordnung” means to him that “Eugen hat ein gutes Jackett an, und er hat seinen Pullover um die Hüften gebunden, und er hat weiße Zähne (Eugen has a nice blazer on, and he has tied his sweater around his hips, and he has white teeth).” He must immediately throw in a rather homophobic clarification: “Das klingt jetzt wie eine Liebeserklärung an Eugen, das soll um Gottes willen nicht so klingen (Now that sounds like a declaration of love for Eugen, for God’s sake it shouldn’t sound like that)” (Kracht 96).

Yet when Eugen gets too close to him at the party, the new friend is suddenly cast in a new light: the narrator cannot focus on his words because he must stare at a scar (“Schmiß”) he’s just noticed on Eugen’s left cheek. Specifically, Schmiß refers to a scar from a student-society Mensur (these are generally on the left side of the face, since most fencing opponents are right-handed). This is an interesting symbol, for it manages to link Eugen the aggressive homosexual with an affluent conservatism that clearly bothers the narrator (hence his many references to Nazis and uncomfortable reflections about the Nazi era). The narrator’s perturbation increases when Eugen leans in and touches him on the neck: he notices Eugen’s beery breath and a smattering of thick black bristles he has neglected to shave from his Adam’s apple. The narrator swallows his disgust and tries to be polite. Then
Eugen inhales a line of cocaine off a Mozart CD case – two more signifiers of the elite – and offers the narrator some, which he declines. It is noteworthy that although the narrator smokes and drinks with abandon, he seems to associate drugs with something sinisterly decadent, and only partakes once, at the party with Nigel, with disastrous effects. In fact, he tells Eugen, “ich würde prinzipiell keine Drogen nehmen (I don’t take drugs on principle)” (Kracht 103). When the narrator makes a move to leave, Eugen grabs him by the waistband and puts a hand on his backside. In the ensuing scuffle, the narrator claims, Eugen even tries to insert a finger into the narrator’s anus through his pants, which seems rather unrealistic and homophobic, as is the swell of giggling from the couple in the corner of the room. In this moment, the narrator’s perception of Eugen is reduced to his scar and his dyed blond hair: “in diesem Moment sehe ich nur den Schmiß und das blonde, etwas längere Haar (in this moment I see only the scar and the blond, somewhat longer hair)” (Kracht 103).

As readers, we see Eugen only as filtered through the narrator’s perceptions. Even though we may notice Eugen’s flirtation or raise eyebrows at his sudden and generous invitation at the Heidelberg bar, we notice his grotesqueness along with the narrator at the exact moment of his sexual advance. Eugen’s attack not only implicates the reader in the narrator’s homophobic horror; it also reveals the narrator’s association of homosexuality with decadent, elitist conservatism, the center of Kracht’s satirical target. Eugen’s scar, his fake tan and expensive sport-coat, denote wealth and elitism. Kracht’s narrator clearly also links drug use and sexual “perversion” with Eugen’s milieu; after all, he finds himself in a similar situation with his affluent friend Nigel in Hamburg. As Eugen tries to force himself
into the narrator – literally – it becomes clear that the feared invasion, the denied part of the narrator’s self, is actually decadent materialism and snobbery, not necessarily homosexuality. At the very least, the two feared invaders are one and the same, with the result that homosexuality comes to represent this frantic, failed abjection.

Further evidence of this metonymic link appears when the narrator remembers a traumatic voyage to Mykonos, where he accidentally finds himself on an all-gay beach, what he calls an “Altmänner-Homosexuellen-Strand (old men’s homosexual beach)” (135-7). Indeed, the men are mostly old, tan, and corpulent, one with a tattoo of Baroque angels on his backside. Overtly, it is this legion of homosexual men which upsets him, though one must assume that the men are also flauntingly well-to-do (even “Baroque” in their decadence): they are, after all, on vacation in Greece, at a beach-side bar in a resort town, dancing naked in broad daylight. One man even sniffs something pharmacological from a vial hanging around his neck. This somewhat sinister frivolity is exactly what might await the narrator at the end of his extended adolescence, and the thought clearly terrifies him.

But then, standing on that threatening beach, he experiences a moment of peace as he watches a steam ship cross the horizon:

Ich zeige mit dem Finger auf den Dampfer, bewege mich dabei nicht und kann sehen, wie das Schiff sich in Relation zu mir bewegt…die Panik wegen den Schwulen geht weg, alles geht wieder in Ordnung. Es ist fast so, als ob ich keine Angst mehr haben müsste im Leben, für einen Moment. (137)

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4 “I point at the steam ship with my finger, don’t move as I do this and can see how the ship moves in relation to me…the panic over the gays goes away, everything is alright again. It is almost as if I didn’t have to be afraid in life, for a moment.”
For this moment, the narrator sees the world stripped of its superficial cacophony, and his small yet definite place in it. Somehow, though, this bare, clean reality does not allow for the perception of homosexual men. Turning away from the steam ship, the narrator immediately flees on his rented moped and catches the next plane out of Mykonos.

One wonders, then, if the narrator’s final journey to Thomas Mann’s grave is as much a gesture to Aschenbach’s tragic inability to escape his own decadence, his own ill-fitting vanity which causes his fleshly decay, as it is about a sense of kinship over repressed homosexuality. It may even have been a comfort for Kracht’s narrator to see Thomas Mann laid neatly to rest, but of course this comfort is denied him. Instead, he makes a possibly suicidal voyage to the middle of a lake at sundown, recalling that still moment on the beach at Mykonos. An escape from delirious post-modernity, a washing clean of all decadent filth – in Kracht’s symbolic language, this means an escape from the threat of homosexuality.

**Homosocial Desire.**

Eve K. Sedgwick suggests another way of looking at possible homosexual undertones in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Setting aside genital homosexuality, Sedgwick focuses on homosocial bonds between men. She posits that such bonds carry the greatest significance and power within Western social structure, and that women are ultimately conduits or currency, existing to facilitate exchange between men (Sedgwick 85-6). Using Shakespeare’s sonnets as examples, she notes that in such a structure, “actual women are so far from the center of consciousness that even to be womanlike, in relation to men, is not very dangerous” (34, emphasis in original). If this is true
for Faserland as well, then it is possible to conclude that the narrator’s potential unexpressed homosexuality – represented both by his effeminacy and by his troubled male friendships – is actually not the problem which plagues him. Indeed, it is more of a problem that he is unable to connect with other men, on whatever level, and to form a successful masculine identity of his own.

In this model, the narrator’s (albeit faulty) bonds with men can still be very deep and important without necessarily being sexual. Sedgwick has demonstrated that such bonds are to be found throughout English literature.\(^5\) In Thomas Mann’s Der Zauberberg, to name a German literary example, Hans Castorp’s relationships with his cousin Joachim Ziemßen, Settembrini, and Peeperkorn are at least as emotional as his interactions with Clawdia Chauchat. Apropos of Mann, we must note that a literary character can have homosexual feelings – or commit homosexual acts – while still being homophobic. Homosexuality and homophobia are by no means mutually exclusive, as evidenced by Mann’s own linkage of decadence and homosexuality in Der Tod in Venedig. And (male-on-male) homophobia, as Sedgwick points out, is ultimately misogynistic; for homophobia is not a fear of men, or even of relationships with men, but rather a fear and hatred of homosexuals and homosexuality as a distinct social identity. This identity is closely allied with femininity in the popular psyche, such that all that is un-manly is somehow “gay,” and is also necessarily effeminate, since femininity is too often defined as that which masculinity is not.

\(^5\) Her examples range from Shakespeare to Tennyson to American author Walt Whitman. I would add that these bonds are a building block of many Western epic tales, from the vampire hunters in Bram Stoker’s Dracula to the relationships between Obi-Wan Kenobi, Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker in George Lucas’s Star Wars.
Yet the relationships between heterosexual, homosocial, and homosexual constructions are more complex than straightforward Self-vs.-Other dynamics. “If all this is heterosexual, the common-sensical reader may ask, then what on earth does it take to be homosexual? One thing that it takes is a cultural context that defines the homosexual as against the heterosexual” (Sedgwick 35). Certainly the narrator of Faserland also lives in a world where homosexuality and heterosexuality are not necessarily mutually exclusive or oppositional, as evidenced by the ménage-a-trois of two men and one woman he witnesses in Nigel’s apartment. As in Bret Easton Ellis’s early novels, sexuality is amorphous, promiscuous and not strictly defined. In this sense, Kahnke’s point is a good one: sexual identity, at least, has escaped binary controls and is consequently difficult to pin down. But this need not be the root of the crisis affecting Kracht’s narrator; it simply supports Sedgwick’s point that homosocial bonds between men can be sexualized without becoming a threatening counter-point to the established social order.

What Baßler and Mertens have noticed is not exactly a “verpaßtes Coming-Out,” but rather a narrative that is entirely focused on bonds between men, which are ultimately unsuccessful. This puts the narrator’s Theweleitian anxieties surrounding sex into a new light, for now it is clear that sex itself, as an act, is in fact as irrelevant as it is frightening for him. It is in this paradoxically asexual and sexually identified space, which is organized around male relationships, that the potential for misogyny truly blossoms. For a woman’s place in this construction is inherently unstable; she is threatened with marginalization to the point of extinction on one hand, and made to represent all that threatens masculine identity
formation, on the other. The men in the text who really are homosexual are similarly threatened – in this case, Eugen and the crowd of men on the beach at Mykonos.

Finally, a narrative organized around male homosocial desire continually reinforces a capitalist paradigm, even in a narrative like Kracht’s which on the surface critiques capitalism, conservatism, and German stodginess as the ’68 generation ages. It describes a social system which revolves around exchanges between privileged men, who negotiate their identities based not just on material wealth but on the women they date (such as Karin, who is passed between the narrator and Sergio as if she were a Barbour jacket herself). The narrator suffers shame because he is unable to solidify his relationship with a well-to-do young girl (his first girlfriend) and – more importantly – with her parents, represented by her imposing father. In short, the very idea of negotiation through human “capital” – the merging of material wealth with human relationships to form one frustrated desire, one questionable goal – threatens to negate the novel’s gentle commentary against the social structures which objectify people.

**Metrosexuality and Consumerism.**

The narrator’s effeminate – or inadequately “masculine” – persona combines with his decadent microcosm and further strengthens the exculpatory gesture of “innere Leere (inner emptiness).” While few readers will actually have been so doubtful about *Faserland’s* narrator’s sexual identity, the fact that Kahnke sees him as androgynous for the entire first chapter of the book is telling. The gender identity he performs is what we now call “metrosexual”: an urban straight man with a strong interest in fashion and personal
grooming previously thought of as effeminate or homosexual. This characterization may seem at first glance to temper or complicate the narrator's homophobic world-view. Yet this juxtaposition may in fact be homophobic, as well. In his article “Schwul leben – heterosexuell lieben: Metrosexualität als homophobe Modernisierung hegemonialer Männlichkeit (Living Gay – Loving Heterosexually: Metrosexuality as Homophobic Modernization of Hegemonic Masculinity),” Sebastian Scheele traces the evolution of metrosexuality as moniker, ultimately concluding that the very concept implicitly denigrates and segregates homosexuality from mainstream culture.

According to Scheele, the term “metrosexual” was coined by British journalist Mark Simpson in 1994 to describe a “new” kind of man, “der schwul oder heterosexuell sein mag. Letzlich ist das ohne Bedeutung, denn er nimmt sich ganz offen selbst zum Objekt seiner Liebe (who could be gay or heterosexual. In the end that has no meaning, because he quite openly takes himself as the object of his love)” – an attitude Scheele sees as producing “narzisstische Körperideale, Kaufkraft und Konsumfreudigkeit (narcissistic body ideals, buying power and joy in consumerism)” (Scheele 213). In this interesting original form, the metrosexual is an asexual being, with all sexual interest turned in upon himself. He is narcissistic and idealistic about the human body – a characteristic he shares with the Theweleitian soldier male who carefully polices his own physical integrity and longs for inhuman perfection in others. This strangely un-sexual, self-centered persona is then paradoxically linked to an oversexed consumer culture, where the ultimate goal is attractiveness. Hence the continual frustration at the culmination of a vague striving for
attention – as the sexual interest of others, once received, is unwelcome in any concrete sense. The whole point is to be desired for the sake of finding oneself desirable.

It is also telling that Simpson originally meant the phrase satirically, as a parodization of contemporary marketing strategies and the widespread adoption of “gay” codes in mainstream male society. He describes the phenomenon thus: “schiesslich versucht die Werbung so viele Männer wie möglich zum Entspannen ihres Schliessmuskels zu überreden, während sie ihnen ins Ohr gurrt, dass nichts Schwules daran ist, vom Konsumdenken der Konzerne gefickt zu werden. Was ironischerweise wahr ist (ultimately advertising tries to convince as many men as possible to relax their sphincters, while cooing in their ears that that there is nothing gay about being fucked by corporate consumer thinking – which is ironically true)” (Simpson qtd. in Scheele 219). The way in which Simpson’s satirical act backfired, stoking the fire of a cultural trend, parallels the trajectory of Kracht’s critical project. Of course, this imagery of consumerism’s violation of humanity as anal sex – gay male sex, to put a point on it – achieves the very same linkage of male homosexuality with capitalist decadence that we see in Faserland. Simpson immediately points out the “irony” that this violation is not gay, but the die has been cast already, such that even the invocation of irony cannot fully rescind the metaphor.

The contemporary metrosexual closely resembles the Dandy of a century ago, which Clarke characterizes as practicing “distinction through modes of consumption,” that is, you are what you buy and wear. The classic example of this in Faserland is the Barbour jacket, which every character seems to own, and the narrator’s debate with his acquaintance, Karin, as to which color is better: blue or green. This practice of distinction sets up the narrator’s
entire world as surface-obsessed and meaningless; whether or not everyone else in the novel is superficial, they seem that way through the eyes of the narrator.

Thus, while the narrator is our source of all this vacuity, we come to see him as a victim of circumstances beyond his control. Adding to this characterization of the narrator as a victim is the fact that he is never in control of his own body. Clearly an alcoholic who forgets to eat for days at a time, the narrator faints on several occasions when confronted with a stressful situation. He vomits without warning, loses control of his bowels, threatens to cry over childhood memories, and smokes constantly to steady his ever-shaky hands; Richard Langston has noted that these bodily reactions are a kind of abjection or defense against his hostile surroundings (“Escape from Germany”). The life he leads threatens to wreck him physically; he appears to be a fragile being, and never more so than when he is trying to forge a connection with another person, an attempt that always ends in failure and physical breakdown. It seems, though, that we should be suspicious of this victimization of the narrator, especially at the hands of women. Scheele puts it bluntly: “Auch an der Dominanz von Männern gegenüber Frauen rüttelt Metroseualität nicht; vielmehr bekommt sie ein neues Outfit, wodurch Privilegien unsichtbarer und schwieriger zu kritisieren werden (Metrosexuality doesn’t shake the dominance of men over women; rather, it gets a new outfit, through which privileges are more invisible and harder to criticize)” (Scheele 224). In other words, the trope of the metrosexual – and I would expand this to include any kind of de-masculinized, yet still male persona – potentially obscures and excuses misogynistic tendencies.
Women.

The narrator’s fatal flaw – his inability to connect with other people – undoubtedly has a sexual element. Women are to blame for the majority of his negative experiences; every interaction he has with them devolves into a moment of abjection, and he flees the scene. Not once can he find anything but pain and disgust at the hands of women, in spite (or perhaps because) of his belief that an idealized woman could somehow solve everything.

Klaus Theweleit details three categories of metaphor that are key to his soldier males’ fantasies concerning women: the white woman, the *vagina dentata*, and the red flood. These three tropes serve as red flags for problematic sexuality in the texts he analyzes; an examination of Kracht’s *Faserland* reveals a similar pattern of sexual symbolism.

The specter of Isabella Rossellini as inanimate fantasy-wife looms large in the narrator’s mind, promising a calm and surprisingly domestic future: “Ich jedenfalls möchte mit Isabella Rossellini Kinder haben, richtige kleine Schönheiten, mit einer Schleife im Haar, egal ob sie Mädchen oder Jungen wären…Isabella und die Kinder und ich würden dann zu Hause sitzen, und wir würden…zusammen Bücher lesen, und ab und zu würden Isabella und ich uns ansehen und dann lächeln (Anyway I would like to have children with Isabella Rossellini, real little beauties, with a band in their hair, whether they were girls or boys…Isabella and the children and I would then sit at home, and we would read books together, and now and then Isabella and I would look at each other and smile)” (Kracht 56-7).

Sex doesn’t seem to enter into this fantasy; in bed at night with “Isa,” the narrator simply runs a hand over her body, with focus on the legs, belly, and nose – apparently
skipping the more interesting stops along the way. Indeed, gender identities seem flattened out in general in the narrator’s daydream: the children all have ponytails irrespective of gender, and the entire family dresses in fisherman’s sweaters and anoraks because of the cold. Thus, the narrator’s ideal experience is presented as asexual and androgynous, a state in which gender elements are merged and normalized (male anoraks with female ponytails, man with wife) without a sexual encounter. It is also worth noting that despite this apparent merger, the feminine part (Isabella) is kept flat, marginal, and external to the narrator: “ich denke nicht direkt an sie, sondern lasse sie am Rand meiner Gedanken auftauchen, ohne ihr näherzutreten oder mit ihr zu sprechen, ohne sie anzusehen (I don’t think about her directly, but rather let her surface on the edge of my thoughts, without coming closer to her or speaking to her, without looking at her)” (Kracht 58). Of course, this utopia cannot exist in the narrator’s world; he can neither control women nor “merge” with them on his terms. He seems to expect far too much of every girl who appeals to him – indeed, nothing short of total redemption. If his fear of their border-busting potential does not annihilate the connection first, then their inevitable failure to save him from himself certainly will. This is why the only possible relationship with a woman for our narrator is with the fictitious Isabella Rossellini, a “white” woman both in pallor and lifelessness. She never speaks nor even moves in his fantasies, but simply lies beside him, motionless, while he runs his hand across her features as if she were an ivory statue, a modern-day Galatea to his Pygmalion.

What makes a woman “white”? To Theweleit, whiteness is suggestive of various characteristics associated with death, artifice, and inhumanity: cold (as snow), bloodlessness, stone (especially the marble statue), sexual disinterest (frigidity, purity) and sexual
unattainability. Paired with the sexualized, scary “red” woman, she forms a rather familiar duality, a version of the Madonna/whore dichotomy so pervasive in the Western literary canon. In Theweleit’s set of soldier memoirs, the white woman might be a nurse, a sister, a wife or fiancée, or an aristocratic widow – essentially, someone either off-limits or thoroughly “owned” by the male protagonist. Of course, they are also white-skinned.¹

These are the women with whom men may consort, and their whiteness allows men to cast them as inhumanly as possible, such that their paleness, delicacy and disinterest threaten to efface them as people completely and turn them into a kind of abstract force or promise of utopian happiness – just like Kracht’s narrator’s usage of Isabella Rossellini. In the novels of Kracht and his peers, this abstraction leads to the vilification of the unattainable woman: inevitably, she will not live up to the divine image which has been superimposed onto her, incurring the wrath of the man who had such high hopes for her redemptive powers.

Furthermore, this intrusion of a woman’s humanity threatens to turn her “red,” make her physically present and attainable – and in reality, our protagonists do not want to actually touch her, just as in Manfred von Killinger’s memoir, when as a child he ties a girl to a tree and has her “sentenced to death” during a cowboys-and-Indians game because she let him kiss her (Theweleit I 69-70). “Wo sie nicht weißgewaschene Ehrungfrau, Statue, Vision, nächtliche Erscheinung, Prinzessin ist, wird die Frau zu einer Bedrohung, derer man sich erwehren muß (Any woman who is neither whiter-than-white virgin, nor statue, vision, nocturnal apparition, princess, becomes a threat that must be warded off)” (Theweleit I 70).

¹ Thus, it seems like no accident that the most unsettling woman in Faserland is a black model who attempts to seduce the narrator into joining an orgy.
In a section entitled “Die Reduzierung der Frau auf die Vagina und deren Erweiterung zum Meer der Meere (The Reduction of the Woman to the Vagina and Her Enlargement to the Sea of Seas),” Theweleit outlines perhaps the most anti-feminist mechanism within this constellation, and one which will turn up again and again in the popular novels. At first the woman is reduced to a vagina, which is portrayed as a mysterious utopia, a safe haven, a universal womb. In this construction, any (white) woman will do; the individual woman does not matter. But since no earthly woman can deliver on these kinds of epic promises – complete safety, satisfaction, beauty, and love – then she is destined to be punished for letting man down (Theweleit I 439-44). This sense of betrayal at the hands of women – who are now denounced as blood-suckers and deceivers – unites soldier males and modern protagonists in the belief that women must either be exalted as fullfillers of ultimate desire or punished as sirens. Indeed, the silver lining for such men seems to be that the renunciation (or elimination) of female love-objects (whether or not they are/were unattainable) allows them to finally get to work – to subjugate and organize the feminine chaos of the uncontrolled world by first damming up their own troublesome desires for women and other kinds of flowing.  

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7 Theweleit uses Goethe’s Faust as an example here, quoting the memorable last lines: “Das ewig Weibliche zieht uns hinan.” He explains: “aber es ist eine Konstruktion: die Frau ist nur deshalb nicht erreichbar, weil sie geopfert wird. Daher kommt die Sublimation, d.i. eine Art der Herrschaft des Mannes über die Erde, die Frau und seine eigenen Affekte…Das ist das Unbeschreibliche, das am Ende des Faust wieder getan ist, die Besiegelung des Herrschaftskontraktes, der die Produktion des Mannes auf die Geschlechtertrennung und Unterwerfung der Weib-Natur baut (But that is a construct; women are unattainable only because they have been sacrificed. This is the starting point of sublimation, a form of male dominance over the earth, women, and men's own affects….The ineffable that wins out at the end of Faust is nothing other than a signed contract for dominance – a contract that bases male production on the division of the sexes and the subjugation of woman-nature)” (Theweleit I 449-50).
And so a woman’s whiteness actually makes her elimination all the easier: “Unter dem Blick des Mannes verwandelt sich die Frau in etwas Kaltes und Totes…[die] die Eigenschaft hat, sich nach und nach im Text zu verflüchtigen…wie die Frau verschwindet, gewinnt der Mann Kontur. Auf diesem Wege schreitet die faschistische Schreibweise oft voran. Fast könnte man sagen, der Stoff, aus dem die ‘Verwandlung’ des Mannes gemacht wird, ist der sich auflösende sexuell unberührte Leib dieser Frau (Under the man’s gaze, the woman is transformed into something cold and dead…[having] the ability to evaporate as the story progresses…As the woman fades out of sight, the contours of the male sharpen; that is the way in which the fascist mode of writing often proceeds. It could almost be said that the raw material for the man’s ‘transformation’ is the sexually untouched, dissolving body of the woman he is with)” (Theweleit I 54). This is how a white woman serves her purpose in the masculine world.

Mothers are conspicuously absent in *Faserland*, in accordance with the motif of failed female saviors. The narrator does not mention his mother once in his extensive reminiscences of his childhood; even his clearly distracted businessman father appears in one story, but his mother is merely an assumption – what did she do to have herself written out of her son’s memory entirely? In any case, she is not there to step in and save her son from his painful drifting. Perhaps she is the prototype for the parade of disappointing women in the narrator’s life. Rollo’s mother is similarly absent; we are told that he never speaks of her, leading the narrator to form a rather uncharitable image of a drunken amateur landscape painter, the iconic neglectful aristocratic mother. Later, reader and narrator discover together, by way of a newspaper article on Rollo’s death, that his mother has been in a
mental institution. Rollo, like Patrick Bateman, can look directly to his insane and thus unfit mother for an explanation of his hopelessness. Such failures can always be traced back to a failed woman.

Thus, all “real” women in Faserland, it seems, are a disappointment; but beneath the let-down lurks the possibility of a more sinister threat to the narrator’s own identity. Even his most viable match, an acquaintance named Karin, proves intolerable, primarily because of her mouth, which is always open and prattling on such that the narrator is incapable of paying attention. He claims this facet of her personality charms him – “umwerfend (stunning),” he calls it, that “Reden ist bei Karin eigentlich schon zuviel gesagt. Sie plappert (talking is actually too strong a word with Karen. She babbles)” -- but his actions tell a different story (Kracht 140). When he isn’t blocking out the sound of her voice, the narrator disagrees with everything she says, no matter how trivial: “Sie erzählt, dass der Mercedes ganz gut ist, weil der wahnsinng schnell fährt und ein Telefon hat. Ich sage ihr, dass ich Mercedes aus Prinzip nicht gut finde. Dann sagt sie, dass es sicher heute regnen wird, und ich sage ihr: nein, ganz bestimmt nicht (She tells me that the Mercedes is pretty good because it goes really fast and has a telephone. I tell her that I don’t like Mercedes on principle. Then she says that it’s surely going to rain today, and I tell her: no, definitely not).” After a moment, he thinks to himself, “Karin hat ziemlich blaue Augen. Ob das gefärbte Kontaktlinsen sind? (Karin has rather blue eyes. Are they colored contact lenses?)” (Kracht 14).

Nothing about Karin is trustworthy, at least according to the narrator, who further presents her as unreliable by describing her sudden exit in the first chapter as if she rejected
him, though in fact she may be embarrassed that her subtle suggestion that he stay on Sylt for another day with her was met with indignation and (possibly willful) misunderstanding. When she reappears with another man near the end of the novel, her blathering mouth has become even more powerful, to the point of disembodiment: “Ihr Mund bewegt sich wie von selbst, so, als ob der Mund ein von ihr losgelöstes Wesen wäre, gar nicht ein Teil von ihr. Einfach nur ein Ding, das sich bewegt (Her mouth moves as if of its own volition, as if her mouth were a being freed from her, not a part of her at all. Just some kind of thing that moves)” (Kracht 141). And if the reader was not yet convinced of the narrator’s lack of sexual interest in Karin, despite his comments to the contrary: this disembodied mouth, strange and potentially threatening, reminds him of his high school gym teacher. This teacher, of Hungarian descent, is then described as enacting revenge on his students for Nazi crimes against Slavs by making them run to a certain tree where two Polish people were hanged during the war. The connection between Karin’s independent mouth and this act of undue revenge suggests that Karin (and her mouth) are potentially predatory. No wonder he must keep his eyes open to kiss her.

Another girl the narrator meets during his journey has a dangerous mouth. She seems, at first, to be an ideal and idealizable candidate, once again because of her malleable silences and empty words: her first line, “Angelo Badalamenti ist gar nicht mal so dementi,” prompts the narrator to exclaim, “dieses Mädchen [hat] alles verstanden…was es zu verstehen gibt (this girl has understood everything there is to understand)” (Kracht 44-5). Other than this sentence, the girl says nothing, except to announce that she needs to use the toilet. Then the narrator, in a gesture either proprietary or presumptuous, follows her into
the bathroom, only to stand by, taken aback, as she vomits profusely into the bathtub.

“Nicht so ein normales Übergeben, sondern ein richtiger Schwall, wie in Der Exorzist, nur
eben nicht grün, sondern rot…Ich wußte gar nicht, dass Menschen auf einen Haufen so viel
kotzen können, ich meine, rein mengenmäßig (Not a normal vomit, but a real flood, like in
The Exorcist, just red instead of green…I had no idea that people could puke so much at
one time, just in terms of volume)” (Kracht 46). Suddenly disinterested in the girl, he
abandons her to her suffering; he, too, feels nauseous, and his hands are shaking.

Granted, such a reaction is understandable; most people would be disturbed by
another person vomiting right next to them. But the presence of this moment in the novel
suggests that its function is to reinforce our impression of the sick feeling the narrator gets
when a real woman gets too close to him. We learn through these encounters with Karin
and the unnamed girl that Kracht’s narrator is unable to connect with women, that he is
either put off by them in general, or else has a knack for choosing women who will
disappoint or disgust him. But clearly there is more to it than that; a red flood of bile issuing
from the mouth of a woman who was supposed to represent romantic redemption must
transcend a straightforward case of attachment disorder. This image is rich with well-worn
symbols of dangerous femininity.

The red color of course signifies blood, which evokes both violent bloodletting and
the frightening mysteries of menstruation. The sudden, forceful surge of fluid – essentially, a
flood – also calls to mind the timeless association of women with water, which is wild,
indiscriminate, and capable of dissolving all things into one another. It also, then, suggests
contamination, since anything could be roiling in the water – in this case, the narrator takes a
moment to note the various foods visible in the girl’s stomach contents. Klaus Theweleit devotes an entire chapter to the so-called “red flood” in his *Male Fantasies*. The flood metaphor, he points out, “setzt die Leute in eine deutlich ambivalente Erregung: es ist bedrohlich, aber auch attraktiv (engenders a clearly ambivalent state of excitement...threatening, but also attractive);” a feminine flood promises to dissolve and penetrate the man’s rigid identity, fulfilling his greatest fear and deepest desire (Theweleit I 290).

It is worth noting that a mouth, after all, is just an orifice, and often a literary stand-in or euphemism for the vagina. In the worst case, this orifice becomes Theweleit’s *vagina dentata*, or toothed vagina. Overtly threatening, the *vagina dentata* is the terrifying vagina-mouth which seems to have captured the subconscious of his soldier males. This toothed orifice, like a vampiric mouth, seeks to puncture, swallow up and annihilate the male ego. This is something of a reversal of Freud’s idea that men might fear the vagina because of its wound-like character compared to the male genitals. To Theweleit it seems clear enough that “dem Manne, der die Vagina fürchtet, ihre Fähigkeit, das männliche Glied in sich aufzunehmen (zu verschlingen, zu verschlucken) [what men who fear vaginas must really be afraid of is the vagina’s ability to take the male member into itself (to devour it, to swallow it up)]” (Theweleit I 249). Paglia adds to Theweleit’s description of the *vagina dentata*: “The North American Indian myth of the toothed vagina (*vagina dentata*) is a gruesomely direct transcription of female power and male fear. Metaphorically, every vagina has secret teeth, for the male exits as less than he entered” (Paglia 13). This state of affairs relates back to our original problem from the previous chapter: “For men, sex is a struggle for identity. In sex,
the male is consumed and released again by the toothed power that bore him, the female
dragon of nature” (Paglia 14). No wonder, then, that our male protagonists (the soldier
males) revile female contact at least as much as they desire it; a man who associates with
women is “less” than a man who keeps them at arm’s length. Karin and the unnamed girl
produce unsavory floods from their orifices which threaten to engulf the narrator and
provoke a defensive response from him.

Varna, the politically engaged, leftist girlfriend of his former friend Alexander, is one
of a very few women in the text who are not potential saviors for the narrator, and
accordingly, he hates her passionately. It seems that the narrator’s jealousy and dislike of
Varna is what ultimately ruined the friendship with Alexander. She holds the distinction of
being the only person the narrator admits he never listened to (though our unreliable
narrator in fact seems to listen to no one):

Ich habe ihr nie zugehört, obwohl ich sonst eigentlich allen zuhöre, weil ja alles
irgendwie interessant ist...Ich konnte es einfach nicht. Varna war so billig, so
vorhersehbar, so liberal-dämlich, daß es einfach nicht möglich war, sich ihre blöden
Ideen anzu hören, ohne auszurasten und sie zu treten oder ihr zumindest aufs Maul
hauen zu wollen (I never listened to her, although I normally listen to everyone, since
everything is somehow interesting ...I just couldn’t. Varna was so cheap, so
predictable, so liberal- idiotic, that it just wasn’t possible to listen to her stupid ideas
without going ballistic and kicking her or at least wanting to punch her in the
mouth). (Kracht 73)

Once again, the source of Varna’s infuriating power is her mouth, here an animal’s “Maul.”

The ideas which inspire such violence in the narrator include, “Daß man ja eigentlich
doch die Grünen wählen müßte, oder man müsse ein Beispiel setzen und kein Auto fahren
(That you really ought to vote for the Greens, or you have to set an example and not drive a
car)” (Kracht 73). Varna’s aggressiveness and the unbearable flood of words from her
mouth are all profoundly threatening to the narrator; they also position Varna as representative of post-’68 leftist politics and hypocrisy, a recurrent subject of the narrator’s scorn (he calls an old man an “SPD-Nazi” and a disapproving businessman a fascist, for example). As Sabine von Dirke has noted, Kracht and his cohort pursue a critique of 68ers and what they perceive as a stifling penchant for political correctness, a “freedom that totally enslaves people,” in the words of Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre, one of Kracht’s literary allies. It is not such a great leap to associate Theweleit’s communist woman symbol, the mistress of the red flood, with the narrator’s hatred of the 68 generation’s equalizing agenda, and also its perceived failure (since so many former 68ers are now comfortable consumers in their own right). This incarnation of a political anxiety in the form of a threatening woman mirrors the use of homosexual Eugen as a cipher for decadent elitism. The narrator (and perhaps the author who stands behind him) seems to long for an orderly, homosocial, bourgeois existence with strictly defined borders. The threat of dissolution can come from above (Eugen) as well as below (Varna), and can be male or female, but it is always sexualized, transforming sex of any kind into a dangerous game, as feared and avoided as it is desired – in short, a very complicated business, and one that rarely, if ever, actually takes place.

At best, the women in Kracht’s novel are used as symbols of cultural hypocrisy and superficial, untrustworthy consumer culture. At worst, they come to represent the ultimate perceived threat to the rigid male identity, that of dissolution through commonality. Varna’s aggressiveness, her siren-like effect on Alexander and the unbearable flood of words from her mouth are all characteristics of Theweleit’s red woman, who threatens to break the
barriers of the soldier male and offends his strict sensibilities, both in terms of his own body and in terms of his well-ordered, hierarchical microcosm. The narrator can only lash out against this perceived threat: as Theweleit explains, “Terror gegen die Frau, die nicht mit dem Mutter/Schwesterbild identifiziert ist, ist grundsätzlich Notwehr (terror against a woman who isn’t identified with the mother/sister image [i.e., white] is essentially self-defense)” (Theweleit I 227, emphasis in original).

**Benjamin Lebert.**

Benjamin Lebert’s debut novel, *Crazy*, made at least as deep a mark upon the German literary scene as Kracht’s *Faserland*. The author’s extreme youth (he was only sixteen when he wrote the novel), direct, spare writing style (Elke Heidenreich has compared him to Hemingway; others mention Böll), and exploration of the contemporary youth experience earned Lebert copious media attention and turned him into a sort of poster-child for “Pop’s” resurgence in Germany; this despite the fact that Lebert has no real ties to the actual movement. In fact, Lebert’s debut is more traditional coming-of-age tale than challenging Pop-text; Nataly Bleuel points out that the “Zögling Törleß vibrierte vor fast hundert Jahren ähnlich irritiert an der Schwelle zum Erwachsenenleben wie Benjamin Lebert heute (Nearly a hundred years ago the young Törleß vibrated, similarly irritated, on the threshold of adult life, just like Benjamin Lebert today),” while Lebert himself acknowledges that his book would not have been possible without Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (Smith). This novel, Pop only in its marketability, is a semi-autobiographical chronicle of Lebert’s
experiences as a disabled teen in boarding school, an adolescent exploration of difference, disability, and the consequences of growing up.

In many ways, Benjamin Lebert and his work are not an obvious choice for a comparison with his contemporary, Christian Kracht. While the two bestselling authors share an editor – Kerstin Gleba of Kiepenheuer & Witsch – and have both been the subject of heated debate in the feuilletons, the two operate according to very different models. Lebert, nearly twenty years Kracht’s junior, has both suffered and profited from his tender age and sheepish, rather “uncool” loner status, only intensified by his disability. Some critics have dismissed *Crazy* as over-hyped and unremarkable – Florian Illies famously bashed the media attention awarded to Lebert in an article called “Das Kind” in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* – and others have gone so far as to suggest that Lebert’s father, a well-known journalist, may have helped him write the novel (Smith). Yet many critics, among them Heidenreich and Maxim Biller, step in to defend Lebert against this backlash. In fact, one gets the sense that some of the journalists who write about him are actually protective of him to the point of pity. They note his “sweet face” and “small polite voice” (Smith), marvel at his unaffected directness (Heidenreich), and criticize the “theater” of publicity which engulfed him after *Crazy*’s release as if he were a passive victim of it (and of Gleba, as Martin Wolf insinuates). One cannot help but wonder if Lebert’s disability, combined with his young age, has partially informed this rather patronizing defense of Lebert himself – far more so than of his book. The fact that Lebert’s protagonist carries his name – Benjamin Lebert – clearly intensifies the drive to compassion, as one feels one *knows* Lebert through the monologue of his character. It is perhaps telling that Lebert sees his decision to name
the character after himself as a “terrible mistake…The feelings are all true…But basically, it’s not true” (Smith). Thus, while Kracht wrestles with the negative “Schnösel (snob)” image attached to him via his nameless narrator, Lebert has the opposite problem, as it were: he receives the sympathy intended for his protagonist from readers who have identified with the fictional Benni.

Clearly Lebert and the cool, enigmatic Kracht are not part of the same cohort, but Nataly Bleuel demonstrates the difference more pointedly, praising Lebert’s thoroughly un-Pop (because un-trendy) attitude “weil sie nichts gemein hat mit dem Geschmacksterror von Benjamins gehypten Vorgängern beim selben Verlag: Christian Kracht und Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre (because it has nothing in common with the taste-terror of Benjamin’s hyped predecessors at the same publishing house: Christian Kracht and Benjamin Lebert).” She claims that when Kerstin Gleba debuted Lebert at the 1998 Frankfurter Buchmesse, Kracht looked the young author up and down “vom…wasserstoffblondierten Scheitel bis zum linken Fuß (from his peroxide-blond head to his left foot)” and, noting Lebert’s Velcro-closure sneakers, supposedly said: “Für einen Autor hast du die falschen Schuhe an (for an author you have the wrong shoes on).” Of course, Lebert is unable to tie his own shoes due to his partial paralysis, and the implication is that Kracht’s comment also refers to Lebert’s lack of physical grace – a low blow indeed. It is clear from Bleuel’s tone (referring to Lebert by his first name, characterizing Kracht and von Stuckrad-Barre as “Geschmacksterroristen
(terrorists of taste)” where her bias lies, but this perception of Kracht and Lebert as very different – both their public personae and their work – is pervasive.⁸

Lebert’s novel is undeniably more straightforward than Kracht’s, and the work does not at first appear to be driven by social critique. Lebert’s protagonist is an adolescent coming of age in the shark tank of a last-chance boarding school, while Kracht’s narrator struggles to navigate through his aimless twenties. Yet Lebert’s novels exhibit many of the same tropes and constructs which characterize Kracht’s fiction, particularly in his characterizations of gender identity and sexual politics. A reading of Crazy through a gender-conscious lens reveals that Lebert’s protagonist suffers from the same frustrated desires as Kracht’s and Ellis’s.

Benjamin is a sixteen-year-old with a partially paralyzed left side who finds himself starting at a new boarding school, his last chance to pass a math course and finally move on from the eighth grade. Like the protagonists of Faserland and Less Than Zero, Benjamin feels lonely and adrift, and looks to women and girls – unsuccessfully – for fulfillment. The difference is that Benjamin does find a kind of fulfillment, this time by joining a male group and – importantly – then leaving it behind.

The boys of Crazy, like many of Lebert’s characters in his subsequent work, represent a cross-section of adolescent male outsider culture, the proverbial “freaks and geeks” who band together to self-hate and self-aggrandize, ultimately forming bonds of friendship that help them find confidence and even transcend their lonely lot in life. There

⁸ See chapter one: Lebert himself satirizes Kracht in his third novel, Kannst du, while Kracht and his cohort see Lebert as a meaningless media phenomenon.
is Janosch, a poor student like Benni who has a knack for getting into trouble; Fat Felix, whose obvious problem is an emotional eating disorder; Thin Felix, who seems to fade into the background, a slight but angry boy from a broken home; Troy, much older than the others and nearly engulfed by a silent rage brought on by a bed-wetting problem and his brother’s rumored terminal illness; and Florian, called “Mädchen (girl),” who is the youngest of the boys and has been orphaned. Though he may have the most obvious disability, Benni fits in perfectly with this rag-tag group because they are all ultimately disabled and impotent (unfähig), whether physically or emotionally, and they are all ultimately angry about it.

Since the Columbine massacre (which happened one year after Crazy’s initial publication) and subsequent high-profile school shootings in both the United States and Germany, the popular psyche has harbored a certain fear and suspicion of angry, disenfranchised young male outsiders. Yet even in Columbine’s media aftermath, there arose a strong (if not entirely correct) implication that the young perpetrators’ years of suffering at the hands of their schoolmates, their troubled and unfortunate lives both at home and in the classroom, were partly to blame for the violence which erupted from them.⁹ As in the popular discourse, Lebert’s novel encourages us to see his male characters both as disabled (whether physically or emotionally), and as victims of misunderstanding and petty cruelty which incite them to drastic behaviors, albeit nonviolent ones.

This spectrum of disabilities – and Benni’s in particular – recreates and even strengthens the excusing mechanism employed by the likes of Kracht and Ellis. Whereas Kracht’s protagonist is impotent and thus victimized because of his aimlessness, his cultural

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malaise, his physical weakness brought on by excess, Lebert’s Benni is a victim because of a very real physical deformity which limits his control over himself and his surroundings. His helplessness is not just emotional but physical, tangible, and irreversible. He cannot tie a shoe or slice a dinner roll; he is persecuted in math class by a merciless teacher even though part of his trouble is a simple lack of motor skills, an inability to hold a protractor or use a compass successfully. This literal incarnation of outsider status – which is also victim status – is the essence of Benni’s appeal as a coming-of-age story protagonist. What we all feel as adolescents – namely, out of control of our own bodies and circumstances, painfully far away from the achievement of our goals – is written onto Benni’s disabled body, turning him into an icon. This lack of physical control is echoed by Troy’s bedwetting, Fat Felix’s uncooperative paunch that can barely keep his pants up and his anxious need for candy at all times, and even Florian’s diminutive, girlish stature. The physical mark both creates and indicates the boys’ status as victim-outsiders. As evidenced by Florian’s nickname – Mädchen – the mark is also an emasculating, potentially feminizing force that threatens the development of a masculine persona.

As in Faserland, lack of physical control is often described in terms of insidious fluids, urine and tears in particular. Troy’s breakdown, which leads to the boys’ final adventure in Munich, displays a representative metaphor:

As in Kracht’s novel, here the internal turmoil becomes a literal “ins-Bett-pissen,” forcing itself outside the body in a torrent of tears, urine, vomit, blood, etc. This is the low moment in the text that incites drastic action, spurring the boys to escape from their boarding school and head for the big city. The Theweleitian notion of flowing/floods as feminine seems to hold here, albeit with a twist: the floods are emasculating because they revert the young men to early childhood (as only babies are expected to lose control and cry or wet themselves). Girls, of course, are allowed (or forced) to retain certain aspects of this childlike “flowing” behavior, by crying and even by menstruating, but boys must close their borders.

That these boys lose control makes them less than men – and more than sympathetic as victim-outsiders – but then they are only mid-way through their own coming-of-age story. One nonetheless has the impression that Benni and his friends strive for Theweleit’s hardened carapace model, impenetrable from both inside and out. Janosch’s favorite words of wisdom are, after all, “Scheiß dir nicht in die Hosen (Don’t shit in your pants).” They are shamed by their own lack of control and eager to prove themselves “crazy,” and perhaps the most important aspect of this process of distinction is a successful interaction with a girl.

In *The Male Body*, Susan Bordo writes, “To be a body with a sex is fine for girls – in fact, it’s what we’re supposed to be. But men are not supposed to be guided by the rhythms

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of bodily cycles, susceptible to hormonal tides. They are not supposed to be slaves to sexual moods and needs, to physical and emotional dependency…They’re not supposed to think with their penises!” (Bordo 19). Not surprisingly, Benni, Janosch, and company certainly do seem to think with their penises for much of the novel, since each of their adventures has a sexual aspect. They converse about their prospects for sex, which do appear grim, and about the necessity of “nageln (nailing).” And yet the tone of these scenes steers very clear of Bordo’s “hormonal tides” and “physical and emotional dependency” on sex. Benni puts it this way: “Früher hingen in unseren Zimmern Superhelden. Nun hängen in unseren Zimmern Supertitten (Before, super heroes hung in our rooms. Now super tits hang in our rooms)” (45). As he and Janosch flip through a Playboy, the discussion turns to whether or not the two want to have children someday, then Benni daydreams about his father. When his attention returns to the magazine, the discussion is not about the pleasure or need of sex, but rather the necessity of it, as if it were an achievement of development, like growing a beard or being able to bench press a certain weight. Fat Felix tries to fight Janosch because Janosch reminds him that he has never had sex in the same breath that he calls him fat. The insults are one and the same because they both target Felix’s deficiencies in the process of developing an independent masculine image. Thus, sex for the boys really is not just about lust, or even a particular interest in the girls themselves; sex is a badge of honor, a necessary obstacle to the achievement of selfhood.

Not surprisingly, then, Lebert’s characterization of women is at best ambiguous, and at worst profoundly negative in a way that goes well beyond a young boy’s apprehensions about growing up and learning to interact with girls on both social and sexual levels. As in
Faserland, women and girls are both all-consuming and repellent, and threaten Lebert’s protagonist, Benjamin, at every turn. Benjamin’s dealings with women are fairly limited, despite being enrolled in a co-ed boarding school. As the novel opens he cleaves to his mother, about whom he feels a mixture of longing, pity, and shame throughout the book. She embarrasses him with a note to the school director explaining his handicap, and yet he dreads her absence; later, as his parents’ marriage begins to crumble, he recalls a haunting image of her sitting at the kitchen table on one of his weekends at home, weeping (Lebert 92). “Sie tut mir leid (I feel sorry for her),” he says of her repeatedly. The flood Frau Lebert threatens to unleash on Benjamin is a rain of tears, both his and hers; she binds him with childhood nostalgia and a worried mother’s co-dependent, suffocating love, not to mention the mixture of guilt, anger, and pity which wells up in him over his parents’ divorce. This emotional downpour gets in the way of Benjamin’s quest for acceptance and peace with his “crazy” peers, and so he flees the boarding school without calling his mother, letting her worry, symbolically leaving her behind.

The two female “leads” in the novel are Malen and Marie, a pair of boarding school students who are at once opposite and rather interchangeable; even their names are similar. Malen is the heart’s desire of first Janosch, then Benjamin, and she is “white” in the Theweleitian sense despite her potentially questionable record because the narrator himself, though he desires her, can never touch her. She is whitewashed into an intangible icon fit only for wistful longing (like Isabella Rossellini for Kracht’s narrator), and any ideas of coming close to her are met with warning signs. As she sits with Janosch at a party in her dorm room, sporting turquoise nails and a set of white silk lingerie improbable for a sixteen-
year-old girl, Benjamin notices that she seems to glow, comparing her blue eyes to a “Laserkanone. Man wird sofort gefangen (laser canon. You’re caught immediately)” (Lebert 71). Tempting, but cold – and capable of penetrating him to the core if he comes too close.

Actual sexual contact occurs with another, heretofore unknown girl – the newcomer Marie – who aggressively “takes” Benjamin’s virginity. Everything about this girl speaks of danger and intimidation: her eyes are “giftgrün (poison green),” her lips “voluminös” and “blutrot (blood red)” over remarkably white teeth (a PG-rated incarnation of the *vagina dentata*). Benjamin notices her dark hair, her large breasts despite an overall thinness, the “pechschwarz (coal black)” of her robe-like nightshirt and underwear (Lebert 69). By this description, Marie could be a body-double for an early Angelina Jolie; and indeed, the “love-bite” on her neck and the way she crushes a beer can in one red-nailed hand indicate that her bad-girl image is more than skin deep. Because of his disability and his shyness (and perhaps his fundamental disinterest), it is Marie who must approach Benjamin in the lavatory, that classic site of elimination, dirtiness, and vulnerability; she must remove both their clothes, put a condom on him, and climb on top of him. Benjamin sits in a chair, a passive victim, overwhelmed and shaken by the experience.

Lebert’s imagery is telling: Benjamin sees in her shaved pubic hair a dark window, accentuating the threatening hole which will swallow him up; and in the sensation of sex he feels a “storm” of seething and mysterious emotions. The flood has come for him, and he must ride it out, half-unwilling, glad only to have proven himself a “man” (long before he can truly be called one, at the tender age of sixteen) by penetrating a woman. Afterwards, in a fit of conscious aggression (“warum zum Kuckuck werde ich so aggressiv? Ich habe doch
gerade ein Mädchen genagelt, verdammt (why the devil am I getting so aggressive? I just nailed a girl, after all, dammit”), Benjamin urinates all over the wall and floor of the girls’ bathroom, then vomits profusely – another moment of fluid release, like Troy’s later crying spell, that signals catastrophic change. But it is simultaneously an act of aggression directed against Marie and the other girls. As Camille Paglia explains, “Male urination is a form of commentary…often aggressive, as in the defacement of public monuments by Sixties rock stars. To piss on is to criticize” (21). Though this may be stereotypical drunken behavior, the bitter glee Benni feels at the thought of Malen or a female teacher finding his used condom in the freshly “marked” bathroom stall further demonstrates that “nailing,” as he puts it, has not really fulfilled Benjamin’s desires, because they are intertwined with his anger (Lebert 83-4). Only hurting a girl (by upsetting her or getting her in trouble) will satisfy him; apparently he sees himself as Marie’s victim and not her lover, and Marie as a representative for all women.

The sex act grants Benjamin access to a certain club among his male peers, or more accurately elevates his status in the group; and thus, as in so many pop texts by male authors, the female figure, no matter how threatening she may seem, is in actuality a mere instrument, a medium through which men (or boys) interact with each other. Eve Sedgwick describes the role of a woman in a love triangle as a conduit for male relationships in *Between Men*. In this case, the woman’s presence actually helps negotiate an exchange between the child narrator and his imminent (masculine) adulthood. Of course, the Bildungsroman, or any coming-of-age story, will nearly always have such an initiation process involving an encounter with the opposite sex; the cultural assumption being that one’s own mature
identity cannot be formed if it is not partially defined by sexual experience. Tellingly, Benjamin “must” think of first Janosch, then his father while copulating with Marie; in a way, Janosch is even more present than the girl in the sex act, as his advice and opinions on the subject run through Benjamin’s head the entire time. As the episode draws to a close, Benjamin himself seems to grasp that the point of “nailing” Marie was for his own development, and was otherwise enough to turn the stomach. Indeed, Kiepenheuer & Witsch seized this very passage for the back cover of their paperback edition: “Das war alles ein wenig viel für mich heute: Anstatt zu schlafen, eine Feuerleiter hinaufzuklettern, zu saufen, was das Zeug hält, mal eben ein bißchen zu vögeln und nebenbei erwachsen zu werden. Das reicht für eine Nacht. Da würde jeder kotzen, glaube ich (That was all a bit much for me today: instead of sleeping, to climb a fire escape, to get drunk, to screw a little bit and along the way to grow up. That’s enough for one night. I think anyone would puke after that).”

As in Sedgwick’s assessment of Shakespeare, sex with a woman is the necessary risk a man must take, a journey into the abyss, in the course of the odyssey to gain access to the club of manhood. This obsession with women as status symbols, and with sex as a sign of success or normalcy, plays an important role in Faserland, as well: the narrator longs for a heterosexual relationship, not just because he desires women’s bodies, but because he likes the idea of himself with a girlfriend. Unfortunately for him, no woman he meets takes the matter into her own hands like Marie does, and so the narrator’s mission fails.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{11}}\text{ It is, of course, really the beer which ultimately turns Benjamin’s stomach; but the fact that he associates the rest of his evening with that feeling, and that feeling with growing up, is both poignant and problematic.}\]
Even the spectral Malen is essentially an object. When Benjamin anxiously confesses to Janosch that he, too, has feelings for Malen, the two are mysteriously overcome by a fit of laughter. Asked if he is angry, Janosch just says, “Unsinn (Nonsense),” explaining that over a hundred boys must have a crush on Malen at the school – one more doesn’t really make a difference. This argument might make sense in theory, but the emotional drama of two young men in love with the same girl has been enough to fuel many a tragic tale – after all, Goethe’s Werther, who longs for a friend’s fiancée, ultimately shoots himself. Indeed, in Lebert’s second novel, such a love triangle ends in violence and anguish. Against this tradition of suffering, a giggling fit is jarring. It is as if even Janosch is aware that Malen is just an object of affection, a symbol for the attainment of manhood. She is the receiver of Janosch’s love letters and of his lustful gaze, and whether or not she serves this purpose for other adolescents really does not matter to him. This exchange between the two boys also reinforces the prevailing message of the novel, that male-to-male friendships are far more significant, and far closer, than any dealings the boys will have with women and girls. After all, by the end of the novel, Marie is conspicuously absent, and Malen is still unattainable; Benjamin has met a girl in his hometown, but seems skeptical that the meeting will amount to a relationship. Even his mother seems more distant than ever – he will move in with his father to attend a special school – and only his bonds with the boys from his hall seem to have amounted to anything.

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12 In Lebert’s Der Vogel ist ein Rabe, protagonist Henry is pitted against his friend Jens over the heart of Christine; when she rejects them both, Jens goes on a violent rampage, causing Henry to flee. Henry’s conversation partner in the text, Paul, ultimately admits to having killed a prostitute out of jealousy.
Sedgwick’s insistence that a text can be homosocial and still homophobic is particularly true when applied to Crazy, as the novel is indeed homophobic in an offhand, adolescent way, and yet absolutely focused on male relationships. The boys’ first adventure together involves a trip to the office hour of a Sexualpädagogin (sex educator), where Florian dares Janosch to pretend he is homosexual and has a problem to discuss with the therapist. Janosch accepts the dare, telling the woman that he wants to have sex with a furious Troy but is concerned about the possible consequences at his school. Fat Felix says it best when he asks the group afterwards, “Warum haben wir das jetzt gemacht (Now why did we just do that)?” (Lebert 33). The weak answer he gets from Janosch is that it was better than doing nothing; in the text, the episode performs the important task, early on, of distinguishing the boys’ homosocial bonds from homosexual relationships. Of course, it is only a dare because Janosch does not want to have sex with Troy – that the very suggestion of it makes Troy angry – that the other boys are as embarrassed and nervous to be lying to an adult as they are to be identified as homosexual.

Considering this incident, combined with a smattering of homophobic jokes and comments throughout the text (Florian is, after all, Mädchen), it seems especially odd that only Janosch is suspicious of the mysterious old man who offers them a place to sleep in Munich during their escape from the school. Sambraus strikes the other boys as a like-minded soul, an aged version of themselves; he tells them that he once attended their school and speaks of his own male friend, now long dead. They assume he is offering them a spot to sleep in his apartment because he understands their mission of self-discovery through
male bonding. Only Janosch seems to consider the possibility that Sambraus has more sinister intentions:


By the time they all reach Sambraus’s apartment – which just happens to be above a seedy strip joint called Leberts Eisen – even Janosch has forgotten his instinctual avoidance of a strange man’s private quarters. In the end, Sambraus is not in the text to corrupt the youth, but to show them toward an adult future, one which is lonely but independent, free of women (his wife is long dead), and also free of the male friendships which molded his youth. Back in Neuseelen, he finds his friend Xaver’s grave with the help of the boys. He speaks to the humble grave, calling Benni’s group “‘Die neue Generation. Du wärest stolz auf sie (The new generation. You’d be proud of them)!’” Fat Felix turns to Benni and asks, “‘Endet so jede Geschichte?’…”Ja, ich glaube, so endet jede Geschichte,’ antworte ich. ‘Aber wer weiß. Vielleicht fängt auch so eine neue Geschichte an (‘Does every story end this way?’ …’Yes, I think every story ends this way. But who knows. Perhaps a new story starts this way, too.’)” (Lebert 170). One paragraph later, Benni is packed and ready to leave the school for good.

Of course, he will leave his friends behind, too – and what have his experiences with them taught him but a sense of self-confidence, self-containment? Like the protagonist in the book which Benjamin reads to his friends, Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea,

13 “I don’t like this old guy,” he whispers. “He’s so weird. Something’s not right with him. I wouldn’t want to go to his apartment with him. He’s crazy…And my mother taught me, that you ought not listen to nuts. You should get out of their way.”
Benjamin must ultimately face his challenges as a determined individual, and it is clear from the novel’s closing paragraphs, addressed to the reader, that his vision of himself as an outsider has not changed, but intensified: “Wenn Sie möchten, können Sie mich ja einmal besuchen…Ich bin der Junge, der sein linkes Bein verdächtig nachzieht. In Menschenmassen bin ich fast nie. Und wenn, dann immer ganz hinten. Am Schwanz (If you like, you can come visit me sometime…I’m the boy who drags his left leg suspiciously behind him. I’m almost never in crowds. And if I am, then always at the back. On the tail end)” (Lebert 173). As important as his band of “brothers” has been to him, Benjamin must soldier on alone. Now, though, his armor is fully formed, and even the penetrating gaze of a beautiful woman cannot stop his progress into masculine selfhood.

If Kracht uses Dandyism or Poppertum to express his character’s “damage” and excuse his destructive behavior, Lebert uses his character’s disability in a similar way. Benni’s emotional damage can be said to stem primarily – if not directly – from the damage his body suffered at birth, and this difference inhibits him – whether concretely or just in his mind – from connecting with other people and from achieving the goals he thinks will make him a successful masculine individual: passing the eighth grade, climbing the fire escape to the girls’ hall, and finding a girlfriend. Perversely, though perhaps predictably, this disability ultimately causes his growth into an individual, only one who is sealed off against human connections and who stands apart, the man who is an island. His disability immobilizes him so that a girl may take advantage of him before he has time to protest or fail to perform, allowing him to sail into those “dangerous waters” and pass the test of manhood. It also adds the dignified sense of justification that eluded Kracht’s narrator in his efforts to remove
himself from society. In this way, Lebert’s Benni actually comes out on top where Kracht’s narrator slips under the waves.

A comparison between the German novels Faserland and Crazy and Bret Easton Ellis’s early work discussed in the previous chapter, Less Than Zero and The Rules of Attraction, reveals a number of similarities, many of which I have already enumerated elsewhere. All four novels explore the troubled task of becoming a man in the 80s and 90s in societies characterized as toxic and superficial. Each protagonist finds his own version of Theweleit’s exoskeleton, a way of keeping other people out and himself isolated and therefore, ostensibly, protected from a feminine and chaotic outside world. Each is in danger of being swallowed up by the force of his own desires.

Yet there is at least one fundamental difference between Ellis’s texts and those of the German authors. While Ellis expresses his social critique in terms of violence as well as sexual frustration, Kracht and Lebert never really approach the brutality of these early works. The dominant image in Less Than Zero, if there is one, might be the dead homeless man neglected in the alley, or the raped and beaten young girl nobody seems to notice at a party. Ellis ends the book with an ominous description of Los Angeles:

The images I had were of people being driven mad by living in the city. Images of parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled that they ate their own children. Images of people, teenagers my own age, looking up from the asphalt and being blinded by the sun…Images so violent and malicious that they seemed to be my only point of reference for a long time afterwards. (Ellis 207-8)
The implication is that the city’s brutality expresses itself through the people, how unaffected they are by others’ suffering; Ellis makes a connection between contemporary consumer culture and the human potential for destruction.

For Kracht and Lebert that line is a mere suggestion, not supported by outright violence in the text. In Faserland, the only dead body is Rollo’s, and it disappears into the water, leaving no trace; we read about it in the newspaper along with the narrator, as distant as possible from Rollo’s actual suffering. In Crazy, the height of the novel’s violence comes in the force of the boys’ rage against their place in the world, and when the ominous, overgrown Troy finally lets it out, it leaks out in the form of tears. There is no sound way to account for this difference – it may well be a matter of the authors’ respective visions and styles – but perhaps it is worth speculating why German novels with similar themes would not employ the kind of violence used by the American Ellis.

Could it be that literary violence carries a different meaning in the German-speaking world than it does in the United States, especially in the late twentieth century, post-war, post-Wall, in the midst of coming to terms with these pivotal, brutal moments in German history? It is possible that depictions of ravaged bodies and murderous rages are taken more seriously in a tradition that can (and chooses to) remember the real thing. Perhaps it is just not so simple a metaphor, not as straight a line, for a German audience. Perhaps the inner devastation of Kracht’s and Lebert’s protagonists, combined with their own first-person victimhood, provides a necessary way of navigating around potential outrage in order to tell the same story that Ellis does in the more straightforward language of 1980s American elitism. In the next chapter I will trace the evolution of both literary “strategies” toward
extreme violence, whether direct or indirect, in hopes of coming closer to an understanding of the entire genre as both cultural critique and portrait of troubled masculinities.
Sympathy for the Devil: Bret Easton Ellis’s \textit{American Psycho}

In the summer of 1991, the young Swiss-German reporter Christian Kracht sat down with the newly notorious American author Bret Easton Ellis to discuss Ellis’s most recent novel, \textit{American Psycho}, for \textit{Tempo} magazine. When the two met for beers at Ellis’s New York apartment, they must have been struck by how much they had in common. Both men were born in the mid-1960s to affluent parents, and both came of age at elite New England colleges (Kracht studied at Sarah Lawrence, while Ellis attended Bennington). As an author, Ellis, an ingénue who first published at the age of twenty-one, was nearly a decade ahead of Kracht, who would not write his breakthrough novel \textit{Faserland} for another three years. Yet already there is evidence of a shared vision in the published interview. Though Kracht begins his article with a clear division between the reporter and his interviewee, by the end of the piece it is unclear which observations are Ellis’s, and which are Kracht’s own, their respective comments seemingly merged into one seamless statement on art and late capitalism.

Kracht may seem even critical or mocking as he sets the scene for his interview, noting that Ellis is overweight and “\textit{linkisch},” awkward, and is wearing an ill-fitting suit as they enter his strikingly bare apartment. The point is that Ellis is rather uncool, an outsider among the elites, and Kracht seems to judge this with his trademark snobbery. Kracht then summarizes the plot and reigning interpretation of \textit{American Psycho}:

\begin{quote}
Ellis’ Roman “\textit{American Psycho}” erzählt die Geschichte des Patrick Bateman, eines jungen Börsenmaklers, der Frauen, Kinder, Bettler und Hunde aufschlitzt.
\end{quote}
Dazwischen referiert der Erzähler – er und Bateman sind dieselbe Person – über die Vorzüge seiner Platin-American-Express-Karte, über Ralph-Lauren-Krawatten…Bateman ist eine Art Dr. Jekyll, der keinen Mr. Hyde braucht, der keine Maske aufsetzen muss, weil das Grauen untrennbar mit seiner Welt verbunden ist.14

Indeed, *American Psycho*, Bret Easton Ellis’s third novel, offers a glimpse into the mind of an all-American boy cum serial killer who spends his days at the office or the gym and his nights hacking prostitutes to pieces in his luxury apartment. Like the two previous novels which made him the most famous member of the American “Literary Brat Pack” – *Less Than Zero* and *The Rules of Attraction* – *American Psycho* holds up a funhouse mirror to the young upper crust of L.A. and Manhattan, amplifying their cruel superficiality, hedonism, and moral emptiness. If *Psycho* is a more violent book than its predecessors, it is also about an older set of players: protagonist Patrick Bateman is literally the older brother of a character from *The Rules of Attraction*. As Ellis’s own brat pack reach their mid-twenties, the stakes are raised, and as Kracht puts it, horror has become an inseparable part of their world.

Kracht then addresses the novel’s scandalous reputation, shaking his head that violence is “das letzte Tabu der Mainstream-Literatur (the last taboo of mainstream literature)” and asking why a reading public that is used to horror movies and devastating news broadcasts would be shocked by a few literary murders. Ellis is quoted directly for the first time as he explains that the scenes in question have been taken out of context, accusing his critics – perhaps quite rightly – of not reading his novel all the way through. But then the two, according to Kracht, retreat to the balcony with a second beer, and from this

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14 “Ellis’s novel *American Psycho* tells the story of Patrick Bateman, a young stockbroker, who slices open women, children, beggars, and dogs. In between the narrator – he and Bateman are the same person – holds forth on the benefits of his platinum American Express card, on Ralph Lauren ties…Bateman is a sort of Jekyll who doesn’t need a Mr. Hyde, who need not put on a mask, because horror is inextricably bound up in his world.”
moment their voices are indistinguishable as they apparently have a conversation in which

Patrick Bateman almost sounds like a real person:


This shared assessment of Bateman’s true flaw – lack of taste – reflects a potential common interest in provocation; Kracht seems eager to showcase Ellis’s flamboyant dismissal of his own novel’s violence. Here it becomes clear that the two authors are toying with the reader: at first, Ellis and his guest play up the novel’s potential for social criticism and the violent scenes’ role as part of that critique; they also cast Ellis as an outsider to the society in question, an awkward intellectual type with a cheap suit and bare walls. Yet by criticizing Bateman for, of all things, his lack of the requisite cool, the two re-position themselves as “Geschmacksfaschisten (fascists of taste)” and reveal themselves to be part of the elite circles in which Bateman moves, whether they are dissenters or not. After all, Kracht himself has been called a “Geschmacksterrorist (terrorist of taste)” on at least one occasion (Bleuel). In fact, the entire description of Bateman strongly favors Kracht’s authorial persona in the mid- to late 90s. Perhaps it is not Ellis whom Kracht identifies with, but Patrick Bateman. Of course, there never really was any question that Kracht’s article would

15 “We talk about Patrick Bateman. He is a monster like Norman Bates from Hitchcock’s Psycho. But while Bates was an outsider... Bateman is a respected member of American society – a product of the Reagan years, a consumer, a conservative taste-terrorist of the first rank. He is intelligent, educated, and held as the authority on lifestyle questions by his fellow brokers. And there is exactly the point: Bateman’s crime, says Ellis, is not just the hideous murders, but that he has no taste. He is weird, awkward, insecure.”
support Ellis: the pages are decorated with upper-case borders of various words, brands, and people relevant to *American Psycho’s* critical message (“PHIL COLLINS. AMERICAN EXPRESS. RALPH LAUREN. WALL STREET. U2. DONALD TRUMP” etc.).

Kracht’s defense of Ellis comes full circle when he calls Ellis’s protagonist Patrick Bateman *linkisch* (awkward), referring back to his commentary on the author himself. Then, curiously, the two glorify Bateman – and his *real-life* counterparts Ed Gein, Ted Bundy, and Jeffrey Dahmer – as a powerful wake-up call for a troubled society. “Was hat er [Ellis] denn Furchtbares getan? Er, der Chronist eines Jahrzehnts, hat es gewagt, einen sehr genauen Blick auf die Wirklichkeit zu werfen…Diese Monster, sagt Ellis, hätten wir verdient (What did he [Ellis] do that was so terrible? He, the chronicler of a decade, dared to cast a very exacting gaze on reality…we would have earned these monsters, says Ellis).” Noting that the word *Monstrum* is related to the Latin verb *monere*, “to warn,” Kracht sees Bateman as “nicht nur…eine Warnung in einer aus den Fugen geratenen Welt, sondern auch ein Vollstrecker: der Teufel im Fegefeuer der Banalität” (not just a warning in a world that is falling apart, but rather also an executioner: the devil in the purgatory of banality” (Kracht 2). At last Kracht’s initially critical assessment of Ellis becomes a sort of deference, his recognition of Ellis’s outsider status that has enabled him to criticize his world’s “banality”. First Kracht implies that Ellis and Bateman are similar, if not the same; then he suggests that Bateman/Ellis has a purgative function: the awkward shall inherit the Earth from the poisoned Manhattan elite. Thus, what ultimately unites the two authors is their cultivation of public personae indistinguishable from their characters (as discussed in chapter one) and a certain brand of provocative posing, a thumbing of their noses at conventions of decency, morality, and
social order from within that social order. That is to say that Kracht and Ellis share the
paradoxical project of deflating upper-class hypocrisy while still belonging to the upper class.

Kracht’s interpretation of Psycho reflects a general consensus among scholars that the
novel is a biting satirical comment on the aforementioned amorality of reigning American
culture. I will examine the success of Ellis’s work as satire in this chapter, for though the
satirical elements of Psycho may seem obvious in critical hindsight, the novel ignited furious
debate in the popular press when it was released. Kracht goes so far as to call it the
“größten Literaturskandal seit der Konfisierung von James Joyce’ “Ulysses” durch den
amerikanischen Zoll in den 20er Jahren (the biggest literature scandal since the confiscation
of James Joyce’s Ulysses by American customs officials in the 1920s).” Such a comparison
leaves no room for doubt about Kracht’s estimation of Ellis’s literary merit; indeed, Kracht
later suggests that Psycho far surpasses Tom Wolfe’s Bonfire of the Vanities as the definitive
literary portrait of New York City. In fact, Kracht’s defense sets the standard among Ellis
supporters, who focus entirely on two things: 1) Ellis’s right to publish his book, however
violent or offensive and 2) Ellis’s satirical agenda, namely to expose the cruelty and vacuity
of elitist American consumer culture in the late 1980s. While I do not take issue with either
point, my aim is to complicate such a straightforward stance on a novel that is anything but:
what else is there to American Psycho, beyond its satirical message and smokescreen of
scandalous press? Can the “satire defense” really explain the novel’s misogynistic overtones?

I would argue that it can’t, but perhaps more importantly, I see a specific pattern of
misogynistic symbolism already familiar to us from Faserland, Crazy, and Ellis’s earlier work:
the “male fantasies” as described by Klaus Theweleit. Thus, American Psycho is an important
case study not just in its own right, but for what it might tell us about the consequences of
the tendencies presented in these “tamer” novels when taken to extremes – if you will, the
last stop on this misogynist train of thought. Kracht has since acknowledged the great debt
he owes to Ellis, and to American Psycho in particular (Poschardt). At first look, Faserland
appears to have much more in common with Ellis’s earlier novels, as I explored in Chapter
1. In this chapter I will examine potential connections between Faserland and American
Psycho, and reveal the centrality of this novel to the phenomenon of misogynist, “damaged”
masculinity in recent Pop fiction.

Few novels have ever generated such a scandal as American Psycho did, even before its
release in March of 1991. Bret Easton Ellis was already a well-known American author of
the 1980s “Literary Brat Pack,” a group of young, hip writers who showed up on late-night
talk shows and in the popular press. His two previous novels, Less Than Zero and The Rules of
Attraction, had sold very well, and his third novel was highly anticipated and scheduled for
details about the manuscript in the autumn of 1990, Time and Spy magazines ran outraged
articles about the novel’s appallingly violent content and alleged unreadability.

The media uproar that followed in the next two months generated such controversy
that Simon & Schuster, who had given Ellis a generous advance on the book in the vicinity
of $300,000, decided at the last minute not to publish it, opening the door for Vintage Books
to buy the rights and distribute the novel as a trade paperback. The same thing happened
again in Germany, when the translation was dropped by Rowohlt, which had published
Ellis’s previous novels, only to be picked up by Kiepenheuer & Witsch. The Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) boycotted Vintage and Ellis over what they called “a how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women” (McDowell), while critics panned *American Psycho*’s undeniably tedious, even downright painful narrative style: Patrick Bateman spares no detail, from the accounts of his murders to the list of grooming products he uses each morning.

There are several charges against the book that are repeated over and over, all of which can be traced back to R.Z. Sheppard’s October 1990 *Time* article, “A Revolting Development.” As the title suggests, Sheppard expresses disgust with the novel, which he seems to have read well before its scheduled publication: firstly, because of its violence, and secondly, because of Ellis’s apparent bad writing. Sheppard cites the outrage of certain women staffers at Simon & Schuster over the novel’s “atrocities against females. But no one wants to say so on the record. Here is a hot property that may be too hot to handle, or says a staffer who requests anonymity, ‘too hot to even talk about’” (Sheppard). Ellis’s cover artist for his first two novels, George Corsillo, who turned down the assignment for *American Psycho*, is quoted as saying, “I felt disgusted with myself for reading it.” It is as if the novel itself is a predator that threatens everyone it touches, stifling their voices and spoiling their own clear consciences.

The journalist himself, however, spends much of his allotted space recounting this violence via well-chosen tidbits, suggestive summaries and a quotation designed to conjure up all the gory details “too hot to talk about” (or print in a mainstream magazine). In fact, the way Sheppard goes on, the reader may well be in danger of imagining even worse than
Bateman’s actual deeds: “These are only warm-ups for what the M.B.A. monster does to women with nail gun, power drill, chain saw and, in a scene that should cause the loudest uproar, a hungry rodent” (Sheppard). Sheppard manages to revel in the novel’s “revolting” elements with the finesse of any good gossip or true-crime TV viewer, relishing Ellis’s text under the pretext of condemning it.

It is important that the monster has an M.B.A., just as it is important that Ellis and his book are “targeted for the best-seller lists” (Sheppard). Money and popularity come up so frequently and with such vitriol that they must lie at the heart of what bothers the early critics about American Psycho. Sheppard suggests that the novel’s violence is somehow worse because its target audience is so assumedly broad. The assumption comes, of course, from the fact that Ellis is already a well-known, even over-publicized author. This status – and his presumably large income – seems to ally Ellis with his protagonist Patrick Bateman in the minds of some critics; despite Ellis’s satirical agenda, the critics lodge a similar complaint against elitism and seemingly soulless economics. Sheppard once again sets the trend when he speculates about the motives of Ellis’s publisher, rather than Ellis himself. “For S&S, caught in a profit squeeze…grossing out readers could mean netting a big return on Ellis’ advance…It would be naïve to think that American Psycho will not find its market” (Sheppard). After Simon & Schuster dropped the book, similar accusations made out Vintage as a profit-hungry smut-monger, and critics on both sides also wondered whether Simon & Schuster’s parent company, Paramount, had anything to do with the decision to let Ellis go.
Sheppard also finds something crass about the combination of violence and class commentary, what he calls “hateful portrayals of Manhattan yuppies as mindless consumers.” Roger Rosenblatt puts a finer point on it in his December 1990 article in *The New York Times* called “Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder?:”

“A designer serial killer, Bateman knows from Tumi leather attaché cases and wool-and-silk suits by Ermenegildo Zegna…and carambola sorbet…and business cards with ‘Silian Rail lettering.’ (In case you can’t tell, I’m out of my element here.)”

In fact, there is no way to know whether or not Rosenblatt is out of his element, except for his extraneous admission – and his dwelling on Ellis’s use of material details: “I do not exaggerate when I say that in his way Mr. Ellis may be the most knowledgeable author in all of American literature. Whatever Melville knew about whaling, whatever Mark Twain knew about rivers are mere amateur stammerings compared with what Mr. Ellis knows about shampoo alone” (Rosenblatt). Rosenblatt takes pains to imply that he himself is the kind of average guy who doesn’t know from fancy suits and exotic sorbets, whereas both Ellis and Bateman – essentially the same person, as insinuated by his article’s bombastic title – are both snobby and effeminate as well as murderous, hence the reference to shampoo, a girlish and frivolous passion compared to the salty, seafaring exploits of “real” American authors. Rosenblatt’s scathing article transcends criticism to the point that one wonders if the novel’s commercial aspects, in both micro- and macrocosm, pose a threat of some kind.

This threat continues to reveal itself in other criticisms of the novel. Sheppard misunderstands Ellis’s use of a tedious and superficial narrator, observing that “Many
readers will not have the stomach to get past the middle” and dismissing the book as “a childish horror fantasy.” Rosenblatt, who also uses the word “childish” (as in “childishly gruesome”), is curiously bothered by Ellis’s grammar, noting a moment in the text where Bateman incorrectly uses “I” instead of “me”. The style of narration offends him so much that he explains Bateman’s violence by saying he “does things to the bodies of women not unlike things that Mr. Ellis does to prose” (Rosenblatt). When Ellis uses a quotation from Notes from the Underground as an epigram, Rosenblatt wonders, “could this fellow really think that he, like Dostoyevsky, was being shockingly critical of the amorality of modern urban life?” This dismissive, belittling attitude culminates in Rosenblatt’s conclusion, in which he denounces Vintage for taking on the novel: “they must have a mighty low opinion of the public’s ability to distinguish between art that is meaningfully sensationalistic and junk.”

Exactly what this distinction is remains unexplained, but clearly the true threat of American Psycho is less the violence than the context, i.e. Pop itself: more than the actual content of the novel, it is Ellis’s status as a pop star, his ability to sell books, and his apparently non-literary, postmodern style which truly offend Rosenblatt and Sheppard. How dare a 26-year-old socialite with a healthy bank account even call on the spirit of Dostoyevsky! The possibility that value might exist beneath the deliberately glossy surface of Blank Fiction does not occur to these critics, nor does the notion that Ellis’s unreliable narrator, and not the author himself, is the tedious, grammatically incorrect monster. Not to allow for the possibility that Ellis has written this novel on purpose is to do him a great disservice, and to misconstrue the trouble with American Psycho completely.
Of course, there was another side to the controversy: Ellis did win the guarded support of some critics and industry organizations. The Authors Guild, the National Writers Union and the PEN American Center condemned Simon & Schuster’s actions as free speech infringement; they also claimed the decision was evidence of the corporate world’s control over American publishing, reacting to rumors that Simon & Schuster’s parent company, Paramount Communications, had ordered the cancellation (“Vintage Buys Violent Book”). Anna Quindlen wrote an opinion piece for the New York Times in which she describes the book as more than just a controversial “enfant terrible,” saying, “As an epitaph for the 80’s, [the novel’s description of an amoral, superficial society] has a repellent reality.” She goes on to offer a justification for Ellis’s depictions of violence: “Is it heartening to read novels in which men and women treat one another with affection and respect…? Yes. Does that reflect the world? Hardly…reflection [on violence, as opposed to suppression of it] is essential because it often leads to thought, and occasionally to understanding” (Quindlen). In his first article as writer-at-large for Vanity Fair, Norman Mailer grudgingly admits that “The writer may have enough talent to be taken seriously…How one wishes he were without talent! One does not want to be caught defending ‘American Psycho’” (Anderson).

As James Annesley points out in Blank Fictions, this line of defense from most critics at the time “tended to privilege issues linked to censorship and freedom of speech over criticism of the text itself, an approach that strengthened the impression that American Psycho was more of a literary event than a work of literature” (Annesley 11). But since the initial controversy, the majority of scholarly voices on the subject of Ellis have sought to redeem American Psycho’s literary value, shifting focus away from issues of (im)morality and
censorship. Elizabeth Young defends Ellis’s work with particular conviction, pointing out critics’ apparent inability to see past the book’s unsavory elements and grasp the satirical meaning underneath. Indeed, it is undoubtedly unfair to misconstrue *American Psycho* as either an autobiography of Ellis or an anti-feminist “manifesto” (Young 87); even eight years after her initial review, Young states in a review of another Ellis novel that “Rarely, if ever, has a serious novel been so totally misread, misunderstood and vilified on its initial publication” (Young *Pandora* 47). The initial media storm thoroughly confused Ellis with his narrator, underestimated Ellis’s literary importance, and ignored the novel’s satirical message in the interest of shock value.

To investigate these defenses or explanations of seemingly misogynist violence, we must first establish exactly what critical message is expressed in the novel, and then question the success of this satirical agenda. In the midst of the initial media firestorm, and even nearly two decades after its publication, it is all too easy for the actual text of *American Psycho* to get lost in the whirlpool of hot-headed reviews and enigmatic statements from the celebrity author. Carolyn Kellogg points out in a recent *LA Times* article on Ellis: “That he’s been writing novels – that these books don’t just spring from his personality fully formed – is sometimes overlooked” (Kellogg 2). Indeed, the vast majority of reviews of *American Psycho*, and indeed most reviews on any of Ellis’s novels (including Kellogg’s), devote many more lines to Ellis himself than to the work in question, especially if the reporter has actually spoken with the author about his book.
Certainly Ellis bears much of the blame for this phenomenon, not only because of his flamboyant behavior as a young celebrity, but also because of his evasive and contradictory way of answering questions. One gets the impression that he is playing a game with the interviewer; as Ellis himself puts it to *Time* magazine, “O.K., this is the first interview of the day…What kind of mood am I in? Am I going to, like, tell some stories?...Do you believe me? Really? Even after reading my book?” (Time).

During an appearance at the Budapest International Book Festival in 2008, Ellis speaks with uncharacteristic frankness about his feeling that critics have misread *American Psycho*: “I thought the book was so earnest in so many ways and I thought that it was so against the things people criticized it for that…I thought it was almost too explicit in my criticism of the society the characters were in, that I wish I had maybe toned it down a little bit. So I was completely shocked that it was so misread by the people who I thought would have maybe championed it. I thought serial killers would have been very angry about the book, but I didn’t think that women would be” (YouTube). In other words, *American Psycho* is clearly intended as a satire of wealthy New York elites in the 1980s, and Bateman’s blankness and brutality serve as a metaphor or extrapolation of that society’s selfishness, insecurity, and exploitation of other people.

Indeed, from the first line to the last, “ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE” to “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT,” Ellis has literally rendered his message in capital letters, an “explicit” and “earnest” project that is developed consistently throughout the novel. Ellis’s attitude toward capitalist culture seems to differ somewhat from that of the Popkulturelle Quintett, who either impassively document the state of (elite) society or else, at
least in the case of Kracht, subtly comment on its destructive superficiality without allowing for the possibility of a less rigid, more populist way of life. Ellis’s stance is bolder in that his work is immediately recognizable as social satire, beginning with the Dostoyevsky quote from *Notes from the Underground* which prefaces *American Psycho*.

...Nevertheless, such persons as the composer of these Notes not only exist in our society, but indeed must exist, considering the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed...He represents a generation that is still living out its days among us...this personage describes himself and his views and attempts, as it were, to clarify the reasons why he appeared and was bound to appear in our midst.

Ellis invites us to use this quote as a guide as we enter his novel, to view his work as the documentation – and condemnation – of a cultural phenomenon. It does also present a lofty precedent, as some critics have noted (see above). But perhaps just as important are the other two epigrams printed on the same page. The first, a quote from “Miss Manners” Judith Martin, observes that civilization is all about manners, for both negative and positive occasions:

That’s what civilization is all about – doing it in a mannerly and not an antagonistic way. One of the places we went wrong was the naturalistic Rousseauean movement of the Sixties in which people said, ‘Why can’t you just say what’s on your mind?’ In civilization there have to be some restraints. If we followed every impulse, we’d be killing one another.

Of course, Ellis’s work will in short order flagrantly disobey Martin’s advice by shattering all notions of taste, as well as set out to prove her wrong: Bateman is among the best-mannered people in Manhattan, at least on the surface. He takes excessive care to present a neat, polished, and appropriate exterior, he laughs at other people’s jokes, and follows all the minor rules of society, convincing a variety of other characters to call him words like “gentle” and “charming.” And yet, of course, he is unsurpassable in his brutality.
This is not to mention his friends and lovers, most of whom are, if not murderous, then far from good citizens in a moral sense. Of course, the reference to the 1960s notion of free expression underscores Ellis’s stylistic and critical kinship with the likes of Burgess and Burroughs: it would seem that Ellis might advocate “Rousseauean” naturalism instead of good taste.

Ellis’s final quotation is from the band the Talking Heads, chroniclers of the 1980s in their own right: “And as things fell apart/ Nobody paid much attention”. This message completes Ellis’s statement of purpose to support the ensuing satire: apathy and superficial “mannerliness” threaten to destroy our little civilization behind our backs, and this situation defines the 1980s for Ellis. His first line, “ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE,” openly states the pessimism of his vision for the succeeding decade and beyond, not to mention the fate, both physical and spiritual, of his fictional characters.

This superficiality takes a literal and exaggerated form in Bateman’s narration, a fact which many critics found maddening (see above) and which many fans of the book find humorous. From the beginning of the novel to the end, Bateman gives us the brand names and brief descriptions of every outfit he encounters; we learn which products he uses on his skin and hair, what he eats for breakfast and how his exercise routine and tanning rituals are designed to keep his appearance in peak condition. Bateman’s description of his morning routine, in particular, will be familiar to most consumers: it is the language of magazine copy, a cover story on 5-step summer skincare. In Bateman’s world, and not just in his head, appearance is everything. Everyone in his circle, from his girlfriend Evelyn to his friends, to his parents and colleagues, to the participants in the talk shows he watches on television, is
self-obsessed and utterly brand-conscious. This litany of products is often used to absurd effect, underscoring the ridiculous interchangeability of the characters, their lack of individuality. For example, in an early scene Bateman attends Evelyn’s dinner party and notes, without seeming to register it himself, that both Evelyn and Bateman’s mistress Courtney are wearing the exact same outfit. Of course, much has also been made of the many moments of mistaken identity in the novel; Bateman and his friends constantly mistake one person for another, inspiring the potential conclusion that Bateman himself is but a cipher – that Patrick Bateman is no one, and could be anyone.

Additionally, Bateman’s everyone/no one quality makes him the perfect narrator for Ellis’s satire: he simply absorbs and reflects the ugliness around him, carrying it to horrific extremes in his attempt to escape it. It is significant that, though Bateman begins the narrative, it is his friend, Tim Price, who does most of the talking in the first ten pages as the two make their way to Evelyn’s party. Bateman listens as Price finishes up a rather defensive rant about his own worth: “I’m resourceful, I’m creative, I’m young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled…In essence what I’m saying is that society cannot afford to lose me. I’m an asset” (Ellis 1). This little statement could describe Bateman, too, or almost anyone in his circle; and it sounds like a desperate attempt to distinguish oneself in a world that seems so ruthless. Of course, Price himself is ruthless, counting beggars on the street for sport, reveling in the horror stories of the local newspaper. He tries to explain his mindset: “But then, when you’ve just come to the point when your reaction to the times is one of total and sheer acceptance, when your body has become somehow tuned into the insanity and you reach that point where it all makes sense…” (Ellis 5). Bateman sits silently beside Price in
the limo, an observer, an *audience* to the mundane evil that informs his personality. In this way, from the very first page, Ellis draws a comparison between Bateman and the reader. Once again, this will prove significant to our experience of the novel.

In the first 100 plus pages of Bateman’s narrative, we do not actually witness Bateman committing murder, nor do we receive any but the most elliptical references to it – that is, it could still be a joke, this brutal side of our friend Patrick, until page 128. Until this moment, when Patrick makes his first “onscreen” kill (a homeless man and his dog), it is possible to judge Bateman’s character in more than one way. It is clear that there is a disturbance beneath his calm exterior: as Bateman himself puts it, “All it comes down to is: I feel like shit but look great” (Ellis 106). But all external perspectives we can gather from Bateman’s friends and girlfriends make him seem harmless; Evelyn keeps calling him “the boy next door” at her party, mostly as a defense against Price’s jibes. It’s more magazine speak, but given nothing else, the reader begins to accept it. In fact, just as in the opening pages, Patrick’s friends are the ones who supply the majority of repellant behavior. Misogynist and racist jokes flow like whiskey as they prepare for yet another dinner out; women, consistently referred to as “hardbodies” (if they’re attractive), are used and abused just like the liquor and cocaine that fuel their endless succession of wild nights. Patrick does not protest, nor does he straightforwardly condone their actions. Even when they turn to him directly, usually for style advice, his replies are often ironic and widely interpretable, such that it is always *possible* to think that Bateman is somehow more reflective than his peers, and that his inner turmoil will bring about change in the course of the novel, a rejection of his errant ways. That this never really happens is part of Ellis’s devastating
satirical style, a familiar outcome from his previous novels, in which protagonists struggle but ultimately fail to find redemption.

Yet Ellis flirts with the possibility of a happy ending for Patrick, embodied by his devoted secretary Jean. From the beginning, Bateman introduces her as a potential Hollywood ending: “My secretary, Jean, who is in love with me and who I will probably end up marrying” (Ellis 64). Like the other characters around Bateman, Jean can only see the good in him, and yet there is something about her that softens him, such that he cannot really do her harm: “A drop of beer has fallen onto my polo shirt. She hands me her napkin. A practical gesture that touches me” (Ellis 377). Even Evelyn winds up eating a urinal cake disguised as a fancy dessert, the butt of one of Patrick’s sadistic plots, but Jean is a victim only in that she believes in Patrick. When he finally breaks up with her near the end of the novel, it is to spare her this fatal association: “she too will be locked in the rhythm of my insanity” (Ellis 378). In a way, even this small kindness of sparing Jean from being tied to a killer humanizes Bateman. In fact, his entire relationship with Jean, as well as his observer status through the first half of the book, serves a necessary purpose within Ellis’s satirical project. For no matter how ugly the monster, we must sympathize with him if we are to see him as a victim of his circumstances, a casualty of a flawed society. He is our guide and our stand-in, and Ellis has ensured that we will feel for him. As he tells Christian Kracht,

Beim Schreiben muß ich, wenn ich Bateman schon nicht sympathisch darstellen kann, ihn wenigstens bemitleidenswert erscheinen lassen. Eine Fiktion ohne Identifikationsperson, und sei sie auch noch so grausam und hassenswert, gibt es nicht…[solche Figuren sind] die einzigen Mittel, um die Werke, in denen sie
existieren, zu begehen. Der Betrachter, der Leser muß sich nicht nur die Sichtweise des Mörders aneignen, sondern sich richtig mit dem Mörder identifizieren.16 (Kracht)

But the phenomenon is more than just a forced identification with a murderer. Bateman is Frankenstein’s monster at his most vulnerable and poetic, as his innocent love is ruined by fear and hatred. Critics who initially saw the novel as intolerably shallow, and Bateman as entirely repulsive, had read with a preconceived bias against it, and prior knowledge of Bateman’s sadistic behavior. Perhaps the uproar before American Psycho’s release did the book an ever greater disservice, despite increasing its readership, because those readers came to it expecting to revel in the diary of a cold-blooded killer, not the unraveling of a damaged young man in the grip of late capitalism.

Ellis’s deconstruction of Patrick’s “Hollywood ending” with Jean is also part of a key ironic element in American Psycho: the reference to other media of popular culture. Filmic elements and terminology crop up throughout the text. Sometimes Bateman sounds like he is describing a scene in a screenplay: “A slow dissolve and Price is bounding up the steps” (Ellis 8); “sex happens, a hardcore montage” (Ellis 303). More than once Bateman describes an important moment as “like a movie,” particularly as he loses control over his impulses and detaches himself from his (supposed) reality. But the most emphatic use of cinematic elements comes in the late chapter “Chase, Manhattan,” in which Bateman’s narrative unravels and becomes truly unreal. The incident begins when Bateman impulsively shoots a street musician, a saxophonist. The silencer on his gun fails, and as it happens, a police car is

16 “While I cannot portray Bateman as likeable, when writing I must at least let him appear worthy of sympathy. A fiction without a person to identify with, however horrible and hateable, does not exist…[such figures are] the only means of accessing the work in which they exist. The viewer, the reader must not only adopt the viewpoint of the murderer, but really identify with the murderer.”
right behind him; an elaborate chase scene ensues. The narrative spills out in run-on sentences, and every paragraph ends with an ellipsis. Like a second-rate action movie, we are pulled through a series of violent events in quick succession: cars flip over and explode, random bystanders are gunned down, Bateman crashes a stolen taxi into a fruit stand. Two pages in, Bateman suddenly switches to the third person, calling himself Patrick, and the cinematic quality intensifies: “Patrick keeps thinking there should be music, he forces a demonic leer” (Ellis 349). Here Bateman is explicitly playing a part, the part of the madman, the fugitive, the outcast, and it doesn’t quite suit him. “The terror he thought had passed engulfing him again, thinking: I have no idea what I’ve done to increase my chances of getting caught, I shot a saxophonist? a saxophonist? who was probably a mime too? for that I get this?” (Ellis 350). Even our narrator realizes the absurdity of the scene, and also acknowledges the immateriality of his victim – the saxophonist is just a prop, an extra.

As in a bad dream, Bateman seeks shelter in what he thinks is his office building, only to realize that it is the wrong one (yet another case of mistaken identity); when he finally does escape into “the anonymity” of his office, Bateman picks up the phone, calls Harold Carnes, and confesses all his crimes in a phone message, the perfect movie climax to start a sloping denouement toward the closing credits. A final special effect: the sun rises with shocking speed, “like it’s some kind of optical illusion” (352). Yet we are still forty plus pages away from the end of American Psycho, and when we reach it Patrick Bateman will notoriously go unpunished for his crimes. Carnes thinks that Bateman’s call was a prank by another acquaintance, Davis; thinking Bateman is Davis at a party, he compliments “Davis” on the joke, while offering the critique that Bateman is far too much a “goody-goody” to
commit a crime (387). And furthermore, Carnes insists he had dinner with Paul Owen, Bateman’s crown jewel of a victim, in London just days before. He finally dismisses Bateman by calling him yet another name, Donaldson, and Bateman is left free to continue wandering through life, anonymous and unaccountable.

These two scenes – “Chase, Manhattan” and Bateman’s subsequent confrontation with Carnes -- are often taken as the primary evidence to suggest that Bateman’s narrative is in fact a figment of his imagination, and not a faithful portrayal of his “real” life; that is, we are to assume that his murders are all just fantasies, and that it is even possible he really isn’t Patrick Bateman, rather another nameless acquaintance who idolizes him. The question has been posed in criticism of American Psycho whether Bateman is a real murderer, or whether the crimes are but figments of his imagination. To my mind, this is neither here nor there, if the goal is a defense of the novel’s violence, as this argument often threatens to be. I would agree with Mark Storey, who writes that “the question is not whether the ‘action’ really takes place…but what the ‘action’ tells us about the person who recounts it” (Storey 58). In other words, it does not matter whether or not Bateman leaves a real, tangible trail of blood and body parts in his wake; this is, after all, a fictional account in any case, as Young points out. Undoubtedly Bateman is an unreliable narrator, and undoubtedly he portrays events that are beyond belief (talk-show host Patty Winters interviewing a Cheerio is a fine example). This is not the important truth to question, but rather the truth of Bateman’s own selfhood. It isn’t Bateman’s given name or his actual criminal history that matters; it is

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17 Annesley seems to view the murders as real within the context of the novel (13), as does Ruth Helyer in “Parodied to Death” (729). Mark Storey views the murders as completely irrelevant, since even Bateman himself has no solid identity to speak of (and is therefore beyond unreliable) (58-9); Elizabeth Young sees Bateman, and thus his crimes, as just “a cipher; a sign in language” (“The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet,” 119).
whether or not he exists at all, and how we have accessed him and his world for the past 400 pages. By playing with and ultimately thwarting cinematic constructions in his text, Ellis has alerted the reader to Bateman’s unreliability, but also his universality: he speaks in a language we understand but often do not critically assess; he comes from the overwhelming flow of glossed and twisted information that forms our media-centric lives. In some ways, Bateman *is* that force of popular culture, in all its attractiveness and murderous exploitation of everything in its path.

Since this is a portrait of the cacophonous 1980s, other types of popular media than just cinema abound. Patrick is a devoted watcher of *The Patty Winters Show*, a morning talk show that often deals in macabre and voyeuristic subject matter (not unlike the real-life talk shows on which it is based): descendants of the Donner Party, for example, or interviews with convicted child murderers and the mothers of murdered children. Posters for *Les Misérables* are plastered all over the city through which Bateman rages, a tongue-in-cheek reminder of both poverty and glamorization in New York. As I mentioned above, Bateman often lapses into magazine speak when discussing fashion and hygiene. He also channels banal music reviews in his manic, long-winded endorsements of bands like Huey Lewis and the News and Genesis. These treatises make up entire chapters, titled with the name of the band or artist, and tend to succeed incidents of extreme violence. “Huey Lewis and the News” is the prime example, following the dramatic “Chase, Manhattan,” in which Bateman seems to narrowly escape capture after a shooting rampage. Many of the bland statements the narrator makes about the band – “hints of longing and regret and dread”, “bleakness and nihilism…Talk about your Angry Young Man!” (Ellis 353) – offer a sort of absurd parallel to
the preceding scene, a deliberately meaningless commentary on Bateman’s own state of mind that throws into stark relief the futility of all attempts to separate reality and illusion, “real life” and pop culture fantasy. The end of the review unravels completely as Bateman’s own voice shines through: “…it’s just a lot of horns that quite frankly, if you turn it up really loud, can give you a fucking headache and maybe even make you feel a little sick, though it might sound different on an album or on a cassette though I wouldn’t know anything about that. Anyway it set off something wicked in me that lasted for days” (Ellis 359). The album review is a sort of nervous tic for Bateman, a way of processing and ordering the chaotic events of his life as a murderer which is related to his habit of roaming the streets wearing a Walkman. But it also reveals the interconnectedness of Bateman’s crimes with the cultural refuse he wraps around him like a blanket. To a large extent, Bateman is the spirit of 80s Manhattan, perhaps even more so than he is a character unto himself.

Finally, it is worthwhile to situate American Psycho within a literary context too often overlooked by critics and reviewers. First of all, the novel is most certainly representative of Ellis’s oeuvre, which projects an unusually unified vision. Elizabeth Young traces a string of thwarted quests for escape or redemption through Ellis’s works, what she calls a “search and destroy mission”: in Less Than Zero, the East coast holds hope and promise for the strung-out youth of Los Angeles; in The Rules of Attraction, that hope proves false, as students at Camden College in New England discover that the East is just as toxic and vacant as the West. These characters, though, long for “real life” in the “real world,” i.e. adulthood. In American Psycho, this hope, too, is dashed. There is no escape from vacuous, amoral
consumer culture and the never-ending struggle to fit in and distinguish oneself at the same time (Young 93-4, 112-13). This cultural critique reverberates in Ellis’s later work with a similar (though far less explicit) employment of violence, from *Glamorama* and *The Informers* to his most recent novel, *Imperial Bedrooms*, a sequel to *Less Than Zero*. Like Faulkner, Ellis has created a microcosm within real-world Los Angeles and New York, featuring a small cast of recurring characters. In turn, Ellis clearly shares Faulkner’s commitment to the portrayal of one subculture in the American spectrum.

*American Psycho* can also be defined as satire within the context of several literary trends or movements, with so-called blank fiction as the obvious starting point. James Annesley includes an analysis of the novel in his *Blank Fictions*, in which he describes a literary trend marked by an “obsession with mass culture and mass consumption…the reifications of violence, decadence and extreme sexuality” (Annesley 136). Certainly this describes the essence of *American Psycho*, and the novel could even be seen as the ultimate expression of blank fiction, the final flourish at the end of the trend’s primary decade. But *American Psycho* also relates well to more specific movements like so-called transgressive fiction, a term coined as late as 1996 to describe “a literary genre that…is based on the premises that knowledge is to be found at the edge of experience and that the body is the site for gaining knowledge” (Soukhanov). This categorization relates Ellis’s novel to many of its provocative forefathers of the late 1950s and 1960s, including Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*, Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*, and Ginsberg’s *Howl*. Such works are connected not only by scandal and the intentional testing of societal boundaries with sexual and violent content, but also by the spirit of critique or affecting change by shocking the reader. Indeed, in this
context, even Kracht’s comparison of the work to Joyce’s *Ulysses* makes sense. Ironically, it seems that transgressive forms of social critique in fiction – the use of shocking depictions of violence and sexuality as a means of calling out hypocrisy and vacuity in the mainstream – are far more intolerable to the Western Anglo-American palate than the meaningless sex and incomprehensible brutality so pervasive in contemporary American(ized) culture.

Thus, Kracht’s assessment of *American Psycho* may ultimately hold water. “Bateman ist eine Art Dr. Jekyll, der keinen Mr. Hyde braucht, der keine Maske aufsetzen muß, weil das Grauen untrennbar mit seiner Welt verbunden ist (Bateman is a kind of Mr. Jekyll who does not need a Mr. Hyde, who need not put on a mask, because horror is inextricably bound up in his world).” The heart of Ellis’s satirical project lies in Bateman’s seamless connection to his hideous cultural moment, his wearing of it like a mantle, so that his individual personality all but disappears beneath it. Kracht describes him as “der Teufel im Fegefeuer der Banalität (the devil in the purgatory of banality),” an executioner (“Vollstrecker”) sent to warn and punish us at the close of an amoral decade. And Ellis seems to agree: he tells Kracht, “Diese Monster…hätten wir verdient (we have earned these monsters).”

No wonder, then, that on the back cover of the Vintage Contemporaries edition, a quote from Katherine Dunn even compares Ellis to Jane Austen “at her vitriolic best.” Not only are there many more gallons of blood between the pages of *American Psycho* than in any Jane Austen book of which I’m aware – but Ellis’s authorial decisions about the form and narrative style of his novel restrict the distances between author, narrator, and reader,
interfering with the alleged goals of his satire. Is it possible that all kinds of horror can be mopped under the rug by the argument that these are modern times? After all, satire is bound to be a bit harder-edged in the America of the early 90s, where every fifth-grader will soon know who Jeffrey Dahmer is and video games are blamed for a supposed national epidemic of adolescent bloodthirstiness. Maybe so, but it would be unwise not to question the role of violence, especially sexual violence, in Ellis’s novel. Though critics’ initial outrage may have led them to overlook *American Psycho*’s satirical value, it is possible that their reaction to the book’s content can lead us to a critique that simultaneously allows for the novel’s complexity.

In this section, I will compare Ellis’s treatment of gender “trouble” to Kracht’s. Though the two novels appear quite different in terms of plot (not to mention body count), I will argue that *American Psycho*, like *Faserland*, enfolds misogyny as a by-product of cultural critique and that the male narrator’s volatile identity exhibits a Theweleitian “soldier male” construction.

In order to fully understand the controversy unleashed by *American Psycho* – and also how dramatic Ellis’s treatment of women is compared to Kracht’s in *Faserland* – let us examine one of the most infamous passages in the novel, in which Patrick Bateman removes the tongue of a female victim (his ex-girlfriend Bethany) and forces her to perform oral sex on him:

I drag her back into the living room, laying her across the floor over a white Voilacurotuo cotton sheet, and then I stretch her arms out, placing her hands flat on thick wooden boards, palms up, and nail three fingers on each hand, at random, to the wood by their tips... I place a camel-hair coat from Ralph Lauren over her head, which drowns out the screams, sort of. I keep shooting nails into her hands until they’re both covered... [he Maces her repeatedly, tries to bite off her thumb, and
stabs her breasts with scissors] I lean in above her and shout, over her screams, “Try to scream, scream, keep screaming…”... I take advantage of her helpless state and with the scissors cut out her tongue, which I pull easily from her mouth and hold in the palm of my hand, warm and still bleeding, seeming so much smaller than in her mouth, and I throw it against the wall, where it sticks for a moment, leaving a stain, before falling to the floor with a tiny wet slap. Blood gushes out of her mouth and I have to hold her head up so she won't choke… (Ellis 245-6)

Excerpts like this one, taken out of context, seem to have initiated the controversy prior to the novel’s publication. Of course, one wonders what context could somehow ameliorate the effects of such a passage. The standard justification from sympathetic critics like Anna Quindlen emphasizes Ellis’s satirical agenda. Kracht wonders why readers are so shocked, given the grisly images and insinuations fired at the 1990s audience on the daily news and in the theaters. Ellis, called upon to defend himself in the midst of the controversy, wearily notes that “…clearly there are metaphors here. Bateman’s actions and especially his reactions to what he does symbolize, at least to me, how desensitized our culture has become toward violence…There seems to be a notion that when you are writing about someone killing and torturing people, especially women, you have to do it in a very earnest and politically correct way. But the murder sequences are so over the top, so baroque in their violence, it seems hard to take them in a literal context…it is still satirical, semi-comic, and – dare I say it? – playful in a way” (Cohen C13).

Thus, we are to accept the violence as unreal because it is too real, too much – and yet not real, because it is symbolic of, or in service to, the noble “message” of the text as a whole. This is the somewhat angry defense strategy of an author who probably should not have been called upon to defend himself against a tidal wave of slander before his book even hit the shelves. Of course, the idea may also have merit. After all, we absorb senseless
violence all day in American culture; why not use this bold strategy to get attention?

Whether or not the above passage should offend is not the question at all, because Ellis wants to offend the reader in hopes of forcing him to pay attention, to “get it.”

Thus the question that remains regarding Ellis’s use of violence is not one of taste, but of context. Let us stop for a moment and consider the symbolism at work in the passage on Bethany’s death. In many cases, Bateman kills unknown women indiscriminately and without direct provocation; but in this case, Bethany clearly provokes his rage during a lunch date, sealing her terrible fate. Even before she arrives, Bateman is nervous, concerned she will reject him; and indeed, he is unhappy to learn that she is dating the chef and co-owner of Dorsia, a restaurant Bateman has been trying, unsuccessfully, to get into for the duration of the novel. Perhaps because Bethany remembers Bateman as he was before he turned into this slick monster-persona, she has a knack for drawing attention to the cracks in his façade, fanning his insecurities and threatening to reveal his identity as a sham, effectively emasculating him. He is horrified when she pays for lunch – “‘But I have a Platinum Express Card,’ I tell her. ‘But so do I,’ she says, smiling” (Ellis 242). Upon entering Bateman’s apartment, Bethany points out, while giggling, that he has hung his prized Onica painting upside down. This is, quite literally, the last nail in her coffin.

As in *Faserland*, it is Bethany’s mouth which holds Bateman’s attention: “her mouth opens, closes, swallows liquid, smiles, takes me in like a magnet covered with lipstick” (237-8). This mouth is both profoundly attractive – like a magnet – and dangerously uncontrollable. The flood of erosive words and laughter which shatter Bateman’s persona becomes, in Bateman’s symbolic torture ritual, a literal torrent of blood; the mouth which
beckoned and threatened with its cavernous depths is forcibly penetrated, turning the tables and taking its power. Just like Kracht – only more overtly – Ellis casts the female body, using the mouth as its metonym, as the force against which Bateman must struggle for survival. As in Faserland, the women of American Psycho are obvious symbols of superficial excess; after all, so much of consumerism is traditionally seen as feminine, since women are expected to decorate themselves with makeup and elaborate clothing (see, for example, Bethany’s painted mouth, her eerily perfect looks, as Bateman gasps, “just like a model”).

Bateman’s other female victims are also impeccably decorated, whether by their own hands or at Bateman’s bidding, in the case of the prostitute he lures back to his apartment and then outfits with designer lingerie and a glass of fine wine. Not surprisingly, Bateman is a control freak, carefully setting the scene with his hired victims, dictating hair color and build to the escort service. Like a film director he poses and instructs their every move as they act out a lurid fantasy version of The Good Life, by turns cultured and pornographic, a snuff film shot on a set of pristine luxury. It is as if Bateman seeks to re-create the empty elegance of his everyday world, only to subvert and destroy it with sudden and shocking brutality. This is the same motivation which compels him to serve his girlfriend Evelyn the urinal cake dressed up as a fancy dessert. Evelyn’s mouth is also a lot of trouble for Bateman, as she is constantly planning their joint future without his consent, nagging him to propose and fretting about the details of their possible wedding. The cake as she consumes it, trying to hide her disgust behind a veneer of good manners (“It’s just…so minty”), is Bateman’s revenge against her out-of-control mouth and the oppressive torrent of social rules it represents.
Unlike the narrators of *Crazy* and *Faserland*, Patrick Bateman seems to have quite a lot of sex; but never does he seem to actually enjoy it, especially when his plans for the evening do not involve killing his partner. Women disappoint him constantly, and he is more disgusted by them alive than he is by their dismembered parts that litter his apartment.

…I grind bone and fat and flesh into patties, and though it does sporadically penetrate how unacceptable some of what I’m doing actually is, I just remind myself that this thing, this girl, is meat, is nothing, is shit, and along with a Xanax…this thought momentarily calms me. (Ellis 345)

In comparison to his nearly unbearably graphic descriptions of his murders, Bateman resorts to cheap, half-hearted porno-speak (“Sex happens – a hardcore montage”) to describe his trysts with prostitutes, and even admits that most of it “starts failing to turn me on – all I can think about is blood”: “her tongue is hot and wet and she keeps flicking it over the head, irritating me…I stare at the Angelis silk-screen print hanging over the bed and I’m thinking about pools of blood, geysers of the stuff” (Ellis 303).

In short, Patrick Bateman is not having *good* sex; he is just as unnerved by the intimate act as Benjamin and Kracht’s narrator. Sex, as described by Klaus Theweleit, is a means of merging with another person, even with the flow of all humanity, masculine and feminine (Theweleit I 64-5). It is a way of dissolving one’s borders; sex flows. All three male protagonists are ultimately incapable of this form of merging; all are at once desirous and terrified of what Theweleit calls “self-dissolution,” the blurring of borders between one’s own identity and another’s, or between oneself and the rest of the world (Theweleit I 64-5). Theweleit writes:

*Es ist, als ob zwei Zwänge des Mannes gleich stark an der Frau zerren: einer will sie entfernen, ganz weit von sich weg halten (Abwehr), und ein anderer will in sie eindringen, will sie ganz nah. Beide Zwänge scheinen im Tötungsakt befriedigt zu*
He might just as easily be speaking of Patrick Bateman rather than a Freikorps soldier.

Turning a woman into “nothing, meat, shit” allows for a kind of merging during which Bateman is still in control, and which effectively eliminates the threat of femininity. Like Jack the Ripper, he reveals the perceived “true nature” of woman, “als würden diese Tötungen als Korrekturen aufgefaßt, Korrekturen an der falschen Erscheinung der Frauen, durch die ihr ‘wahres’ Wesen sichtbar würde (as if the killings are conceived as corrective measures, which alter the false appearances of the women so that their ‘true natures’ can become visible)” (Theweleit I 243).

The implications of bad sex become apparent in American Psycho as Bateman’s singular narrative style reinforces his objectification of his victims, particularly women. As Laura Tanner explains, Bateman’s obsessive attention to the superficial details of a person’s ensemble “replaces characterization with the description of material commodities,” thereby turning that person into an object (98-9). Concurrently, his description of his victims exclusively as an assortment of body parts, devoid of individual subjectivity, forbids the reader to see the victim of violence as an independent human entity. The women in

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18 “It’s as if two male compulsions were tearing at the women with equal strength. One is trying to push them away, to keep them at arm’s length (defense); the other wants to penetrate them, to have them very near. Both compulsions seem to find satisfaction in the act of killing, where the man pushes the woman far away (takes her life), and gets very close to her (penetrates her with a bullet, stab wound, club, etc.). The closeness is made possible by robbing the woman of her identity as an object with concrete dimensions and a unique name. Once she has lost all that and is reduced to a pulp, a shapeless, bloody mass, the man can breathe a sigh of relief…What we are dealing with here is the dissolution of the body itself, and of the woman as bodily entity as well as love object.”
Bateman’s life are not people but possessions, objects accumulated, displayed, and discarded in order to fit in and feel empowered. Desire has nothing to do with it, as is evidenced by Bateman’s uncharacteristically vague and perfunctory references to sex and the sexual attractiveness of women [“a…hard body with a perfect ass and great full tits” (97); “She’s blond and slim and young, trashy but not an escort bimbo” (168)].

Tanner goes on to suggest that the meticulous descriptions of Bateman’s murderous methods – she uses the blinding of a homeless man with a knife as her example – further objectify the victim by drawing attention to the qualities of their “internal structure,” their organs, which are objective because generic, common to everyone (99). The reduction of a woman to a pile of abused organs negates both her interiority (which offends the sensibilities of a capitalist, surface-obsessed world) as well as her potential for a separate identity. She becomes, to speak with Klaus Theweleit, a “bloody mass,” exposed and annihilated. Of course, Bateman does claim several male victims, and indeed, they too are objectified and disfigured in the same manner. Ultimately, this has a feminizing effect on them, revealing orifices in a most base and physical way: the homeless man’s eyes burst out of his face, creating an oozing socket (131); Paul Owen’s forehead opens up after being hit with an axe, spraying blood and emitting a “rude farting noise” along with pieces of brain, “pink and glistening” (217). If men must be reduced to feminine objects, then women – in particular their genitals – must be reduced to “undifferentiated matter,” mutilated beyond recognition, in order to become controllable commodities rather than mysterious, interior threats (Tanner 100).
These male victims have been duly noted by proponents of *American Psycho* who aim to render accusations of misogynist violence by the National Organization for Women (NOW) essentially void. Bateman is not exclusively a killer of women – a fact which makes him atypical for a “real life” serial killer, who generally chooses one sex and kills for one main reason – but this does not exactly make him an equal-opportunity offender. To serve Ellis’s satirical purposes, Bateman also kills several kinds of men in the course of his narrative. His first murder, in fact, is the aforementioned homeless man and his dog, a man named Al whom Bateman taunts for several minutes, apparently trying to find common ground with Al before losing his patience and deciding he cannot empathize with the man:

> “You *reek*,” I tell him. “You *reek*…of *shit*.” I’m still petting the dog, its eyes wide and wet and grateful. “Do you know that? Goddamnit, Al – look at me and stop crying like some kind of *faggot*,” I shout. My rage builds, subsides, and I close my eyes, bringing my hand up to squeeze the bridge of my nose, then I sigh. “Al…I’m sorry. It’s just that…I don’t know. I don’t have anything in common with you.” (Ellis 130-1)

What follows is a murder made even more horrible by Bateman’s momentary offer of a hint of mercy; he is actually holding out a bill to Al, a comforting hand on the dog, before deciding to stuff the money back into his pocket and slaughter them both. The turning point for Bateman seems to be Al’s tears, mirrored in the helpless dog’s “wide and wet and grateful” gaze. In Bateman’s view, this display of emotion is weak, a leaking dam, the stuff of nightmares for any soldier male in Theweleit’s model. His only recourse is to call the man a “faggot,” which to Bateman does not have to do with sexual desire so much as emotional weakness, a state which both terrifies and enrages him. The impulse to eradicate perceived weakness leads him to murder several other dogs throughout the novel, an ostensibly
homosexual older man who is walking a dog, and a male child at the zoo. Notice that male “weakness” -- which is of course in the eye of the beholder (Bateman), and here refers to a sense of dependence, emotional sensitivity, and actual physical softness compared to Bateman’s excessive musculature -- is often coupled with an animal reference. Bateman’s victims in this category are prey, like his prostitute victims, but they are also representative of the wildness which so threatens Bateman that he feels compelled to commit acts of what I would call organizational violence. That is, his murders help him cope with what he sees as a chaotic and horrifying existence. If Bateman were to let himself actually feel, he would fall apart; thus, he holds himself together by bringing order to chaos, by squashing any threat to his carefully molded sense of self. Killing for him stems from the same impulse that leads him to catalog his shower products in the morning and obsess about the details of the menus at trendy restaurants. Bateman himself comes close to expressing this function of his violent behavior in the brief chapter called “Taking an Uzi to the Gym,” in which the gym’s promise of bodily perfection is another of his defenses: “there’s something more manly about an Uzi, something dramatic about it that gets me excited…I’m in a reflective mood and I place the gun, which is a symbol of order to me, back in the locker, to be used at another time” (Ellis 346). Violence is a particularly objectionable, and desperate, coping mechanism, a way of defining himself as a man and as a personality distinct from his surroundings.

Perhaps the most obvious moments of panic in Bateman’s narrative come in the scenes with Luis Carruthers, the official boyfriend of Bateman’s mistress Courtney. Bateman decides to kill Luis in the men’s room of the Yale Club in order to simplify his
relationship with Courtney. Aptly enough, Luis appears just as McDermott enrages Bateman by massaging his neck in a playful way (“draw back a stump,” Bateman snaps). Bateman then gets up and follows Luis into the men’s room. As Bateman wraps his hands around Luis’s neck to strangle him at the urinal, Luis turns around and mistakes Bateman’s behavior as a sexual advance. Somehow unable to convince Luis otherwise and also unable to actually kill him, Bateman spends the rest of the novel ducking Luis’s heartfelt professions of love.

Of course, there is something unconvincing about Bateman’s rejection of Luis. If Luis really posed such a problem for Bateman, then he ought to have no issue with killing him, as he kills Paul Owen, the business rival whose illustrious Fisher account Bateman is set on obtaining. Instead a frustrated and panicky Bateman flees the scene and returns to his table in order to save face, notably following the account of this incident with the murder of the “queer” and his dog. Furthermore, the setting of the Luis incident, the Yale Club, is likely a joke for Ellis, who later has Bateman describe Paul Owen as part of the “Yale thing”: “Well, I think, for one, that he was probably a closet homosexual…Who did a lot of cocaine…That Yale thing” (Ellis 271). It does not take a psychoanalyst to see that Bateman’s homophobia touches on some vital facet of his mental disturbance.

Seventy-five pages letter, Luis reappears while Bateman is shopping for a birthday present for his brother. The two re-convene in the department store when they each run into a married couple and their baby, who are acquaintances of both. Both men touch and speak to the baby tenderly, then Luis follows Bateman as he tries to escape the awkward situation:
“Well, well,” I say, shaking his hand. Luis’s grip is overly firm, yet horribly sensuous at the same time…I wave bye-bye to baby Glenn…wiping my hand against a two-hundred-dollar bath towel that hangs on a marble rack. Soon enough Luis wanders over and leans against the tie drawer, pretending to examine the ties like I’m doing. “What are you doing here?” he whispers. “Buying a tie for my brother. It’s his birthday soon. Excuse me.” I move down the rack, away from him. “He must feel very lucky to have a brother like you,” he says, sliding up next to me, grinning sincerely. “Maybe, but I find him completely repellent,” I say. “You might like him though.” “Patrick, why won’t you look at me?” Luis asks, sounding anguished. “Look at me.” “Please, please leave me alone, Luis,” I say, my eyes closed, both fists clenched in anger… “Patrick,” he says, “I love you very much. I hope you realize this.” (Ellis 222-223)

Ultimately, Bateman can only escape Luis by pulling a knife and hissing like a wild animal. This scene is humorous, as the mass murderer is cornered by the unwelcome advances of an unsuspecting innocent, but it is also layered with clues about the true source of Patrick’s fear. It is jarring to witness Bateman’s surprisingly tender interaction with the infant, Glenn; it is also a moment when we see him picking out a present for his brother, who will indeed prove “repellent” but who clearly means something to Bateman, enough for him to fret over which tie to get for him. Soon we will meet Sean Bateman, a character who also makes an appearance in The Rules of Attraction, in which he, too, finds himself conflicted and vulnerable on the brink of a homosexual relationship.

Ellis’s treatment of homosexuality is considerably more nuanced and less careless than Kracht’s. Where Kracht establishes a solid link between homosexuality and the meaningless decadence of a declining culture, Ellis provides a semi-reversal of this pattern in which homosexuality comes to represent emotionality and a comparatively innocent human connection in the midst of moral and emotional emptiness. His protagonist lives in horror
of homosexuality because he simultaneously fears and desires this presumably “queer” state of connecting with others and with one’s own emotions, embodied by the effeminate walkers of fuzzy dogs, the blubbery homeless man begging for mercy, Luis Carruthers’s warm and insistent touch. Bateman, as the ultimate representative of his cultural sickness, associates the feminine with disorderliness and overflow, a force of wildness that threatens to swallow up the masculine individual and his constructed, well-tended environment. Thus, homophobia could once again be seen as an iteration of misogyny (Sedgwick). It is no coincidence that Bateman’s male victims and inferiors, like all the women in the novel, are known primarily by their first names. His troublesome admirers, Jean and Luis, also share this distinction. On the other hand, Paul Owen is consistently referred to by both his names, presumably because, like Donald Trump, he is a figure who inspires jealousy and aspiration. All other men in Bateman’s life – the ones he considers his equals – are known by their last names: McDermott, Price. The last name is comparatively formal and impersonal, a holdover from the old boys’ club that only very rarely applies to women. This group of men keep their distance from one another and insulate themselves against the masses who are perceived as feminine, “red,” and threatening. The omnipresent poster for Les Misérables makes even more sense in this context, with its resolute, proletarian female face swathed in vibrant color, hair swept out by the wind in an unkempt wave. In one sense, we must assume that Ellis is in control of this symbolic order and that he has orchestrated a denunciation of it by satirizing Patrick Bateman’s milieu. Yet by upholding the symbolic system that equates femininity (and any gender identity or characteristic other than dominant heterosexual masculinity) with wildness, threats to order, and the disintegration of
individuality, Ellis allows the language of misogyny to overpower his message and potentially negate the brunt of his satirical work.

None of this is to say that Bateman is necessarily gay; after all, no sex seems to truly interest or satisfy him, and in fact the content of his unwritten fantasies are not necessary to our understanding of the text. In the same way that Theweleit describes the asexuality of his soldier males, Bateman can be seen as an asexual being, since any form of (consensual, equal) sexual intercourse would threaten his borders and possibly release the flood within.

Rather, like Jean the secretary, Luis represents a small group of people who really care about Patrick Bateman, and who are therefore somewhat innocent of the cold vacuity Bateman senses in the fair-weather friends around him. We might add Bateman’s institutionalized mother to this list; when he visits her, she makes the plain statement, “You look unhappy” (Ellis 365). Only the insane mother seems to notice this overwhelming fact upfront. In his weakest moments, Bateman admits that “I just want to be loved” (345); after confessing to Carnes, he is haunted by images of himself and Sean riding horses and playing tennis as children (362). Like Kracht’s narrator in Faserland, Patrick Bateman longs for the very thing that terrifies him, and in his case drives him to kill: unconditional love through connection with another human being.

The final fifty pages of Ellis’s novel serve to rekindle any identification with Bateman we may have lost, to deepen our bond with him as we are lost inside his head. There are no more murders after “Chase, Manhattan,” though there are many allusions to Bateman’s sick behavior. A lyric from Madonna’s hit song “Like a Prayer” haunts him: “Life is a mystery/Everyone must stand alone.” Isolation threatens Bateman’s deepest desires, while
the state is also a necessity to his very existence. He arrives at Paul Owen’s apartment, where he has stored several bodies, only to find that it has been cleaned and remodeled. A “distressingly real-looking” real estate agent confronts him and tells him to leave; it is unclear whether she has covered up the crime scene, or whether Bateman has imagined the whole thing. But the moment transcends this tension to become something more:

We stare at each other endlessly. I’m convinced she senses I’m about to say something. I’ve seen this look on someone’s face before. Was it in a club? A victim’s expression? Had it appeared on a movie screen recently? Or had I seen it in the mirror?...All frontiers, if there had ever been any, seem suddenly detachable and have been removed, a feeling that others are creating my fate will not leave me for the rest of the day. This...is...not...a...game, I want to shout, but I can’t catch my breath...Confused, I reach out for a moment to touch Mrs. Wolfe’s arm...but I stop it in midair, move it to my chest instead, but I can’t feel it, not even when I loosen my tie; it rests there, trembling. (Ellis 369-70)

Ever since the surreal shooting spree that led him to call up Carnes and confess, Bateman has been steadily losing control of himself and his fictional surroundings. The nagging feeling that “others are creating my fate” disturbs him deeply; notice that he implicitly categorizes himself with his victims (and with the filmic mythology of popular culture) while trying to figure out the déjà vu caused by Mrs. Wolfe’s expression. It is here that the parallels with Theweleit’s soldier male return in earnest, for a soldier male must always maintain control of himself and impose order upon his external reach. At the gym following the scene with Mrs. Wolfe, Bateman works out to “relieve stress”; in the mirror he observes the results, “my chest steel, pectorals granite hard, my eyes white as ice.” His response to the increasingly chaotic nature of his mind and experience is to harden his body, to literally turn to stone and ice, making himself as impenetrable and inhuman as possible, a fortress of masculinity. Going even further, he mentions several vaginas he has stashed in his locker, “a
blue ribbon from Hermès tied around my favorite” (Ellis 370). Bateman has quite literally excised, packaged, and contained the feminine threat, the chaotic cavern of human experience, in the unsubtle language of his murderous ritual.

The next chapter, aptly titled “End of the 1980s,” heralds the breakdown of Bateman’s orderly existence into a nightmarish shambles. He dreams of pink peppercorns and disaster footage and imagines himself acting in a commercial. Patty Winters interviews the Cheerio; Bateman finds a bone in his Dove Bar. Something has short-circuited; the distinction between fiction and reality for Bateman has been irrevocably violated such that he can no longer control his public behavior. He accidentally refers to himself in the third person while talking to Jean, as if he isn’t quite sure whether he is real or not. In the midst of this conversation with Jean, during which he will break up with her, Bateman slips in and out of a stream of consciousness soliloquy that has become one of the most quoted sections of the novel.

…where there was nature and earth, life and water, I saw a desert landscape that was unending…so devoid of reason and light and spirit that the mind could not grasp it…a vision so clear and real and vital to me that in its purity it was almost abstract. This was what I could understand, this was how I lived my life, what I constructed my movement around, how I dealt with the tangible. This was the geography around which my reality revolved: it did not occur to me, ever, that people were good or that a man was capable of change or that the world could be a better place through one’s taking pleasure in a feeling or a look or a gesture, of receiving another person’s love or kindness. (Ellis 374-5)

This is a distilled glimpse into the mind of the soldier male in crisis: the desert which holds the key to dealing with life, the unacceptability of meaningful, loving exchange with another person outside the confines of social cliché. After another snippet of conversation with Jean, he continues:
For the first time I see Jean as uninhibited; she seems stronger, less controllable, wanting to take me into a new and unfamiliar land – the dreaded uncertainty of a totally different world...it’s almost as if she’s making the decision about who I am, and in my own stubborn, willful way I can admit to feeling a pang, something tightening inside, and before I can stop it I find myself almost dazzled and moved that I might have the capacity to accept, though not return, her love. (Ellis 378-9)

Bateman’s subsequent decision to cut Jean loose has a dual meaning. On one hand, it reinforces Ellis’s characterization of Bateman as a Theweleitian soldier male who fears all that flows (emotion, tears, blood, femininity) at the same time that he desires it, especially through connection with another person. Thus it is only natural that Bateman must push away the one woman who comes close to forging a more than superficial bond with him.

On the other hand, this behavior seems atypical of Bateman up to this point in the novel; why doesn’t he just kill her, solving the problem in his standard, soldier-male-approved manner? Bateman claims he is incapable of returning Jean’s love, but at the very least he reveals that he is capable of doing what is best for her, of sparing her the torturous sentence of a deeper association with him. These moments with Jean are the culmination of trace evidence Ellis leaves throughout the novel, most notably the breakdown Bateman suffers while trying to cook and eat a victim, during which he sobs, “I just wanted to be loved,” and notes that “these are terrible times” (Ellis 345-6). This is the point at which the reader should realize that Bateman is as much a victim as he is a killer, as much hero as villain in this bleak portrait of 1989 Manhattan. After the initial shock of Bateman’s crimes, one notices Bateman’s ambiguous sarcasm when dealing with his vacuous friends and lovers, his crushing boredom with a life that offers only material wealth and spiritual poverty. By the end of the book, Bateman can’t even finish his sentences about his evenings with friends (“Someone who looks like Todd Lauder, and in fact may be, gives thumbs-up from across
the room, etc. etc.’) (Ellis 395). His flirtation with Jean, his tortured interactions with Luis, and his moments of (albeit twisted) introspection ultimately leave us with the impression that Bateman, like we do, searches for something real in the garish landscape of simulacra that is postmodernity. That this search is in vain, and drives him to horrific violence, makes him a tragic, and thus not entirely unsympathetic, figure. Stephen doCarmo highlights this phenomenon, explaining,

He [Bateman] seems, for a while, to rediscover the real in the bodies of his victims – some pure, thing-in-itself…However depraved and misguided his actions may be, then, they’re born in part from what Ellis might have to consider a noble ambition. As Martin Schecter has observed, ‘all this poor guy [Patrick] wants is for people to start feeling things again, even if the only thing left to feel is absolute terror. In an upside-down world, he’s a kind of humanitarian’…He exists not only to caution us against the inhuman greed capitalism enforces, but to alert us to its increasingly efficient erasure of the real, our need for which must keep resurfacing more violently and insistently the longer it’s suppressed. (doCarmo 70)

Thus, Kracht is not the only one to see Bateman as the executioner and warning in “terrible times,” a kind of dark hero who sinks to such depths that we may learn our lesson. Some version of this sentiment certainly comes across in Ellis’s first epigram, the Dostoyevsky quotation. In Sexual Personae, Camille Paglia notes that “Modern life, with its hospitals and paper products, has distanced and sanitized these primitive mysteries, just as it has done with death, which used to be a gruelling at-home affair. An awful lot is being swept under the rug: the awe and terror that is our lot” (Paglia 17). Following Paglia’s argument, we could conclude that Patrick Bateman simply forces us to see that awe and terror; he rips away the covering we have smoothed over the vicious reality of human existence. This, then, would be Ellis’s ultimate criticism of contemporary materialist culture: it distances us from our true lives, which are a struggle against nature. That external armor
Bateman finds in the form of designer suits, a perfect business card, a well-chosen dinner reservation, proves insufficient to stem and conceal the inevitable flow of violence, the taking of life, blood ritual. Perhaps it is less a fully-formed criticism than an expressed fear – Bateman’s existence is the nightmare of the well-controlled, armored man. What if that material shell will not be enough? What if our culture dissolves, leaving us to the “awe and terror that is our lot” in feminine nature? When the illusion of “intellectual control over nature” fails, the wizard behind the curtain turns out to be a bloodthirsty madman.

Reading the novel this way, we discover a narrative with a much more traditional structure than many critics have assumed. If Bateman’s goal is to feel something “real” as opposed to the “numbness” (Ellis 379) that is his lot, then his dismay at not getting caught after confessing to Carnes makes perfect sense, as do his continual confessions to other characters throughout the text. Bateman longs for something, anything, to happen to him that will release him from the terrible banality of his privileged life. By the end, Bateman seems to resent his position in his own narrative as the embodiment of evil’s banality, its presence in the everyday. By the time we reach “Chase, Manhattan,” Bateman is bored even of his crimes, viewing his own rampage as a spectator would, relying on increasingly outrageous stunts to quell the fear and frustration that threaten to creep in during every dull moment. When Bateman goes unpunished at the end of the novel – reading THIS IS NOT AN EXIT over the door at his usual hangout – his failure to escape the evil of banality is complete, and we have just witnessed the conclusion of a tragedy.

In this regard, Ellis’s novel successfully focuses its blame for Bateman’s violence on the greater social structure of his time and place, positioning Bateman as at worst a
representative of contemporary capitalist brutality and at best a martyr for the cause of authenticity in a world of fakes and filler. Without a doubt, from the epigram to the last line, *American Psycho*’s satirical agenda requires the reader to identify with Bateman in order to fully indict American culture as a proponent of exploitative, objectifying violence, both real and metaphorical, against everyone involved, rich and poor, male and female.

But this message comes at a cost. By choosing a rich (assumedly) heterosexual male as his protagonist and pitting him against women, gay men, and the poor, Ellis has reconstituted the objectifying and exploitative symbolic pattern he may initially have set out to satirize, this time with a distinctly misogynist aftertaste. The feminine comes to represent both the threatening elements of the victim – flowing and flooding, emotionality, the swallowing of individuality – as well as the superficiality and vanity of the metrosexual male ruling class. By entrapping the reader in a sympathetic relationship with Bateman, Ellis implicitly endorses Bateman’s own code of conduct, one that closely resembles Theweleit’s profile of the soldier male.

But perhaps Ellis’s characterization even transcends identification. I suggested earlier that Bateman serves more as an embodiment of 1980s consumer culture than as an individual man. Laura Tanner takes this argument a step further in *Intimate Violence*, asserting that *American Psycho*’s protagonist escapes the readers’ judgment not just by allowing us only one “subject” to identify with, i.e. Bateman, but by failing to define his character to the point that he is actually “no character at all” (103). Indeed, we never really get to know Patrick Bateman, despite spending nearly 400 pages in his head; this flatness was a major point of
critique in initial reviews of the novel. While Ellis has certainly made a career out of so-called “empty” characters, it would be selling him very short to conclude, as some have, that this is simply the result of bad writing, especially considering the emotional weight conveyed in *Less Than Zero* and the undeniable elegance of his overall style. In fact, it must take considerable skill for an author schooled in canonical narratives to sustain this kind of vacuity in a first-person narrator for the duration of the novel. The question, then, is what this virtual negation of Bateman’s subjectivity achieves in the text. While it may well support Ellis’s satirical agenda, I would agree with Tanner that it ultimately denies the reader the opportunity to react against Bateman’s point of view, implicating him/her in the novel’s violence.

Tanner notes that Bateman is both unpredictable and without clear motivations, and in his rare moments of introspection, he offers only generic psychobabble and cultural clichés. “The American psycho has no psyche; in refusing to lend him one, Ellis also refuses to lend his readers a category through which to differentiate themselves from this killer” (Tanner 104). Thus, because Bateman is no one in particular, he could be anyone; he could be one of us – after all, he has the same cultural points of reference as we do. We must assume that the very point of Bateman’s existence is to represent the amorality and (albeit metaphorical) violence inherent in the superficial world of 1980s Manhattan. Ellis jokes with Kracht: “Ich will nicht sagen, dass jemand, der Huey Lewis und Phil Collins verehrt, 

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19 Bateman’s indiscriminate killing is a conflation of two different types of killer: the spree killer (who embarks on a brief rampage, not caring whom he kills or how) and the serial killer (who is generally very meticulous in his methods and choice of victims, often kills only one sex for sexual gratification, and is active over a longer time period). The two “types” do not, as far as we know, ever coexist in one person. This unrealistic touch further complicates the issue of Bateman’s motivation, as his particular brand of pathology is impossible to pin down based on his erratic behavior.
But what are the implications of identification with an unidentifiable psychopath? Tanner asserts that Bateman, because of his non-existence as a subject, manages to appropriate every possible identity in the novel – from perpetrator to victim to spectator himself – only to finally confess his artificiality: “…there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory…I simply am not there…Myself is fabricated, an aberration” (377). Unable to escape Bateman (since we are unable to define just what it is we must protest), we participate in torture. When Bateman weeps for himself, or else fantasizes about the nightmarish thoughts of his victims, we must allow him to play the victim. When he suddenly slips into the third person near the end of the novel, during his final murderous spree, we are watching him as if in a movie, unable to see past the black edges of the screen. We as readers cannot stand Bateman, not because he is a monster, but because he is elusive and in control, a terrible ghost.

The nonexistent, the fabricated, have no accountability, and they form no barrier or filter between the reader and the horror of their actions (or, for that matter, the author himself). Like Kracht’s narrator, the nothingness Patrick Bateman sees in the mirror
ultimately does violence to the reader by implicating us in the narrator’s violent actions, violent gaze. Ellis may have succeeded in his project at too much cost, undermining his own condemnation of capitalist “violence” by enacting a similar violence on us, making us – and Ellis himself – into potential misogynists by forcing us to choose penetrative violence as the only “way out.” “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT.”
This is Not an Exit: Later Works of Lebert, Kracht, and Ellis

The three novels discussed in the previous two chapters were undoubtedly turning points for their authors' careers. Lebert and Kracht made their debuts in the 1990s and achieved celebrity status, largely based on a literary movement of which neither author claims to be part. Ellis released a third novel that shocked the public and cemented his presence in the American literary scene, though perhaps at the cost of his reputation. In the previous chapters, I have explained the misogynistic system of symbols employed by all three authors in the service of social critique, and demonstrated that its presence in Crazy, Faserland, and American Psycho links the three works across national boundaries. But the comparisons between these authors do not end with these three novels, though each develops his focus differently as his career continues. Lebert, Kracht, and Ellis each refine and, indeed, strengthen their use of misogynistic symbolism in their subsequent works, albeit in somewhat different ways. Lebert plays up his characterizations of “white” and “red” women in Theweleitian terms and explores the violent potential of the damaged young man. Kracht sharpens his critique of his parent generation with a more fully developed employment of the decadent homosexual trope hinted at in Faserland. And Ellis, in a story collection actually conceived before American Psycho, clarifies the satirical function of his linkage of sexual violence and capitalism.
Lebert’s second novel, *Der Vogel ist ein Rabe* (The Bird is a Raven), provides a striking employment of Theweleitian male fantasies in novelistic form. The nascent aggression toward women and focus on male friendship and isolation in *Crazy* have progressed into full-blown violence and despair. *Vogel* is structured as a frame tale in which two young men, this time in their late teens and early twenties, ride the overnight train from Munich to Berlin. Paul, the narrator, listens to Henry’s extended monologue about the events which have led to his boarding the train for unknown Berlin; Paul keeps his own story to himself until he is arrested upon exiting the train at Zoologischer Garten. Both men’s lives have been destroyed by a violent outburst, brought on by the frustrated love of a cruel woman. Whereas in *Crazy*, Benjamin’s dealings with unreliable women lead him to close himself off in an even harder shell (aside from his one physical outburst, to urinate and vomit all over the girls’ bathroom), in *Vogel* Paul’s obsession and subsequent disillusionment with a high-end prostitute ultimately drive him to kill her.

As in *Crazy*, women are the greatest desire, challenge, and enemy to the two protagonists in *Vogel*. Both Henry and Paul suffer from rejection at the hands of idealized women, which makes them feel profoundly outcast from society. Paul introduces this idealization/disillusionment process by describing, with bitterness, the apparently widespread perception that the women of Berlin are incomparable: “Die Luft [in Berlin] ist keine Luft. Sie enthält Goldstaub…Und die Mädchen! Sie sind unfassbar!...Man merkt, dass sie schon tierisch viel Goldstaub eingeatmet haben. Aber das alles stimmte nicht wirklich. Ich meine, die Mädchen…waren tatsächlich unfassbar. Jedoch atmeten sie keinen
Goldstaub (The air [in Berlin] isn’t air. It contains gold dust…And the girls! They’re untouchable!…You see that they’ve already inhaled an awful lot of gold dust. But that wasn’t really true. I mean, the girls…really were untouchable. In any case they didn’t breathe gold dust)’ (Vogel 9). Henry likewise directly identifies his greatest problem as “Mädchen (girls)” and describes the painful experience of watching girls at a school dance as a voyeur excluded from the enjoyment of their perfection: “Und die Mädchen sahen alle so toll aus. Als ob sie leuchten würden. Und ihr Geruch war, als wären sie kurz bevor sie auf den Ball kamen, in einem anderen Universum, in einer anderen Welt…ich stand immer da und war dem allem so fern (And the girls all looked so great. As if they were glowing. And their scent was as if, just before they came to the dance, they’d been in another universe, another world…I always stood there and was so far from them all)” (Vogel 17). His response to this otherworldly unattainability is hatred; at once the celestial creatures become base ones, ridiculous, promiscuous and cruel.

Ausserdem wurde ich zornig auf die Mädchen. Ich sah sie vor mir, tanzend und blöd kichernd, während die Arms ihrer verdammten Tanzpartner sie umschlingen und Brüste quetschen. Ich dachte, die Mädchen sind gar nicht die wunderbaren Geschöpfe, so wie ich sie mir vorstellte, so zart und feinfühlig und weich und verletzlich. Um die man sich immer gut kümmern muss und alles. Die Mädchen sind Bastarde. Die genau wissen, was sie einem antun. (Vogel 18)\(^\text{20}\)

Henry’s best friend, the obese Jens, feels similarly excluded from the sexualized world and echoes this anger at beautiful women.

\(^{20}\) “Aside from this I was angry at the girls. I saw them before me, dancing and giggling like idiots, while the arms of their dance partners circled them and mashed their breasts. I thought, girls are not at all the wonderful creatures I had imagined, so tender and sensitive and soft and vulnerable. That you have to always take good care of and everything. Girls are bastards. Who know exactly what they’re doing to you.”
Die Mädchen tun immer so, als wäre ihnen nur das Herz, die Zartheit, Verletzlichkeit, die Seele und so weiter wichtig, aber das stimmt einfach nicht. Sie fahren auf andere Dinge tausend Mal mehr ab. Auf Coolness, auf Schönheit, auf Rock ‘n’ Roll. Genauso wie die Männer. Mit dem Unterschied, dass die Mädchen ständig so tun, als ob das nicht so wäre. Das ist das Schlimme. Und sie sind überhaupt nicht arm, hilfebedürftig oder irgendwie benachteiligt…Sie sind berechnend und scheisse. (Vogel 35-6)

The rhetoric of anger hits a fever pitch when Henry confides in Paul that he longs for girls more than anything else in the world, and yet “dass ich sie gleichzeitig auf die brutalste Weise umbringen möchte. Alle (that I would simultaneously like to kill them in the most brutal way. All of them),” a statement that will prove ironic when we discover that Paul has done exactly this to a woman who rejected him (Vogel 70).

In a way, Paul’s story functions as an intensifier of Henry’s, an exaggerated version of the same tragedy in which a man glorifies a woman to the brink of deification, only to discover, as she rejects him, that she is but flesh and blood, and will provide no redemption from his isolation and fear. For Paul, this happens as he professes his love to Mandy, the prostitute of whom he had previously said, “Wenn ich mit ihr zusammen bin, wird die Dunkelheit nie wieder bedrohlich sein. Und ich wollte sie auf der Stelle ficken. So ficken, bis es nichts mehr zu ficken gab (When I am with her, the darkness will never be threatening again. And I wanted to fuck her on the spot. Fuck her until there was nothing more to fuck)” (122). Already there is a dangerous confusion between redemptive love, sex, and violence: “fucking” to the point of oblivion is the immediate response to a feeling of

21 “The girls always act as though only the heart, the tenderness, vulnerability, soul and so forth were important to them, but that just isn’t true. They are a thousand times more interested in other things. Coolness, beauty, rock ’n’ roll. Just like the men. With the difference that the girls always act is if it weren’t so. That’s the awful thing. And they aren’t at all poor, helpless or somehow discriminated against…they are calculating and shitty.”
excessive attachment and the possibility of redemption. The theme continues in his profession to Mandy:

Du bist das Leuchtendste, das mir je in meinem Leben begegnet ist. Und obwohl mich so tiefe Nacht umgibt, bringst du mich in dem Moment, in dem du auftrittst, ebenfalls zum Leuchten. Und das ist nicht nur jetzt so. Das wird immer so sein. Wir gehören zusammen. Ich werde alles für dich tun…und es wird keine Nacht mehr geben. Nie mehr. (Vogel 133)²²

Mandy’s response is “entgeistert (dumbfounded)”; she scoffs, complains that she “frier[t sich] den Arsch ab, und du redest so einen Mist (is freezing her ass off and you’re spouting this bullshit).” Then she rejects him, enacting the soldier male’s greatest fear, by noting that she could do much better using her position at the bordello, someone with money and fame rather than a young student like Paul (Vogel 133-4).

The only way to remove the evidence of this disillusionment and survive the damage to the exoskeleton is to reduce the woman to less than flesh and blood, i.e., to kill her, reduce her to ravaged matter, steal her ethereal beauty and her irritating selfhood. Paul returns to the bordello and asks to speak with Mandy one more time. She takes him upstairs to a bedroom, crosses her legs, and utters an exasperated final word: “Und? (Well?)” Paul strangles her and leaves, fortifying himself with a glass of champagne on the way out. No longer can Mandy pass judgment and threaten his masculine selfhood.

As in Crazy, the desired and then disappointing women of Vogel are modern-day incarnations of the soldier males’ “white woman.” Henry’s unrequited love for his older cousin Christine resembles the painful crush experienced by Benjamin, only more intense.

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²²“You are the most luminous thing that I have ever encountered in my life. And although deep night surrounds me, in the moment you appear you make me glow, too. And that isn’t just so now. That will always be so. We belong together. I will do everything for you…and there will be no more night anymore. Never.”
Christine, an anorexic who has moved to Munich to seek treatment for her disease, is a quintessential Ice Princess, a white woman in her objectified extreme. Her surreal perfection and fragility obsess Henry, as well as her silence and stillness:

Sie war sehr blass, redete wenig, hatte einen abwesenden Gesichtsausdruck. Der gehörte, wie ich später erfuhr, zu ihrer Krankheit. Sie hatte dieses Gekichere nicht, was ich bei Mädchen nicht ausstehen konnte, sie sass immer nur in einem Sessel mit nackten Füssen oder lag auf dem Sofa mit nackten Füssen. Ihre Füsse waren winzig. Sie sahen nicht aus wie Füsse, mit denen man rumläufts…Christines Körp er war makellos. (Vogel 19-20)

Later he elaborates on her “merkwürdige Abwesenheit…als würde sie alles ständig wie durch einen Schleier wahrnehmen… Es hätte ihr wahrscheinlich keine Schwierigkeiten gemacht, verschleiert zu gehen. Das hätte zu ihr gepsast (peculiar absentness…as if she were always perceiving everything through a veil…It probably wouldn’t have given her trouble to walk around veiled)” (Vogel 60-1). Essentially, the idealized Christine is a corpse bride, limp and lifeless in an imaginary death shroud, devoid of all free will or agency, a beautiful doll down to her tiny, functionless feet.

This kind of insistent idealization of Christine is, after all, its own form of aggression; no wonder that she rejects the advances of the two boys who seem concerned only with her ethereal perfection. Christine’s emaciated body and emotionally lifeless quality are what draw both Henry and his rival, Jens, to her; in a way, her resemblance to a dead and wasted body, the fact that she exists just barely, taking up as little space as possible in both form and

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23 “She was very pale, spoke little, had an absent facial expression. This was part of her illness, as I learned later. She didn’t have this giggle anymore, that I could never stand in girls, she just sat in an armchair with bare feet or lay on the sofa with bare feet. Her feet were tiny. They didn’t look like feet you walk around with…Christine’s body was flawless.”
personality, seems to make her even more appealing and untouchable, a forbidden dream. Indeed, her illness functions only as an accentuation of her slightness. Henry never views her as actually sick, or depicts anorexia as anything more than an expression of her fragile beauty. He notes that Christine’s illness went unnoticed at first, that she was just one of the many pretty, slender girls. When she is noticed throughout the text, it is for her beauty, not her extreme thinness. Even further, Christine seems to have no serious problems with food, which is ever-present in the novel. In a particularly tasteless passage, she and Jens have a debate over which is better: food or sex. Christine, of course, argues for sex, while Jens takes the side of food. When Henry confesses his love to her in the form of a note written on a napkin, the two are eating pizza in his bedroom; no mention is made of Christine’s illness. Henry’s descriptions of Christine prompt Paul to remember a lost love from his past, a girl named Oona who shares many of Christine’s defining features: “Feine Züge. Blass. Schmale Lippen. Sie hatte etwas Verletzliches (Fine features. Pale. Thin lips. She has something vulnerable about her)” (Vogel 33). This breakable quality is the important characteristic, a physical expression of innocence and helplessness; thus, anorexia is but a device used to underline Christine’s fragile appeal.

Of course, we learn that Oona has rejected Paul and will not return his calls. Like all the women in the text, Oona and Christine prove themselves unworthy of the white fantasy projected upon them. Throughout the text, Henry mentions various aspects of Christine’s character that hint at her imminent betrayal of her admirers. He sees her as arrogant and

24 Elisabeth Bronfen explores representations of the dead female body in art and literature in Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic (New York: Routledge, 1992). Of course, Edgar Allan Poe posits in his “Philosophy of Composition” that “the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world” (1846).
vain, mentioning the hours she spends in front of her makeup mirror and the high-heeled shoes she totters in. She has an active sex life, and seems to relish telling Henry and Jens all about it: “Sie berührte die eine Seite ihres Gesichtes mit der flachen Hand, als wolle sie sich fühlend der Schönheit ihres Gesichts vergewissern… Sie genoss es sichtlich, wenn sie an einem bestimmten Punkt ihrer Erzählung bemerkte, dass uns praktisch der Speichel aus den Mündern tropfte (She touched one side of her face with her flat hand, as if she wanted by feeling to ensure the beauty of her face…She visibly enjoyed it when she noticed at a certain point in her story that the drool was practically dripping from our mouths)” (Vogel 57-8).

This tease proves dangerous for Christine, who ultimately suffers an attack at the hands of a jealous Jens. When, bruised and disheveled from the beating, she denies Henry access to her apartment and a male voice, presumably a boyfriend, tells him to go away, Christine finally loses her ethereal shine and is revealed as the siren from which Henry must flee for his life. The white woman is not supposed to be touched, certainly not by anyone but her distant lover; once sullied, she must be reduced to a bloody pulp, a non-entity. Jens does his best to turn her insides out, as Theweleit describes, by bruising her body, and also by gathering her used toiletry items from his apartment into a box, which ends up left in the stairwell of her apartment, exposed for all to see: comb, underwear, washcloth, all evidence of her secret, repulsive humanity. The “white” woman who becomes the seductress risks punishment at the hands of her “victims.”

There are many literary examples of this pattern. In Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, the fiancée turned vampire Lucy is ultimately staked – with histrionic relish – by Van Helsing’s team. In Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, Lotte bears the weight of her guilt after Werther commits suicide. Hamlet’s mother must die because she has fallen in love with her late husband’s brother, thus breaking the eternal marriage vow and scandalizing her son. Of course, Eve herself earns womankind eternal suffering and subservience because she offers Adam forbidden fruit.
Mandy appears like a vision to Paul, innocent and pure and perfect, until he returns to find her with another client; already she begins to sully the whiteness of her image in his mind. As she rebuffs his advances in the street outside the brothel, the snow falls down around them, reflecting the other side of the white woman, a coldness of heart. The only remedy for this betrayal, as we have seen, is death. After the murder, the dead Mandy fulfills Paul’s fantasy again: “Ihr wunderschönes Gesicht...war weiß. Und ihre Augen waren auch ganz weiß. Und ich habe sie liegen gelassen (Her beautiful face...was white. And her eyes were all white, too. And I left her lying there)” (Vogel 117). What haunts Paul is not that he turned her back to “white,” but that he abandoned his beloved, now perfectly still at last. Here we may fully understand Theweleit’s observation that “die Idealisierung (= Entlebendigung) ist auch eine Form des Tötens (Idealization, or ‘devivification,’ is another form of killing),” in this case, it leads to a very real death (Theweleit I 140). As Theweleit has described above, the objectified woman’s (literally) disappearing presence in the text is the medium through which the boys solidify their (albeit warped) manhood – by fighting over and against her.

As in Crazy, Lebert has assembled a group of young men who are on the verge of falling apart, both physically and mentally. This lack of control over the external borders, coupled with a crippling fear of internal invasion, make for exaggerated versions of the Theweleitian traits exhibited by Benjamin and his friends. Henry and Jens are bonded, in part, because of their physical problems which have ostensibly caused their being cast out from “normal” society.
Small and birdlike (the *Vogel* of the title), Henry suffers from a kind of disability which prevents him from interacting with most women: when nervous, he sweats profusely, has nosebleeds and suffers from excessive diarrhea. Richard Langston points out in his article, “Escape from Germany: Disappearing Bodies and Postmodern Space in Christian Kracht’s Prose,” that “corporeal sites and conditions that espouse formlessness and non-being” – like diarrhea, sweating and bleeding – underscore “the abject’s blurring of borders and obfuscation of identities” (Langston 51). In other words, diarrhea is an involuntary breach of Henry’s borders, a moment of self-dissolution brought on by the proximity of women. In this way, it makes manifest the intangible threat posed by Christine and other girls. This condition underlines Henry’s role as a sexual outsider, a victim of women (who cause his symptoms and would be disgusted by them); it also serves as a vivid embodiment of the filthy flood in the text. At one point, Henry even imagines a great flood of his own excrement and blood:


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²⁶ “Sometimes…I suddenly had such a disgusting smell in my nose. Whenever this smell was there, I had the feeling that everything I had shit out recently in my diarrhea, all the blood I’d recently lost through nosebleeds, had gathered somewhere and would now break over me and all the people in the bookstore in an enormous wave. I imagined how the people would be thrown around and carried forth…And how then they’d all lie there. In my shit. And wallow in it. And I too would have wallowed in it.”
Henry’s only respite from this threatening wave is in the confines of his own room, where he gains control of his bowels and can exert control over two other unruly orifices: he masturbates and makes elaborate artworks with the blood that drips out of his nose (Vogel 43).

As in both *Crazy* and *Faserland*, the men of *Vogel* struggle to maintain control over their bodies. Paul, though apparently more pulled together than Henry, feels nauseous and dizzy as he boards the train. When they first meet, Henry notices a brown spot in Paul’s right eye. We learn that the spot has been there for just a few days, having appeared around the time Paul strangled Mandy. In this small way, Paul, too, bears the physical marks of his pain. Like the narrator of *Faserland*, Paul forgets to eat for days at a time. When Henry asks about Berlin, Paul replies, “Berlin…beisst einem buchstäblich Körperteile ab…Irgendwann werden sie ganz gefressen (Berlin…literally bites off parts of your body..At some point you’re eaten up completely)” (Vogel 21). Though his body may not rebel against him in visible ways, Paul nevertheless views the world as someone who is not whole, unable.

Though both Christine and Jens have been diagnosed with eating disorders – she with anorexia, he with a form of emotionally-linked morbid obesity – their conditions are handled by Henry’s narrative in very different ways. Jens’s extreme fatness becomes an external symbol of his outsider status, his sense of being cut off from natural human interactions like sex and his lack of physical control. His weight is provided as the reason behind his emotional instability and his final psychotic break; more importantly, it is ostensibly because he is fat that Christine does not love him, indeed that he is despairingly
lonely. In this way, Jens is actually compared more overtly to Henry in the text than to Christine.

Sander Gilman provides a thought-provoking discussion of male obesity in *Fat Boys*. He notes that “The fat male body generates multiple meanings,” and can either be evocative of femininity and weakness, or else the opposite, “patriarchal gigantism” (Gilman 6). Similarly, fat men can be “characterized as hypersexual as well as asexual” (Gilman x). Jens embodies this dualism, being at once powerful and fragile, masculine and effeminate, sex-obsessed and asexual in his unwilling celibacy. In a way, these contradictions are representative of all the male figures discussed here, as they can all be read as both victims and perpetrators, feminized and hyper-masculine.

As in Theweleit and in *Crazy*, the feminine threat comes not just from the rejection and judgment of a woman, but from her very body, and the possibility of self-dissolution in the throes of sexual intercourse. This threat is all the more insidious because it is also a deep desire. As in *Crazy*, the two sex scenes in *Vogel* are ambivalent at best. When Henry finally manages to sleep with Christine during a sleepover at Jens’s parents’ house, Jens is snoring in the same room, a constant reminder of his presence in the love triangle; of course, he wakes up and discovers them in the act just as Henry climaxes, forever ruining the longed-for moment. The scene begins with Henry’s tension as he tries to sleep only feet from Christine’s half-naked body, a feeling that Henry describes as fear: “Da war ein Schrei in mir, der aber nicht rauskam. Das Aufheulen irgendeines widerlichen Geschoepfes, das in meinem Koerper kauerte: ich selbst. Und ich hatte Angst (There was a scream in me that didn’t come out. The howling of some repulsive creature that cowered in my body: myself. And I was
afraid)” (Vogel 82). What he fears is within himself, a primal and repellant creature. Indeed, he is quickly overtaken by aggression and resentment as he stares at Christine, whom he has previously described as if she were made of snowflakes: “ich wollte mich auf Schneekristalle betten. So lange, bis sie geschmolzen waren (I wanted to make my bed upon the snow crystals. Until they were melted)” (83). This metaphor of destruction is replaced by a concrete threat moments later, as Henry’s stomach cramps return and he thinks of Christine’s rejection: “War ich auch zu jung, um sie zu vergewaltigen? Ich war kurz davor, sie zu packen, herumzurissen, ihr bescheuertes, wunderbares Loch in Position zu bringen und sie dann zu ficken. Egal, ob sie es wollte oder nicht (Was I also too young to rape her? I was about to grab her, drag her around, bring her crazy, wonderful hole into position and then fuck her. Whether she wanted it or not)” (Vogel 84). In the same breath Henry turns to Paul, who is listening to this story, and asks him, “Hast du dann auch das Gefühl, gegen das gewaltige, das dunkle Meer anbrüllen zu müssen? (Do you then have the feeling that you must scream against the violent, dark sea?)” (85). Christine’s body is both icicle and angry sea, fragile and vast, desired and hated.

When she accepts his advances and Henry enters her, his reaction is similar to Benjamin’s in Crazy: “Ich zitterte. Es war, als müsste ich mich enthäuten….Und ich dachte, ich müsste augenblicklich Teil dieses Brodelnden werden. Mich selbst sofort auflösen…Langsam glitt ich in sie. Und dann endete sie. Und wir fingen an (I trembled. It was as if I had to skin myself…And I thought I must immediately become part of this seething. Immediately dissolve myself…Slowly I glided into her. And then she ended. And we began)” (Vogel 86-7). Henry feels an impulse to dissolve, to crawl out of his own skin
and open his borders in a moment of total connection to a human being. But even in the moment, it is sie – Christine – who ends and becomes part of the wir, the “we”. And when the act is over, has in fact been violated by Jens, the only feeling left is disgust, from the stickiness of Henry’s underwear to the guilt brought on by Jens’s flight from the room. Later in the novel, Paul thinks back on his moment of connection with Mandy in a swimming pool to similar effect. Like Henry, he feels himself dissolving – “Mir wurde schwindelig. Ich wollte unbedingt selbst zu Wasser werden (I was dizzy. I wanted absolutely to become water myself)” – and like Henry his ejaculate does not hit its mark, this time floating in the pool. Paul imagines the reaction of the next customer upon seeing it. Like Benjamin, Paul and Henry emerge from their sexual experiences, to speak with Camille Paglia, as somewhat less than when they entered. The quest for Selbstauflösung (self-dissolution) with the “perfect” woman has proven fruitless.

This is a major crisis in the novel, but I would argue that in the end, it is not the only one. As in Crazy, the relationships of true importance in Vogel are not between men and women, but between men. Male friendship – its potential and its difficulty – is ultimately the central theme of both of Lebert’s novels discussed here.

To extend the comparison to Male Fantasies, there is almost a sense that Henry and Paul, as well as Henry and Jens, are war buddies, that they have faced a common adversary and been scarred by a common trauma. This bond, as volatile as it can be, is by far the more powerful connection in the texts, compared to the limp characterizations of female characters and emotionless sexual misfires that result with them. Within Henry’s narrative, Jens is his soul mate; they are, as Henry puts it, Leidensgenossen, comrades in suffering (46).
Both suffer from physical problems that have driven them to the edges of society, and both are painfully obsessed with a beautiful ideal of “normal” life embodied by Christine. Jens’s voice dominates clearly in the text, compared to Christine, who barely says a word directly. Jens is the person Henry “needs,” even though he is embarrassed by him. In this way, theirs is the true love of Henry’s story, and the death of their friendship the true loss, brought on as it was by Christine’s promiscuity.

Henry complains of Jens that they only function as a trio in his mind, meaning that Jens and Henry do not spend much time together without Christine there to bind them (59). But this fact could also be seen from another angle: Christine’s actual function in the text is to bring the two young men together, to bring out their loneliness and insecurity and ignite their passions within the context of a socially acceptable, “normal” interaction: the love triangle. This use of the woman as a vessel of male-to-male communication a la Sedgwick and Girard is familiar from Crazy, though here the structure is doubled, for Paul and Henry’s friendship functions within the same confines. Henry pours his heart out to Paul over a girl – ostensibly, though clearly his problems with Jens are the cause of his suffering. Paul understands because he has had a similar problem with a girl, though he has had no one to share with up to this point. Perhaps, in a way, this utter loneliness focuses his rage on Mandy, allows it to spiral out of control.

As he is led away by police at the Berlin train station, Paul turns back to Henry and says, “ich bin eben kein Erzähler wie du (I am not a storyteller like you)” (140). On one level, this is a sly metafictional moment, since of course Paul is our Erzähler, building on a previous comment by Henry, who tells Paul he would like to be the protagonist of a novel.
so that a host of readers would feel for him. Paul, of course, has achieved this trick, since we
are unaware of his crime until the final pages of the novel. We assume him to be sane, and
see Henry’s adventure as the exaggerated version of his own troubled life, until the tables are
turned and Paul is revealed as the more disturbed of the two. But on another level, Paul’s
final comment references Henry’s advantage over Paul: he talks about his feelings, and he
manages to confide in two men, to make two friends. Paul is unable to reach out; the
confession we finally read is from his internal monologue. Though from the very beginning,
we know that Paul is searching for a confidant. When he first meets Henry on the train, he
thinks to himself, “Liegt es an dem monotone Dam-Dam der Räder, dass diese merkwürdige
Stimmung aufkommt? Eine anonyme Vertraulichkeit. So, als trafen sich zwei unbekannte
Wanderer an einem Fluss. Sie setzten sich gemeinsam hin. Sie kennen sich nicht. Alles, was
sie miteinander verbindet, ist der Fluss (Is it because of the monotonous dam-dam of the
wheels that this strange atmosphere takes over? An anonymous familiarity. As if two
unkown travelers met at a river’s edge. They’d sit down together. They don’t know each
other. All that connects them to each other is the river)” (13). The river that binds the two
travelers, is of course the destructive flood of female sex, their anonymity a barrier only
surmountable at the treacherous banks of the dark water. In Vogel, the lone figure first
introduced in Crazy continues to search for human connections, this time not just over the
body of a woman, but over her bruised and dead body.
After his tour through the West German fatherland, Christian Kracht aimed his literary interest east – specifically, the Middle and Far East. His work around the turn of the millennium focuses on his travels through Asia, first in the form of autobiographical travel essays (Der gelbe Bleistift [The Yellow Pencil], 1998) and then as a novel set in Iran, Tibet, and China (1979, 2001). Always a citizen of the world – he spent his childhood and adolescence throughout Europe and North America – Kracht’s tenure in Asia seems to have inspired the course of his later work to track toward the obscure, mystical, even apocalyptic. In addition to his own works, Kracht edited both a magazine (Der Freund [The Friend]) and a story collection (Mesopotamia, 2000) during this period with similar themes.

This turn to the East may seem unexpected given Kracht’s pointed exclusion of eastern Germany in his debut novel. The narrator travels from Sylt to Hamburg down through Frankfurt, Heidelberg, and Bavaria until he finally stops in Zurich. Though the novel is often presented as a sort of road novel which expresses some truth about German culture as a whole, it is a decidedly Western truth, as even Berlin is not a stop on the narrator’s journey. Indeed, he only mentions the former East as an image, the „ungewaschene Horden (unwashed hordes)“ who have poured across the border into the West. To him, East Germany is still a foreign country, even though the novel takes place in the mid-1990s.²⁷ Kracht makes his point with greater incision in his bizarre 2005 re-writing

²⁷ Though no specific date is mentioned, the year of the action (1993) can be determined from cultural references, for example, a poster the narrator sees for the movie Stalingrad, which was released in that year.
of *Faserland* as a science fiction screenplay, in which the former GDR has been turned into a radioactive wasteland after a nuclear accident.

The release of Christian Kracht’s second novel shortly before the American terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 has seemed, to critics and scholars alike, an especially apt moment to pinpoint as the death of Pop Literature in Germany. Late 2001 felt like the end of an era, and a new beginning, throughout the Western world. The obsession with surface and youth culture seen as the hallmark of Pop had metamorphosed from a revolutionary stance into a meaningless cash cow, such that the word „Pop“ in German media could be equated not with avant-garde, but with the bestseller list (Ernst 76). It was a time to reflect on this frivolity, and at first look Kracht’s novel of Eastern violence and decadent downfall seemed the perfect deadly blow to mindless mass fiction: and so Kracht, whose first novel heralded the New Wave of *Popliteratur* in the mid-90s, was credited with the movement’s demise less than a decade later (Drügh). Talk show host Harald Schmidt, a self-professed fan of Kracht’s earlier work, tells Kracht in a 2001 interview that he sees in 1979 „eine neue Richtung...Es hat was Visionäres, gerade in der Zeit, in der wir jetzt leben [in den Monaten nach dem 11. September 2001].“

Schmidt does not give Kracht an opportunity to respond directly to this assessment, though he looks puzzled when Schmidt uses the word „ernsthaft“ (serious), saying „ich hab‘ beim Schreiben immer sehr lachen müssen (I had to laugh a lot while writing).“ It would not seem that Kracht shares Schmidt’s judgment of 1979’s gravitas and topicality. Indeed, Kracht has distanced himself from the Pop phenomenon in interviews throughout his career, claiming he does not know what Pop is, exactly. To Kracht, as to Ernst, the word is
essentially meaningless, and irrelevant to an assessment of his work. This does not mean that Kracht’s novel could not have put an end to Pop in its „New Wave“ incarnation, but it does support the possibility that there are other readings of 1979 in which the novel is not a negation of Kracht’s earlier work, or indeed of „Pop“ as a general concept. I will argue that 1979 is in fact a logical progression of Kracht’s narrative and symbolic strategies from Faserland and his projects in the intervening years. Though the backdrop may be different and the stakes for the characters raised, 1979 continues Faserland’s exploration of the masculine identity struggle through a misogynistic symbolic language.

“Ich habe nie Menschenfleisch gegessen.” ‘I have never eaten human flesh.’ This is the very best that the doomed narrator of 1979 can say of himself at the end of his life. Once a gay interior decorator from West Germany, the man who now speaks to us no longer has any identity separate from that of the Maoist prison camp in which he finds himself, starving to death, working in rocky fields near a nuclear waste dump. “Ich war ein guter Gefangener. Ich habe nie Menschenfleisch gegessen (I was a good prisoner. I never ate human flesh)” (Kracht 183).

As in Faserland, the narrator of 1979 makes a journey in that fateful year, first to Tehran with his partner Christopher, then, after Christopher’s death and the outbreak of the revolution, to Tibet. There he follows the advice of a mysterious stranger he meets at a party in Iran, Mavrocordato, who urges him to make a pilgrimage around Mount Kailash as a purifying sacrifice. After this arduous journey, he is arrested by Chinese border police, who suspect him of being a spy for the United States and send him to a prison camp. The novel is divided into two parts: Part One details the events in Tehran up to the narrator’s
departure, and Part Two describes his pilgrimage and subsequent imprisonment, during which the narrator apparently undergoes a transformation.

Most instrumental in this process, in addition to his confinement and starvation, is the “Selbstkritik (self-criticism)” enforced by the Maoists who detain him. The narrator is forced to appear before a panel of men and one woman and answer questions designed to gauge his submissiveness and willingness to devote himself to their cause; for example, he learns to admit that he is a parasite, an “Ausbeuter,” but that it is possible for him to change. Whenever he answers in a way that displeases the panel, the woman hits him in the face, “manchmal mit der flachen Hand, manchmal mit der Faust, einmal mit dem Knauf einer Pistole an den linken Wangenknochen (sometimes with an open hand, sometimes with her fist, once with the butt of a pistol on my left cheekbone)” (Kracht 158). The men take notes. One of them gives the narrator an English volume of Mao’s teachings, and he treasures the book. He understands the sense of the “Selbstkritik” thus: “Wenn man also alles zugab und es bereute, war es möglich, sich darauf aufbauend zu verbessern...wenn man ein neuer Mensch geworden wäre, dann könnte man gehen und wäre frei (If one admitted to everything and regretted it, it was possible to gradually improve oneself...when one had become a new person, then he could go and would be free)” (Kracht 160).

But the only freedom which awaits the narrator is the freedom of death; spared from the lead mines, he is nonetheless sent to a labor camp in the midst of an old nuclear waste dump, and the rations he is given are not enough for him to survive long-term. He and his fellow prisoners resort to eating maggots cultivated on their own excrement. The narrator’s metamorphosis into a “good prisoner” is complete; he gives blood even though the camp
doctor tells him he is too weak. He lives for the good of the Volks, but his own life will soon be gone completely. His tone in the last pages is one of quiet satisfaction, like one who has finally done penance for the immense sins of his past.

The female characters of 1979 are not so much unsympathetic as simply not there. Women appear as fleeting, if sinister, scenery: two Muslim cleaning women chant “Death to America” after an unpleasant exchange with Christopher in the hallway. A young mother attends the Tehran party in the company of her six-year-old daughter, who has been dressed in sexy lingerie, and snorts cocaine in front of her. The head of the Maoist interrogation committee is a violent and terrible woman who seems to exist only to expedite his punishment. Because women are not sexual objects for the narrator, they are not the primary threat in the novel, but their characterizations are nonetheless menacing and schematic.

As in Faserland, Kracht relates homosexuality to his portrayal of harmful decadence in the life of his protagonist. Kracht’s narrator is himself homosexual; but everything about this fact seems to hurt and disgust him. Christopher, his long-time lover, is arrogant and cruel: “Du siehst nichts, gar nichts. Du bist nicht nur dumm, sondern auch blind (You see nothing, nothing at all. You’re not only dumm, but also blind),” he says; „...Geh doch hinauf ins Haus und sieh Dir ein bißchen die schönen Möbel an, oder die Blumenarrangements (Just go up to the house and look at the beautiful furniture for a bit, or the floral arrangements)“ (Kracht 48-49). He makes a point of picking on the narrator’s occupation; though he implies that he is ignorant, when Christopher suggests that the narrator go back up to the house and view the décor, he is also mocking an aspect of the man that is
stereotypically homosexual (and also effeminate). Though Christopher himself is homosexual, he finds his boyfriend’s interest in material beauty repulsive, prissy, even, and terribly un-intellectual.

On the other hand, Kracht paints Christopher as a tyrannical and scruple-less hedonist, a die-hard partygoer in shockingly expensive shoes who would take his pants off for anyone and stands by unconcerned while a model snorts cocaine in the presence of her six-year-old daughter (Kracht 40). As we follow the narrator and Christopher through the party, the instances of frighteningly decadent behavior pile up on each other. In most cases, it is Christopher who participates, and the narrator who watches in horror, as when they take a stroll through the hash forest with their host, who asks them to strip naked and try out a sinister machine he has strapped to his body. The man is himself hairy and fat, a walking symbol of sins of the flesh, and while Christopher shimmies out of his pants, the narrator reacts by slapping the host across the face, provoking Christopher’s rage (Kracht 44-49).

From the beginning of the novel, it is Christopher who most clearly represents the segment of this society which must be eliminated for its decadence.

It is significant that this couple has been together for a very long time, for we learn very quickly that the two haven’t actually had sexual intercourse in recent memory. They are a bitter old married couple – our narrator is an abused spouse, and the lack of physical connection between them is only reiterated by the weeping sores on Christopher’s legs. Not only are the two not actively involved with each other sexually, but they are actually disgusted by one another. It is no surprise, then, that the narrator’s strongest feeling when Christopher dies is one of liberation rather than mourning. He is quite relieved to be single
and sexually unattached, albeit with good reason. But his attachments later in the novel, to Mavrocordato and then to fellow inmate Liu, never make it all the way to sexual attraction; something always gets warped on the way, and by the end of the book the narrator never even seems to think about sex or romantic love. He is simply a body, an instrument, stripped not only of excess flesh but of its fleshly drives.

This progression ties into an important aspect of the narrator as representation of homosexuality: his obvious self-loathing and self-disgust, exemplified for Volker Weidermann by the narrator’s only childhood memory:

…damals hatte ich immer versucht, die Milchränder an meinem täglichen Zehnuhr-Glas Milch zu umtrinken, indem ich das Glas langsam im Uhrzeigersinn vor mir herumdrehte, so sehr ekelte ich mich vor meiner eigenen Milchspucke. (Kracht 34, Weidermann 304)

He is as disgusted with himself as he is with Christopher, the party host, the greasy-haired guest Alexander who listens to Nazi music and abuses his date. If Christopher is the member of hedonistic society who deserves his death, then the narrator stands for the part of that society which must be rehabilitated and “healed” (in a way which ultimately amounts to dying, too).

Kracht’s character is equally punishing of his own effeminacy; Christopher’s mocking comments about his decorating interest affects him as a severe blow, and he even seems vaguely ashamed of himself in the presence of strong-willed Mavrocordato. “Ich würde lieber hier bei Ihnen bleiben (I would rather stay here with you),” he says to his new friend as they lie chastely in bed, and Mavrocordato says only, “Ich weiss (I know),” as he

28 “Back then I always tried to drink around the edges of the milk in my daily ten-o’clock glass of milk, in that I slowly turned my glass clockwise in front of me, so disgusted was I by my own milk-sput.”
smokes a cigarette (Kracht 118). And in an interesting moment late in the text, the narrator looks down at his emaciated body while on the way to the labor camp and says, “Ich dachte an Christopher, daran, daß ich mich immer zu dick gefühlt hatte, und ich war glücklich darüber, endlich seriously abzunehmen…jetzt waren schon mindestens zehn oder zwölf Kilo weg, Gott sei Dank (I thought about Christopher, about how I always felt too fat, and I was happy to finally seriously lose weight)” (Kracht 166). The stereotypically “feminine” – and, by extension, “homosexual” – compulsion to lose weight, to be slim, is still ingrained in the narrator’s mind, even after all that has happened to him, even after Selbstkritik. Of course he will pay for this vanity in the succeeding pages, where his starvation reaches near-lethal levels. Above that, though, there is a certain humor in the passage, such that one wonders if Kracht is making fun of his own protagonist: the vain, decadent capitalist who will pay for his inability to change.

Since Pop, as discussed in the introduction, is so often associated with a tradition of hedonism, it would make sense for the media to view 1979 as a break from this tradition in its overt purging of Western decadence with a look toward the East for ascetic guidance. The setting, on the cusp of a conservative revolution in Iran, certainly supports this conception.

Mavrocordato notices the narrator’s passivity and confusion and tells him: “Sie selbst müssen sich zu etwas entscheiden…Sie müßten etwas hergeben, ohne etwas dafür zu erwarten oder zu bekommen (You yourself must decide on something...you must give something without expecting or receiving anything in return)” (Kracht 114). What this ultimately amounts to is a sacrifice of the narrator’s Western life. His lover is dead; he leaves
most of his possessions behind. Significantly, he chooses to make the pilgrimage in the late
Christopher’s expensive leather shoes, until they wear out and his guide makes him a new
pair out of felt. The outward traces of his old life, of his decadent and materialistic native
culture, begin to fall away. Indeed, as miserable as the conditions are in which the narrator
finds himself in the second half of the novel, his state of mind seems to lighten and clarify as
his body wastes away and earthly pleasures recede from memory. He embraces the Maoist
doctrine and in fact, even as death is imminent at the novel’s end, the narrator nears a kind
of Nirvana, which after all is just nothingness.

Yet to read 1979 as a triumph of Eastern asceticism over Western decadence would
be a misreading of the novel as both unreflectively Orientalist and profoundly serious. The
narrator’s remark about „seriously“ losing weight effectively shatters any notion of successful
transformation, along with many other moments of absurdity. When the narrator meets a
group of Tibetan pilgrims as he starts his second lap around Mount Kailash (as the first
round failed to produce any effect), he claims that they spontaneously perform a
choreographed routine while singing a song by the American band the Ink Spots. Perhaps
this is a break with reality as it is represented in the text; more likely, though, we are given
the narrator’s distinctly Western perspective, from which he (and by necessity, we) are
unable to escape. The Tibetans’ ritual reminds him of the Ink Spots song he danced to with
his driver back in Tehran and he is unable to see past this association, just as he cannot help
but be pleased at his drastic weight loss following weeks of starvation.

Like the narrator of Faserland, this narrator remains unnamed in the novel and is
probably on the verge of death at the end of his tale. Both narrators are blank as discussed
in chapter one, and both lose their struggle to forge and keep an individual identity. This quest is even more overt in 1979; the narrator is consistently portrayed as an empty vessel, a passive follower who needs others to guide him and in fact has no past to shape his sense of self, save for one lone childhood memory. The narrator's pilgrimage to Mount Kailash is intended as both sacrifice and self-discovery, but when the first lap around the mountain is finished, he feels nothing. The second lap ends in imprisonment, where the narrator is forced to partake of „Selbstkritik,“ a practice designed not to improve the self but to break it down completely in service to the state. Once again, an „inner emptiness“ is exposed, albeit a different kind: the narrator’s „Naivität, seine Offenheit für Eindrücke und Anweisungen sind letztlich Zeichen seiner Leere – er ist ein ‚leerer Kelch‘, wie Mavrocordato es ihm bescheinigt hatte, jedoch nicht in mystischem Sinne als für Eindrücke und Empfindungen besonders empfänglich, sondern offen für jegliche Phrase und Ideologie (naivite, his openness for impressions and directions are finally a sign of his emptiness – he is an ‚empty vessel,’ as Mavrocordato put it to him, though not in the mystical sense as particularly receptive to impressions and feelings, but rather open for any suggestion and ideology)” (Schneider 241).

Steffen and Mirjam Schneider, in their study of sacrificial figures in literary „Orientreisen (travels to the Orient),“ see 1979 as a deconstruction of central discourses of „Orientreisefiction,“ namely the model of „Sterb und Werde“ („die and become“: the notion that a sacrifice – a sacrificial death – will bring about renewal in a cycle like the phoenix born from its own ashes). In their reading, Kracht deconstructs this trope of orientalist literature by short-circuiting the cycle. His victim/sacrifice of a narrator is not
redeemed at the end of the novel, nor is either society – the decadent West nor the militant East. In place of cyclical renewal „tritt bloßer Wiederholungszwang, ein blindes Kreisen, das sich in der immer gleichen Bewegung erschöpft (appears the drive to repetition, a blind circling, that exhausts itself in the repetitive movement)“ (Schneider 239). Because there is no progress, and all effort „läuft...ins Leere (runs into emptiness),“ Kracht’s text cites and then denies another orientalist trope – the finding of the true self on an Eastern journey (Schneider 240). Both self and sacrifice are proven empty, worthless.

Most compelling is the Schneiders’ conclusion that this deconstruction is a statement, not just on „Orientreiseleratur,“ but on the 68er generation and their „Vorstellungen von Revolution und Opfer (ideas of revolution and sacrificial victims)“ (241). As they point out, Benno Ohnesorg, the original „Opfer“ of the 68ers, was shot during a protest against the Iranian Shah, and the revolution in 1979 was of great interest in the West as well. In Kracht’s novel, the „Langhaarige (long-hairs)“ from the West take part in the demonstrations in Tehran, and islamic revolutionaries carry signs reading „Bater-Meinof“, indicating a collaboration of sorts, an ideological connection between the RAF and the revolutionaries. Moreover, the Schneiders note the exchange of cassettes as revolutionary media: the narrator accepts a tape of music by the Ink Spots from Hassan, only to discover that it contains instead an inflammatory speech. The cassette, as the Schneiders describe, can be seen to represent not just the interchangeability of ideologies and cultural products – since one recording can be erased and taped over by another – but also the agents of this exchange, the revolutionaries from East and West who manipulate the same discourse of sacrifice and renewal for their own purposes. Ultimately, the Schneiders
find that Kracht’s use of these elements adds up to a parody of the 68ers’ hope, as their
decade of cultural domination draws to a close, that the East, in particular Eastern
spirituality, will bring about inner revolution and spiritual healing (Schneider). I would add
that Kracht’s decision to title his novel 1979 supports this hypothesis, for the year becomes
the work’s true subject.

Of course, Kracht’s narrator finds no such redemption in the arms of Eastern
ideology, only physical and mental dissolution in a work camp in which he will certainly die.
Perhaps we can attribute Kracht’s laughter during the writing process to a certain
Schadenfreude at sending 68 to its death. But there are other cultural citations at work here,
most obviously in the form of the narrator’s imprisonment, which cannot help but recall a
Nazi concentration camp. There are other references to Nazis in the text, first the Neo-Nazi
music that the unpleasant Alexander is playing at the Tehran party, and then the swastika
that the narrator sees on a hillside during his journey to Mount Kailash. But, as in Faserland,
these references are red herrings of a sort, never adding up to anything – perhaps just
representative of the notion of collective guilt that hangs over the narrator’s generation.

The attack on the 68ers is familiar from Faserland as well. In the earlier novel, the
narrator merely dismisses his elders as „SPD-Nazis“ and mocks their hypocrisy. Yet in
1979, as we have just seen, the stakes are raised, and the 68ers are literally punished to death.
The Janus-head of guilt and decadence first introduced in Faserland is finally crushed in 1979.
The hope for redemption from past and current sin is critiqued, even parodied, and the
instrument of this critique is the body of a homosexual man who is stripped, starved, and
beaten. This time, our narrator is no aggressor but rather the ultimate victim of the narrative
in which he finds himself, but the symbolic web in which he is caught is no less damaging in terms of gender characterizations than *American Psycho*.

In that light, an analysis of *1979* in this context may benefit from a comparison with *American Psycho*, the novel that may have inspired Kracht’s first novel as well. I see the violence in both novels, whether self-inflicted or directed at others, as representative of a certain progression of tendencies in the works of both authors. I might even call it a mutation. What began in *Faserland, Less Than Zero* and *The Rules of Attraction*, reaches a fever pitch in *1979* and *American Psycho*.

The boys who felt ill-at-ease and angry in the earlier novels have aged into men who will do anything in their power to become not-men. Kracht’s narrator leaves his identity as a gay German man behind and embraces a new identity: a model prisoner, a submissive instrument of an Eastern regime, an automaton, a skeleton. In his heart, he must believe that this is what he deserves as an overfed Westerner; he might even entertain a thought or two about the sins of his ancestors, who would not submit, who starved skeletons of their own in labor camps.

Patrick Bateman takes the opposite path; he would rather be a monster, a killing machine, a demon, than a man. Whether or not he literally wields the chainsaw is irrelevant. Ignoring it in the text would be just as inexcusable as the way Ellis’s characters fail to notice Bateman’s insanity. Because Bateman’s method necessitates slaughter; Ellis’s monster feeds on blood, though who is to say that Kracht’s monster wouldn’t, if let out of his cage as a newly enlightened creature? Both authors imply that violence is the only way to re-order their deadly habitat. And yet they also agree on the futility of that re-ordering: “THIS IS
NOT AN EXIT.” “I never ate human flesh.” The ultimate message is that there is no solution. There is no way to be a man without suffering, without causing suffering.

_The Informers._

_American Psycho_ was certainly a hard act to follow. “The knives are sharpened,” Bret Easton Ellis said in a _Vanity Fair_ interview upon the publication of his next book, _The Informers_, in 1994. Once again, explicit passages were leaked before the novel’s release and negative reviews surfaced before the book ever hit the shelves. Like _American Psycho_, _The Informers_ features Ellis’s violent and sexualized brand of social critique, eliding consumerism and bloodlust, blankness and cruelty into one horrific portrait of young America in the 1980s.

Yet in many ways, _The Informers_ is not a true follow-up to _American Psycho_. A series of interconnected short stories set in 1984, _The Informers_ was actually written (in fragmented form) before _American Psycho_, parts of it even before Ellis’s second novel, _The Rules of Attraction_. Thus, not only does the action take place several years before that of _Psycho_, but the book also represents an earlier stage in the development of Ellis’s satirical worldview. The decision to publish _The Informers_ after _Psycho_ was a practical one, at least in part: Ellis’s next novel, _Glamorama_, was taking longer than expected to complete. In addition, it would seem a wise move to release a book which returns to early-80s Los Angeles, the setting for Ellis’s most successful first novel, _Less Than Zero_. Certainly the landscape, the young age of many of the characters, and even many of the recurring motifs (the billboard reading “Disappear Here,” for example) recall this first novel more than any of Ellis’s other works.
But *The Informers* also exhibits a sophistication and clarity of vision that elevates it above Ellis’s early work, and allows a fruitful comparison with the seemingly different *American Psycho*. In a way, it is a shame that Ellis waited to publish the collection until after the media firestorm created by *Psycho* made him infamous; an analysis of several stories from *The Informers* will reiterate and clarify the satirical potential – in necessarily gendered terms – of *Psycho*.

As I have mentioned in previous chapters, Ellis develops a Faulknerian microcosm in his prose that connects his novels to each other via minor characters and fictional settings. Most college students attend the fictional Camden College in New Hampshire, while the siblings and exes of characters from one novel appear in bit parts in the next. *The Informers* is written as a series of short stories told by a succession of linked characters, including an entire family (parents and two children and stepmother), several young male friends of the son, and several previously unknown figures who seem to be linked by a common drug dealer, Spin, who also appears in *Less Than Zero*.

At least two characters close to Patrick Bateman presumably make their debut in *The Informers*: Sean, his college-age younger brother, who is present only as the addressee of unanswered letters from a Camden acquaintance who has moved to Los Angeles; and Tim Price, the friend whose callous monologues open *American Psycho* and who disappears down the tracks at Tunnel, only to reappear mysteriously at the end of the novel, unable to account for his time away. Tim figures prominently in two stories, narrating the first and becoming the main focus of the second, which is narrated by his father.
In “At the Still Point,” Tim eats at an Italian restaurant with his friends Graham, Dirk, and Raymond, and they have a tense discussion about their friend Jamie’s death in a car accident one year to the day before. In this story, Tim is like all of Ellis’s novel protagonists: entangled in a system of denial-driven superficiality and drug-numbed emotions, yet just barely more reflective and sensitive than those around him. He reveals this to us through his comparative lack of participation in the discussion, as Raymond tries to dredge up memories of Jamie and Dirk and Graham sneeringly make every effort to stop him. Tim also offers his own memories of Jamie to the readers, most of them involving drugs, though one sentence carries more weight: “Another line and he said that he understood me or something like that and I did another line and believed him because it is easier to move through the motions than not to” (Informers 10). Later, Tim comforts Raymond, who sobs in the restroom, convinced that Jamie was his best friend. Tim knows that Jamie did not like Raymond, that the two weren’t close at all, and yet he agrees with Raymond, calming him, in a moment of near tenderness. Garbled as it is with drugs and other self-preservation tactics, we see Tim’s humanity.

In “In the Islands,” Tim’s father, Les, takes Tim on a trip to the Mauna Kea Hotel in Hawaii as an attempt to bond with his son. The story opens as Les stares out the window of his office and sees Tim and Graham waiting in line for a movie, Terms of Endearment. Les knows that Tim cannot see him; he notes that Tim and Graham look very much alike, tall and blond and tan. This one-way mirror effect, along with the ironic film choice, introduces the impossibility of a father-son connection as well as the apparent (though, as we saw in “At the Still Point,” not actual) blankness and interchangeability of the characters. Later, on
the limo ride to the airport, Tim will deny having been in the area when Les saw him, rendering the scene even more questionable. Tim’s forced pleasantness grates on his father, who tries too hard to please him by playing rock music on the radio and offering him a drink so early in the morning. He notices that Tim only pretends to drink the vodka, an act, a pose. This tension, between Les’s expectations of a father son trip to Hawaii – Don Ho singing “Tiny Bubbles,” picking up women at a beachside bar – and the reality of Tim’s total estrangement from him pervades the story. Tim is impermeable, obscure. Les observes him on the way to the hotel, “his blank eyes staring sadly out the tinted windows, looking over the sweeps of green land, the GQ still clutched in his hands, and I ask myself if this is the right thing to do. Tim glances over at me and I avert my gaze and an imagined sense of imposed peace washes calmly over the two of us, answering my question” (Informers 49).

Much of the tension between father and son stems from sexual politics. On one hand, Les seems to fear that his son is homosexual. He sees something “lascivious” in the way Tim whispers with Graham outside the theater; later, at the Mauna Kea, Les keeps an eye on a small group of homosexual men, “the fags” he calls them, one of whom is an TV actor. He is convinced that they are flirting with Tim at every turn and launches an aggressive counter-effort to find Tim a female companion. “Don’t you go out with girls? What is this?” he hisses when Tim refuses to cooperate with Les’s scheme to pick up women at the bar. Yet when Tim does meet a girl his age on the beach and invites her to dinner with his father, Les manages to upstage his son, just as he mercilessly beats a disinterested Tim at tennis. Les refers to Tim as “blank” repeatedly throughout the story, and when he successfully steals the girl’s attention, he notes that “Tim is so deflated it doesn’t even seem
like he exists” (60). The correlation between Tim’s “blankness” – his distance from his father – and Les’s behavior seems to completely escape him. Though the story ends with the two sitting on the beach together, their estrangement, and its damage to Tim, has been proven irreversible.

Taken together, these two stories provide a significant back-story for Tim Price, Patrick Bateman’s doppelganger from American Psycho. We see him from both inside and outside as a young man of nineteen, before he has hardened into the loudmouthed, bigoted young investment banker who sounds remarkably like his father. We can, in fact, quite easily blame Les Price for the wasting of a potentially empathetic human being, and more generally the system which supports extreme materialism and the disintegration of interpersonal bonds. Tim’s story, then, underscores that of Patrick Bateman, which is only hinted at in American Psycho but seems strikingly similar. Not only can Patrick be seen as an inevitable product of a problematic social system, but he can be seen as just the most extreme in a series of American psychos, from Tim and his friends to the narrators of Less Than Zero and The Rules of Attraction. The murderous impulse stems from consumerism, an emotional vacuum, and a losing battle to establish a masculine identity – and so it could seize almost anyone in Ellis’s world.

No wonder, then, that as The Informers draws to a close, the lust and cruelty which pulsate through all the stories reach a fever pitch in the form of vampires who roam Los Angeles searching for fresh blood, mostly from the bodies of young sexual conquests. In “The Secrets of Summer,” a vampire named Jamie who may well be Tim’s supposedly dead friend trolls nightclubs for naïve young girls, his attitude very similar to that of Patrick
Bateman. Every girl is judged according to her youth and beauty in denigrating language, interspersed with racist comments: “I’m trying to pick up this ok-looking blond Valley bitch at Powertools…I’m getting totally psyched to get this bitch back to my place in Encino and I even get a medium hard-on waiting for her…I think I banged the DJ about a million years ago but I’m not too sure and she’s playing some god-awful nigger rap song and I’m getting hungry” (Informers 175-6). When he gets this first victim to his house, he tells her that he likes having sex with stupid women, and reminds her to put in her diaphragm by saying, “You don’t want to get pregnant, do you? End up giving birth to something awful. A monster? Some kind of beast? You want that?...Jesus, even your abortionist would freak out” (176). Even before he changes, sex is monstrous with Jamie. Like Patrick Bateman, Jamie feels very little during sex; it is only when he reverts to his true nature, baring a hideous maw full of jagged teeth and “bleeding” the girl by his pool, that he finds satisfaction.

As violent as Jamie’s exploits are, there is a certain light-heartedness to Ellis’s depiction of L.A. vampirism. Jamie and his cultured friend Miranda eat rare steaks and drink red wine spritzers at a chic restaurant; Jamie sleeps in a sleek coffin outfitted with cable TV and designers sheets; a friend of theirs is staked to death in his swimming pool with a sharpened baseball bat seasoned with Lawry’s garlic powder. When Jamie tries to bleed a young woman who has shot heroin, he vomits great geysers of her blood, incapacitated; she shows no fear even when he changes into his monstrous form, and after she leaves he finds a note with her phone number that reads, “Had a wild time.” While amusing, this incident also exhibits, in exaggerated form, many of the misogynist elements present in American
Psycho. The woman’s tainted blood spawns a real red flood, and her lack of fear, her laughing mouth, deeply bother Jamie, who is used to controlling and terrifying his victims.

The vampires themselves find humor primarily in jokes about starving Ethiopians, such as “What do you call an Ethiopian with sesame seeds on his head?...A Quarter Pounder.” Such jokes recall Patrick Bateman and friends’ constant taunting of the (mostly African-American) homeless they pass on the streets of Manhattan. Jamie and Miranda mention Donald Trump, Bateman’s great role model, and hint that he may be a vampire, too. The parallel drawn between vampirism and capitalism in this exchange is difficult to miss. The vampires are key to Ellis’s interweaving of sex, violence, and materialism. They are sexual predators as well as snobs – racist, misogynist, elitist. Their languid navigation through exploitative L.A. society flows seamlessly with the metaphorical exploiting of people for blood and sex.

Later, Jamie also visits a therapist, Dr. Nova, whom he threatens wildly when Dr. Nova hesitates to refill a prescription for him. But Dr. Nova is unimpressed by Jamie’s bizarre warnings:

“I’ll be waiting,” I tell him. “I’ll be waiting in your bedroom one night. Or under the table of your favorite restaurant, mutilating your wittle foot.”
“Is…this a threat?” Dr. Nova asks.
“Or when you take your daughter to McDonald’s,” I say, “I’ll be dressed as Ronald McDonald or the Grimace and I’ll eat her in the parking lot while you watch and quickly get fucked up.”
“We’ve talked about this before, Jamie.” (Informers 193)

When Dr. Nova asks Jamie why he should fear him, Jamie answers, “Because I’m a tan burly motherfucker and my teeth are so sharp they make a straight razor seem like a butter knife” (194). If we take the teeth metaphorically, this is the fearsome thing about all of the young
men who populate Ellis’s fiction, and The Informers in particular. Just as there is very little we might use to distinguish Tim from Graham, might there also be less difference than we might think between Tim and Jamie? Dr. Nova finally does become upset – cries, in fact – when Jamie asks him to define the vanishing point. “You define it,” he says, and Jamie responds, “We’ve already been there…we’ve already seen it.” “Who’s…we?” Dr. Nova asks, and Jamie replies, “Legion” (195). This demonic legion could be the vampires, but in the context of the book as a whole, we are encouraged to view Jamie as one of a legion of young, blank Adonises, hiding their insecurities and their violent potential behind Wayfarer sunglasses, a masculine embodiment of both the victims and the perpetrators of the feminine flood of late capitalism.
Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, I examine the ways in which the work of Bret Easton Ellis, Christian Kracht, and Benjamin Lebert produce misogyny in the process of expressing a social critique. First, I discuss the concept of inner emptiness – “innere Leere” – as an exonerative strategy in Ellis’s and Kracht’s debut novels, Less Than Zero and Faserland, respectively. The rhetoric of inner emptiness, used by the narrator, the author, and the critic, allows the text to remain ambivalent and vague in its critical message and shields it from critical scrutiny. Looking past the “emptiness,” I examine Kracht’s Faserland and Lebert’s Crazy and find parallels between the male narrators’ descriptions of women and homosexual men and those of Klaus Theweleit’s “soldier male,” whose misogynistic perspective sees femininity as the chaotic force which can destroy rigid masculine identities. I argue that in both novels, this attitude toward the feminine is embedded in the heart of the critique, the struggle for identity formation against the destructive force of contemporary culture. This construction appears again in Ellis’s American Psycho in more extreme terms, and the novel’s exploration of sexual violence as product of, and possibly even protest against, an unbearable cultural state of superficiality and excess, further exposes the troublesome gendering of cultural critique in the Pop novel. In the final chapter, I analyze later works of all three authors, including Kracht’s 1979, Lebert’s Der Vogel ist ein Rabe, and Ellis’s The Informers, and find that, though each author appears to be moving in a different direction, their later work continues to use the feminine as a metaphor for an antagonistic socio-cultural atmosphere.
In conclusion, I would like to offer a brief analysis of Mary Harron’s 2000 film version of *American Psycho*. For the past ten years, it has become impossible to discuss *American Psycho* without reference, whether explicit or implicit, to Harron’s film of the same name. It is largely this film which has kept Patrick Bateman in the popular consciousness for so long; a generation of college students who were not yet born at the novel’s publication recognize the chilling, impassive expression of Christian Bale as the American Psycho. In this way, Harron’s film is a final form of extrapolation from Ellis’s original text. Harron develops and in some ways alters the paradigm of violent masculinity and critical misogyny set forth in Ellis’s novel; her interpretation is, I think, representative of the present trajectory in popular gendered conceptions of cultural critique.

Like the novel before it, *American Psycho* the film caused controversy from the very beginning. Rumors circulated that Oliver Stone would direct and Leonardo DiCaprio would star, and then that Bret Easton Ellis had clashed with the two over the conception of the film. Even after Mary Harron, an independent filmmaker known for her film about would-be Andy Warhol assassin Valerie Solanas (*I Shot Andy Warhol*, 1996), signed on as director and cast Christian Bale\(^1\) in the lead role, there were whispers of discontent between director and author, who agreed to consult during the writing of the screenplay. Yet the end result is a film that, if anything, distills Ellis’s novel into a clearer critique of 1980s American consumer culture, and has certainly brought it to a wider audience. In a 2000 interview with

\(^1\) Oddly enough, Bale’s stepmother was Gloria Steinem, one of the feminist leaders who protested the novel and subsequently spoke out against the film’s production.
Charlie Rose (that also included Harron and Bale), Ellis says, “I think it clarified the themes of the novel” by foregrounding its critical and humorous elements and downplaying the violence, which Ellis fears may have foreshadowed the novel’s message and allowed a “misreading” to overtake public perceptions of his work.

The film visualizes many of the symbols conjured by the novel, strengthening and reinforcing them. Most notably the motif of mirrors and reflections makes frequent appearances. Repeatedly Bateman glimpses his reflection in dark and distorted surfaces: the steel refrigerator door, his office window at night. Early on in the film, Bale as Bateman narrates his morning routine in voiceover as we watch him work out and then shower, the camera lingering on his impeccable physique against the backdrop of his pristine bathroom. As he leans in to the mirror and peels off his daily face mask, Bale’s voice recites the infamous line from much later in the novel: “There is an idea of Patrick Bateman…I simply am not there.” Bale’s eyes are utterly blank as he stares past the fleshly mask of his own perfectly groomed face. Instead of reaching this conclusion near the end of the narrative, this Bateman is born with the knowledge of his own non-existence, and we as viewers are urged to accept Bateman’s (non)view of himself. After Bateman has killed Paul Allen (Paul Owen in the novel) with an axe, he removes the raincoat used to protect his designer suit and we see that half his face is splattered with blood. He turns first this side of his face to the camera and then, as he sits down to light a cigar, the clean cheek, his hand rising to smooth back his hair in a delicate gesture. Bateman is a Janus figure, half animal and half civilization, the halves hinged together by their common cruelty.
This symbolic game with mirror images at first seems synonymous with Bateman’s thoughts in the novel regarding his own reflection – certainly Bale’s cold gaze faithfully depicts the blankness described by Ellis’s narrator. And yet this rendering is ultimately undermined by the most obvious of differences between the two media: in the film version, we see Patrick Bateman, not to mention everyone else in the story. Bateman can no longer be anyone because he has been given an actual face; he *is* there for us, and his crimes are real to us, even if they aren’t “real” in the world of the film. His victims and friends are equally real and individual, from his fiancée Evelyn to “Christie,” one of his prostitute victims. Christie serves as a prime example of film’s inherent inclusiveness of other viewpoints. Barring amateur-style filmmaking in the tradition of *The Blair Witch Project*, it is difficult to produce a film that reveals one character’s experience only. It is impossible not to feel for Christie as the camera watches her for several moments before Bateman’s limo pulls into the shot. Later, when Christie realizes Bateman’s intentions and makes a desperate attempt to escape Paul Allen’s apartment, the sequence adopts the conventions of a horror movie, conveying the victim’s panic and shock as she flails through the hallways, opening doors onto gruesome surprises, making one last pitiful attempt to escape her inevitable fate. Pursuing her with a chainsaw as she runs down flights of twisting, Hitchcockian stairs, Bateman becomes the monstrous antagonist, barking out his satisfaction like an animal when the chainsaw he has just dropped hits its target.

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey details the typical, phallocentric construction of the classic Hollywood film. The woman, whose “lack” as an essentially castrated figure produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, is an element of
spectacle, simultaneously looked at and displayed. Unable to make meaning (as a phallic symbol could), she can only bear it, provoking or representing something to the male hero and/or the audience. She becomes an alien presence, an erotic object for both hero and spectator. In this way, the story is told upon her body, as she serves as a medium, representing and reflecting the messages and emotions of the film without taking an active part in the making of meaning.

As in the novel, the women in Harron’s *American Psycho* are caught in this same construction. In fact, their very objectification is necessary to the expression of the film’s meaning, even as it critiques society’s objectifying power. Evelyn, Courtney, Jean, and Christie are all very similar to each other physically: blonde hair, large eyes, petite frames. Just as they are interchangeable to Bateman, the inattentive viewer could easily get them confused, and indeed this would have no effect on his or her understanding of the film. Young, needy, vacuous women, they represent both the lobotomizing effect of contemporary culture and the naiveté of its average victim. What actually happens to these women in the film is beside the point. Mulvey might argue that the male unconscious’s preoccupation with woman’s original trauma – her “lack” – urges both Bateman and the (male) viewer to first investigate this mysterious difference, then punish her for it. Certainly, Christie and her fellow victims bear the ultimate punishment of literal dismemberment and exposure of the body’s internal secrets, as described in Theweleit and in Chapter Three.

Conversely, Mulvey sees the male role in film as that of the looker, who actively takes other people as objects and subjects them to a controlling and curious gaze. In this case, Bateman must be the one who gazes for us, figuratively as well as literally penetrating
and controlling the bodies of those around him. To Mulvey, this makes Bateman the figure we as viewers identify with, for it is through him that we too are allowed to look. He is our other self in the mirror, whom we recognize and misrecognize all at once in the Lacanian sense, provoking both pleasure and pain.

But of course, *American Psycho* is no classic Hollywood film, and Bateman’s role in our experience of the film is more complicated than that. Harron takes great pains to emphasize Bateman’s own objectification. The camera lingers on his body as he silently goes about his morning routine, exercising and then showering in a minimalist setting designed to highlight the near-perfection of Bateman’s physical form. As the film progresses, Bateman loses ever more control over the narrative, surrendering his role as protagonist to the whims of the film itself. He is chased through the city in a scene parallel to the novel’s “Chase, Manhattan,” and the look on Bateman’s face is pure bewilderment: his own story has gotten away from him, and he never expected to be here. When he delivers the climactic confession, it is a desperate attempt to regain control, to return to the linear story line. But as in the novel, this resolution is stolen from him, and Bateman finds no release in the acknowledgment of his crimes. By the end of the film, Bateman has been revealed as the one great bearer of meaning, the object set before us to symbolize the horrific dark side of contemporary culture.

Thus, we are torn between identifying with Bateman and objectifying him. When we stare at his face in the mirror, are we seeing ourselves, or the “idea” of Bateman, Bateman-as-symbol? If we may see both – if we can identify with Bateman and simultaneously abstract him into the embodiment of societal evil – then the critical impact of the film is
dramatically lessened. We identify with Bateman when it is comfortable, and distance ourselves from him when it is not. Curiously, the actual moment of looking into the mirror and seeing Bateman produces distance rather than identification, for what we see is a troubling blankness as we are told that Bateman is not there. Yet near the end of the film, as Bateman aims a nail gun at the back of an oblivious Jean’s head as she chats nervously, we are led to feel his consternation. Jean’s innocence and genuine feeling for Bateman prevent him from pulling the trigger, and in a moment of conscience that does not exist in the novel, Bateman lowers the gun and then forces Jean to leave, stammering that if she stays he may do something he will regret. Both Jean and the viewer notice Bateman’s vulnerability in this moment, providing an opportunity for identification.

Does this ambivalence toward Bateman change the nature of the gendered symbolic structures that have carried over from the novel? Essentially, no – femininity is just as threatening, and masculinity just as rigid, in the film as in the novel. Yet the film’s uncertainty as to Bateman’s role tends to make these structures less obvious and more palatable. There is, necessarily, far less blood and gore in the film, which makes it possible to ignore the full extent of Bateman’s violence. We are spared filmic versions of Bateman’s most horrific acts: cannibalism, animal cruelty, playing with his victims. Both novel and film require an identification with Bateman, implicating the reader/viewer in the violence; but whereas in the novel the reader finds him- or herself identifying with a void, a non-entity, in the film version this duality allows the viewer to escape identification in the moments when it proves too painful: the mirror scene, the chainsaw attack on Christie, etc. Thus, the
satirical message, though intact and in many ways distilled in visual form, is blunted by the objectification of Bateman.

In the preceding chapters, I acknowledge the potential success of each novel’s critical agenda while considering at what cost this success comes. Now I would like to conclude by questioning whether we can call a novel’s critical project successful if it exhibits the misogynist patterns explained above. What are the critical implications of metaphorically placing blame on a vilified femininity? The antagonistic forces at work in each novel are couched in symbolic structures that pit victimized masculine protagonists against a feminine threat, whether that threat is explicitly female, such as Der Vogel ist ein Rabe’s rejecting young women, or else a force described in feminine terms, like the materialistic vacuity Patrick Bateman deals with by murdering women in American Psycho. This construction allows for all involved – narrator, author, and most importantly, the reader – to remove blame to a vaguely defined “Other,” the socio-cultural evil that threatens a helpless and hopeless protagonist. This scapegoating of the external, feminine “Other” relieves the narrator – and by extension, the reader – of any obligation to introspection. The threat is external, and of course the internal space of the narrator is empty; thus, there is no need to examine the potential responsibility that lies within the narrator. If the narrator is a victim, a product of his particular time and place, then he bears no burden of blame, shame, or guilt for the destruction he himself unleashes on the world. And if the reader identifies with the narrator, then the reader, too, need not examine his or her own role in cultural production, in the employment of destructive cultural trends. This phenomenon necessarily blunts the force of cultural critique in all three authors’ work.
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Biography

Molly Knight was born in Spartanburg, South Carolina on August 17th, 1983. She attended Clemson University, where she received a Bachelor of Arts in English with a minor in German summa cum laude in August of 2005. She has published two articles: “Smoking Guns: Gender, Terror, and the Germany Story in Volker Schlöndorff’s Die Stille nach dem Schuss” in Germanic Notes and Reviews 40.1 (Spring 2009), and “Blank Check: Die ‘innere Leere’ in Christian Krachts Faserland” in Andererseits: Yearbook of Transatlantic German Studies (2010). While at Duke, she received the T. Anne Hill Summer Research Fellowship (2009), a tuition and stipend grant to attend the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell University (2008), and a year-long research fellowship at the Free University in Berlin (2007-8).