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“New German Pop Literature”: Difference, Identity, and the Redefinition of Pop Literature after Postmodernism

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The term “Neue Deutsche Popliteratur” was coined in the late Nineties for a number of young writers like Christian Kracht, Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre, and Florian Illies. Their novels, short stories, and essays published between 1995 and 2000, such as Kracht’s *Faserland* (1995), Stuckrad-Barre’s *Soloalbum* (1998), and Illies’ *Generation Golf* (2000), were extremely successful and quickly established the reputations of these young writers. The *Popliterat* became a pop star, promoted as a young and flexible media worker involved in different sectors of cultural production: as gag writer for late-night comedy shows, as music promoter, as journalist for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, or even as DJ. Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre staged his readings as stand-up comedy with a DJ set, sometimes attracting an audience of several thousand, made up mainly of teenagers and young adults. Eventually, he even managed to get his own – albeit short-lived – literature show on MTV. In Germany, pop literature became a catchy brand name for a recognizable group of authors and for a fast-written, easy-to-digest commodity, produced for and well received by a young audience. But what, apart from this culture industry context, makes this genuine *Zeitgeist* phenomenon so appealing, especially among young readers, and what social and political implications can be found in these texts? Finally, why and how do they refer to the concept of pop?

Defining German pop literature of the Nineties is not an easy task. Had these writers formed a group and chosen this term as a label for their shared literary position, doing so might have been easier, but literary circles and manifestos seem to be out of fashion nowadays. It might be impossible to track down when and by whom the term “pop literature” was introduced to refer to the work of these writers within the prospering scene of young German literature in the Nineties. Nor do the difficulties end there, for the term pop was also claimed by a number of other writers to label their work. In 1998, the publisher Suhrkamp launched an advertisement showing book covers of the authors Rainald Goetz, Andreas Neumeister, and Thomas

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Meinecke, all born in the Fifties, accompanied simply by the word “pop.” Meanwhile, social-beat and slam-poetry writers claimed to be pop in their own right – all of this accompanied by mutual accusations about who is “pop” and who is not.

In 1964 the Austrian writer Hans Carl Artmann was the first to use the term “Pop-literatur” (Artmann 44) in the search for a broader definition of literature in order to overcome the predominant aesthetics of high modernism. Years before Leslie A. Fiedler held his talk at the university of Freiburg on literature and postmodernism in 1968, Artmann had envisaged new academic approaches similar to what later came to be called cultural studies, and he underlined the necessity of accepting comics, films, etc. as cultural expressions of no lesser value than traditional forms of literature. In his autobiographical prose Artmann gave an example of his understanding of pop literature: he employed symbols of mass consumption and popular culture, keeping track of the banalities of everyday life, and registering sensations and experiences in a stream of consciousness. In a more general context, the term pop literature indeed proves to be useful to differentiate works by Artmann and other writers such as Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, Hubert Fichte, and Peter Handke from the prevailing trends of that time as typified by the sophisticated forms of late modernism in the tradition of Gottfried Benn, the writings of the *Gruppe 47*, and the literature of political engagement. This form of pop literature evolved from a process of confrontation with new realism, the French *nouveau roman* and the experimental literature of concrete poetry, following Susan Sontag’s demands for a new sensibility and a close scrutiny of the environment. Influenced by beat literature and music, pop art and Anglo-American underground culture, pop literature was bound to the social context of youth culture in the Sixties and therefore strongly affected by its decline as a form of social protest and the diminution of subversive subcultures. After 1970 pop literature in German nearly ceased to exist, because the authors were seeking other forms of expression, often drawing from realistic or modern literary traditions.

Considered in the light of this outcome of “historical” pop literature, the return to pop as a reference in the Nineties is indeed a surprise. Although there are various forms of appropriation as already mentioned, this article focusses on the “new German pop literature” as the most popular and successful. It is important to note that it does not form a homogeneous group and the texts mentioned as a representative selection are not based on the same literary strategies. But there are striking similarities especially concerning the construction of identity. Most of the texts are set in the present or immediate past, constructed with a young first-person narrator who describes his daily life, directly responding to his social environment or recapitulating his biography. The narrating subject, deprived of any stable bonds such as peer groups, family, class, subculture, etc., takes an unfocussed position within society, orientating himself according to attitudes of style and an affirmative response to consumer society.

This is paradigmatically expressed in the novel *Faserland* (1995) by Christian Kracht. The protagonist, a boarding-school drop-out with an upper-class background presumably in his mid-twenties, recounts his travels from Sylt to Zurich on a senseless and aimless journey. Although the narrator accidentally meets acquaintances or friends here and there, he stays nowhere for long; he constantly finds himself in embarrassing situations that force him to move on, disgusted by the people he meets. Not only do his sexual advances usually end in disaster, but the protagonist also lacks social competence and fails to communicate with others. Close friends or family exist only in childhood memories that surface in an idiosyncratic manner. The protagonist is haunted by these reminiscences, which are the only feelings that can give him any sense of security and emotional warmth, although they derive from an irretrievably lost past. Unable to fulfil this desire for emotional security and authenticity in a society that is becoming ever more complex and incalculable, he is constantly trying to escape the past as well as the present, even resorting to massive alcohol abuse.

Insecurity, the loss of emotional control, and the denial of recognition are transformed into hatred for almost everybody around him, excluding a select few friends. Any person-to-person contact is overshadowed by the fact that he cannot interact with others in a normal or rational way. On the one hand, the need for difference leads to an attitude of irony, derision, contempt, and disgust. On the other, a fetishist idolatry of status symbols and the continuous scanning of style codes, attitudes, and taste help to establish aesthetic distinction. In the literary criticism of *Faserland* this established the link to “pop” as a symbol for the explicit affirmation of the Nineties consumer culture. This mindset, the upper-class background of the narrator, and the abundance of financial resources have led to a frequent misreading of the novel as an enthusiastic embrace of a yuppie lifestyle. But despite his detachment from the world, the protagonist is well aware of the spurious character of the upper class lifestyle. Neither the yuppie peers nor the upper class milieu provide a stable framework for personal relations or social identity. The protagonist is thrown back onto his distinguished taste and style as the last resort of any feeling of security based on distance from other individuals.

While the narrator despises everybody who is unfashionable, his fiercest reactions are against those who criticize his own carelessness in terms of society, history, and politics. About Varna, an arty left-wing intellectual, for instance, he says:

Im Grunde haben diese Menschen nur nachgeplappert, was sie in diesen Heften, Texte zur Kunst hießen die, glaube ich, gelesen hatten, und das, was in diesen Heftchen stand, war auch nicht besonders interessant. Jedenfalls rannte Varna immer auf diese Menschen zu, und man hatte das Gefühl, daß es ihr furchtbar peinlich war, vorher 34 Sekunden lang bei mir gestanden zu haben, weil ich rahmengenähte Schuhe trage und mich weigere, über Kunst zu diskutieren oder

über irgendwelche Independent-Bands, die im Spex erwähnt werden, oder über den aufkeimenden Rechtsradikalismus, die braune Scheiße, wie Varna immer sagte.
(68)

The narrator is unable to confront Varna's involvement in politics, music, or art on any discursive level. Any communicative interaction is bound to fail when he undermines the seriousness of her views by claiming, for instance, that “jeder, der sich aufregt über politische Verhältnisse, einen polizeilich verordneten Einlauf bekommen müßte” (70). Simply because Varna's social and political concerns call the narrator's ironic detachment from society into question, she triggers his most dismissive responses. The confrontation with her demonstrates that the protagonist's perception of society is based on a catalogue of stereotypes by means of which he categorizes everyone he meets. Varna is perceived only in the terms of the essentially predictable and interchangeable behaviour patterns of her peer group. Other individuals are fitted into similar categories, which are variously defined as “Linke, Nazis, Ökos, Intellektuelle, Busfahrer” (27), from which one has to distinguish oneself by any means necessary. The perception of others in a matrix of preformed discourses, dress codes, and attitudes relates to the absence of the very same authentic individualism that the protagonist himself is longing for. But contempt and style are the only means to establish oneself as different from other individuals, and the denial of this longing results in hate and aggression.

This fragile construction of difference necessarily abolishes any referential meaning of discourse, history, and space. This continues on the trip through Germany and Switzerland, where all places become insignificant and interchangeable non-places. The abolition of any topographical reference corresponds to a dissolution of historical symbolism and consciousness. Although the narrator is obsessed with images of National Socialism and stories of the Nazi period, history becomes merely a panorama of meaningless or at best obscure anecdotes. Having finally arrived in Switzerland, he looks back on Germany:

Von den Deutschen würde ich erzählen, von den Nationalsozialisten mit ihren sauber ausrasierten Nacken, von den Raketen-Konstrukteuren, die Füllfederhalter in der Brusttasche ihrer weißen Kittel stecken haben, fein aufgereiht. Ich würde erzählen von den Selektierern an der Rampe, von den Geschäftsleuten mit ihren schlecht sitzenden Anzügen, von den Gewerkschaftern, die immer SPD wählen, als ob wirklich etwas davon abhinge, und von den Autonomen, mit ihren Volkküchen und ihrer Abneigung gegen Trinkgeld.

Ich würde auch erzählen von Männern, die nach Thailand fliegen, weil sie so gerne mächtig und geliebt wären, und von den Frauen, die nach Jamaica fliegen, weil sie ebenfalls mächtig und geliebt sein wollen. Von den Kellnern würde ich erzählen, von den Studenten, den Taxifahrern, den Nazis, den Rentnern, den Schwulen, den Bausparvertrags-Abschließern, von den Werbern, den DJs, den

Ecstasy-Dealern, den Obdachlosen, den Fußballspielern und den Rechtsanwälten.
(149)

History and society are reduced to a negative typology of anachronistic lifestyles, forming a heap of insignificant clichés and stereotypes, blended together in a negative structuralism that abolishes any difference. The equation of Holocaust perpetrators and soccer players obviously renders any morally or politically grounded judgments obsolete. It is not the abyss of German history that frightens the narrator, but the presumed absence of individuality in a society formed by different but essentially interchangeable standard patterns. The desire to escape the rotten “Faserland” Germany and its past has its prototype in Thomas Bernhard’s novel *Auslöschung* (1986), but the differences are remarkable, not only in the narrative strategy. Like Bernhard’s protagonist, Franz Josef Murau, who flees to Italy, Kracht’s narrator in *Faserland* ends up abroad, in Zurich. While the intellectual Murau comforts himself with classical philosophy, art, and literature, Kracht’s protagonist visits Thomas Mann’s grave without any definite purpose, but he fails to find it in the cemetery due to the onset of darkness. The novel ends with an allusion to Klopstock’s frivolous day out on Lake Zurich in 1750, when he rowed out with several couples of his acquaintance, playfully exchanging partners. Kracht’s narrator instead asks a man to row him out to the middle of the lake, remaining alone and forsaken.

With a protagonist who neither gains any significant experiences nor tries to explore his environment, Kracht’s inversion of the Bildungsroman and travel report demonstrates a postmodern, although somewhat predictable way of dealing with literary traditions. The specific constitution of the protagonist’s subjectivity, his perception of society, and the attitude towards consumption and style were adapted in many texts by other pop writers, although these works generally lacked the narrative depth and the intertextual framework of Kracht’s novel. *Faserland* appears, for instance, to be the blueprint for Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre’s *Soloalbum* (1998), in which a young media agent with a job in the music industry recounts his everyday life, consisting of miserable working conditions, socializing, and parties. The story begins shortly after the narrator has been left by his girlfriend, and the plot, narrated in direct and explicit language, revolves around his attempts to overcome his lovesickness by trying to meet and have sex with other women. These strategies prove futile. The narrator is haunted by the images of his lost love. While the protagonist perceives his environment in terms of the same set of categories and stereotypes characteristic of the narrator’s ironic posture in *Faserland*, *Soloalbum* renounces the literary conventions and the clear distinction between the fictive ego and the author present in Kracht’s novel. Stuckrad-Barre reflects on his work experience in the media sector as a general strategy of writing, using his biography and everyday life as well as language fragments of the media and advertisements as material, incorporating lists of spoken and written phrases such as the captions under the daily photographs of

nude female models on page one of the tabloid newspaper *Bild*, a technique that was extensively elaborated in much early pop literature. Stuckrad-Barre’s “rubrizierte Elemente sind Fundstücke aus vorliegenden Texten, aber mit dem Anwachsen der Sammlung zeigen sich die Regelmäßigkeiten, es schält sich heraus, worin die Äquivalenz der Elemente eigentlich besteht” (Baßler 102).

Obviously, there is no authentic, unmediated language outside these patterns, which Stuckrad-Barre’s narrator generally treats by affirming them ironically. But at the same time, the strategy of listing is less ironic when the narrator offers the list of his top ten hit singles. Here, pop literature is meant less as a textual strategy than as a reference to pop music as a framework of cultural identity. The narrator adores the British band *Oasis*, and its singer Liam Gallagher is his undisputed role model. “Pop” in this case simply means a fan attitude towards macho British laddism, applying an *Oasis* song to every situation in life, and the mediation of one’s own experience by categories drawn from pop songs. Therefore, *Soloalbum* is set only in the present; the protagonist lives for today, adhering to a lifestyle as expressed in Brit-Pop, a product of the Nineties culture industry.

Whereas *Faserland* and *Soloalbum* focus on a strictly individualistic or rather monadic perspective, two books published shortly afterwards demonstrate that there seems to be an urgent desire for self-explication and identity formation in an even broader sense. The writer Joachim Bessing formed a “popkulturelles Quintett” by inviting his friends, the writers Kracht, Stuckrad-Barre, Eckhart Nickel, and Alexander von Schönburg, for a weekend in the Hotel Adlon in Berlin. He taped their conversations and published the reworked transcript under the title *Tristesse Royale* (1999), claiming that it offered a “Sittenbild unserer Generation” (Bessing 11). The conversations among the writers, ranging over topics such as brands, clothes, style, economy, politics, relationships, travelling, corporate identities, and music, are rambling and unfocussed. The subjects, mostly chosen at random, are meant to expose the disorientation in the contemporary world of information overload and the absence of any binding values and political ideas.

Alexander von Schönburg maintains:

Wir sind nichts als Produkte einer postmateriellen Generation, die nur noch mit der Langeweile zu kämpfen hat. Genau wie die Haltung zum Geld, das immer da sein muss, ob man es nun hat oder nicht. Unser Grundluxus ist so hoch, dass wir auch durch Schulden nicht weit fallen können. [...] Wer es sich leisten kann, sein Konto um fünfzigtausend Mark zu ueberziehen, ist sehr reich. Wer sich die Schulden leisten kann, ist reich. Deshalb gibt es für uns auch keine Spur des Existenzkampfes mehr. Wir kennen auch den Statuskampf der vorherigen Generation nicht mehr. (33)

Supplied with the necessary financial resources, the writers cultivate a dandy-like,

elitist rejection of labour, affirming the economic status quo without developing any form of economic analysis. It is not very convincing when five of the happy few with a wealthy family background or success in the media sector pretend to represent the full scope of a generation. Instead, they represent an a-traditional upper-class ideology that casts its social position as a universal one; although poverty, marginalization, social problems, and economic crises do indeed exist in capitalist society, they are dismissed as irrelevant to one's own life. Instead, the well-paid pop writers praise life on credit, talking proudly about their overdrawn accounts, and describe themselves as gamblers in the "casino capitalism." They demand a high standard of living here and now, while the self-restraint and work ethic of their parents' generation are considered unthinkable. But the unwillingness to work and the pursuit of their needs and wants do not lead to any form of recalcitrant behaviour as in previous youth cultures, because they can rely on the wealth accumulated by the post-war generation. Narcissistic reports of their lifestyle and exhaustive details about expensive watches and luxury clothes, are combined with expressions of existential desperation and alienation. Nickel sees around him only "Menschen, die ich gar nicht kenne" (54), and Bessing questions their strategy of "Abgrenzung zu anderen Menschen aus ästhetischen Gründen." Instead: "Ich möchte darüber nicht mehr länger nachdenken müssen [...]. Kein Gedanke. Nichts" (65). These contradictory codes and the citation of inconsistent philosophical positions develop along the well-known lines of modernism: fragmentation, alienation, and the perceived senselessness of a contemporary life that is now the subject of a play with both seriousness and irony.

The essayist and *FAZ* journalist Florian Illies has chosen a somewhat different approach for, as he puts it, a self-description of the experiences of his generation, meaning those Germans between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age. He took the slogan of the Volkswagen advertising campaign "Generation Golf" as the title for his most successful essay. The concept of "generation" is reduced to a very short period of time, ten years at most. Adding elements of his biography, childhood and teenage memories, Illies declares his middle-class socialization to be a universal experience of his generation, without reflecting on the sociological complexity, preconditions, and restrictions arising from his social background. The concept of generation is defined by shared experiences of commodity consumption and media events, such as the toys, TV shows, movies, and commercials that constitute the focus of a nostalgia for the Eighties:

Aber so war eben jene Zeit. Es ging allen gut, man hatte kaum noch Angst, und wenn man den Fernseher anmachte, sah man immer Helmut Kohl. Nicole sang ein bißchen vom Frieden, Boris Becker spielte ein bißchen Tennis, Kaffee hieß plötzlich Cappuccino, das war's auch schon. Die achtziger Jahre waren wie eine gigantische Endlosschleife. Raider heißt jetzt Twix, sonst änderte sich nix. [...]
Noch ahnte man nicht, daß man einer Generation angehörte, für die sich leider das

ganze Leben, selbst an einem Montag, anfühlte wie die träge Bewegungslosigkeit eines gutgepolsterten Sonntagnachmittags. (Illies 16)

Illies describes the process of individuation as a change of consumer habits and style codes from the perspective of the social cocoon of a financially secure middle class background. The greatest ambition is to possess one's own Volkswagen as the membership card for the “Generation Golf,” the target group of the Volkswagen sales strategy among fashionable people. From Illies's perspective the experiences of self, emotion, and identity are mediated only by the categories of commodification. Individuality is the effect of possessing high-end commodities produced for mass consumption – the success of an aesthetics of commodification that focusses less on use and exchange value than on the social prestige that comes with the commodity. This is a paradox that even Illies himself reflects when he describes his peer group as “Fanatiker des Allgemeinindividualismus” (91). Although Illies compiles a considerable number of elements typical of the late Seventies and Eighties media and consumer culture, his attempt to portray a generation from his own experience fails because of the narrowing down of sociological, cultural, and political complexity to one perspective. As if there were no other experiences possible, as if there were nobody challenging the middle-class harmony and its delusive peacefulness, the text is written in an obtrusive “we” that presupposes the undisputed agreement of the reader – including his rejection of politics:

Das Problem der Generation Golf ist dabei natürlich, daß sie sich tatsächlich mehr Gedanken macht über die Anzüge der Politiker als über deren Taten, politisch also völlig indifferent ist. [...] Denn wir stehen Schröder so emotionslos gegenüber wie der gesamten nationalen und internationalen Politik. Wir haben zur Frage, ob man Socken zu Sandalen tragen darf und welche Internetaktie man kaufen sollte, eine dezidierte Meinung als zum Nato-Einsatz im Kosovo. [...] Allein die Flucht Oskar Lafontaines aus allen seinen Ämtern entlockte auch der Generation Golf einmal so etwas wie eine leidenschaftliche Reaktion. Sie hieß: endlich! [...] Lafontaine war eine Unperson. Sein Abgang bestärkte die Generation Golf in dem Glauben, daß nun auch in der Politik endlich die Zeit der Ideologien und Überzeugungen vorbei ist. (121f.)

If one considers Hegel's and Marx's description of bourgeois ideology as an anti-traditional and antagonistic system of dissociated individuals, the accordance with the ego-centred identities as depicted by Illies, free of any social, historical, and political consciousness is striking. Illies' end of ideology is rather the victory of the ideology of the market. The postmodern narrative of the end of ideology as articulated by Francois Lyotard aimed at burying master narratives such as Marxism and nationalism. After the collapse of the Eastern bloc, this narrative reemerged in Francis Fukuyama's thesis of the “end of history.” Although these theories proved wrong or at least problematic,

Illies takes them a step further. His interpretation of Oskar Lafontaine's dismissal as symbolic not just of the political decline of left-wing social democratic reform strategy, but also of the end of ideology *as such* implies strongly that any dissent or political confrontation even within representative democracy is obsolete. Effectively, this interpretation is an argument for the diminution of ideological confrontation in political discourse, with the political pandering to the economic and the political parties becoming more and more similar in their programmes. The political landscape in the Sixties and Seventies is reduced to the simplistic ideology of a backward-looking 1968 generation, relentlessly occupying and defending strategic points within society. Only Joschka Fischer, the Generation Golf's favourite politician, has learned the lesson, because he managed to rid himself of his "68er-Seele" (91) by long distance running. But unlike the protagonist in Alan Sillitoe's novel, he did not dodge the finish line.

Although Illies to an extent echoes the rhetoric of the *Neue Mitte* when he claims that political differences have to be overcome and antagonistic interests ignored for the sake of "reasonable" politics, his focus on a re-evaluation of National Socialism and its significance for the German present follows conservative strategies that surfaced in the Eighties after the election of Helmut Kohl as Chancellor. He complains about an over-emphasis on National Socialism in the post-war period, denouncing this political discourse as the result of a pathological father-fixation on the part of the Sixties' generation. In Illies' description, the German obsession with the past has rendered his peers essentially harmless and weary of the attempts at coming to terms with the history of National Socialism. Therefore, the famous "Schlussstrich" often called for in the Eighties has become normality for the "Generation Golf":

Das Verhältnis unserer Generation zur Geschichte allgemein und zum Holocaust ist dermaßen Roman-Herzoghaft unverkrampft, daß Kritiker dahinter Geschichtsvergessenheit vermuten, Ignoranz oder Schlimmeres. [...] Die Generation Golf verstand sehr gut, was Martin Walser meinte, als er von der "Dauerrepräsentation unserer Schande" redete und von der Kultur des Wegschauens. [...] Zugleich sah dennoch kein Generationsangehöriger weder im ganzen Walser-Bubis-Streit noch im Kosovo-Krieg Anlaß, sich zu äußern. (174f.)

His support for Martin Walser demonstrates a strange coalition of Germans from different political backgrounds. Walser, drawing on arguments already developed in his reflections on the Eichmann trial of the 1960s, points to the spontaneity of his own personal reminiscences in contrast to the politically correct memory typical of the institutionalized public discourse that has grown up around the Holocaust. Meanwhile, the German government, as exemplified by the rhetoric of Joschka Fischer during the Balkans conflict, has made a practice of referring to Auschwitz in order to legitimate its "moral politics" and the military engagement in Kosovo in 1999. These are diverse motivations based on different generational experiences. Walser's argumentation

reflects a more general tendency to rewrite the history of National Socialism, in part re-establishing the perspective of an “ordinary German” of that time and diminishing the difference between perpetrators and victims by focussing on the suffering endured by the Germans. Fischer’s moral legitimization of politics has its roots in the political ideas of the Sixties’ student movement and the post-1968 left. Like Stuckrad-Barre’s narrator, who cannot come to grips with history at all, and Kracht’s perspective on history as a farce, Illies takes a position of absolute personal indifference and denies any obligation of contemporary German politics towards its history in the twentieth century. But there is a link bridging the generation gap between Fischer and Walser: the aim is to make peace with the German nation, and the desire is for a history with a clean record. This essentially conservative strategy had to be redefined as non-ideological and perceived as reasonable to be adopted by the political centre in the Nineties.

It is no coincidence that this detachment from the German past and from Auschwitz as a central point of reference for political consciousness has led to a slow change, not only in political discourse but also in the use of contemporary language. Words, phrases, and Nazi slang are being used that a few years ago would have been strictly avoided. While reflecting on the negative outcome of history, Kracht’s protagonist employs a stereotype, deeply rooted in the German racist tradition, of the “großen ungewaschenen Massen aus dem Osten” (Kracht 102) about to invade Europe in the near future. While in this case the reader can take this statement as deliberately ironic, the use of the term “finaler Genickschuß” by Stuckrad-Barre’s narrator in *Soloalbum* to describe his girlfriend’s ending of their relationship (16) is rather an example of a lack of awareness and sensibility, especially given that there are no other political implications or allusions to National Socialism to be found in the text. Illies expresses more blatantly his relief that his peers can finally laugh at “Polenwitze” again “ohne gleich an den Polenfeldzug 1939 denken zu müssen” (Illies 180). This deliberate breaking of taboos and the desire to overcome the urge to steer clear of certain politically and historically loaded expressions show that *Generation Golf* and other texts of the new pop literature serve a different purpose than that of building an archive of contemporary culture, as Moritz Baßler suggests in his study. Instead, they take a revisionist stance in the ongoing debate on the definition and representation of the post-war period.

Even though the recent pop literature combines elements of *fin de siècle*, bohemia, decadence, political conservatism, modernism, and contempt for mass society, the conservative turn is more intricate than the mere rollback identified by literary critics such as Gustav Seibt. The commitment to a fashionable, trendy lifestyle does coincide with a conservative, essentially affirmative political mentality. The self-definition of Stuckrad-Barre as “wertkonservativer Popkonsument” (Bessing 35) points to this intrinsic paradox. Blending together contradictory attitudes, the pop writers can simultaneously affirm the status quo and express a need for distinction. The outcome is “Rebellion gegen die Rebellion” (48), a rebellion of conformists, turning against anything that is not in fashion or is connected to any form of political

or social ethics. This is the framework in which the writers construct a left or at least liberal, politically correct mainstream – for Illies the “Latzhosenträger, BH-losen Frauen, Reinhard Meys, Rainer Langhans, der Zigarettenselbstdreher und Liegeradfahrer” (Illies 181) – with attitudes and lifestyles from which they distinguish themselves, thus creating an exclusively negative form of identity. It is of little consequence to these writers that the objects of antipathy are social groups or subcultures of the years gone by, already anachronistic and marginalized. Thus Illies explains the success of Stuckrad-Barre’s *Soloalbum* “weil es so mustergültig abrechnete mit der Latzhosen-Moral der siebziger Jahre und ihrer verlogenen Sprache” (155) – even though *Soloalbum* was published decades afterwards.

Their status is based on a postmodern play with popular culture codes. But the descriptions of music, literature, and brands lack any profound knowledge. Instead, the subjects are simplified to echo the writer’s projections and desires. Of relevance also is the reception of writers like Thomas Bernhard and Bret Easton Ellis, who portrayed the yuppie America of the Eighties in his novels *Less than Zero* (1985) and *American Psycho* (1991), in which he describes the pathological character of contemporary social relations. The main character in *American Psycho* is a New York yuppie who lives only for style and commodities and who accepts other people only through their wealth and fashion brands, while his hobby is rape and the murder of prostitutes. Ellis’s characters come out of a milieu where money does not have to be earned by actual work; instead it originates from an impenetrable capital process. If the relation between labour, commodity, and capital has disintegrated, then, for Ellis, the bourgeois consciousness falls into a state of self-destruction. According to Florian Illies, *American Psycho* had impressed

uns weniger wegen der blutrünstigen Gewaltphantasien [...] als wegen der Dokumentation des Markenfetischismus unserer Generation. Jede Socke einer handelnden Person wurde einer bestimmten Firma zugewiesen und seltsames Verhalten sofort auf die unpassende Krawatte zurückgeführt. (154)

This misreading, which ignores the nexus of commodified consciousness and violence, demonstrates that Ellis’s main topic is not recognized by his young German friends at all – and the same goes for the social pathology in Thomas Bernhard’s Austrian scenarios. Focussing exclusively on distinction through commodity and style, the young pop writers deliberately ignore the critique of Ellis and Bernhard.

This phenomenon of affirmation and de-politicization becomes even more visible if we draw a comparison with authors who are one or two decades older, like Ulrich Woelk, Thomas Hettche, and Andreas Neumeister, all publishing with Suhrkamp, who all chose reunification as the main topic for their novels. These texts constitute an attempt at dealing with political issues within the realm of literature, and they even do so in a subjective manner – a feature that is completely absent from the texts of the new pop *literati*. What the latter have in common instead is an aversion to any kind of

political thinking or practice as such, even though one has to distinguish between the middle-class conservatism of Florian Illies, the elitist and hierarchical mentality of Christian Kracht, and the ego-centred political indifference of Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre. Despite these differences, there is a strong affinity to the central shift in cultural and political debate in Germany after 1989 as implied in the term “normalization,” meaning the dissociation from the conflicts typical to the post-war period in Germany in a political, ideological, or youth-cultural context. Although these writers have been socialized for the most part in the old *Bundesrepublik*, the self-definition of some of the pop writers as “‘89ers,” as members of the “reunification generation,” implies that the political and social debates that dominated West Germany before 1989 are no longer relevant. West Germany is, in this sense, nothing less than an anachronistic state of society, a manifestation of the post-war period that should finally come to an end. The texts discussed above agree on the idea that neither political thinking nor acting makes any sense any more. On this point, they are in contrast to the ever more frequent calls for a new patriotism and “Volksgemeinschaft” after the famous “Ruck-Rede” of Roman Herzog and the revival of a new national mythology – the most recent example being the film *Das Wunder von Bern* (2003) by Sönke Wortmann.

But again: why a new “German pop literature”? To answer this question in a more general context one has to take into account the new attempts to vitalize and promote a national culture (or a national culture industry) in the field of pop culture that can be registered in various fields of cultural production since 1989. Indications are exhibitions such as *deutschlandbilder. Kunst in einem geteilten Land* (1997, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin), the discussion of a sixty-four percent quota for music with lyrics in a foreign language and in German on television and radio as promoted by the singer Heinz-Rudolf Kunze in *Der Spiegel*, the Germanification of pop music via the music-television channels *Viva* and *Viva II* or the WDR-produced series *Pop 2000* – even in the Eighties, the *Neue Deutsche Welle* had proved pop to be an effective strategy for renationalizing the music sector of cultural production. The heavy promotion of German pop literature by publishers such as Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Rowohlt, Suhrkamp, and Ullstein can be seen as an attempt to reinforce this effort in the literary market. The success was based less on extraordinary literary quality or new narrative forms than on new marketing strategies such as the aforementioned promotion of the pop writer as a multi-sector cultural worker who did not follow the well-trodden paths of the established market for literature. Pop literature found an audience outside the traditional polarity between “artistic” literature and merely entertaining fiction. The intentional naivety of pop literature in its handling of form and traditions, as well as its self-referentiality, implied a rejection not just of the literary establishment, but also of the idea of literature as a form of moral engagement and of the definition of literature as a highbrow art form. This, apparently, made pop so appealing to a large audience. In addition, the call for a space for these young writers within the literary market was a response to the criticism voiced in the fierce post-unification literary debate about

contemporary German literature. Noted literary critics objected to the predominance of egocentrism and narrative incompetence in literature of the Eighties, calling for a descriptive fiction based on traditional forms of narration (Köhler and Moritz). Even though there was no direct involvement of the pop writers in this discussion, their works can be seen as responses to these objections.

Even though there are many formal similarities between today's pop literature and its precursors in the Sixties, the specific employment of these elements is very different. The recent texts move solely within the "second hand" language of media phrases; there are no innovative literary developments in this mostly autobiographical prose and the continuous efforts of the protagonists to distinguish themselves from others show an urgent desire for lines of social demarcation. The texts generally work within a very minimal fictional dimension and invite the reader to identify with the narrator. This is very different from the experimental early pop literature, which was always in search of adequate expressions for new experiences. Instead, the recent pop literature

verlässt die Welt der Kenntnisse und Vorstellungen ihrer Leser nie, sie blendet keine Fremdheiten und fremdartige Perspektiven ein. [...] Gleichzeitig ist sie bemüht, Zeitgenossenschaft vor allem durch Benennung der zeitgenössischen Phänomene zu belegen, nicht durch ihre Beschreibung. (Diederichsen)

Despite this, the protagonists are anything but well-adapted individuals. They are socially incompetent, struggling with their own emotions, superficial and without any historical dimension and always in opposition to almost everybody else. Paradoxically, the fragile individualities based on slight differences and distinctions at the center of these texts – "Verständigungstexte" as Thomas Meinecke puts it (189) – rely on a code system whose participants have many things in common. This makes sense when the literary text is a form of self-reassurance both for the author and the (presumably) young reader. Avoiding any aesthetic perfection, then, is not a deficiency, but rather an expression of authenticity that is gained or strengthened by the representation of the subject through the medium of the text.

In a situation where three different strategies of writing – *Suhrkamp-Pop*, slam poetry, and the young pop writers – are considered to be pop literature, it seems impossible to provide a coherent definition of this term for the Nineties, whereas it might be possible to do so for the "historical" pop literature of the Sixties (although even this is a task yet to be accomplished with any real degree of precision). Theorists today have tried to overcome this problem in different ways: by accepting everything as pop that declares itself or is declared as pop (Ullmaier); by integrating Nineties pop literature into a broad survey of counter-culture and avant-garde literature starting with Dada and Surrealism at the beginning of the twentieth century (Ernst); by diminishing the importance of the term pop while focussing on other characteristics the texts have in common (Baßler); by comparing the recent pop literature with the

canon of Sixties pop writers, coming to the conclusion that they have little in common (an argument widely used in literary reviews); by understanding the term pop as a framework for intergenerational conflict, a questionable interpretation in view of the fact that the potential for conflict is much reduced given the permissive attitudes of post-Sixties parents (Frank); or, finally, by focussing on the appropriation of formal elements (Schumacher). Each approach has its problems and benefits, but they all offer only a limited contribution to a useful definition of pop literature. One reason for this might be that the differences between pop art, music, literature, and the interface between them are not addressed adequately.

Given that the pop literature in the German language was born in a specific historical and aesthetic context – the transformation to a post-Fordist society, the strong impact of US culture on post war Germany, the crisis of literary realism and the aesthetic of high modernism – it makes sense neither to develop an unhistorical definition nor to cling to a Sixties definition as the benchmark for judging contemporary pop literature. Even Fichte or Brinkmann did not refer to their work using the term “pop,” which during the early Sixties was generally attributed to pop art and then only later adapted to their writing. Furthermore, pop in general was a dynamic strategy of fluctuating cultural production that collided with any idea of a canon or a fixed set of forms or approaches. It was born in opposition to high culture and its aesthetic strategy necessarily demands the maintenance of this difference. Subsequently however, postmodernism has established pop as high culture, fundamentally transforming this constellation. The rhetoric of “subculture” and “underground” was appropriated by the culture industry, which supported the diversification of identity strategies and discourses in the “mainstream of minorities” (Holert and Terkessidis). Already in the early Nineties, the subversive intentions of pop theory and cultural studies were being adapted for the mainstream without any of their original critical intentions, leading to the decline of the left-wing project of a critical pop theory as discussed in the magazine *SPEX* by intellectuals such as Diedrich Diederichsen, Tom Holert, and Mark Terkessidis.

The recent wave of pop literature can be seen as one possible response to the implosion of pop as an underground and subversive subculture, differing from other strategies in contemporary German literature of the Nineties such as new subjectivism, migrant literature, “Ostalgie,” or the revival of national mythology. After religion, family, class, and political party, even the subcultural peer group has vanished as a stable framework of identity, leading to a melancholic, backward-looking attempt to construct a generation with the minimal common characteristics of age group and lifestyle. Here there is a connection to the outcome of the early pop literature: the realization that the individual cannot expect either authenticity or acknowledgement in late capitalist society. The promises of the Sixties pop literature as a form of early postmodernism, the liberation of the subject through difference, new forms of sexual relationships, and a new sensibility towards the objects of consumer culture have given way to a profound disillusionment and a grim defence of individuality based solely on

negative differences within a commodified society. While in the Sixties the trivial myths of Western heroes, Third World guerrillas, and science fiction developed around the utopia of a better world in either the past or the future, history and utopia are absent in the new German pop literature in the Nineties; it exploits the positive semantics of the origins of pop in the Sixties, while ignoring its historical and aesthetic context. The intrinsic dynamic of any concept of pop leads to the paradox that the focus on the present demands the rejection of the past, even when this past is pop's own history.

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