

Illusions From High To Late Capitalism

by

Colin Quinn O'Connor  
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### **Abstract**

This piece is a historically-situated comparative literary analysis through the lens of critical theory. In it, I analyze two novels, *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen (2001) and *Faserland* by Christian Kracht (1995), primarily as social artifacts, texts that are indicative of our current historical moment and the various social, cultural, and political undercurrents that inhabit it.

## Introduction

This piece is a historically-situated comparative literary analysis through the lens of critical theory. In it, I analyze two novels, *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen (2001) and *Faserland* by Christian Kracht (1995), primarily as social artifacts, texts that are indicative of our current historical moment and the various social, cultural, and political undercurrents that inhabit it. More specifically, my analysis works with the historical progression from high to late-capitalism and the shifting structure of social realities and experience that come about as a result. In these texts, this shifting historical current is reflected in the inner psyches of the characters. I will analyze three of the principal figures in the two novels: Alfred (from *The Corrections*), the proud, disciplined patriarch of the high-capitalist Midwest, who slowly loses control as capitalist forces rise and supplant his sovereignty; Enid, Alfred's wife, who as an avid investor and consumer eagerly encourages capitalist development at the expense of her oppressive husband; and finally, the narrator of *Faserland*, a wildly impulsive youth in whom we can see a convergence of the illusions Alfred and Enid represent, which results in a frightening, unstable character. In each of these cases I begin with an analysis of the character's individual situation and attempt to tease out two things. One, how each individual character is indicative of a wider cultural disposition in their politico-historic moment, and, two, how, this disposition fits into the social, cultural, and political mechanisms of that time period.

The idea to do such an analysis originally came to me on the heels of reading Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, which in its most basic sense argues for "the priority of the political interpretation of

literary texts” (17). Jameson does an in depth analysis of the ideology of literary form in which he situates concurrent literary and philosophical texts in their politico-historic context and exposes their matching formal features as implicit, unconscious commentaries on their historical moment. Here I will pursue a much more modest task, but my analysis rests on the same basic presumption that Jameson makes: that literary and theoretical works are always confined by, derived from, and expressive of their historical moment. More precisely, my goal is to employ a collection of historically congruent texts, theoretical and literary, and see how they can be read across one another in order to achieve a sort of diagnosis of our current moment.

Consequently I have read *The Corrections* and *Faserland* in conjunction with a host of theoretical texts which, when historically arranged in the context of the Franzen and Kracht’s respective novels, serve as a conceptual axis around which my paper revolves. These theoretical texts, that is, serve as a type of intellectual history in their own right and, with respect to *The Corrections* and *Faserland*, as powerful tools for textual explication. This theoretical spine so to speak consists of Arthur Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*, Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* and *The Future of an Illusion*, and Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*. Theodor W. Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realis*, serve as useful compliments which help fill out and tie down Debord’s hyper abstract polemic as well as offering a few helpful theoretical nuggets of their own.

The progression of Schopenhauer, Freud, and Debord forms a body of work that serves to track the shifting dynamics of social illusion. Schopenhauer’s basic idea

that nature is chaotic and unknowable and that, furthermore, any complete, comprehensive, objective “understanding” of it must come in the form of a necessarily limited representation that overlays this chaotic, unknowable truth serves as a forerunner and conceptual spring board for Freud’s religious illusion and Debord’s spectacular one. Ideologies, whatever their specific structures or intentions, attempt to superimpose a distinctly graspable, understandable layer of objective “reality” over a forever mysterious nature. *The Corrections* and *Faserland* depict the historical, social shifts and interactions of these layers of representation. The historical progression within my analysis starts with the patriarchal representation of reality in the form of the culturally homogenous super-ego of the 1950s Midwest; it then progresses to the religious illusion in which the impotent narrator of *Faserland* longs for a patriarchal order no longer present; and it finally finishes in the form of the spectacular illusion in which Enid and the narrator of *Faserland* are absorbed, albeit with two distinct roles within this illusion.

This general progression conveys the format of my chapters as well. In my first chapter I focus on the character of Alfred, who I take to be an ideologeme of the Midwestern patriarchal culture of the 1950s. From the height of Alfred’s career as head of the Engineering Department at Midpac Railroads to his symbolic death aboard the commercialized hell that is the Nordic Pleasure Lines Cruise, I track the nature of Alfred’s demise. This demise is a result of two things: Alfred’s decreasing ability to physically impose his “reality” on others as he ages and his dwindling financial significance with the rise of more developed capitalist forces. By the time the chapter reaches Franzen’s literary present Alfred is a mere body, representing

only a residual historical current that, despite still shaping the psyche of the present, is very much on its last legs. In this section I use three theoretical texts to help my analysis: Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* and *The Future of an Illusion* and Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. Freud's texts serve to explicate the psychoanalytical model by which Alfred's tradition of patriarchal restraint originally came to be, and, in his earlier years of strength, perpetuated itself. Schopenhauer meanwhile provides a handy theoretical tool to counterbalance the hard stereotype of Alfred as a pure patriarch. More specifically, Schopenhauer is useful in identifying the ideological layer of representation that is the Midwest's moral code and in understanding its decline.

If chapter one chronicles the dissolution of patriarchal order, chapter two explores the consequences of this collapse. Here, I focus on the protagonist of Kracht's novel, who is also the narrator of the story. This character, in contrast to Alfred, has been raised in a family and culture seemingly bereft of patriarchal discipline. Consequently, the narrator is an impulsive wreck, a prime example of the anti-social, anti-societal force that the Freudian father sought, in the name of civilization, to keep at bay. Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* elucidates the consequence of such a chaotic state of existence, namely in identifying the narrator's wish for a father as symptomatic of a "post-modern nostalgia mode." Freud's *Future of an Illusion* serves as a helpful psychoanalytic guide to this wish. Unlike the time in which Freud wrote his book, however, the narrator lives in a period in which this particular illusion is especially hard to maintain. In need of a sense of order and attention that he does not have, the narrator commits a series of crimes in order to

provoke the fatherly figure he wishes was watching over him to discipline him. In the end, however, the reader comes to see that the apparently absent fatherly restriction still exists, it has just become subordinated to another authority: wealth. The market has installed itself above the old, weakened strictures of patriarchal organization.

In chapter three, I examine the social reality that this new order of the market imposes on its subjects. With the helpful support of Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* takes center stage. Enid, the faithful consumer, undergoes the disillusionment, isolation, and shame all induced by, as Debord puts it, "the material reconstruction of the religious illusion," or what he calls Spectacle. Enid's experience takes place aboard the Nodric Pleasurelines Fall Cruise, a super commodity stuffed with an array of mini-commodities to the point of existential suffocation. The cruise ship and the people aboard it also serve as an exaggerated example of the wider cultural phenomenon of spectacular time and the shift in "reality" that it creates. Catalyzed by the atomizing and mentally distressing effects of the Spectacle, Enid commits a spiritual suicide by taking the drug Aslan. As capitalist ideological control packed into a pill, Aslan, induces the closest thing to a lived death there is. It actualizes the social death the Spectacle strives to create.

Chapter four concludes with a return to *Faserland* for a consideration of its representation of a central feature of Debord's Spectacle: the emptying out of reality and the domination of appearance. In Kracht's world, even capitalist acquisition has yielded its importance and value to appearance, and any form of understanding is reduced to surface. The narrator's obsession with women, his view of people in general and even his perceptions of himself are acts of commoditization based on

appearance. The self-destructive indulgence of the over class which the narrator is part of, a fevered flight from surface to surface, is both the apotheosis of the spectacular illusion and means of maintaining social dominance.

## **Chapter 1: Down with the Patriarchy**

### **Cracks in the Pavement, Demise Foreshadowed, Freud and Schopenhauer**

In *The Corrections* the story revolves around the Lambert family: Alfred, the father, Enid the mother, and their three children, Gary, Chip and Denise. As the novel progresses, the narrative cuts back and forth between what each character is doing in the present and formative past events. The flashbacks fill out each individual character's narrative and through their juxtaposition seek to explain how the web of relationships between the now grown-up children and their elderly parents came to be.

The family began in the fictional Midwest town of St. Jude, Kansas in the 1960s, a historical point in the middle of a general decline of the geographic and cultural "North" of the United States. This region, while vast and variegated, stretching from New England to the Great Plains, was defined by agricultural productivity and even more by the industrial development that began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The development of transportation along east-west lines—the Erie Canal opened up the Great Lakes in 1825, and New York City was connected to Chicago by rail in 1852—bound disparate sections together through immigration and trade. Regional unity was more fully defined during the American Civil War in opposition to the slave-owning states of the South. The North's ample natural resources, excellent inland-waterway system, and the proliferation of railways made it the economic hub of the country. Its development continued apace through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, fueled by the virile energies, Protestant heritage and manifest-destiny mentality that had propelled the country from its beginnings. But the region's

fortunes began to shift in the latter half of the century. Industrialization had affected the environment, causing water and air pollution, and foreign competition was eroding its manufacturing base. In addition, the North faced a worsening racial problem. While the South had been the focus of the most visible abuse of African Americans, desperate conditions in inner-city black ghettos in the North spawned race riots in city after city in the 1960s. These problems combined to spur a significant migration of people to southern and western states. In 1939, the North had 70 percent of the country's manufacturing. By the late 1970s, this figure had fallen to barely more than half. The North accounted for 58 percent of the country's total population in 1940, but only 40 percent at the end of the century. The muscular, enterprising spirit that had driven development in the North was still alive in the cities and smaller communities of the Midwest, such as St. Jude, but the tides of economic change and cultural transformation were in motion.

It is in the context of this historical development and identity of the North, one of industrial might and grueling, male-powered labor that the Lamberts, particularly the patriarch Alfred, stand. This is an ideology that is squarely located in the temporal-geographical community of the mid-century Midwest, an ideology that derives its validity from the traditional patriarchal set of values that structure the social relations in which it exists. Franzen highlights the geographical locus of this ethical system through Alfred's increasing distaste as he travels further east on the Erie Belt Railroad on a business trip. As he moves closer to the Atlantic coast, he witnesses what he calls an "eastern blight" of "an effeminate generation for whom

‘easygoing’ was a compliment.” “On the high prairie where he’d grown up,” Alfred asserts, “a person who took it easy wasn’t much of a man” (Franzen 243).

The intensity of Alfred’s work ethic and his moral rectitude are rooted in the hardscrabble farming conditions in which he grew up, circumstances in which “any soil that might have nurtured hope in Alfred had blown away in one or another west Kansas drought” (246). Unrelenting work was a given. It was the ground in which his character was planted, and its harvest was his unsparing ethics.

Freud mentions this process of developing morality in *Civilization and Its*

*Discontents*:

“As long as things go well with a man, his conscience is lenient and lets the ego do all sorts of things; but when misfortune befalls him, he searches his soul, acknowledges his sinfulness, heightens the demands of his conscience, imposes abstinences on himself and punishes himself with penances” (87).

The strength of one’s conscience varies in proportion to the difficulty of one’s life. Alfred’s strictness, his domineering righteousness is the expression of a superego writ large. The process by which such righteousness comes into being is a complex series of psychic transactions. It begins with an act of what Freud views as a natural outward aggression, an action performed on a basic individual impulse or want. He sees this outward impulse, which originates from the ego, being

“introjected, internalized...sent back to where it came from – that is, it is directed towards [the] ego. There it is taken over by a portion of the ego, which sets itself over against the rest... as super-ego, and which now, in the form of ‘conscience,’ is ready to put into action against the ego the same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would have liked to satisfy upon other, extraneous individuals” (84).

The suppression of our innate aggressive impulses by the environment is redirected at ourselves. Freud is only talking here about a subject in relation to other humans, not to the natural environment, but the concept is still the same: outward impulsivity that results in punishment causes the individual to internalize the regulating role of the punisher. Harsh parental control or harsh prairie existence become harsh self-control. Conscience, the regulator and judge of moral action, is not something that is naturally occurring, but rather something created when individual impulses are restricted by the social entity in which they exist.

Alfred's conscience is as strenuously developed as a New England Puritan, and the Midwestern tradition of hard work with which it is bound up is a type of social contract on which the region operates. There is a certain reciprocity to the system—those who abide by it are properly rewarded, which in turn validates the credo--and it manifests itself on both the individual and communal level. Alfred received and maintains his position as head of Midpac's Engineering Department as a result of his disciplined, dutiful character; the same adherence to discipline and duty has made Midpac successful enough that it is about to take over the eastern Erie Belt, which is the occasion for Alfred's trip.

Freud states that "Civilization is built upon a renunciation of instinct" (52). This is exemplified by the Midwest of the 1960s. The renunciation is a conscious tradeoff—the individual surrenders the right to certain pursuits in exchange for societal protection from nature and the aggression of other creatures. Alfred restricts his impulses (sexual and aggressive) and in return society treats him relatively well: he is regarded with respect as a white male and has a good paying job at Midpac, a

position which allows him to support his family. The tradeoff of individual impulsivity for protection makes sense.

Alfred attempts to indoctrinate his sons in the same moral tradition that has allowed him to thrive. As a father, Alfred ‘corrects’ out of his sons “the nature to throw their arms around him,” teaching them instead to stand and wait “like company subordinates for the boss to speak.” A “shouter and a punisher”, as his younger son Chip describes him, Alfred uses physical force to put his children in their place, spanking them when they fail to obey (Franzen 253). At the same time, despite working long hours, Alfred finds the time to read aloud to his children, to do yard work and home maintenance and to process a nightly briefcase of executive paper (34). His punitive discipline is counterbalanced by a sense of responsibility to care for those underneath him. There is a necessity, a logic that ties together Alfred and Midpac’s exacting demands with their roles as providers for and caretakers of their respective families.

In maintaining such uncompromising standards, Alfred delineates ethical lines of perfect clarity along which he can judge. What falls inside the boundaries is unquestionably right. Whatever—or whoever—is outside the borders is corrupt and worthless. For Alfred, this outer moral space is occupied by African Americans who he predicts will:

“...be the ruination of this country, ‘the blacks’ were incapable of coexisting with whites, they expected the government to take care of them, they didn’t know the meaning of hard work, what they lacked above all was *discipline*, it was going to end with slaughter in the streets, *with slaughter in the streets*” (22).

This apocalyptic racism is embedded in Alfred's ideology, and those who would challenge it are dismissed as ignorant. When a grown-up Chip brings his hyper-liberal girlfriend Ruthie to visit Alfred and Enid, Alfred is untroubled by her prodding him about his racial attitudes. "He didn't give a damn what Ruthie thought of him, she was a visitor in his house and his country, and she had no right to criticize things she didn't understand" (22).

Yet even in Alfred's adamant defense of his principles, Franzen indicates that his moral sensibilities are not always as crude and ossified as they first seem. Despite imposing a stern ethical framework on his family, himself, and the people around him, Alfred recognizes, at least at some moments, the faults of its structure. We see this on one occasion when Alfred attempts to combat an invasion of his yard by squirrels, an intrusion that Franzen explicitly relates to Alfred's racial prejudices.

"One Sunday morning, after he'd stood at a window counting squirrels and assessing the damage to his oak tress and zoysia the way white men in marginal neighborhoods took stock of how many houses had been lost to 'the blacks,' Alfred had performed an experiment in genocide, bringing up a rat trap and setting it up in the backyard. Later that day, a young male squirrel, engaging in the high-risk behavior of the economically desperate, helped itself to the bread and had its skull crushed... Alfred's own mouth and chin were sewn up in the distaste that special exertion of discipline—the spanking of a child, the eating of rutabaga—always caused him. (He was quite unconscious of this distaste that he betrayed for discipline)" (129).

Alfred subconsciously knows and dislikes the dark underbelly of the ethical order he supports—the physical abuse and subjugation required to maintain control. After hoisting the squirrel into the trash, he retires to the basement "his legs buckl[ing] a little," never to repeat the same action again (129). He seems to decide, if only

somewhat consciously, that the oppression needed to uphold at least certain aspects of traditional order is not worth the moral tradeoff.

Alfred experiences an even greater disturbance to his faith in his code one evening after a rebellion at the dinner table by his son Chip, who refused to eat the liver that Enid served him. Alfred had found the liver repulsive himself, but he ate it out of duty, and he forbade Chip to leave the table until he had done the same. Two hours later, Alfred finds Chip passed out at the table, his plate undisturbed. Staring at his young son, he is unexpectedly struck by remorse, and it triggers a memory of his younger self. “the scene was so wrong...that for a moment Alfred honestly thought the boy at the table was a ghost from his own childhood” (271). The image of the scene lingers in his mind as Alfred flings his passed out son over his shoulder and takes him up to bed. After tucking Chip in and leaving the room, Alfred, tired, kneels on the ground for a short rest. Still mentally shook, Alfred comes to an anxious epiphany.

“Maybe a floor became truly a floor only in his mental reconstruction of it. The floor’s nature was to some extent inarguable, of course; the wood definitely existed and had measurable properties. But there was a *second* floor, the floor as mirrored in his head, and he worried that the beleaguered “reality” that he championed was not the reality of an actual floor in an actual bedroom but the reality of a floor in his head which was idealized and no more worthy, therefore, than one of Enid’s silly fantasies.... If the world refused to square with his version of reality then... he was doomed to be violently lonely in it” (272).

The basic concept in Alfred’s light bulb moment—that his perceived reality is separate from, although corresponding to, another inaccessible reality—belongs to the

philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, whose pessimistic (and misogynist) theories Alfred has, surprisingly, been reading.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Brief Digression into Schopenhauer**

In his magnum opus *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer says:

“What is knowledge? It is primarily and essentially idea. What is idea? A very complicated physiological process in the brain of an animal, the result of which is the consciousness of a picture there. Clearly the relation between such a picture and something entirely different from the animal in whose brain it exists can only be a very indirect one. This is perhaps the simplest and most comprehensible way of disclosing the deep gulf between the ideal and the real. This belongs to the things of which, like the motion of the earth, we are not directly conscious; therefore the ancients did not observe it, just as they did not observe the motion of the earth” (Vol. II 400).

In other words, knowledge consists of an abstracted combination of perceptions.

These perceptions roughly correlate to an outer object, the nature of which we partially grasp through our faculties of observation. But what we actually perceive and take to be reality is only a mental representation, a representation that, due to the limits of human perception, is necessarily partial. The consequence is that

“we can never arrive at the real nature of things from without. However much we investigate, we can never reach anything but images and names. We are like a man who goes round a castle seeking in vain for an entrance, and sometimes sketching the façades. And yet this is the method that has been followed by all philosophers before me (*The World as Will and Idea*, Vol. I 129).

Any “knowledge” that is constructed in accordance with these perceived representations, the graspable formulations of our mental faculty, is trapped within the castle of our perceptions, unable to see outside of it. The complete nature of things in their complete objectivity can never be known. Any “reality” that claims objective authority, for example Alfred’s strict moral code, is only an idealized

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of this can be found on pages 264, 256, 260, 274 of Franzen’s novel.

mental construction. There exists no conceptual ground on which Alfred can definitively make the assertion that he is right and Enid is wrong. His “beleaguered ‘reality’” is no more legitimate than “Enid’s silly fantasies.”

Where Alfred is incorrect, however, is in his assertion that he is violently lonely. Yes, it is true that Schopenhauer’s notion of subjective perceptivity does imply a certain amount of loneliness—everyone perceives and constructs their reality in a subjective way specific to their own experiences, a subjective feeling that another person could never quite grasp—but it does not create an insurmountable division between individuals. Midpac and the Midwest are proof of this. Alfred’s ethics are also those of the company and the larger community. They are ideals that have been collectively formed based on a common condition and represent a code of action specific to that geographical and historical condition. Just because reality is filtered through individual subjective lenses, it does not mean that perception is entirely confined to the individual. Rather, it is an inter-subjective phenomenon that is subject to change and alteration based on the agreements and disagreements of the subject contained within it. Of course, if there is no opportunity for sharing perspectives, then a groundless, feeble isolation is the result of Schopenhauer’s theory. In this sense, Alfred’s realization is less an indictment of his current situation and more of a premonition of what is to come: the dissolution of the moral system through which the Midwest defines (and confines) itself and his resulting loneliness in the absence of this community and its corresponding *weltanschauung*.

**Back to St. Jude**

Either way, Alfred's belief of what he takes to be "right" as an objective truth is shaken. Later in the evening while in bed with Enid, he is further unsettled when she begins to talk to him about making an investment to capitalize on the impending takeover of Midpac. Not only is Alfred opposed to the idea because it would constitute insider trading, he is offended by the very fact that Enid brought up the subject of investing, a transgression of a particularly hoary Schopenhauer tenet stating "The people who make money are men, not women; and from this it follows that women are neither justified in having unconditional possession of it, nor fit persons to be entrusted with its administration" (*On Women*). Enid, who is at this point pregnant with Denise, tries to coax Alfred into accepting the idea by giving him a blowjob, but Alfred snaps. He throws Enid off, flips her over, and proceeds to have his way with her as she cries out, "Oh, I'm so unhappy about this!" (Franzen 281). All Alfred can think in his frenzy is that he was "a man having lawful sexual intercourse with his lawful wife" (280).

Once finished with his lustful assault, however, Alfred is overcome with shame. And he is gripped by the thought that it is not only Enid that he has just assaulted: "Worst was the image of the little girl curled up inside of her, a girl not much larger than a large bug but already a witness to such harm..." (278). He vows to restrain himself in the future, even though it is technically 'within his rights' to act forcefully toward his wife and children. He thinks to himself that when his daughter is born he will "relax the law for her, indulge her outright, even, and never once force her to sit at the table after everyone was gone" (278).

To Alfred's credit he does follow up on his vow—he treats Denise with less harshness and he does not yell at Enid in the same way he did during Chip and Gary's childhoods. But his flexibility only goes so far. Not once does he let Enid invest with his money, nor does he ever really let down his stoic, emotionless façade. Instead, he insists, “nevermind what's going on underneath... as long as we are all civil. That is the essence of my philosophy” (171). Here, by being “civil”,—abiding by his traditional code of Midwestern cordiality and duty (a code with fixed definitions and values)—Alfred is able to exist in and maintain a discernable, clear, navigable reality. He is not forced to confront the troubling thoughts that linger on the edges of his consciousness.

### **Unraveling and Falling Apart**

Although we can view Alfred as an ideologeme, a character type that embodies the credo of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Midwest, he does not thoughtlessly uphold tradition. Quite the contrary, in fact; he is an avid intellectual and his ideas, even if traditional, are supported by a body of thought and have significance in themselves. Alfred's infatuation with Schopenhauer serves to explicate his concerns about moral relativity and fallibility, but also explains the intentions and ideas behind many of his actions, habits, and beliefs. Consider his scientific experiments. The same line of Schopenhauer's thinking that underlay Alfred's realization that his morality is not objectively justifiable is also at play. Schopenhauer's critique of how “knowable” the world is also applies to scientific inquiry, which is really a certain configuration of perceptions and concepts that may follow from them. Science will always be

limited in its understanding, as it can only “understand” through the mental dispositions which characterize “understanding”.

Additionally, the findings of science, even if seemingly correct, will always be speculative because there is no way to attribute a finding exclusively to the cause which science seems to identify. Franzen dramatizes this idea in the comical, directionless groping of Alfred’s experiments. Alfred models his investigative ambitions on those of a college classmate named Jack Callahan who “already made his first million with the results of a chance discovery” (270). But what seems like a quest for success and discovery in a field popularly characterized as a series of “rational” deductions with their corresponding progression is, in fact, entirely arbitrary: “it wasn’t hard science but the brute probabilism of trial and error, a groping for accidents that he might profit from” (270).

The real reason Alfred engages in this seemingly inane practice, besides the fact that it gives him an excuse to take a break from his family, is evident when one considers what Schopenhauer takes to occupy the space outside the bounds of (and also, in a way, within) human cognition. This amorphous essence, which Schopenhauer calls “The Will”, is manifested in the unreachable subjective pole of whatever object is being perceived and objectified as the object is being cognitively processed and “understood.” Schopenhauer explains:

“The will as thing-in-itself is quite different from its phenomenon, and is entirely free from all the forms of the phenomenon into which it first passes when it appears, and which therefore concern only its objectivity, and are foreign to the will itself. Even the most universal form of all idea, that of being object for a subject, does not concern it; still less the forms which are subordinate to this and which collectively have their common expression in the principle of sufficient reason, to which we know that time and space

belong, and consequently multiplicity also, which exists and is possible only through these” (*The World as Will and Representation* 112).

Schopenhauer’s view, in other words, is monistic. He “sees” the single entity of existence as a waxing and waning Will, which is simultaneously expressed as a subjective and objective phenomenon. The subjective phenomenon of hunger, for example, is objectified in “teeth, gullet, and intestinal canal” (108). These are the two poles through which humans experience the Will. In this sense, the person, is not will as thing-in-itself, but is phenomenon of the will” (113). Moreover, through the person’s instinctual impulses and the corresponding actions that pertain to such impulses the Will “most distinctly” manifests itself. The result for mankind, Schopenhauer thinks, is endless suffering:

“All willing springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering. Fulfillment brings this to an end; yet for one wish that is fulfilled there remain at least ten that are denied. Further, desiring lasts a long time, demands and requests go on to infinity, fulfillment is short and meted out sparingly. But even the final satisfaction itself is only apparent; the wish fulfilled at once makes way for a new one; the former is a known delusion, the latter a delusion not as yet known. No attained object of willing can give a satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines; but it is always like the alms thrown to a beggar, which relieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow. Therefore, so long as our consciousness is filled by our will [which is as long as we are will-filled living beings], so long as we are given up to the throng of desires with its constant hopes and fears, so long as we are the subject of willing, we never obtain lasting happiness or peace. Essentially, it is all the same whether we pursue or flee, fear harm or aspire to enjoyment; care for the constantly demanding will, no matter in what form, continually fills and moves consciousness; but without peace and calm, true well-being is absolutely impossible (196).

Because man can never have his wishes fulfilled (for there will always be something he does not have), there is no correction to this suffering other than death. In other words, “the enormous amount of pain that abounds everywhere in the world, and

originates in needs and necessities is inseparable from life itself” (*Studies in Pessimism* 1).

This will manifests itself in Alfred most notably in his sexual fantasies about the young women he ogles while he is on the road for his job. From the young, attractive varsity cheerleaders doing splits on the ball field as he drives by, to the filthy magazine he finds in Youngstown, Ohio, it seems to him as if “the world seemed bent on torturing a man of virtue” (Franzen 245).

Alfred, however, unlike his seemingly endless stream of hotel neighbors, “who fornicated like there was no tomorrow” (244), does not act on these impulses; he endures them with ascetic resolve. He only listens to this hotel neighbors fornicate, he never does so himself. Whenever waitresses make a point of leaning over him “with their spherical mammaries insufficiently buttoned into a monogrammed blouse”, he quickly asks for the check (245). Through all this “he refuse[s] to weep” (244). He thinks to himself “if nothing else he had discipline. The power to refuse: he had this” (244). In this sense, Alfred’s purely negative character, the character that says “no and no again” (566), the character that shows no signs of any vision for the future outside of the purchase of “vaguely gubernatorial” big blue chair (8) (which at the point of the purchase is really only a feeble attempt to hold on to the fading power he has in the household), represents the disposition that Schopenhauer thinks men should take in light of the ruthless torture of desire: denial. “All satisfaction” Schopenhauer says, “or what is commonly called happiness, is really and essentially always *negative* only, and never positive” (*The World as Will and Representation* 319). That is to say, happiness is only found in a lack of suffering. Consequently, the

simplest way to reduce this suffering (as much as it can be reduced) is to take on an abstinent character; giving into desire will only cause a proliferation of wants and needs.

Alfred's scientific intentions make sense in light of this mentality. His goal is to prove the superiority of strong, durable, unbending metal (which represents "a high level of order") over its cheaper, weaker, flimsier, less honorable counterpart of plastic. Alfred views his experiments as part of a "cultural war." Unfortunately, "the forces of plastic were winning. Alfred had seen jam and jelly jars with plastic lids. Cars with plastic roofs." (Franzen 269). But unfortunately for Alfred "nature was slatternly and preferred disorder" (269). The Will can never be fully restrained and is always tending towards chaos. It is always tending towards plastic:

"The crumble of rust. The promiscuity of molecules in solution. The chaos of warm things. States of disorder were vastly more likely to arise spontaneously than were cubes of perfect iron. According to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, much *work* was required to resist this tyranny of the probable—to force the atoms of metal to behave themselves" (269).

Alfred's scientific intensity, like his strict parenting, his faithfulness to his wife and his relentless work ethic, is an attempt to suppress and reduce the manic Will. In the end, however, he still accepts that "life is a task to be done" (Studies in Pessimism 3), saying, "there are things in life that simply have to be endured" (Franzen 173).

### **The Joke is on You**

But the directionless, impulsive Will that Alfred tries to restrain through his intense self-control is gaining energy around him. It appears in the pleasure-seeking, individualistic disposition towards which the growing forces of capitalism are

pushing more and more people. Franzen dramatizes this in the parallel between Alfred's lustful fantasies and the indulgences of his plump, easy-going neighbor Chuck Meister.

Chuck, in his banking job where he works "easy hours" (246), in his salacious fantasies and masturbation over Enid, in his willingness to pounce at the smallest chance to make money regardless of any moral factors and what he does with his money, is the antithesis of Alfred. He is the "banker relaxing at the wheel" while Alfred is the "engineer standing at attention" (246); he favors "golf-wear," Alfred wears a suit; he is "shiny-apted and saggy-breasted," Alfred, "lean and flattopped; Chuck "never learned not to trust the world," while Alfred exists in a constant state of distrust.

The place each of these men and their corresponding ideologies has in Franzen's literary present is exemplified by how the two men handle the information about Midpac's purchase of the Erie Belt Railroad. Alfred believes making an investment on private, exclusive information (information he accidentally let slip to Chuck) would be "to take unfair advantage of other investors" (274). Consequently, the Lamberts do not invest in Midpac stock and nothing comes of Alfred's knowledge. Chuck, on the other hand leaps at the opportunity. His big investment in Erie Belt stock on the eve of Midpac's buyout helps fund a new mansion in Paradise Valley. Chuck is also promoted to "board chairman of his bank while Alfred stalled in the Midpac's second echelon and put his savings into inflation prone annuities" (292). In this case, Alfred's morality is a failing one, too stubborn and inflexible to realize the cannibalizing consequences of its principles. It is a code that is being

subsumed and stripped of its legitimacy by the rising strength of an evolving capitalist economy and culture.

Twenty years after the incident, the time at which Franzen starts the novel, we see how this development has progressed. The ominous sense, with which the reader is brought into the world of the Lamberts—“trees restless, temperatures falling, the whole northern religion of things coming to an end” (3)—introduces a vastly weakened, enfeebled Alfred. Due to a worsening case of Parkinson’s Disease, Alfred has lost the “neurological wherewithal” to rule the house (6). He can no longer physically enforce his reign. Alfred’s financial authority has also faded. In the past, if Enid attempted to claim any legitimacy from her labors in the home (labors to which she was relegated despite her “gift for math” and her degree in accounting [265]), “Al simply asked her whose labors had paid for the house and the food and the linens” (249). Now that argument, which “was, so to speak, the constitutional basis of the tyranny’s legitimacy”, will not work (10). Enid now has an income of her own, money that had grown from a small inheritance from her mother years ago, and she uses it to redecorate the house, a political maneuver that forces Alfred and his “gubernatorial” throne of a chair down into the basement. This is a domestic “civil war” between the rising force of Enid, herself a kind of capitalist with her relentless “raids into Alfred’s privacy, her infatuation with appearance, and her private investment portfolio” and Alfred, the old stalwart monarch, sadly existing with a deteriorating body and a paltry pension from his long past days at Midpac (6). It is a scenario in which “any lingering semblance of order” has shriveled (6), a condition that continues throughout the rest of the novel.

The faded power and legitimacy of Alfred's geographically, temporally situated code of ethics is mirrored in the fate of Midpac, the symbol of, and testament to Alfred's value system. In the early 80s, as Alfred neared retirement, Midpac was taken over by Hillard and Chauncy Wroth, fraternal twin brothers from Oak Ridge, Tennessee, who had "expanded a family meat-packing business into the empire of the dollar" (69) and "can't abide by any principle, but the ruthless pursuit of profit" (70). In a meeting with their newly captured corporate prey, the Wroths patronize the Midpac CEO, repeatedly addressing him as Dad: "*Gosh, and here Hillard and myself was under the impression, DAD, that you're operating a business, not a charity*" (69). It is clear that the days of paternalistic, community-minded commerce are passed. The Wroths manage to wring wage and work-rule concessions from Midpac's labor force worth almost \$200 million, and embark on a new regime that devastates the company.

Here we see two ways in which late-capitalism erodes the old power structures. First is the replacement of old values with monetary measurements. The laws of society, which are, among other things, supposed to act as broad moral guidelines, no longer correspond to the paternalistic code; instead, they favor the cold-blooded capitalist entrepreneur. The legitimacy of a business is now solely measured in terms of its bottom line, and any policy that mitigates gain is seen as stupid and superfluous. The second attack is to exploit the resentment of those oppressed by the old system. By appealing to the unionized workforce, the Wroths are able to take power from the former heads of Midpac. Of course, the Wroths have no intention of actually granting the workers any more freedom or worth than the

previous system did. They promptly fire or retire a third of the employees in St. Jude upon taking control. They simply manipulated the worker's negative feelings for their own gain.

The effects of this shift also extend to the communities that Midpac so proudly served; the changing physical infrastructure of Midpac with the Wroths' arrival is also a moral one. The Wroths' order to rip up the copper wires in the aptly named town of New Chartres, an unprofitable prairie town with a sparse population. A friend of Alfred's tells him a story in which the sheriff of the town "got a call that some roughnecks were trashing Midpac signal wires. He went over to the siding and saw three fellows ripping down the wire, smashing signal boxes, coiling up anything copper. One of them took a county bullet in his hip before the other made [the sheriff] understand they were working for the Midpac" (70). The sheriff, dismayed and ashamed of his transgression of the law it was his job to uphold, has himself arrested.

The destruction of the copper wires is an analogy to Alfred's deteriorating mental state. "Five years after the takeover, the rails were still in place... only the copper nervous system, in an act of corporate self-vandalism, had been dismantled" (70). The connections that linked the Midwest together and made it a cohesive whole are ripped out. The railroad's neural system, which Alfred worked to build for thirty years, is abruptly torn to pieces, just as his own neurological network has begun to die with the onset of Parkinsons.

It makes sense then that the point at which Alfred becomes completely physically and mentally unhinged, the point at which his decline culminates, is also the point at which he has become completely divorced from the community that

grounded him and from which he derived his authority. Enid and Alfred embark on a “fall colors” tour up the Northeast coast on a cruise ship the “Nordic Pleasurelines Fall Luxury Cruise” (19), whose atmosphere of frivolous luxury could not be more absurdly foreign to Alfred’s sensibility. And at sea, the ambiguous space between countries, he has no claim to moral authority. Here he cannot tell someone like Ruthie that this is his country with his rules. Furthermore, unlike “dry land” which lacks a “z-axis”, the sea, at every point on its surface, is “a point where you could sink and by sinking disappear” (239). Alfred can no longer remain on the cordial surface he wants to uphold. He is forced to confront the “underneath” that he wants to “nevermind.” Partially due to his location and partially due to his mental and physical deterioration, Alfred no longer has the ability to be disciplined and can no longer repress the forces that were latent in his idealized moral community of the Midwest. In his second-class cabin, beneath the water’s glass surface, he begins to simultaneously shit himself and to hallucinate.

The main character in Alfred’s hallucination, to be clear, is an actual piece of his feces, a turd. This “turd,” is personified as a bitter African American. Alfred’s inability to restrain himself—poop simply comes out regardless of whether or not he is at a toilet—is also his inability to control the subjects he had once oppressed or to ignore the paradoxes in his justification of racism. The turd is everything Alfred ever hated about blacks—impulsive, self-indulgent and individualistic. “Me personally, I am opposed to all strictures,” it says. “If you feel it, let it rip. If you want it, go for it. Dude’s gotta put his own interests first” (283). Yet this impulsive nature is in many ways Alfred’s own creation.

With droll irony, Franzen names the cruise ship the *Gunnar Myrdal*, after the Swedish Nobel laureate economist who wrote *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Myrdal dissected the absurd contradiction in America's treatment of its black citizens, asserting that United States history creates a vicious circle for African Americans:

“In the beginning the Negroes were owned as property. When slavery disappeared, caste remained. Within this framework of adverse tradition the average Negro in every generation has had a most disadvantageous start. Discrimination against Negroes is thus rooted in this tradition of economic exploitation” (Myrdal 208).

Alfred is aboard a ship sailing into racial light, with the revelation in the form of a toilet-humor joke. Alfred, the white man, has created the turd (the insolent Negro) through his own action, but now he can no longer restrain it.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud gives a helpful explanation of the libidinal forces at play in the social phenomenon of racism. He suggests that the exclusion practiced by a community is not a simple, fixable fault, but that the community's moral cohesion depends on it. “It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love,” he writes, “so long as there are people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness” (72). For the white Midwesterners, African Americans are the leftovers. “What's a jail *for* if not to toss a Negro in it?” asks the turd (Franzen 285). The paradise of Alfred's ethical code, the white Midwest, only exists because of its black target of aggression, and any progression in racial justice necessitates an unraveling of the civil bonds that Alfred holds so dear. It is another case in which “what made correction possible also doomed it” (278).

Freud's "renunciation of instinct" that civilization is built upon (*Civilization and its Discontents* 52) and that Alfred as the "anal retentive type" maintains (Franzen 284), therefore, makes no sense for the turd.<sup>2</sup> And in its resentment of the collective spirit that excluded it, the turd takes on a purely individualistic attitude. "Civilization?" it says, "Overrated. I ask you what's it ever done for me? Flushed me down the toilet, treated me like shit" (283).

All in all, Alfred's time aboard the cruise ship amounts to a funeral procession. Franzen sets the scene in sardonic death imagery as he and Enid arrive at the dock to depart.

"There was something netherwordly in their determined migration, something chilling in the cordiality and white raiment of the Nordic Pleasurelines shore personnel... a throng at twilight by the Styx." (130)

The ship will be cruising on the Styx, the river in Ancient Greek mythology that formed the boundary between Earth and the Underworld. On board, Alfred's demise is foreshadowed when, "A very fat man walked by in a t-shirt that said TITANTIC: THE BODY" (290), a feeble joke with a grim overtone. The cruise represents the point at which the patriarchal order that Alfred once championed has become, like himself, hollowed out. In the era of the Titanic, the rich held to dress codes to mark their status. But aboard Nordic Pleasurelines this order has completely dissolved. Enid is disturbed by the crudeness of many of the passengers.

"It rankled her that people richer than she were so often less worthy and attractive. More slobbish and louty. Comfort could be found in being poorer

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<sup>2</sup> Freud's renunciation can be seen as a conceptual extension and variation on Schopenhauer's asceticism. It is not just that suffering is a necessary part of life, but also that suffering caused by a lack of fulfillment of desire, in Freud's opinion, is an increasingly necessary phenomenon as civilization becomes more developed.

than people who were smart and beautiful. But to be less affluent than these T-shirted, joke-cracking fatsos..." (291)

Rich people now flout decorum by wearing gag t-shirts with no regard for the fact that they are "officially discouraged" (290). The t-shirt is a sign of the final stage of Alfred's regression first seen with the Wroths' destruction of Midpac's nervous system. Ten years or so after the beginning of Alfred's mental and physical decline he has become powerless and largely insubstantial. The Lambert's vacation ends when Alfred accidentally falls off the ship. He does not actually die, but for the two and a half more years that he lives, Alfred is no longer functional in any way.

## Chapter 2: Looking Backwards and Stumbling Forwards, a Fatherless Present

The historical and narrative scope of Christian Kracht's *Faserland* is more confined than that of *The Corrections*. Instead of tracking an entire family over a span of 40 years, *Faserland* is the story of a single narrator's self-implosion over the course of a frantic five-day blitz southward through the heart of Germany. The story ends in his (likely) suicide. The novel's pace stands in stark contrast to *The Corrections*, which is an almost 600-page marathon that reads somewhat like the opening lines of Franzen's final chapter:

“The correction, when it finally came, was not an overnight bursting of a bubble but a much more gentle letdown, a year-long leakage of value from key financial markets, a contraction too gradual to generate headlines and too predictable to seriously hurt anybody” (561).<sup>3</sup>

Franzen's novel is a gradual unfolding and dissipation of false hopes. Alfred slowly declines from a proud father to a helpless, hallucinating senior; Enid's dream of one last picture-perfect Christmas with the family happily united next to a warm fire devolves into a more realistic, socially tense Christmas morning breakfast; Chip's loses his tenure-track position, and his shady business venture in Lithuania falls to pieces; Denise, as one of the nation's top chefs, has her brand new top-of-the-line restaurant shut down because she seduces both the restaurant's manager and his wife on separate occasions; and Gary gradually loses all emotional connection with the family. Even “the correction” at the end of the novel (the correction that actually happens as opposed to all the other imagined corrections throughout the story)–

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<sup>3</sup> “There's no moment of disaster; the world doesn't end with a bang, it unravels, gradually falls apart. What caused the catastrophe to occur, who knows; its cause lies long in the past, so absolutely detached from the present as to seem like the caprice of a malign being” (Fisher 2)

Alfred's death—has been brooding since its first pages, slowly taking form over Franzen's broad narrative arc.

*Faserland* on the other hand hurls the reader about in a tumultuous whirlwind. We are jerked from place to place with little forewarning as the narrator tears from one city to the next. Unlike *The Corrections*, which extends backwards, filling out each of its main characters' historical narratives and revealing their inner psychology, the pace of *Faserland* throws the reader (and presumably the reader as well) into a type of “vertiginous ‘continuous present’” (Fisher 58).<sup>4</sup> In this present, the narrative is cut up into a “series of evanescent event ciphers and action set pieces” (58). The protagonist, who is also the narrator, is never at rest; the story drives relentlessly forward without break. In the first chapter alone, a chapter that only spans eleven pages, the narrator, a young twenty something male, eats a meal with his love interest Karin (two pages), drives with her to the beach (two and a half pages), “relaxes” on the beach with another couple (two and a half pages), drives to the bar (two-thirds a page), stays at the bar (one third of a page), drives back to the beach (one page) and sits on the beach with his love interest, Karin (one page). The chapter ends and the next day the narrator leaves the island of Sylt, where the action up to this point has taken place.<sup>5</sup> The narrative continues at this pace for the rest of the novel.

The frenzied drive that characterizes Kracht's narrative is one that leaves no time or space for reflection (and, consequently, character development). The novel

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<sup>4</sup> Frederic Jameson argues this experiential sensation is characteristic of post-modern temporality.

<sup>5</sup> The entire chapter measures at a little less than 3000 words. By contrast, in *The Corrections*, 3000 words cover Alfred's hallucinatory episode with the turd, an event that spans half an hour at most.

simply happens to the reader, as life simply happens to the narrator. It is too fast to process. Jameson sees this frenetic assault of experience as creating a

“post-modern nostalgia mode...in which contemporary or even futuristic reference at the level of content obscure a reliance on established or antiquated models at the level of form” (Jameson qtd. In Fisher 58-59).

The present, in other words, is changing at such a fast pace that there is no time to create any new form of substantial depth. As a result, the characters in this present can only reach back into the past and perform fixed, outdated styles. Culture becomes “excessively nostalgic, given over to retrospection, incapable of generating any authentic novelty” (59).

*Faserland* can be read through the lens of this nostalgic disposition. Kracht’s title, a play on the words “Vaterland” (Fatherland) and “Fasern” (threads), discretely gestures in this direction. The choice of “Vaterland,” a semantic shortening of the phrase “Land des Vaters,” (Land of the Father) over the alternative “Heimat” (Homeland) is significant. In a general sense, the word Vaterland refers to a patriarchal organization of power; it is a German translation of the Latin “patria” and has a possessive connotation—the land is the father’s land, not the mother’s or the children’s. The word “Vaterland,” however, also has distinct historical baggage in Germany in that Hitler branded himself as a type of primal father figure. He was the father coming to clean up Germany, to set the country in order.<sup>6</sup>

The narrator’s nostalgia for such a period of order is manifested by his captivation with Heidelberg, a place (at least in the physical sense) relatively

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<sup>6</sup> Kracht’s narrator tells the reader that in the opening scene of Leni Riefenstahl’s famous Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* Hitler, flying into Nuremberg in an airplane, descends from the heavenly clouds, “as if he was sent from God down to Germany in order to clean it up.” “als ob er von Gott heruntergesandt wird nach Deutschland, um da mal aufzuräumen.” (61)

untouched by WWII—the last and loudest cry of German patriarchal and national authority. In Heidelberg he remarks that, because it was the desired headquarters of the American section it, “was never bombed. As a result, all the old buildings still stand as if nothing had happened at all.” “nie zerbombt werden, und deswegen stehen die ganzen alten Gebäude noch, so, also ob nichts geschehen wär” (Kracht 85). “ “ “So könnte Deutschland sein” the narrator remarks reminiscently, “wenn es keinen Krieg gegeben hätte und wenn der Juden nicht vergast worden wäre” (85). In the middle of the city stands a “proper train station, like one out of the 50s” “richtiger Bahnhof, so aus den fünfziger Jahren” (85) an aesthetic that is representative of the pre-war order of Germany.

The narrator’s nostalgia is also expressed through his sense of fashion. He wears only Brooks Brothers shirts, a brand that advertises itself as “classic clothing and apparel” , dons a “fancy” “hochgetragenen” “ suit for his friend Rollo’s party which includes a “fresh white shirt” “frisches weißes Hemd” (127), “a blue and white striped tie” “eine blau-weiß gestreifte Krawatte” and a “single-breasted dark blue Blazer” “einreihigen nachtblau Blazer” something that makes him look like a “silly Yacht owner” “alberner Yachtbesitzer” (130). His appearance is the antithesis of the “stupid Hippie” “blöder Hippie” (62). He is well dressed, with short hair<sup>7</sup>, though his suit, while traditional, is not reserved.

In the same vein, the narrator also purports to value cordial manners, reliable service and cleanliness. He commends the courtesy and efficient performance of the personnel at the Hotel Alt Heidelberg saying the whole place, “runs quite smoothly. It

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<sup>7</sup> More specifically, his haircut is “long in the front and rather short in the back” “vorne lang und hinten ziemlich kurz,” with a “shaved” “ausrasiert” neck, the same haircut as the Nazis.

should be that way.” “läuft sauber ab, und so muß das sein” (87). Additionally, he prefers to hang out “in clean Bars...or Clubs where you know for sure that there won’t be any cellar critters in your beer glass” “in sauberen Bars...oder in Discos, wo man genau weiß, dass einem da keine Kellerasseln ins Bierglas laufen” (35). Finally, he appreciates how good an old woman who is sitting next to him on a plane smells. More precisely, he appreciates how she does not smell “like a lot of old people, who have at one point or another lost the desire to wash themselves—both for their own good and for the good of the people around them.” ”nicht wie viele alte Menschen, die keine Lust mehr haben, sich zu waschen, weil ihnen die Lust am Waschen, das sich Suabermachenfür irgend jemand und besonders für sich selbst irgendwann mal vergangen ist” (56). In all of these situations, the narrator expects the people around him to maintain themselves and their services out of respect for him.

Lastly, as the honorable, respectable, moral Mensch that he purports to be, the narrator declares that he “doesn’t take any drugs on principle.” “würde prizipiell keine Drogen nehmen” (105). The narrator is thus similar to Alfred, the paradigm of the restrictive Freudian civilian in his suited appearance and professed values of order and cleanliness.

This is, however, laughably confined to his appearance and his deluded self-image. His behavior could not be more absurdly opposed to Alfred’s asceticism: he is a reckless ball of impulsivity, a shining example of disorder. The middle part of his trip, includes a string of petty crimes, each one provoking a pathetic blunder that sets up and leads to his next offense. The progression starts when he steals sandwiches, chocolate bars and yogurts from an airport food stand. (He manages to sneeze all over

the entire assortment of food in the process). During his flight, the yogurts, which he had stuffed in his jacket pocket, somehow come open and leak all over his jacket and pants. When he finally arrives in Frankfurt, the destination of the flight, the narrator has been sitting in a wet pool of thick white paste for the better part of an hour. (He was too embarrassed by his condition to get up from his seat and clean himself). His jacket is ruined and he makes the sudden, rather bizarre decision to light it on fire in the middle of the airport and flee. Left without a jacket, the narrator resorts to swiping his friend Alexander's coat later in the chapter. The chaotic, floundering progression of events exemplifies the speeding pace of Jameson's post-modern temporality and serves as a microcosm of the rest of the story.

The narrator's crimes are not the product of carefully thought through mal-intent. His decisions are spontaneous and markedly irrational, the result of his inability to control his impulses. There is no thought to his drinking or smoking, he just does it. In this regard, the narrator exhibits another consequence of Jameson's continuous present, a character that, as Fisher puts it, lacks narrative memory (we know little about his past) "but retains what we might call formal memory: a memory of techniques, practices, and actions—that is literally embodied in a series of reflexes and tics" (58). The narrator's misdemeanors, his constant drinking and smoking are by and large reflexive reactions that are tied up with the relentless pace of events. The narrator is completely guided by his impulses and is jerked from place to place so that his realities assume a tone that is simultaneously homogenous and chaotic.

The narrator hardly lives up to his own standards of order or cleanliness either. He complains about a taxi driver's halitosis, but after drinking and chain

smoking all night, his own breath must be far from sweet. The narrator's intoxication is by no means confined to this incident. The only time in the entire novel when the narrator is sober is at the end of the second to last chapter. Otherwise, his uninterrupted substance abuse turns him into a bumbling wreck. He passes out on a toilet (Kracht 27). He stumbles into and shatters an entire crate of beer at a party (105). He drops cigarette ash all over his friend Rollo's expensive Chinese silk rug (125).

This dissolute chaos recalls Alfred's state at the end of his life, with the obvious difference being that the narrator is a physically healthy young man. The narrator stops short of shitting his pants, but his failure of self-control is otherwise as pathetic as that of the octogenarian Alfred. Both are hollowed out versions of a self, and both reflect the absence of a regulating force, Freud's superego. Alfred has lost his to age and disease, while the narrator seems never to have developed one in the first place. Psychologically and physically, the narrator seems to be virtually fatherless. Only twice in the whole novel does he even mention his father. One time is when he is recalling a situation in which his father simply left him alone at a hotel. He "had disappeared for a day because he had to take care of several business matters" "hat sich einen Tag lang abgesetzt, weil er irgendwelchen Geschäften nachgehen mußte" (88), and the young narrator ends up looking at a porn magazine.<sup>8</sup> His father is also apparently absent at the time of the narrator's most irresponsible act of youthful debauchery—drinking with his friend Alexander before taking the Abitur (62), the capstone test for primary education in Germany. This serious infraction

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<sup>8</sup> This could be read as a precursor to the narrator's lustful, intensely objectifying treatment of women throughout the novel. See chapter 3

seems to have gone completely unpunished. Nowhere in his childhood is there a disciplinary presence.

And the narrator's misbehavior comes with little to no career repercussions. He is not flipping burgers at McDonald's because he failed his exams; he is on an extended trip through Germany. We see that he doesn't have to concern himself with money. His wealth is alluded to throughout the novel: he "obviously always had more money" "natürlich immer mehr Geld" (77) than his childhood friend Hansens, his shirts are "all from Brooks Brothers" "alle von Brooks Brothers" (92), he purchases plane and train tickets at will, and there is no mention of work of any sort. His impulsivity is cultivated, then, not only by a lack of parental regulation, but also by very deep pockets.

In the purest Freudian sense, the narrator is a child, a virtual infant, untouched and unaffected by any restriction, a pure ego. Freud's process of developing a conscience, in which outward impulsive energy is redirected onto the ego, superimposing itself over the initial urges and creating a self-governing super-ego, has yet to take place. The narrator seems to be an unadulterated manifestation of the naturally-occurring, irrational "destructive... anti-social and anti-cultural trends" present within all people (*Future of an Illusion* 8). He is distinctly amoral.

Thus, the narrator's nostalgia is the product of two distinct, but intertwined phenomena. First, a hyper-speed pace of living that progresses at such a rate that the only way the narrator can form his identity is by reaching into the past and imitating dead forms; and second, a yearning for some force of restraint which he imagines to have been in the past. The rapid, continual emergence of his impulses is what drives

the frantic pace of his life, yanking him from one situation to the next. His nostalgia for a time period of more defined order is essentially a wish for the father and the state of order that he has never had and, as a result, cannot generate himself.

For Freud, one can view the narrator's inability to control his own life, a condition, which undoubtedly produces a feeling of helplessness, would be the precondition of the religious illusion. The illusion consists of "the relation of the child's helplessness to the helplessness of the adult which continues it" (29). This helplessness is a feeling of weakness that inevitably occurs in the face of nature, a wild, incomprehensible, crushingly superior force that can levy death or harm spontaneously. Freud sees man's "longing for a father" as "a motive identical with his need for protection against the consequences of his own human weakness" (30).

In an attempt to appease this feeling of weakness man performs the "humanization of nature" (20) in which he lends the "strange superior powers of nature" to the figure of his father; he creates for himself the gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate, and whom he nevertheless trusts with his own protection" (30). In this sense, Freud's religious illusion is, in Schopenhauer's terms, an attempt to fit nature into the confines of human cognition. It frames nature in a conceptual model that man can understand and grasp with certainty. Moreover, now that man "understands" these natural processes he can also control it.<sup>9</sup> In short, at its core the religion illusion stems from a need for a feeling of control and certainty. It satisfies this need by mapping the concept of a father figure onto the uncontrollable, incomprehensible force of nature and assuming that, like the familial father, this

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<sup>9</sup> "it is natural in man to personify everything that he wants to understand in order to control it (psychical mastering as a preparation for physical mastering)

primordial father ordains and assigns a definitive, graspable structure to reality. In this sense the religious illusion mimics the function of the narrator's illusion of himself as a person of order and Alfred's "beleaguered reality" (Franzen 272). All are conceptual blankets of self-deception, surface layers of cognitive order superimposed on incomprehensible chaos in order to induce a sense of control and security.

It is not surprising then that, like Freud's religious illusion and Alfred's fantasy of Midwestern moral objectivity, the narrator's illusion of fatherly order not only applies to himself, but also to the structure of the world around him. His deluded image of himself as supporter of order and cleanliness is coupled with a resentment of an illusory confining order he falsely sees as imposed on him by the people and institutions in his environment. This is apparent in his incessant labeling of things he distains as Nazi or SPD-like, two large authoritarian regimes with decidedly negative connotations. When a businessman gives him a reproachful look for stealing the yogurts at the airport and mutters something under his breath, the narrator whispers, "Shut your trap, you SPD-Nazi" . "Halt's Maul, du SPD-Nazi" (Kracht 53). He relishes sitting in the non-smoking section of the airplane because it gives him the chance "to emphatically shout Fascist at the stupid non-smokers whenever they told him to put out his cigarette" "den blöden Nichtrauchern ein kräftiges Faschist! Entgegenzurufen, wenn sie einen auffordern, die Zigarette auszumachen" (58). Finally he calls life in Germany a "bleak, imprisoning Nazi-life" "grauhaften Nazi-Leben" (70). In each of these situations, the narrator thinks of these different entities as restrictive forces holding him back from what he wants.

This aspect of the narrator's fatherly illusion serves two psychological purposes. The first is that it gives him a sense of importance. If someone cares to restrict his actions, it means that his actions have significance. That it matters to someone that he does the right thing also implies that *he* matters to someone. The psychological link between governance and self-worth is apparent when the narrator admits he has a "feeling... of importance" "Gefühl... des Wichtigseins" as he is inspected while going through airport security (52). Despite the fact that this is utterly commonplace, the narrator is buoyed by the assumption that he could be a person powerful enough to bring down a plane, so powerful that they must scan him before he boards his flight. This is a sign that a fatherly entity is watching over him and ensuring his own and other people's protection.

The narrator's projection of patriarchal restriction also functions as an identifiable figure that he can blame, and through blaming, give purpose to his feeling of helplessness. The narrator's inadequacies and dissatisfactions are not his own fault, but rather due to the restrictive presence of the father.<sup>10</sup>

Yet the narrator's presumed "father figures" never actually limit him. Instead, they turn out to be, like the narrator himself, hollow shells of what their appearances suggest. At first, it seems as if the businessman has gone to report the narrator's act of thievery. The narrator sees him talking to a stewardess while continuously taking looks at the narrator. But when the narrator boards the plane a few minutes later, the stewardess takes his boarding pass, smiles at him and wishes him a good flight (54).

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<sup>10</sup> "The protest impulse of the 60s posited a malevolent Father, the harbinger of a reality principle that (supposedly) cruelly and arbitrarily denies the 'right' to total enjoyment. This Father has unlimited access to resources, but he selfishly—and senselessly—hoards them. Yet it is not capitalism, but protest itself which depends upon this figuration of the Father." (Fisher 14)

Similarly, on the plane, smoking his second cigarette in the non-smoking section the narrator remarks, “weirdly none complained about it,” “komischerweise beschwert sich niemand darüber” (58). The non-smoking sign here proves to be the equivalent of the cruise ship’s comically spineless dress code that “officially discourages” passengers from not complying. In all of these cases, rules are no longer definitive decrees, but are merely feeble suggestions. Moreover, not only are the rules of the plane not enforced, no one seems to ever expect them to be. Otherwise, someone might have complained. Finally, the narrator’s assertion that life in Germany is a “grauhaften Nazi-Leben” is similarly misguided. Despite his disdain for his home country, the narrator is never directly oppressed or limited in any way. For all of his criminal activity on his trip from the northern-most end of Germany down through its middle and out across the southern border, the narrator is never arrested. In the final scene, which takes place in Germany, the narrator crosses the Swiss-German border driving a stolen car, and his passport goes completely unchecked (146). The Fatherland, either out of negligence or inability or both, is unable to properly restrain and discipline its resident. The Fatherland fails in its governing duty. The narrator’s lack of a governing father is an analogy for a wider cultural phenomenon in which patriarchal restriction is no longer valued.

The narrator’s concept of a father figure is just as hollow and superficial as the entities that he accuses of fatherly restrictions. The most obvious indicator of this is his use of the insult “SPD-Nazi”, a confused and contradictory term, considering that the SPD was the only party to actually oppose Hitler. The many instances in which he

uses either “Nazi”, “SPD”, their nonsensical combination, or “fascist” are,<sup>11</sup> without exception, inane. He calls the author Ernst Jünger “a half Nazi” “ein halber Nazi” on the grounds that he has heard that Jünger’s prose (which he has not even read himself) sounds like that of Herman Hesse, an author he did not like reading in school (59). He mental labels a taxidriver as a “Fascist” “Faschist” because he smokes low quality cigarettes, wears exercise clothes and farts a lot (38). By the end of the novel, the narrator has used the terms so often and so carelessly that they have been sapped of any semantic meaning. Rather, they serve more as simple indications that he does not like something or someone.

His accusations are also hollow and based purely on the appearance of the object of his contempt. The narrator disdains the businessmen gathering outside his airplane gate in Hamburg. Filled with spite, the narrator eyes the consultants as, “they greet each other at the gate with nonchalant smiles, while straightening their ties” “sie grüßen sich am Gate mit einem nonchalanten Lächeln und zupfen dabei ihre Krawatten zurecht” (52). This is ironic considering that one of his closer friends seems to be in business. His friend Nigel, who has “a very nice apartment” “eine sehr schöne Wohnung” seems to be “often on the phone with investment advisors in Switzerland or Hong-Kong” “telefoniert viel mit Anlageberatern in der Schweiz oder in Hong-Kong”, indicating that his profession is not too far off from the group of people the narrator despises (29). The only difference between Nigel and the businessmen seems to be their appearance. The businessmen wear suits, while his investment-advising friend appears “a little shabbily dressed” “ein bisschen schäbig angezogen” (31). The narrator’s malice is entirely superficial: it has no depth.

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<sup>11</sup> Examples can be found on pages 38, 53, 59, 97, 114 of *Faserland*

Yet his contempt points to another telling paradox, one with a historical dimension: the narrator has vehement disdain for the fatherly order he so desperately craves. Kratch's novel, published in 1995, is set sometime in the years following the fall of Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany. The country is in the process of trying to reconcile its divergent halves, with the shadows of the Nazis still lingering. East Germany was as much a totalitarian state as the Third Reich, and in the post-communist era matters of civic duty and obedient restraint were freighted by a murderous national history. In this context, the narrator's instinctive contempt for authority and control has a deep resonance. There is a broader cultural inclination away from any form of discipline, a cultural phobia toward patriarchal order.

In a rare moment of insight, however, the narrator also recognizes the positive aspects that a power structure can have on its subjects. In a moment of intense anxiety—so intense the realization only comes while he is fainting—the narrator expresses deep concern for his future as someone who has never had the benefits of patriarchal restriction. His worry is catalyzed by thoughts about reunification. He explains:

“I think about how I don't know what will happen in the coming years... Right now I simply do not know what will come. Will things go on with the colorful track suits with purple, light green and black? They all wear them in the East where the people are more patient, quieter, and also much more attractive. Perhaps the East will steamroll over the West with its calm and track suits. “Ich denke daran, das ich nicht weiß, wie das in den kommenden Jahren sein wird... Jetzt weiß ich einfach nicht, was da kommt. Ob es so weitergeht mit den bunte Traininganzügen, mit lila, hellgrün und Schwarz? Das tragen sie alle im Osten, und die Menschen dort sind geduldiger, stiller, und auch sehr viel schöner. Vieeleicht wir der Osten den Westen überrollen mit seiner Ruhe und seinen Traininganzügen” (106).

The citizens of the former DDR have been brought up in a culture that has taught them restraint and discipline. They are calmer and more focused, and as a result of this disposition, more effective. The narrator worries that his fellow citizens in the uninhibited, shopping-crazed West, who “are in a mall somewhere slurping oysters “ “irgend wo in einer Einkaufspassage Austern schlürft” (106) will be no match for the organized East.

This realization comes at a moment in which the narrator’s illusion of his own discipline and order has been shattered. He had been invited to a party by a man named Eugene, who brings the narrator upstairs to his room, pushes some cocaine on him (this is when the narrator replies, “I don’t do drugs on principle” “ich würde prinzipiell keine Drogen nehmen” (105)) and then attempts to stick his finger up the narrator’s ass. Disturbed by Eugene’s sexual advance, the narrator flees the room and searches for a girl, Nadja, that he had been hitting on earlier at the party. He finds his way down to the basement where he sees his friend Nigel and Nadja shooting up some kind of drug. Overcome with anxiety, the narrator stumbles up the stairs, through the party, and out the door, at which point he has his revelation as he is falling to the ground.

The key figure in this scene is Nigel who serves to remind the narrator of two underlying truths that upset the surface layer of reality in which he would like to exist. The smaller truth of the two is simply that the narrator’s statement “ich würde prinzipiell keine Drogen nehmen” is entirely fallacious. Just a few days earlier while at a party with Nigel, the narrator, at Nigel’s insistence, had swallowed a pill that had effects similar to ecstasy. The second, more damning truth (at least to the narrator), is

that the narrator himself is homosexual. Although the narrator's queer identity is never explicitly acknowledged in the novel, there is evidence that hints at his Uranian leanings. All of the narrator's friends are men; Nigel is at the very least bisexual. Alexander, the friend with whom he seems to be closest, suggests a gay naked beach as a prime vacation spot for the narrator and their relationship does not seem to be of a strictly Platonic character. The way in which the narrator describes their falling out has the feel of a break-up scene. The spell of social paralysis that falls over the narrator when he randomly calls Alexander or hears his voice and when he sees Alexander in the bar (and when Alexander doesn't see him, the narrator steals his jacket and immediately makes the sensual remark that it is "beautifully warm" "schön warm" (81)) indicates some form of deeper attraction to his friend. The narrator's decision to visit the grave of Thomas Mann—the famous German novelist who was secretly bisexual himself—gives credence to the interpretation of the narrator as a closeted queer. The narrator had fled Nigel's apartment a few days earlier when he came upon a bi-sexual orgy there. When he sees Nigel directly after his encounter with Eugene, the narrator is forced to confront his repressed sexual desires, which lie beneath his clean-cut, straight male image.<sup>12</sup>

Faced with this uncomfortable truth, the narrator's illusion of his fatherly order momentarily evaporates and, with it, the cognitive certainty and security that it provided him. He admits "that I don't know what will happen in the coming years" "dass ich nicht weiß, wie das in den kommenden Jahren sein wird" (106). And his

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<sup>12</sup> Deeper analysis in chapter 3

comment about the superiority of the self-disciplined easterners is his implicit admittance of his own ineptitude. Overcome by this admission, he faints.<sup>13</sup>

This moment in which the narrator flees conscience in the face of anxiety— anxiety induced by the disruption of his illusion (and corresponding control)—provides a frame of understanding for every frantic departure the narrator makes in his trip southward through Germany (except his initial departure from Sylt<sup>14</sup>). When he comes upon the bi-sexual orgy at Nigel’s place,<sup>15</sup> he bolts out of the apartment with his hands shaking. When he arrives at the airport and goes to buy his ticket he holds on tightly to the ticket counter “because I have the feeling that I will faint, if I cannot get a hold of myself “ “weil ich das Gefühl habe: Ich werde umkippen, wenn ich mich jetzt nicht beherrsche” (51). This line has a dual function. It foreshadows the narrator’s later loss of consciousness when he admits that he has no control over the situation, and it shows how the narrator’s illusion is characterized by a need for control and security. His illusion, like the religious illusion and Alfred’s beleaguered reality is an illusion of comprehension, of cognitive control over reality.

The narrator attempts to regain control by physically asserting himself on his environment—stealing the food at the airport. After he successfully completes his petty crime he proclaims, “All of a sudden I feel better. “ “Plötzlich geht es mir besser” (53) a declaration of his recaptured mental calm. This action, as mentioned before, is the catalyst for a string of other crimes, which we can now view as the simultaneous

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<sup>13</sup> Ironically the narrator’s most poignant moment of insight is one in which he admits that he has absolutely no idea what is going on.

<sup>14</sup> See chapter 3

<sup>15</sup> All three members of the orgy, it is worth noting, are wearing no clothes. The layer of appearance that the narrator usually utilizes to order his reality (see chapter 3) is not there. He cannot judge based on appearance, because the surface has been (literally) stripped.

effort to assert control, and a desperate cry for attention and order in the face of a fatherless, chaotic society. By lighting his ruined jacket on fire, the narrator rids himself of an unclean image and commits an action for which he should surely be rebuked. By stealing Alexander's jacket he reclaims control over a situation (and a person, Alexander) that he is "not prepared whatsoever" "überhaupt nicht drauf vorbereitet" and creates an opportunity in which someone can reprimand him for his actions. Instead, he narrates "No one comes after, no one yells at me from behind" "Keiner kommt mir nach, keiner ruft mir hinterher" (81).

The final example of this pattern occurs at the narrator's friend Rollo's house. There the narrator's illusion of control is pushed to the brink, as he is forced to confront a mirror image of himself in the gradually disintegrating Rollo. Like the narrator, both of Rollo's parents are absent from his life. His parents are also "very rich people" "ganz reichen Leute" (121) and seem to be supporting Rollo financially; he has a "enormous" "riesengroß" apartment that has "at least nine rooms" "mindestens neun Zimmer" (116) in Munich, despite there being no mention of him having any job. Rollo's only activities, according to the narrator, are bar hopping and attending raves (108).

Rollo's social situation also matches that of the narrator. Watching Rollo mill about at his own party, the narrator comments that Rollo "simply knew too many people. All of his "friendships" were weak." "kennt einfach zuviele Menschen, und diese Menschen haben es zu viel leicht mit ihm" (144). The people who claim to be Rollo's friends at the party "are not his friends" "sind nicht seine Freunde" (144). The narrator continues, "his friends would make sure to tell him that looks like and is an

alcoholic ” “seine Freunde würden ihm doch sagen, das ser aussieht wie ein Alkoholiker und tablettensüchtig ist” (138). In hindsight, the narrator’s friendships seem equally shallow. When he is with Nigel for instance, he must “think about why he and Nigel are actually like each other “ “daran denken, warum Nigel und ich uns eigentlich mögen” (38). Thinking for a moment more he concludes “I actually have no idea why” “ich eigentlich gar nicht weiß warum” (38). With Rollo, things are even more depressing and empty. When the two of them return home after being out at a bar, Rollo talks for a short while about his upcoming birthday party before the conversation falls silent. They switch on the television, but when they find nothing interesting on, the narrator retires to the bedroom and Rollo stays up reading alone. Even though Rollo had found the narrator passed out on the ground in a drunken stupor, he doesn’t say a word about the narrator’s alcohol abuse.

Finally, even the physical manifestations of Rollo’s angst mirror the narrator’s. Rollo, desperately craving sleeping tablets and distraught over a birthday party filled with people who don’t actually like him, begins “to shake uncontrollably and began to howl” ”unkontrolliert zu zittern, und dann heult er richtig” (145). When fleeing Nigel’s house the narrator’s “hands shake “ “Hände zittern” and “on his way out of the city, he also starts to howl. (50).

The effect that Rollo has on the narrator is summed up by the fact that the narrator is unable to look at himself in the mirror while at Rollo’s party.

“I see my face in the mirror, but I do not really see it there. It only appears on the edges. Whenever I say that I would rather see on the edges, I really mean it. I don’t want to see the middle of my face any more, only the edges“ “[ich] sehe dabei in mein Gesicht im Spiegel. Ich sehe nicht wirklich hin, nur so an die Ränder... Wenn ich sage, ich würde an die Ränder sehen, dann meine ich

das wirklich so. Die Mitte von meinem Gesicht, die ich will gar nicht mehr sehen, nur noch die Umrisse” (128).

When the narrator is with Rollo, he is forced to view a reflection of himself, an image of chaos and “inner emptiness” “innere Leere” (144) under a well-dressed façade. This is an image that he does not want to see or admit to. In the end, this image is “simply too much” “einfach zu viel” (145) for the narrator. Abandoning Rollo, who is on the verge of suicide (a doubling of the narrator’s own situation at the end of the novel), the narrator flees the party. He grabs his belongings, and in his final act of thievery, drives off in Rollo’s Porsche<sup>16</sup>.

Ironically, the Porsche seems to represent an order more legitimate than the sovereign power that the narrator longs for. Earlier, when Rollo and the narrator drove down the highway “quite slow” “ziemlich langsam” the narrator notices that “behind us a tiny mass of traffic had built up” “hinter uns hat sich ein kleiner Stau gebildet” (120). In spite of all the traffic, however, the narrator explains “People do not dare to honk when you drive a Porsche really slowly in front of them” “Leute trauen sich ja nicht zu hupen, wenn man mit einem Porsche vor ihnen ganz langsam fährt” (121). It is the expensive sports car that sets the speed limit, not the local authorities. The car’s unquestioned border crossing likewise indicates a country in which wealth, rather than any sovereign power, rules.

All of the narrator’s acts of rebellion are in vain, as he is unable to elicit the punitive response he desires because of his wealth. It is not that the “father figure”

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<sup>16</sup> The car is the perfect analogy for the narrator and its owner: from the outside the Porsche is “das schönste Auto auf der Parkweise.” On the inside, however, “sieht es überhaupt nicht porschlochartig aus, sondern wie in einem VW-Käfer. Das Leder ist zerschlissen, und alles hat dieses Halbfertige, diese Holprigkeit” (Kracht 113). On the outside the narrator, Rollo, and the Porsche all look quite good, even exemplary models of the upper class. On the inside, however, underneath their polished surface, each one is torn up and chaotic.

does not exist; it is rather that the father figure is now subordinate to financial might, which the narrator's expensive appearance signals he has. The businessman who sees the narrator steal the food, the narrator claims, "if I were a foreigner without my jacket, for whom he has to hand over his salary [to the government] then he would have certainly said something" "wenn ich ein Ausländer wäre und kein Jackett an hätte, wofür er einen halben Monatslohn [zur Regierung] hergeben müßte, dann hätte er auch bestimmt etwas gesagt" (53). Were it not for the narrator's privilege, the father figure would have acted and the narrator would have been punished for his crime. Smiling at the businessman from across the room, the narrator suddenly realizes "why Nigel always wears t-shirts with corporate names across the front and why it's a provocation" "warum Nigel immer T-Shirts mit Firmenlogos drauf trägt und warum das so eine Provokation ist" (54). The narrator's friend Nigel's t-shirts with corporate logos, like the narrator's expensive Jacket, represent a level of privilege above the sovereign. They serve as reminders that the narrator, like Nigel, is part of an untouchable order. An order to which everyone else, from the "Leftists, nazis, tree huggers, intellectuals, bus drivers" "Linke, Nazis, Ökos, Intellektuelle, Busfahrer" (31) is helplessly subordinated.

### Chapter 3: Complications in Desire, Commodification and Identity

The order grounded in financial might, as opposed to ordained patriarchal authority, is a system of power that, as Mark Fisher in his book *Capitalist Realism* tells us, “is no longer governed by transcendental Law; on the contrary, it dismantles all such codes, only to reinstall them on an *ad hoc* basis” (6). This is the process Franzen dramatizes in *The Corrections*. The market, personified in the capital-hungry characters of the Wroth Brothers, Chuck and Enid, overtake the “transcendental” authority represented by Alfred and Midpac. The Wroth Brothers rip up the tracks that Alfred had spent so many years building, Chuck gets a windfall from stock purchased with Alfred’s insider information, and Enid starts investing in the market with her own money. By the time of the novel’s present, Alfred’s ideology has almost completely unraveled in the face of the new market forces. His representation of the world is now more or less gone. The father figure is now subordinate to the market.

Enid, the ideologue of the faithful capitalist, embraces the new Schopenhauerian economic representation: she believes in “interest-bearing bank accounts”; she believes that “blue-chip stocks held for the long term with reinvested dividends,”<sup>17</sup> can “provide for her old age” (Franzen 276). But hers is a faith in a system that, even more than the old order, is built on illusion. For what is this thing called the market? It is a collection of interacting human projections and interpretations that attempt to determine how much a company is worth, or how much it will be worth in the future. The market’s dips, dives, and upswings are entirely dependent on how investors perceive, or think they understand what is going on. This is, precisely, Schopenhauer’s notion of an idea: a human representation abstracted

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<sup>17</sup> The market, like religion, works because it is a collective illusion.

from reality and then superimposed on that same reality as a way of understanding and controlling it.

The market does not, however, exist purely within the realm of stock trading and Wall Street. It also affects relations in society at large. In his seminal work *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord attempts to outline how this layer of inter-subjective, inter(trans)active reality structures the social existence of people who live in a market society. The term he comes up with for this social phenomenon is “The Spectacle”, which he says, “expresses [sic] the total practice of one particular economic and social formation” (15). The economic forces of the market (re)structure social life and how it is experienced in a particular way; in addition to being a layer of economic representation, the market creates a corresponding social representation through which reality is filtered.<sup>18</sup>

Debord sees this layer of representation as:

“...the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Not that its techniques have dispelled those religious mists in which human beings once located their powers, the very powers that had been wrenched from them—but those cloud-enshrouded entities have now been brought down to earth (18).

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<sup>18</sup> (I had this paragraph where the footnote is located. Debord characterizes this act of representation in a similar way to Schopenhauer. He says that it is

“The spectacle is heir to all the weakness of the project of western philosophy, which was an attempt to understand activity by the means of vision...philosophy is at once the power of alienated thought and the thought of alienated power, and as such it has never been able to emancipate itself from theology.” (Society of the Spectacle, Theses 17-18)

That is to say people caught up in the spectacular illusion are privy to the fallacy that claims that the world can be understood through the alienating and objectifying action of vision. To “see” something, to behold it, to “understand” it requires the understander to one, see the thing it understands as at least cognitively exterior to itself, and two have the object filtered through the inherently limited faculty of human sight.

The order that structures reality is no longer conceptually located in the heavens; it is on here on Earth. Paradise is no longer situated somewhere above human existence, it is in a clearly labeled, wealthy new subdivision in another part of town: Paradise Valley. The enormous mansions that populate this “paradise” are material reconstructions of the heavenly house of God.<sup>19</sup> Enid is in complete awe of the “eight bedroom” homes and the life style they promise. After going to a wealthy banker’s house warming party, she exuberantly reports to Chip that “It was spectacular... they had *pyramids* of shrimp. It was solid shrimp in pyramids. I’ve never seen anything like it” (Franzen 21). Enid’s religious fervor had always been dismissed, or “pooh-poohed” by Alfred (323). Now it has been redirected towards these larger than life “spectacular” products.

It turns out, however, that the shrimp was frozen and the walls of the mansion were “like paper” (22). The house and the shrimp are examples of what Debord sees as a general phenomenon in the spectacle in which the “commodity form is characterized exclusively by self-equivalence;” it is “solely quantitative in nature” (Debord 27). Or, as Alfred puts it, it’s “a large house, but cheaply done” (Franzen 22). Despite knowing this, however, Enid still insists that this “super-deluxe” house was “elegant, elegant” (98). It is no surprise, then, that she is thrilled to go aboard the gargantuan cruise ship *Gunnar Myrdal* for the “deluxe” Nordic Pleasure Lines Fall Luxury Cruise.

The cruise ship functions as propaganda machine for the market, and it offers a magnified look at the ideological features of a market-based society, the particular socio-economic formation characteristic of *The Correction*’s and *Faserland*’s present.

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<sup>19</sup> Paradise, or being rich, means freedom from desires and freedom from suffering.

The cruise features a speech by the “internationally noted investment counselor” Jim Crolius in which the fluctuations of the market are compared to the seasons.

“The year has its rhythms—winter, spring, summer, fall. The whole thing is cyclical. You got your upswings in the spring, you got your downturns in the fall. It’s just like the market” (Franzen 334).

Crolius brings the good news that the market and its operations are as inevitable as the quarterly shifts in the weather. It is a fact of life, something everyone should accept.<sup>20</sup> This neatly exemplifies Fisher’s description of how an ideological agenda succeeds: “an ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact” (6).

From here on out, the cruise, an exciting all-inclusive pre-paid package that offers everything from a gambling room to “free” ice cream and alcohol stands to a Swedish string quartet, only serves as a deeper immersion in Debord’s “society of the spectacle”, which Enid is eager to dive into. In the months leading up to the cruise, she was filled with excitement, anticipating deliverance from the drudgery of her life in St. Jude:

“There were a thousand things she wanted from life, and since few were available at home with Alfred in St. Jude, she had forcibly channeled all her wanting into the numbered days, the mayfly lifetime, that the luxury cruise would last. For months the cruise had been her mind’s safe parking space, the future that made her present bearable” (Franzen 289).

Enid has been on cruises before. The “complimentary cruise ship photo” stashed in her mess of papers back in Kansas disclose that these excursions are a type of recurring ritual for the Lamberts—a periodic bloodletting for Enid that allows her to

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<sup>20</sup> With the effect of large scale industrialization on the environment, the irony is that the market may actually change and dictate the seasons in some way. (Insert Fisher quote?)

endure her unsatisfactory life in St. Jude. In this sense, the cruise is an example of a type of entertainment that Horkheimer and Adorno in their essay *In the Culture Industry*, call “amusement:”

“Amusement always means putting things out of mind, forgetting suffering, even when it is on display. At its root is powerlessness. It is indeed, escape, but not, as it claims, escape from bad reality but from the last thought of resisting that reality. The liberation which amusement promises is from thinking as negation” (Horkheimer & Adorno 116).

Enid’s cruises and the excited anticipation they allow her do not produce any substantial change in her life; they only allow her temporary escape. The cruise momentarily dulls her dissatisfaction, but does nothing to prevent its return.

The cruise is, however, an example of a more insidious form of entertainment than Horkheimer and Adorno’s definition of amusement encompasses. A type of super commodity, it is a maniacal cousin of the houses in Paradise Valley. Debord asserts:

“In its most advanced sectors, a highly concentrated capitalism has begun selling “fully equipped” blocks of time, each of which is a complete commodity combining a variety of other commodities. This is the logic behind appearance, within an expanding economy of “services “and leisure activities, of the “all inclusive” purchase of spectacular forms of housing, of collective pseudo-travel, of participation in cultural consumption and even of sociability itself, in the form of ‘exciting conversations,’ ‘meeting with celebrities’ and such” (111).

Enid’s two-week, pre-paid, all-inclusive vacation complete with Swedish massage, prescribed “socials,” and celebrity lectures, aboard what she takes to be an “authentically Scandanavian” ship (it was actually built in America), is an entirely commoditized world in which every “experience” is a thing to be had, an object to be acquired. Franzen’s “twilight by the Styx” imagery relates not only to Alfred’s

funeral procession (Franzen 130). The “netherworldly... migration” (130) of the seniors into the cruise ship is a descent into a ghostly, hyper-commoditized realm in which every action must be an act of consumption.

The insidious nature of this commodity of “spectacular time” exerts an effect on its customers analogous to the conceptual naturalization of the market that Jim Crolius attempted in his speech: the spectacular time commodity is “presented as a moment of authentic life whose cyclical return we are supposed to look forward to” (Debord 111). The name of the cruise, Nordic Pleasureline’s *Fall Luxury Cruise*, implies this much. The cruise is a commoditized “season,” a “natural” occurrence composed of a tightly wound bundle of fixed, objectified, reified experiences. “Fall” on the *Gunnar Myrdal* is a historical tour of Rhode Island, or a Swedish massage. Commoditized time, is “irreversible time made abstract” (147) in the form of a series of products. It is a representation of time superimposed over the actual, organic flow of the seasons.

The cruise, though, doesn’t merely “translate” each season. The physically confining nature of the ship, along with its fully organized schedule—everyone eats at the same time, and morning, noon, and night are filled with pre-planned activities—allows no room for spontaneous experience and materializes the procession of time. The cruise represents “time-as-commodity”. It is “homogenous” and occurs in a series “exchangeable units” (147), which take the form of afternoon activities A, B, and C. Time can only be consumed as an object, not experienced as a subject. Moreover, this rigid translation of time into commodity doesn’t just turn time into an abstracted, objective entity. It actively redefines, and in redefining controls,

how time is conceptualized. The afternoon is no longer defined by the position of the sun, but rather by the designated time slot of the “afternoon activity”. The spectacle presents time as a series of “purely quantitative equalities” to be exchanged or rearranged within a limited set of parameters.

This homogenous “pseudo-cyclical time” (148) is not a phenomenon limited to Nordic Pleasurelines. The two-week cruise through Franzen’s commercialized hell is only an exaggerated example of the temporal experience of more and more of society. The fact that the cruise is a recurrent ritual for Enid and Alfred is a testament to this. For Enid, rather than summer, spring, fall and winter, the four seasons are better described as cruise time, not cruise time, the lead up to Christmas, and Christmas itself. The ebb and flow of nature is covered over by the coming and going of abstracted, objectified commodity-experiences.

This commoditized time is the temporal equivalent of the Paradise Valley house and its ostentatious piles of frozen shrimp, in that “spectacular commodities of this type could obviously not exist were it not for the increasing impoverishment of the realities they parody” (Debord 112). Just as the luxurious image of the pyramid of shrimp is only a façade to a tasteless and unpleasantly cold hors d'oeuvre, the insistent “deluxe” and “luxury” titles of the cruise mask an ultimately disappointing experience.

Instead of the elegant atmosphere Enid thought she was paying for, the cruise is filled with dozens of “slobbish and louty” (Franzen 291) people in t-shirts, each one a “small trampling” (290) of her fantasy. In this we see that “the spectacle’s essential character must expose itself as a negation of life—and as a negation of life

that has invented a visual form for itself” (Debord 143). The commodity can only be an object of desire when viewed at a distance in a state of dispossession.<sup>21</sup> Once it is acquired, its veil of quality is removed and attraction fades. For this reason, the commodity can only exist as a negation of life, something that one does not have.

The character of spectacular time is a state of negation that relentlessly oscillates between a false consciousness and disillusionment. Enid is in a world where she can only act through the consumption of spectacular commodities, entities that exist only in negation to her. Each action is in turn a process of disillusionment, as the commodity she “acquires” is emptied of substance. By the second day, despite winning \$60 in the gambling room, she feels like “a lab animal caged with other lever-yanking animals amid the mechanized blink and burble”. It is no wonder that by the end of that night she could hear “the anxiety bell ringing with such force that her bed frame vibrated” (Franzen 313). Having finally reached her “promised land” Enid experiences “spectacular time...the time of a real transformation experienced as illusion” (Debord 113). The subject existing in spectacular time does not exist on the surface, the commoditized representation superimposed over reality. Instead they are hopelessly drowning underneath the surface constantly trying to swim upwards.

The cruise ship experience as commodity, then, can only exist as an experience not being had. Either this dispossession is in the form of Enid’s eager anticipation of the experience or in the form of a specific experience on the cruise that she is not having. As a result, almost the entire time Enid is aboard the *Gunnary Myrdal* she is fraught with anxiety and dissatisfaction. Enid attributes this to two

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<sup>21</sup> “the abundance” of commodities, is experienced by its producers only as an abundance of dispossession” (Debord 23).

main factors: her dysfunctional husband and the constant reminders of her paltry financial situation. But the actual cause of her anxiety is her constant feeling of dispossession. This dispossession is a social phenomenon, one that occurs only in the realization of how her situation compares to everyone around her. Everywhere she looks on the cruise ship “fun was being had buoyantly on every deck by cliques of seniors enjoying their retirement the way she wished Alfred would enjoy his” (Franzen 289). In this respect, the spectacle “is not a collection of images: rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord 12). The spectacle is not the image of other people having fun; instead, it exists in the tension between the “spectacular life” that is imminently present and the lived reality of the passive, alienated subject beholding the image of this life. The spectacle exacts its effects through images, but it is not the images themselves.

This alienated state of dispossession is the quintessential individual disposition of the society-wide phenomenon of the spectacle. But it feels as if it occurs in complete isolation. It is not only that Enid’s husband is weak and disabled in relation to the other people on the cruise or that she sees herself as poor compared to the other passengers, but also that she is seemingly alone in her struggle. In the spectacle, this subjective loneliness is the rule:

“the former unity of life is lost forever. Apprehended in a partial way, reality unfolds in the pseudo-world apart, solely as an object of contemplation. The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous version of non-life” (Debord 12).

Enid, the spectator, is removed from the reality that she perceives to be going on around her.

“Widows in excellent health guided one another by the elbow to special mustering places where name tags and information packets were distributed and the preferred token of mutual recognition was the glass-shattering scream. Already seniors intent on savoring every minute of precious cruise time were drinking the frozen cocktail du jour, a Lingonberry Lapp Frappe, from a schooner that took two hands to handle safety” (Franzen 290).

All the while, Enid sat in the “B” deck lounge and

“listened to the slow plant-and-drag of someone’s walker-aided progress across the “A” Deck lounge above her” while Alfred had a final pre-dinner session in the bathroom, his third session inside an hour” (290).

Enid feels entirely alienated from what is going on. Never mind the sounds of the slow moving, disabled person above her, never mind the fact that Parkinson’s or bowel problems are relatively common among seniors, never mind the presence of a “C” and a “D” deck below the “B” deck; all she see is “retirees *running*, actually lifting their feet off the ground, in the direction of the Lingonberry Lapp Frappe” (291).<sup>22</sup> All she feels is the emotion provoked by the thought “You’d spent a lifetime being waited for impatiently and now your impatient husband’s minimum stay in a bathroom was fifteen minutes” (290) or the impression that “she felt that she and Al were the only intelligent people of her generation who had managed not to become rich” (312).

This type of tunnel vision is another part of the spectacle, which Debord explains,

“...appears at once as society itself, as a means of unification. As part of society, it is that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges. Being isolated—and precisely for that reason—this sector is the locus of

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<sup>22</sup> “In the ‘empire of the self’ everyone feels the same’ without ever escaping a condition of solipsism. ‘What people suffer from’ Curtis claims, ‘is being trapped within themselves—in a world of individualism everyone is trapped within their own feelings, trapped within their own feelings, trapped within their own imaginations” (Fisher 74).

illusion and false consciousness; the unity it imposes is merely the official language of generalized separation” (12).

Where this tunnel vision is pointed towards is also significant in understanding how the spectacle functions. The general answer to this question is towards the things Enid does not have or towards the people who have the things she does not have. The more specific answer is: toward the rich. To Debord, this is no surprise, as “power draped itself in the outward garb of a mythical order from the beginning” (20). What is particular to how the rich present themselves, however, is that –

“In former times the category of the sacred justified the cosmic and ontological ordering of things that best served the interests of their masters, expounding upon and embellishing what society could not deliver...the modern spectacle, by contrast, depicts what society can deliver, but within this depiction what is permitted is rigidly distinguished from what is possible” (20).

In other words, while the old patriarchal structure of power proclaimed, “God alone is strong and good, man is weak and sinful” (48), the new spectacular structure arouses “both aspirations and the expectations that they can be fulfilled... in the entrepreneurial fantasy society, the delusion is fostered that anyone can be Alan Sugar or Bill Gates, never mind that the actual likelihood of this occurring has diminished since the 1970s” (Fisher 36). The difference between the two systems is that the former entails a general indictment of humanity, while the latter focuses on the individual. In the first formulation, man collectively shares guilt; in the second, the poor, inadequate individual is the one that is blamed.

The result is an atomized feeling of responsibility and guilt. Moreover, this feeling of guilt is ever present as the stratosphere of the rich is always looming overhead. Enid breaks down crying when she shamefully admits to her new friend Sylvia that her room is on the lower, less-extravagant “B” deck instead of the “A” deck. The spectacular society simultaneously induces a feeling of dispossession and guilt for that dispossession.

Enid’s social atomization reaches an apotheosis midway through her time on the *Gunnar Myrdal*. After two sleepless nights dealing with a hallucinating Alfred and a day spent touring the historic homes of the super-rich in Newport, Rhode Island, her anxiety is at an all-time high. With the intention of getting help for Alfred, she takes a trip to the lowest “D” deck of the ship<sup>23</sup> where, in the Alfred Nobel Infirmary, she encounters the ship physician Dr. Hibbard. She begins to explain her problem to Dr. Hibbard saying, “I’m having some trouble.”

“Mental trouble? Emotional trouble?” he replies.

“Well, it’s my husband—“

“Excuse me. Stop? Stop?... You say *you’re* having trouble?”

“My trouble,” she sad, “is my husband and my children—“

“Sorry again, Edith. Time out?... We need to be clear: *you* are having the trouble?”

“No, *I’m* fine. But everyone else in my—“

“Are you anxious?”

“Yes, but—“

“Not sleeping?”

“Exactly. You see my husband—“...

Dr. Hibbard nodded and sat up straight, rolled open a deep drawer in the console behind him, and withdrew a handful of rattling plastic-and-foil packages...

“This is an excellent new medication that will help you enormously,”

Hibbard recited in a monotone. He winked at her.

“Excuse me?”

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<sup>23</sup> This is at the lowest class of the ship where anxiety presumably runs the highest.

“Have we misunderstood each other? I believe you said ‘I am having trouble.’ And mentioned anxiety and sleep disturbance?” (Franzen 314-315).

The doctor’s diagnostic logic is a comic metaphor. Franzen is satirizing the same line of reasoning by which the spectacular illusion induces shame in its subjects. Hibbard’s insistence to Enid that “you are the one having the trouble” is equivalent to the statement “it is your fault for being poor”. Mark Fisher makes the point that modern western medicine often reinforces the system’s atomizing mechanism:

By privatizing these problems—treating them as if they were caused only by chemical imbalances in the individual’s neurology and/or by their family background—any question of social systematic causation is ruled out” (21).

Hibbard’s diagnosis fails to acknowledge Enid’s anxiety as a product of a larger structure of social relationships. It ignores her anxiety as it relates to Alfred and to the stresses induced by the market system itself.

Ironically, in treating people as individual, autonomous entities, Dr. Hibbard’s treatment could not be any less individualized, less sensitive to the actual meaning of what it is to be an “individual.” At different points in their conversation, he addresses Enid by nine different names: Edwina, Elaine, Eartha, Enid, Edie, Eden, Edna, Enith, and Elinor. His continual blundering is a natural consequence of the treatment he administers.<sup>24</sup> By focusing purely on isolated symptoms, the doctor prescribes the diagnosis of “the vicious bipolarity of shame, that rapid cycling between confession and concealment” as simply, “Chemicals in your brain, Elaine. A

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<sup>24</sup> “The culture industry can only manipulate individuality so successfully because the fractured nature of society has always been reproduced within it” (Horkheimer & Adorno 126).

strong urge to confess, a strong urge to conceal: What's a strong urge? What else can it be but chemicals?" (Franzen 320).

As Fisher points out, capital's drive towards "atomistic individualization (you are sick because of your brain chemistry) provides an enormously lucrative market for multinational pharmaceutical corporations (we can cure you with our SSRIs.)" (37). And "the chemico-biologization of mental illness is of course strictly commensurate with its depolitization. Considering mental illness, an individual chemico-biological problem has enormous benefits for capitalism" (37). Hibbard has a solution for Enid in plastic and foil pill packets.

He prescribes a drug called Aslan, which "exerts a remarkable blocking effect on 'deep' or 'morbid' shame" and switches your anxiety to the "off" position (Franzen 319). The name of the drug, another of Franzen's caustic strokes, is the same as the hero of C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, "a furry, four-pawed Christ figure" (140). (It should be noted that, two hundred pages earlier, Enid's grandson Jonah was reading this book). Aslan the drug, like Christ the savior, is a guilt-removing, correction. Aslan absolves its takers from their sins and, in turn, their anxiety over everything from "a quarrel with your spouse, anxiety about a pet you've left behind, a perceived snub where none was intended" (317).

The method by which the drug seems to eliminate anxiety is by dulling the social awareness responsible for the anxiety. Deciding to ingest it is a decision to escape social bonds. In his mocking parallel with Lewis's story, Franzen suggests this is a moral failure akin to suicide. Enid's grandson describes the *Narnia* characters' journey to the end of the world as "like they are on a luxury cruise."

What lies at the end of this world is Aslan, a large lion, the Christ figure (139). The end of the world, the final frontier so to speak, is analogous to death:

“There came a time, however, when death ceased to be the enforcer of finitude and began to look, instead, like the last opportunity for radical transformation, the only plausible portal to the infinite” (464).

Enid goes on her luxury cruise in a search for deliverance; a spiritual quest for the better life she imagines is on board. The search eventually leads her to Aslan, which stands at the final frontier between her and the heavenly gates of anxiety free bliss. Aslan produces a chemically induced heaven within the paradise of the cruise.

Dr. Hibbard even admits the death-like quality of Aslan to Enid as he tries to convince her to take his magical pills:

“We all have irrational attachments to the particular chemical coordinates of our character and temperament. It’s a version of the fear of death, right? I don’t know what it will be like not to be anymore. But guess what? If ‘I’m’ not around to tell the difference, then what do ‘I’ really care? Being dead’s only a problem if you know you’re dead, which you never do because you are dead!” (321).

We fear the unknown, but, he implies, we can charge into it in order to grasp everything life can be.<sup>25</sup>

And here again is the atomization: if “*I*’m not around to tell the difference, then what do *I* really care?” There is no acknowledgement that when “you” die “you” do not just die for yourself, but “you” also die for others. The effect is not only singular, it is social. Hibbard’s rationalization for Aslan fails to recognize the individual as one particular intersection within a larger social entity, a condition that

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<sup>25</sup> The irony is that Aslan takes its consumer past this final frontier into a type of heaven, but then, as it wears out it sends them crashing back to earth. All the shame that it had repressed comes flooding back.

inevitably causes anxieties. In eliminating social anxieties through desensitization, Aslan also dissolves the social bonds that create those anxieties in the first place.

After Enid has started taking the pills, she is able to sleep through Alfred's hallucinatory encounter with his own piece of poop, completely unconscious of his cries for help. When she finds him curled up in the shower the next morning, she wakes him up and politely informs him that "this is not the place to sleep" (323). As Alfred struggles in pain to get to his feet, Enid watches with "low to medium interest." When he tries to draw her attention to his ripped, shit-filled diapers, her response is a chipper, "I had the most wonderful night's sleep" (323).

This stands in stark contrast to the previous night's events in which Enid returned to their cabin to find a manic, hallucinating Alfred. It is a chaotic scene wrought with emotional intensity. Alfred rages, even hits Enid at one point, and she weeps and hits him back. Through all of this she begs Alfred to calm down and does her best to comfort him. But addition to creating Enid's most intense anxiety, this encounter also creates her most intense feeling of affection for Alfred. "Even now she couldn't help loving him," Franzen writes. "Maybe especially now...maybe all the love she'd given [her children], all the love for which in the end she'd gotten so little in return, had merely been practice for this most demanding of her children" (311). It is Enid's moment of highest social responsibility that induces her greatest anxiety, but this moment also creates her greatest sense of her own identity. As a caretaker, Enid renounces her life as purely for her own benefit. In doing so, she becomes someone of essential importance for Alfred, and his need is proof that her life has value. This is the antithesis of the underlying assumption of Dr. Hibbard's diagnosis, the

assumption that capitalism makes of the sick or poor individual, the sentiment that they are worthless.

This phenomenon applies not only to Aslan, but to illusions in general. Hibbard's argument against the fear of death could also be read as, "Being delusional is only a problem if you know you're delusional, which you never do because you are delusional!"

By justifying the escape and explaining away the fear of death, Dr. Hibbard's argument for Aslan is essentially an argument for suicide, a self-administered death, which by renouncing social ties, sends the consumer into a state of bliss. It is only in isolation that suicide becomes justified. It is the ultimate result of atomization, the rejection of the self as a social being, of the ties that make the subject precisely who he or she is.<sup>26</sup> It is a relinquishing of social responsibility that, behind the guise of a "benevolent" treatment, is based in the same sentiment as the selfish turd's, an impulse that says "Up yours jack! I got mine."

#### Chapter 4: "Bliss"

In *Faserland*, the narrator is a member of the class that occupies the fanciful stratosphere of financial might that Enid so longs for. As a result, the entire story takes place in a type of lived illusion. The narrator, rather than being burdened with a constant sense of material deprivation, has no excuse for not having a good time. We can attribute the jovial and inscrutable exterior he presents to the reader to this apparent good fortune. In the opening scene of the novel, life for Kracht's protagonist is seemingly quite good. The weather is beautiful—"Der Himmler ist blau. Ab und zu schiebt sich dicke Wolke vor die Sonne."—he is sexually fulfilled by Karin who

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<sup>26</sup> Enid does not want to be an individual in that she wants to be the same as everyone else, to participate in what everyone else is doing (Franzen 465).

“looks quite good in fact” “sieht eigentlich ganz gut aus” and is “certainly good in bed” “sicher gut im Bett.” (13), and the island of Sylt evokes warm, pleasant memories of the past times he spent there “as a small child” “als kleines Kind” (16).

As Karin and the narrator pull up to the bar the scene resembles a clichéd advertisement:

“The sun was already low in the sky and immersed Whiskeystreet in a golden light. . . . Someone form behind the bar put on *Hotel California*, and they way the music played and the dog munched on his little piece of bread, while outside the sun set und I felt so damn happy. A grin spread across my face because I was happy und then Anna and she began to grin und Karin saw and grinned too, even Sergio had to laugh.” “Die Sonne steht schon tief am Himmel und taucht die Whiskystraße in ein goldenes Licht. . . jemand hinter der Bar legt *Hotel California* von den Eagles auf, und wie die Musik so spielt und der Hund Max sein Brötchen zerkaut und draußen die Sonne untergeht, fühle ich mich auf einaml so verdammt glücklich. Ich bekomme ein dämliches Grinsen, weil ich so glücklich bin, und Anne merkt das und fängt auch an zu grinsen, und jetzt grinst auch Karin und sogar Sergio muß lächeln” (20-21).

Even the song choice—a dated hit that everyone knows and generally approves of—feels safe in its perfection. It is a scene that from afar, like the cruise ship, seems like it would be like a lot of fun.

This happy description, the surface of smiles and sunlit streets, is, however, undermined by currents of tension and disappointment. Sitting next to Karin’s friend’s boyfriend, Sergio, on the beach before they head to the aforementioned bar, the narrator tries to start a conversation.

“In order to say something I mention that it’s going to rain later. Sergio replies that he thinks the weather is going to say just the way it is. I notice that he has an accent and I ask him where he comes from. He says Columbia. The conversations grinds to a halt and Sergio says nothing more, so I light a cigarette, looks at my nails and then out at the sea” “Um irgend etwas zu sagen, sage ich, dass es nachher regnen wird, und Sergio meint, dass das Wetter ganz bestimmt so bleibt. Ich merke, das ser einen Akzent hat, und frage ihn, woher er kommt, und er sagt: aus Kolumbien. Dann geht uns

irgendwie Gesprächstoff aus, und Sergio redet nicht weiter, also zünde ich mir eine Zigarette an und sehe erst auf meine Fingernägel und dann aufs Meer” (18).

The scene is uncomfortable and socially awkward, not a relaxing time with warm sunlight and rolling waves. The narrator’s relationship, of lack thereof, with Karin’s friend Anne doesn’t hold much more promise for a good time. The one time he had seen her before, he had tried to drunkenly hit on her in a bar in Munich. That interaction ended with the narrator excusing himself to throw up in the bathroom, allowing Anne time to flee. When she sees him on Sylt, she doesn’t even acknowledge that she knows him. “Anne doesn’t recognize me or at least she acts as if she doesn’t.” “Anne erkennt mich nicht, oder sie tut so, als ob sie mich nicht erkennen würde” (18).

Even Karin, the person who the narrator is closest to and has (supposedly) slept with, does not offer the narrator any type of fulfilling experience. He finds their conversations incredibly dull. On their way to the beach, Karin blabbers on while the narrator looks listlessly out the car’s passenger window. So bored is he by Karin, he begins to ogle other women, “I throw my cigarette out the window, while Karin steps on the gas. We overtake a small car in which a fairly cute girl sits. I put my sunglasses on while Karin blabbers on. I look out the window.” “Ich werfe meine Zigarette aus dem Fenster, während Karin losfährt... überholt sie einen Golf, in dem ein ziemlich hübsches Mädchen sitzt. Ich setzte meine Sonnenbrille auf, und Karin erzählt irgend etwas, und ich sehe aus dem Fenster” (15). The narrator isn’t interested in what she has to say, nor does he seem to enjoy the time he spends with her.

In short, despite the happy setting, Karin and the rest of the crew hardly seem like a group with whom the narrator could share a good time at the bar. Kracht pushes the farcical nature of the scene by confronting us with a disgustingly drunk advertising agent vomiting all over the door of his Porsche as Karin and the narrator are leaving the bar.

The contrast between the appearance of the narrator's experience and its reality is mirrored in his relationship with Karin. He mentions at the very beginning of the novel that she "looks quite good in fact" "sieht eigentlich ganz gut aus" (13), but this description does not do justice to his intense lust over her physical appearance. The nature of his fixation becomes clear as the chapter progresses. He is actively inattentive to Karin's words but seriously focused on her physical features, which include "her blond page boy [hairstyle]" "ihren blonden Pagenkopf" (13), intensely blue eyes (14) and her "rather big, firm breasts" "ziemlich große, feste Brüste" (17). In this sense, Karin is for the narrator a spectacular commodity. From afar Karin is an object that stirs the narrator's desire, but once he "consumes" her and goes past her alluring outer shell, his lust and attraction dissipate, as there is nothing but bland conversations about fashion. When the narrator questions the authenticity of Karin's eye color ("Karin had rather blue eyes." "Karin hat ziemlich blaue Augen. Ob das gefärbte Kontaktlinsen sind?" (14)), it serves as a metaphor for how he views her entire personality and his experience on the island of Sylt. He is asking "are these things authentic?" His two decisions at the end of the chapter—that she does have "blue contact-lenses "blaugefärbten Kontaktlinsen" (23)<sup>27</sup> and to leave Sylt—are

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<sup>27</sup> Although he is still not certain about this assumption.

analogous to one another and an indirect admission to the reader that, despite the outward appearance of his life on Sylt, he is very dissatisfied.

Yet the narrator seems only mildly self-conscious of this fact. While on the beach he even proclaims, “I think I like Karin quite a lot” “Ich glaube, ich mag Karin ganz gerne” (19). In the context of his actions, this is a peculiar statement and one that provokes the question, “why?” The only possible answer seems to be that it springs from his physical attraction to her—it is the only complement he ever gave her. Her appearance, not her substance is what matters. This is a common enough story, but in the context of the novel, it has more than common resonance.

Appearance over substance is an essential theme of Kracht’s milieu, an ever broader characteristic of the culture he critiques. It is a principal feature of Debord’s “society of the spectacle” and falls in line with the type of commoditized *weltanschauung* prevalent on Franzen’s cruise ship. Debord explains this cultural phenomenon more precisely saying:

“(in) an earlier stage in the economy’s domination of social life entailed an obvious downgrading of being into having...the present stage, in which social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy, entails a general shift from having to appearing: all effective having must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate *raison d’être* from appearances” (16).

Debord takes the theme of representation being superimposed over being, a graspable image or structure of understanding placed over an incomprehensible nature, to a wider level. He describes a type of understanding that is almost entirely based on surface. While more developed frames of representation—for example, modern western science—attempt to question and understand the world through admittedly

limited faculties of perception, in Debord's spectacular society everything is taken at, and purely to be, its face value. Karin, for the narrator is simply her appearance.

As the story continues, the narrator's lascivious appetite for women only becomes more apparent. Everywhere he goes he is constantly eying women,<sup>28</sup> and his attraction borders on obsession. To him, women are alluring objects that present themselves as potential conquest; he refers to sex with Karin as "The Triumph". No matter which city he is in, there is always "a couple of pretty girls" "ein paar hübsche Mädchen" (78) on which the narrator is ready to use various flirtatious "tricks" "in order to see how ready these girls are to fuck me" "um zu sehen, wie weit die Menschen bereit sind, auf mich einzulassen" (101).

In none of these situations, however, does the narrator ever successfully seduce the woman he lusts after. Most of the time he does not even manage to strike up a conversation. Instead, he observes the woman from a discrete distance. His objectification is passive and abstracted, recalling Enid as she watches the partying crowd of seniors on board the cruise. For the narrator, women are a type of spectacular commodity.

Kracht makes this explicitly clear in the narrator's lustful contemplation of Hannah, "a beauty" "eine Schönheit" who he met a few times in different pubs across Munich. Looking at her from across the room of a bar the narrator says, "Ich think to myself how I could get to talking to her. But actually I really do not want to at all. I only want to stand her and look at her." "Ich überlege, wie ich sie am besten ansprechen könnte Aber eigentlich will ich das auch gar nicht. Ich will nur hier stehen

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<sup>28</sup> Examples of this can be found on pages 14, 20, 29, 38, 39, 45, 79, 101, 115, 129, and 151 of the novel.

und ihr zuzusehen" (115). The narrator recognizes Hannah as an object that can only be desirable in a state of dispossession. Any attempt to "consume" her, to penetrate her spectacular façade can only result in disappointment. The greatest pleasure that Hannah can provide him with is a masochistic one. Horkheimer and Adorno give a psychological account of this phenomenon:

"The culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises. The promissory note of pleasure issued by plot and packaging is indefinitely prolonged: the promise, which actually compromises the entire show, disdainfully intimates that there is nothing more to come, that the dinner must be satisfied with reading the menu.... By constantly exhibiting the object of desire, the breasts beneath the sweater, the naked torso of the sporting hero, it merely goads the unsublimated anticipation of pleasure, which through the habit of denial has long since been mutilated as masochism. There is no erotic situation in which innuendo and incitement are not accompanied by the clear notification that things will never go so far" (Horkheimer & Adorno 111).

The objects of desire in Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry are analogous to the spectacular commodity. They present themselves as promises of pleasure, but once consumed, the pleasure proves illusory. It is simply relocated to the next object of desire. The promissory note can only exist as a promissory note.

This phenomenon is one that the reader and Kracht's protagonist are well acquainted with from the narrator's days on Sylt. His fling with Karin is an episode in which he is "cheated out" of the pleasure seemingly promised by a stereotypically beautiful girl. Despite Karin's "fat Breasts" "feste Brüste" the narrator is, once on the other side of the sexual pursuit, despondent and unsatisfied. The promissory note is relocated to the "rather pretty girls" "ziemlich hübsche Mädchen," (15) that they drive by on the way to the beach. For all his boasting, the narrator's "triumph" is only an appearance of victory, an unsatisfying, empty act.

In the scene with Hannah, the narrator has simply made the decision to let hanging fruit stay hanging, to let his unfulfilled desire serve as the most intense feeling he can hope for, a feeling that is so intense that when he sees Hannah flirting with other men “it almost hurt me” “es mir fast weh tut” (115). Kracht emphasizes Hannah’s existence for narrator as an object that can only ever offer any sustained pleasure in its denial by placing her behind a sales counter filled with “buckets with candy, cigarettes, tasty bread and bags with various chip” “Kübel mit Süßigkeiten, Zigaretten, selbstgeschmierten Broten und Tüten mit verschieden Chips” (115). As Rollo and the narrator leave the bar a little while later, the narrator eats one of the Gummy Bears that Rollo had gotten from Hannah. He comments, “it tastes horribly sweet and it sticks on the teeth” “es schmeckt furchtbar süß, und es klebt an den Zähnen” (116). The sweets, like Hannah, are only attractive in their façade. When actually consumed they are rather unenjoyable.

Equally telling of Hannah’s role as a commodity is her overly refined appearance in which “she plucked her eyebrows so perfectly that above her eyes only stood a small thin line” “sie ihre Augenbrauen so zurechtzupft, das über ihren Augen nur noch ein ganz dünner Strich steht” (115). The only further description the reader receives is the generic term “Beauty” “Schönheit”. In this sense, Hannah is an example of another motif in the novel in which the women the narrator ogles seem like different types of sexual commodities from which he can select, items on a menu from which he can choose to satisfy his appetite:

“Frankfurt girls always have a naturalness to them that you cannot find anywhere else in Germany. In Hamburg all of the girl wear barbour green, in Berlin they dress kind of poorly to give out the appearance of an artist and in Munich all of the girl have a strange inner light because of the blowdryer. But

in Frankfurt all of the girls are simply casual... girl that have clothing on medium-length hair and noses that points slightly upwards, while they sit around in bars and laugh" "Frankfurter Mädchen haben immer so eine Selbstverständlichkeit, die man nirgendwo sonst in Deutschland findet. In Hamburg sind alle Mädchen barbourgrün, in Berlin ziehen sie sich betont schlecht an, damit sie so aussehen wie Künstler, und in München habe die Mädchen wegen dem Föhn so ein seltsames inneres Leuchten. Aber in Frankfurt, da sind die Mädchen einfach lässig... Mädchen, die Kleider anhaben und halblange, hellbraune Haare und leicht nach oben zeigende Nasen und die in Kneipen herumsitzen und lachen" (79).

The narrator's attitude toward potential female conquests shares the same shallowness with which he regards almost all other people. Appearance all but becomes identity and personality. This is apparent in the way he describes Sergio,

"Sergio is one of those people who always has to wear pink Polos with an old Rolex and if he were not bare foot with rolled up pant sleeves then he would wear slippers from Alde. I see this immediately." "Sergio, das ist so einer, der immer rosa Ralph-Lauren-Hemden tragen muß und dazu eine alte Rolex, und wenn er nicht barfuß wäre, mit hochgekremelten Hosenbeinen, dann würde er Slipper tragen von Alden, das sehe ich sofort" (18).

He characterizes Sergio before he even talks with him. The narrator makes the same type of assumption with virtually every character he meets. His assertion that a random man on the train is a "Jazz-Freak" who attends a particular "Mojo-Club" is based on the fact that the man has a "short beard" "kleines Bärtchen" (25); he takes the first two taxi drivers he meets to be spiteful lower class scum, the first because of the brand of jacket he is wearing, the second because of the brand of cigarette he smokes; and he proclaims that the flight stewardess who serves him is a "correct stewardess" "richtige Pilotenuhren" (51) simply because her uniform looks so official.

The narrator defines himself through his appearance as well,

“My shirts are all from Brook Brothers. The difference between Brooks Brothers shirts and Ralph Lauren shirts is that naturally Ralph Lauren shirts are much more expensive and cheaply made and in reality look terrible and you always have to have a stupid Polo emblem on the left side of your breast.”  
“Meine Hemden sind alle von Brooks Brothers...Der Unterschied zwischen Brooks-Borthers-Hemden und Raplh Lauren-Hemden ist natürlich der, dass Raplh Lauren viel teuer ist, viel schlechter in der Verarbeitung, im Grunde scheiße aussieht und man dann noch meistens so ein blödes Polo-Emblem auf der linken Brust vor sich herum tragen muss” (92).

Who he is, is fully and properly communicated by his appearance. In Debord’s words,

“Understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance” (14).

Importantly, the appearances that define the narrator’s perceptions are largely created and mediated by the market. The narrator’s view of people and the world around him is filtered through a commoditized lens.

Because the narrator defines himself largely through his appearance, the social bonds that he has are also mediated by this characteristic. Indeed, the big thing that Nigel and the narrator seem to have in common is the same haircut—“we both have rather similar hair cuts, long in the front short in the back ” “wir haben beide sowieso ziemlich ähnliche Frisuren, vorne lang und hinten ziemlich kurz” (31). As mentioned before, the narrator even wonders to himself at one point, “why Nigel and I like each other. I really have no idea” “warum Nigel und ich uns eigentlich mögen, und dass ich eigentlich gar nicht weiß warum” (38). His friendship with Rollo seems likewise centered on image, as they both wear “proper attire” “ordentliche Kleidung” (108), something that distinguishes them from the pierced, tattooed, longhaired crowd around them at a rave and binds them together in the situation.

Despite this superficiality, the narrator and his friends seem to believe their relationships have actual intimacy. Nigel has enough confidence in the narrator to give him his apartment key, and Rollo chose the narrator out of all the people at his party, to talk to in the moments leading up to his suicide. One would think that such acts of trust would be reserved for friendships based on more than just appearance. But in Kracht's drug and party filled, brand-saturated world of youth culture, they are not.

Nigel and Rollo's affection toward the narrator stems from what they share with him: isolation, substance abuse, focus on appearance. These are features of the general youth culture in the book, though the narrator, in his narcissistic introversion, has no perception of this. His ritual is the same in every place he goes, save his final destination of Switzerland: he arrives, gets himself settled and goes to a party or bar, all the while chain smoking cigarettes and drinking, getting progressively more drunk as the night wears on. At first, the narrator seems to be alone in his tumble through Germany, but upon closer inspection, almost everybody he knows seems to be following the same pattern. He sees Anne three separate times throughout the novel, four counting his prior encounter with her in Munich, each time at a different party. After the narrator flees Nigel's apartment, he encounters him again in Heidelberg, this time shooting up hard drugs. The narrator is not by any means singular in his alienated, intoxicated journey, but part of an entire generation experiencing a deficiency of personal connection.

It is a generation trapped in spectacular time. Addicted to a monotonous, repetitive round of party-sleep-party, the natural cycle of day and night becomes

almost irrelevant in structuring time. The party schedule is superimposed over all other temporal strictures. And within this repetitious existence of ceaseless celebration, their actions, like those of the passengers on the cruise ship, are entirely confined to consumption. In one sense, because people have mentally reduced themselves and others to commoditized, consumable representations (filtered and confined by the different brands and character types available), the only possible interaction would seem to be through consumption of one another. The rampant, impulsive consumption of different intoxicating substances is simultaneously a sign of the inability to do anything but consume, and a coping mechanism for the anxiety and instability that arises from a ideology as feeble and fungible as the narrator's confused "father order".

The youth culture that Kracht is depicting is, of course, not an all-inclusive one, but one confined to the wealthiest class. With this in mind, we could see this group's dissolute hedonism as a control mechanism that ironically reinforces their position as the dominant class. The spectacular illusion that the narrator tries to uphold for the reader is the same illusion that is structured by the market. To fail to maintain the illusion, which corresponds to and supports his position of privilege, would be to risk losing his entitlement.

In this sense, the narrator's and his generation's almost unconscious decision to continue their life style of unchecked partying, consumption, and material indulgence is analogous to Alfred's internalized habit of physical subjugation. Both are patterns of behavior that are produced by and correspond with the order from which they originate. The narrator's impulsivity is enabled by the wealth that the

market supplies him with. This wealth then, as a result of the narrator's impulsive consumption, reproduces the spectacular illusion and is also returned back to the market. Similarly, Alfred's tradition of patriarchal restraint physically enforces the law of the sovereign, and through the institution of the family raises new fathers who in turn reinforce the tradition they have internalized. Both the spectacular society and the patriarchal society reproduce themselves through rearing the carriers of power. It is no coincidence that Alfred is misogynistic and racist or that Kracht's narrator shows vehement disdain for poor people. They are both tools for their respective regimes.

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