

Böll's 'Violence-Relationship': On the Implications of Subjectivity for the Interpretation and Judgment of Forms

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Introduction

“Ich fordere die ganze Bevölkerung auf, sich von der Terrortätigkeit zu distanzieren, insbesondere den Dichter Heinrich Böll, der noch vor wenigen Monaten unter dem Pseudonym Katharina Blum ein Buch geschrieben hat, das eine Rechtfertigung von Gewalt darstellt” (Karl Carstens – Bundespräsident of West Germany’s, 1979 -1984).¹

While Karl Carstens’ words confirm West Germany’s postwar, democratic-capitalist society to be in a state of perpetual self-contradiction, he is, as this paper will demonstrate, in this sense correct in his reading of Heinrich Böll’s *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* – it is very much so the demonstration of “eine Rechtfertigung von Gewalt,” even if the violence here is fictional. His condemnation of the text based on the premise of this realization, however, negates whatever credit one might have given his literary analysis, and manages to bring Carstens’ understanding of the concept ‘violence’ itself into question. In fact, his statement only underlines the legitimacy of the social criticism Böll outlines in *Die verlorene Ehre*: the

¹ Staeck, 22. Juli, 2010.

interpretation and judgment of things based on one's experiences of 'reality' is ridiculous, and lends itself to the emergence of an extreme breed of irony as a perpetual state of being, rife with obscene contradictions and conducive to the production of dangerous satire. 'Violence' in and unto itself is shown in Böll's text to be, along with any other perception, perhaps immune to moral categorization entirely.

Die verlorene Ehre as a Satire

Beginning with the above statement regarding Böll's 1974 novel (carrying the subtitle: *Wie Gewalt entstehen und wohin sie führen kann*), it has already been indicated that Carstens' in DATE evaluation of the text was, in a sense, 'correct'; the narrative essentially attempts to expose the audience to the possibility of protagonist Katherina Blum's act of murder as something that can be rationalized. Katherina, the novel's title-character, is apprehended by police after a *Weiberfastnachtsfest* for having associated herself with fugitive Ludwig Götten, and the tabloid press, DIE ZEITUNG (which, at times, appears to be acting rather in tandem with the police), works to gradually invade, slander, and ultimately 'destroy' her life: their tactics range from obtaining sensational stories from her ex-husband, to an invasive interview with her dying mother, and the externalities of their product (the by-products of the paper) are shown to include hate mail and phone calls to Katharina from DIE ZEITUNG's readership, and even the death of her mother (alluded to as being sped along by the stress of the ordeal).² Katharina transforms over the course of the story from a law-abiding, even naïve, single, working woman

² "Sicher ist, nachgewiesen, belegt gerade dazu, dass Dr. Heinen überrascht war vom plötzlichen Tod seiner Patienten Maria Blum und dass er >>unvorhergesehene Einwirkungen, wenn nicht nachweisen, so doch auch nicht ausschliessen kann<<. [...] Fest steht: Tötges hat *behauptet*...bei Maria Blum zu sein und sie interviewt zu haben" Böll, pp. 104.

into the likes of a fiction-thriller murderer: she shoots the ZEITUNG journalist Tötges to death with a concealed pistol after luring him to her apartment with the promise of an exclusive interview. At the end of the novel, however, we are nonetheless left with the feeling that the sequence of events precluding the murder – at least to a certain extent – has served to rationalize this outcome.

The ironic tone of Böll's writing appears to reinforce the consistency of such a rationalization. This tone emerges from the contradictive manner in which the press media is depicted by the narrator, and simultaneously defended by certain key characters in the narrative. When Katharina's employer and friend Else Woltersheim becomes suddenly implicated in the investigation pursuing Götten (his encounter with Katherina having occurred at Woltersheim's house), she is brought into the police office for questioning. Woltersheim vigorously defends Katherina's character, asking that DIE ZEITUNG compensate her for the damages that have been already inflicted, and that they stop prying into her personal life: "Jetzt allerdings, wenn es night gelänge, ihre Genugtuung gegenüber der ZEITUNG zu verschaffen, schwinde mit dem Interesse an ihrer Wohnung auch Katherinas Interesse an ihrem Beruf."³ This comment is swiftly and patronizingly denounced by the crown prosecutor – the 'state lawyer' (Staatsanwaltschaft) – and the policemen present, "An diesem Punkt der Aussage wurde auch Frau Woltersheim darüber belehrt, dass es nicht Sache der Polizei oder der Staatsanwalt sei, >>gewisse gewiss verwerfliche Formen des Journalismus strafrechtlich zu verfolgen<<. Die Pressefreiheit dürfe nicht leicht angetastet werden..."⁴ The irony of this expression is unmistakable: the *State* essentially feigns here as its own sort of 'public watchdog' – the traditional role of the press.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 65.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 64.

Meanwhile, to further the inherent contradiction of Katherina's agitator's behavior, *the press* appears to be doing the work of the State (or at the very least has become its accomplice/cheerleader):

*“War ihre Wohnung ein Konspirationszentrum, ein Bandentreff, ein
Waffenumschlagplatz? [...] Was sie an der Beute aus den Bankrauben beteiligt?
Polizei ermittelt weiter. Staatsanwaltschaft arbeitet auf Hochtouren. Morgen mehr.
DIE ZEITUNG BLEIBT IMMER AM BALL!”⁵*

Here in DIE ZEITUNG's first article covering Katherina's involvement with Götten, we see the press posing the questions, which is the tendency of the investigator. DIE ZEITUNG fails entirely to provide information to the public regarding the behaviour of the State in this investigation. Not to beat a dead adage: 'Watchdog' or lapdog?

The irony of the narrative's plot is perhaps most neatly encapsulated in the eulogy of Werner Tötges funeral, as depicted by Schlöndorff in his filmic rendering of the novel. The film was released one year after the publication of Böll's book, and is likewise programmatic in its ironic portrayal of the role of the press in West German society:⁶

*“Die Schüsse, die Werner Tötges tödlich getroffen haben, haben nicht nur ihn
getroffen. Sie galten der Pressefreiheit, einem der kostbarsten Güter unserer jungen
Demokratie. [...] Seid wachsam, denn mit der Pressefreiheit steht und fällt alles.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 37.

⁶ <http://www.zweitausendeins.de/filmlexikon/?sucheNach=titel&wert=28745>

Wohlstand, sozialer Fortschritt, Demokratie, Pluralismus: Meinungsvielfalt. Und wer DIE ZEITUNG angreift, greift uns alle an."⁷

In this statement the eulogist, represented by a harsh, treacherous-sounding and crooked-looking man hunched over a microphone wearing smoke-tinted glasses – the physicality of the figure embodying the contradiction of the press itself as it is portrayed in Böll's narrative – reflects upon the theoretical role of the press in the political discourse, leaving his audience with little doubt as to the gravity of the act which has been carried out against *them* (that is, the attendants and mass viewership of the funeral; literally, all of society). Having witnessed the remainder of the film, however, the discrepancy between theory and praxis in this realm is as obvious as that between the speaker's words and his aura of untrustworthiness.

Broadly speaking, satire is a brand of criticism formulated by exposing the internal and ironic contradiction(s) of a given expression; as Carrie Smith-Prei describes in *Postmillennial Family Narratives*: "For satire to exist a portion of society must recognize the difference between reality and ideology and form a critical consensus about that gap."⁸ This principle is apparent in the structure of Böll's story (upon which the Schlöndorff film is closely based), with every alleged social pillar listed in the eulogy being obviously undermined *by* DIE ZEITUNG – that is, the very institution charged with preservation of these upheld values is portrayed as their virulent destroyer. In the case of 'diversity of opinion', or "Meinungsvielfalt", especially, there is a clearly indicated discrepancy between the theoretical role of the press and their behavior in the actuality of the narrative: "[Woltersheim] habe dann...aus dem Archiv der Berichte anderer

⁷ Schlöndorff, 1:43:39 – 1:45:31.

⁸ Smith-Prei, 78.

Zeitungen geholt, in denen über Verstrickung und Vernehmung der Blum, ihre mögliche Rolle, in durchaus sachlicher Form berichtet worden sei”, to which Blum responds: “Wer liest das schon? Alle Leute, die ich kenne, lesen DIE ZEITUNG!”⁹ Woltersheim attempts to soothe Katherina’s frustration with DIE ZEITUNG’s coverage of her involvement with Götten by showing her examples of more ‘objective’ press coverage, but this attempt to rationalize the behavior of DIE ZEITUNG as merely one part of a multifaceted system of media coverage only serves to underline the failure of the system as a whole: what do the alternative media sources matter if the only one being consumed by those in direct relation to Katharina is DIE ZEITUNG? The damage to her will be inflicted regardless. There *is* no ‘diversity of opinion’ in Katherina’s world, no *Meinungvielfalt*, because the only opinions people there have access to are DIE ZEITUNG’s. The discussion between Katharina and Woltersheim precedes Tötges eulogy in Schlöndorff’s film, and so the irony of the scene is unmistakable to the audience, who, will likely be in consensus as to the contradiction present there.

The political criticism that Böll expresses with the above statement is, of course, mimetically related to the enormous news-media market share held by Axel-Springer Verlag at the time of publication of his novel.¹⁰ His argument mirrors that of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, as expressed in their joint 1944 essay *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, mass-production and distribution of cultural commodities in industrialized capitalist societies homogenizes cultural expression: all aesthetic preferences but that of the ‘universal’ gradually fade out of existence as the profit-maximizing

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 61.

¹⁰ Against which the 1968 student movement was vociferously posited, distributing pamphlets, delivering denouncing speeches, even setting the Axel Springer Verlag’s office building ablaze – i.e., “[the movement] prepared the ‘Springer tribunal’ in 1967” (Cornils, pp. 147-8).

model democratically selects dominant artistic expressions for reproduction.¹¹ As Böll suggests via Katherina's above statement to Mrs. Woltersheim, the dominant 'species' of cultural commodity (in this case 'news') that the market demands is not guaranteed to be that which strives for 'objectivity': throughout Böll's book, DIE ZEITUNG is shown to be simply publishing whatever piques their consumers' curiosity or fantasy. Katherina's employers Blorna and Truda, for example, are shocked one Thursday morning during their holidays to read the following example of this phenomenon in DIE ZEITUNG:

“Die Blum erhielt seit zwei Jahren regelmässig Herrenbesuch. War ihre Wohnung ein Konspirationszentrum, ein Bandentreff, ein Waffenumschlagplatz? Wie kam die erst siebenundzwanzigjährige Hausangestellte an eine Eigentumswohnung im Werte von schätzungsweise 110 000 Marke? War sie an der Beute aus den Bankrauben beteiligt?“

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Indeed, in this sense DIE ZEITUNG appears to be *creating demand* for information as opposed to responding to it, much in the same way that Adorno and Horkheimer describe the authoritarian behaviour of the industrial 'culture industry' in general: "Kant's formalism still expected a contribution from the individual, who was thought to relate the varied experiences of the senses to fundamental concepts; but industry robs the individual of his function. Its prime service to the customer is to do his schematizing for him."¹³ So while newspaper consumption may ideally function as a two-directional interaction between producer and consumer, with consumers

¹¹ i.e.) Adorn and Horkheimer describe commodity selection in industrialized markets as abandoning "objective trends which represent something different to the style which they incarnate" in favour of "[expressing] that which...is subsumed through style into the dominant forms of generality." Adorno & Horkheimer, pp. 406-7.

¹² Böll, pp. 37.

¹³ Adorno & Horkheimer, pp. 33.

communicating their information preferences via the dollar (or here, the German Mark), the medium in this case operates as the preference *setter* by dictating the discourse.¹⁴ Of course, while DIE ZEITUNG constructs this demand with the promise of delivery (thus securing continued interest, consumption and profits),¹⁵ fulfillment of that demand is never intended: "...the promise [of the culture industry], which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu."¹⁶ Delivery of the product's promise of conclusive information here would represent an act of 'economic suicide' for DIE ZEITUNG, which survives on the basis of consumer demand.

It is important to note that DIE ZEITUNG does not explicitly 'lie' in *Die verlorene Ehre*, rather preferring to raise suspicion and excitement wherever possible, drawing dubious, though not impossible associations between its muse/victim Katherina and other objects of public antagonism. This allows DIE ZEITUNG to avoid conviction in court, which would, if persecuted, expose the mirage that it had been profiteering by. The truth about their subject matter may have been dull, but an exposed and explicit *lie* would have been treacherous, especially to profit margins. The audience wants to at least believe that what they are buying is some form of 'truth'. The day following Katherina's interrogation by the police, for instance,

¹⁴ This reinforces the consistency of Böll's argument with that of Adorno and Horkheimer further: "The need which might resist central control has already been suppressed by the control of the individual consciousness. The step from the telephone to the radio has clearly distinguished the roles. The former still allowed the subscriber to play the role of subject, and was liberal. The latter is democratic: it turns all participants into listeners and authoritatively subjects them to broadcast programs which are all exactly the same" (Adorno & Horkheimer, pp.). The newspaper therefore functions in the same authoritarian mode as radio broadcasting; dialogue is one-directional.

¹⁵ i.e.) The article ends with: "*Polizei ermittelt weiter. Staatsanwaltschaft arbeitet auf Hochtouren. Morgen mehr...*" (Böll, pp. 37)

¹⁶ Adorno & Horkheimer, pp.

DIE ZEITUNG's coverage of Götten's getaway focuses in on select hearsay-details of the personal life and background of Katherina, his *suspected* (though not convicted) accomplice:

Der Pfarrer von Gemmelsbroich hatte ausgesagt: >>[Katherina] traue ich alles zu. Der Vater was ein verkappter Kommunist und ihre Mutter, die ich aus Barmherzigkeit eine Zeitlang als Putzhilfe beschäftigt, das Messwein gestohlen und in der Sakristi mit ihren Liebhabern Orgien gefeiert<<. ¹⁷

This sort of unreliable, anecdotal 'evidence' demonstrates the strategy of tabloid press production perfectly. As outlined above, there is a certain necessity of DIE ZEITUNG to distribute 'unproven' information, or better, 'unprovable'. There is no 'lie' per se, at least not in the way a lie is generally understood, as fiction that diametrically manipulates the truth composed in the hopes of obtaining something one wants; here, things that *could* be true are suggested, playing on the fantasies and suspicions of the audience in order to obtain what the firm desires – monetary returns.

Further along in the story Böll contextualizes some of the priest's characterizations of Katherina's parents (via the third person narrator), presenting an entirely different perspective on the issue of her character, as well as perhaps that of the priest. Given context, Katherina appears more the victim than the perpetrator:

Katherina sei immer ein fließiges, ordentliches, ein bisschen schüchternes, oder besser gesagt: eingeschüchtertes Mädchen gewesen, als Kind sogar fromm und

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-7.

kirchentreu. Dann aber sei ihre Mutter, die auch die Kirche in Gemmelsbroich geputzt habe, mehrmals der Unordentlichkeit überführt und einmal sogar erwischt worden, wie sie in der Sakristei gemeinsam mit dem Küster eine Flasche Messwein getrunken habe. Daraus sei eine >>Orgie<< und ein Skandal gemacht worden, und Katherina sei in der Schule vom Pfarrer schlecht behandelt worden. Ja, Frau Blum, Katherinas Mutter, sei sehr labil, streckenweise auch Alkoholikerin gewesen, aber man müsse sich diesen ewig nörgelnden, kränklichen Mann – Katherinas Vater – vorstellen, der als Wrack aus dem Krieg heimgekommen sei, dann die verbitterte Mutter und den – ja man könne sagen missratenen Bruder.¹⁸

If the priest, now established as having abused Katherina during her childhood, is still considered an appropriate biographical source, then this new context offers explanation to much of what the priest alleges against her. Her father's disillusion with the war may have led to develop communist tendencies and certainly led to his emotionally shattered state, which, in turn, helps to explain the mother's dysfunctional behaviour. *If* Gemmelsbroich's suspicions of Katherina as being 'capable of anything' were accurate – which, at least at that point in the story, they are not – then surely her family history would have offered some explanation as to the *cause* of her deviance, with empathy and humanization taking precedent amongst the audience of the commodity over condemnation and explicit Othering.

Explanation, however, as Adorno and Horkheimer have already indicated in their essay, is not and *cannot* be the aim of DIE ZEITUNG, and it is with this extra-textual knowledge that the funeral scene in Tötges' eulogy takes on a satirical turn of character: it describes an idealized

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-4.

behaviour which blatantly contradicts an observable behaviour. The goal of the firm is to maximize profits, which are based on consumption growth and retention. When the news story reaches its conclusion, so too does consumption of the cultural commodity and therefore profits. Explanatory information, then, is not sought after in the first place, which also constitutes a certain intentional withholding of information from the audience.¹⁹ “[S]ozialer Fortschritt, Demokratie, Pluralismus: Meinungsvielfalt”, these concepts are fittingly preceded in the eulogy by the word “Wohlstand”, and *cannot* be what the firm (DIE ZEITUNG) strives to produce unless they are principally that which is demanded of the firm by consumers; this is, deductively, not the case. As audience to this narrative from start to finish, the contradiction is clear to us: we have been exposed to the prior abuses of DIE ZEITUNG over the course of the piece. If one had only witnessed the eulogy itself, and not the events which eventually led to Katharina’s shooting of Tötges, the irony would be absent – the scene is therefore in line with the condition of satirical criticism given by Adorno and Lukács’: “[Lukács and Adorno] posit that the true intent of critique is not written into the text itself but rather can be understood only in congruence with extra-literary consensus.”²⁰ We require knowledge of what has been said and done outside of the eulogy to understand the critique.

While this ‘extra-literary’ consensus is actually inherent in the remainder of the plot – the satirical ‘scene’ relies on scenes other than itself to expose the irony, as demonstrated above – Böll’s criticism is extended to the whole of West German society due to the non-fictive parallel established in *Die verlorene Ehre* – in both the book and the film. The following is, in both mediums, the first thing the audience sees and interprets, and it sets the tone for the entire piece:

¹⁹ Rest assured, if Tötges and DIE ZEITUNG *had* wanted to find and present that information, they would have.

²⁰ Smith-Prei, pp. 78.

Personen und Handlung dieser Erzählung sind frei erfunden. Sollten sich bei der Schilderung gewisser journalistischer Praktikanten Ähnlichkeiten mit den Praktikanten der >Bild<-Zeitung ergeben haben, so sind diese Ähnlichkeiten weder beabsichtigt noch zufällig, sondern unvermeidlich.

The above statement is likewise only understood as a satirical criticism if read ‘in congruence with extra-literary consensus’, and in this case the plot of the story on its own will not suffice; *Bild* (barely) lies outside of the scope of the Böll narrative. While mentioned on the first page of the text, nothing is *explicitly* offered to indicate that there is a link between the two firms. It is only by way of *suggestion* – ironically (and appropriately, for the purposes of this essay), the same tactic employed by the fictive ZEITUNG to generate sensationalism and profits – that Böll renders *Bild* suspect. The criticism that Böll expresses here is, of course, related to the enormous news-media market share held by Axel-Springer Verlag at the time of publication of his novel.²¹ With this note he not only draws a parallel between the two firms – thus extending his critical analysis of DIE ZEITUNG to *Bild* – he also strengthens his argument by exacerbating the sense of irony that is developed in the plot. This is achieved, firstly, by using the same technique that DIE ZEITUNG was just demonstrated to have been using – playing on the audience’s suspicions and fantasies by *creating* fictitious possibilities for them to consume (i.e., DIE ZEITUNG), and then selling these fictions under the auspices of reality (i.e. the ‘news’). The ‘story’ in this case forces the audience to step outside the realm of the fiction, into their own contemporary context in order to grasp the full meaning of what is being said to them.

²¹ ..."Springer’s press monopoly in West Berlin.” (Cornils, pp. 148)

Of course, as Svea Bräunert has indicated, the book was released in 1974 (the movie following in '75), "im Moment des Entstehens [des westdeutschen Terrorismus] und der Hochzeit seiner Aktionen in den 70er Jahren...."²² It is not only *Bild* and the 'Springer Presse' that transfer metaphorically to the story, but also other obvious motifs, such as violence. As Karen Bauer has indicated, during the liveliest decade of the RAF, 'violence' occupied a central place in a very polarized public discourse: "Since the 70s, the divisive debates about the RAF often move along highly polarized political and ideological fault lines. Discussions all too often come to a standstill as condemnations and accusations are exchanged and each side seems to be blind to the other's point of view."²³ In such a politically polarized environment as this one, where the making of over-simplified caricatures of people is commonplace, oversimplified caricaturization and categorization of Böll (as Carstens did) is an easy mistake to make.

Die verlorene Ehre does not, however, align itself in binary fashion against the so-called 'Tätergeneration' and therefore with the RAF or any of the other more violent manifestations of youth revolt that sprang out of the 68er movements. It is, after all, Konrad Beiter, the partner of Katherina's employer Else Woltersheim, who is revealed to be a former Nazi as well as the owner of the weapon Katherina uses to murder Tötges.²⁴ He is *not* portrayed as an antagonistic figure at all, and several others from the same generation are characterized in the story likewise – the Blornas and Else Woltersheim, for example. This inconsistency of 'appearance' and 'essence' -- that is, the former Nazi assisting the younger counter-culturalist -- with the contemporary (at the time the book came out, as demonstrated in the quote from Bauer) constructions of good and evil by both 'sides' (West German hegemonic discourse vs.

²² Bräunert, pp. 28.

²³ Bauer, pp. 1.

²⁴ Böll, pp. 133.

countercultural youth and student movements) lends itself to a consensus of a relatively 'neutral' territory. It is from such a consensus that satirical criticism may be launched.

The Impotence of Form

In fact, *Die verlorene Ehre* is much less worried about criticizing German society's past as it is an attempt to demonstrate the dangers of oversimplified categorizations of things as they are perceived in actuality. It is clear based on the previous analysis of *Die verlorene Ehre*'s satirical character that the death of Tötges even possibly had anything to do with some martyred cause such as the freedom of the press is ludicrous to the audience. Tötges death seems, if not actually justified, hardly a cause for alarm – the satirical element of the story *depends* on the audience seeing a connection between Katharina's experience with DIE ZEITUNG and her decision to murder Tötges.

To return to Carstens' interpretation of the novel, violence *is* justifiable because it cannot be in and unto itself anything more than a mode of expression. Violence is a *means* to an end; it is only the ends itself that justifies or fails to justify the means. Violence is always carried out with some other purpose in mind. In the same way that painting, music, technology, language – all 'mediums' of human expression and culture – may be used to justify the purposes of both 'good' or 'evil', violence, too, is an ethically neutral category. In the case of the violence against Katharina, it was not that DIE ZEITUNG had arbitrarily decided to attack her – she was the convenient target of public fear and fantasy, which was essential to the media firm's profit function. Katharina's decision to murder Tötges was similarly a strategic act, especially if we

consider the title of the piece, ‘*Die verlorene Ehre*’ – Katharina considered Tötges responsible for the early death of her mother, and for the ruin of her reputation; she engaged in revenge-killing necessary for her to maintain her honour. Even if an act of violence *is* seemingly committed at random there is always some purpose lurking in the background, some story to rationalize the brutality, no matter how inconsistent and seemingly contradictory that story might be. Violence is, then, *always* justified in the eyes of the perpetrator (at least in that moment), and Carstens statement used in the introduction of this essay loses a significant degree of meaning through his use of this generalization. Violence is mere a ‘medium’ or ‘form’ of expression, a blank page and a pen waiting to write a message. Is writing ‘good’ or ‘evil’? It obviously depends on what is written, and the same may be said with regards to violence – to what ends is the act committed?

As theoretician and philosopher Michel Foucault has demonstrated regarding *architectural* forms, there is a certain futility in attempting to construct reality such that “one thing is of the order of ‘liberation’ and another is of the order of ‘repression’.”²⁵ In reference to the *Famelistère*, for instance, a building constructed with the socialist-utopian intentions of architect Jean-Baptiste Godin, Foucault suggests two possible and yet diametrically opposed (in terms of freedom) applications of the same design: firstly, “no one could enter or leave the place without being seen by everyone – as aspect of the architecture that could be totally oppressive”, and then: “Now let’s imagine a community of unlimited sexual practices that might be established there. It would once again become a place of freedom.”²⁶ It is evident that the *means* here, the *form* of the *Famelistère*, can be used to any number of human purposes or ends; form is

²⁵ Foucault, pp. 135.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.136.

impotent in that it cannot determine how it is interpreted by the Subject. It is the *interpretation* of the form which determines its categorization as being, in this case, ‘liberating’ or ‘repressive’.

This observation can, as Foucault alludes, be applied to other such forms of human expression as well: “I do not think there is *anything* that is functionally – by its very nature – absolutely liberating.”²⁷ He describes his theory of forms as it applies to social institutions, which may be intended to uphold ‘freedom’ within society, but often perform the opposite function in reality: “The liberty of men is never assured by the institutions and laws that are intended to guarantee them.”²⁸ This statement ties in nicely with the institution of the press, whose role in political theory as defender of democracy, social progress, pluralism and freedom of opinion was suggested in the analysis of the eulogy above to be in reality a contradictory and farcical claim: while this is a *possible* function of the institution there is nothing in the concept itself that guarantees it to perform this duty. The behaviour of the press is guided by the culture of the consumer – ‘how’ the culture interprets and consumes a particular form of expression, such as news – which, as we have seen in *Die verlorene Ehre*, has thus far *not* been conducive to encouragement of necessarily fair or objective news coverage.

Meanwhile in the case of architectural ‘forms’ the same holds true: *nothing* about the form itself guarantees the cultural interpretation of that form – as Foucault’s example of the *Familistère* demonstrates: the same form can be used to entirely different ends, depending on how it is interpreted within the culture of the people experiencing it. For instance, we may look on Katharina’s apartment building as either a form of positive consequence in that possession of

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 135.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 135.

it may grant a certain degree of social status (in the eyes of much of society) and privacy, or we may view it as in a certain way containing the potential for danger and *invasion* of privacy, as is exemplified in Schlöndorff's film by the scene with the faceless neighbour looking into her apartment from the balcony, watching her. The anonymous hate-mail from her neighbour is another phenomenon allowed – but not necessarily induced – by the structure of the building: the amount of people in the building and the lifestyles of those people are not inherently conducive to allowing for the development of a strong community – i.e. life is private in a usually 'liberating' way, but this privacy also allows for the unchecked and usually unnoticed presence of certain predatory types of people to be perpetuated, their lifestyles and perspectives remaining unchallenged or criticized. There is nothing *intrinsically* negative or 'bad' about the compartmentalized structure of the apartment building. It is always how people employ that structure and project possible meaning *onto* it and then use it that determines its moral standing.

Likewise, violence may not be assigned an ethical standing unto itself, because it describes a MEDIUM of expression, which can only be granted meaning by an audience and does not carry with it any specific meaning unto itself. The next section will describe the way in which meaning and medium become associated and sometimes confused with one another.

The Construction of Meaning

In order to properly explain the role of satire in Böll's narrative, the relevance of this element of his fictional narrative to this historical context in which it was written, and ultimately his critique of that context, it is necessary to investigate the nature of human interpretation.

Interpretation is often confused as an act of reception when it necessarily has to be an act of *projection*. As Kant describes in his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* the experience of existence can only guarantee the reality of two things: the Subject, one's conscious self, and the Object, which essentially may encompass everything (other than the Subject itself) that the Subject can possibly experience. As Hall paraphrases:

Things are objects of experience just in case they conform to these sensible and conceptual conditions of experience which are themselves grounded in the subject's epistemic faculties. A result of this view is that things are objects for us insofar as they appear to us in space and time and in accordance with our concepts. We have no cognition of objects (or even ourselves) as they might be in themselves independent of the cognitive conditions of the subject.²⁹

The Subject, then, does not exactly experience 'an' Object, but rather 'the' Object. Categorization occurs necessarily after this experience of reality (excepting the 'reality' oneself) as a whole; discrimination between like and unlike things from the perspective of the Subject leads to division and sub-division of the Object into an infinite number of classifications and categories – thus, 'subjective perspective' is constructed. This perspective *is* not and *cannot* be shared by two individuals due to the fact that they *cannot* share the same time and space, and will therefore be unable to have the exact same experience or construction of reality. Some aspects of either individual's experience of reality can and will of course be shared, allowing for the construction of language and systems of communication, which necessitate mutually understood points of reference.

²⁹ Hall, pp. 3.

Extending the implications of this ‘micro-analysis’ to the macro-cultural scale, Jürgen Habermas’ hermeneutic philosophy suggests that like experiences lend themselves to the development of cultures: consistent (at least as an aggregate average) projectors of meaning onto objects (or rather, *the Object*):

[T]he collective background and context of speakers and hearers determines interpretations of their explicit utterances to an extraordinarily high degree... Naturally this meaning could not be thought independently of contextual conditions altogether; for each type of speech act there are *general* contextual conditions that must be met if the speaker is to be able to achieve illocutionary success.³⁰

Alternatively, then, communication breakdowns may be thus understood as *dissimilar* experiences lending themselves to the construction of categorical perspectives that differ, and which are perhaps even incompatible with one another. Lacking any such common reference points based within ‘objective’ reality, two ‘subjective’ individuals will be unable to understand or relate to one another. The degree to which their experience of reality is identical determines the degree to which communication between them is possible.

Kant and Habermas’ ideas are essential to any attempted understanding of difference in the interpretation amongst those exposed to identical expressions: it is the *reader*, as opposed to the author, who projects meaning onto the text. That meaning may be a result of the individual’s

³⁰ Pressler & Davila, pp. 163.

unique experiences/memories, or it may involve a *cultural* discourse (of which the reader forms a part, also known as ‘cultural memory’). These two operate in tandem to construct meaning with the individual’s (as Gadamer terms it) ‘horizon’ of reality.

The Perception of Violence in Capitalism

Again, because individual perspectives are limited by time and space in their experience of reality, even individual objects cannot be experienced in their totality: “[W]e cannot cognize objects as they might exist in themselves but only insofar as they appear to us spatiotemporally and in accordance with our concepts of them, where not only these concepts but space and time themselves are contributions of the subject to her experience of these objects.”³¹ The Subject is always identifying patterns and similarities between elements as they are *perceived* within a subjective reality and not actually things as they might actually be in their entirety. The dimensions of space and time, therefore, make reality interpretable, but also limit our experience of objects in a way that can lend itself to confusion. For instance, if one’s experience of violence in the past has been consistently negative (finding oneself to be the victim in every encounter, for instance), then his or her categorization of any such similar act is likely to be negative, regardless of the intention and result of that particular expression of violence (i.e., its ‘ends’).

As Slavoj Žižek has aptly demonstrated, however, not every manifestation of violence need necessarily be in and unto itself a ‘negative’, ‘evil’ or ‘bad’ thing. He goes so far as to suggest that love necessitated the existence of violence:

³¹ Hall, pp. 2.

[T]o paraphrase Kant and Robespierre yet again: love without cruelty is blind, a short-lived passion which loses its persistent edge. The underlying paradox is that what makes love angelic, what elevates it over mere unstable and pathetic sentimentality, is its cruelty itself, its link with violence – it is this link which raises it “over and beyond the actual limitations of man” and this transforms it into an unconditional drive.³²

Žižek fails to provide anything of much more substantial than a poetic version of his own opinion in the above statement, yet his position makes intuitive sense. After all, what is love but the most inhumane form of injustice, favouring and remaining loyal to one person above all others, despite all of their own shortcomings and relative regularity? And, perhaps more problematic for Carstens and his denunciation of Böll on the basis of his ‘Rechtfertigung von Gewalt’, what about instances of violence that are in fact conducted with the very intention of assisting or even *loving* the Other? Is violence inherently ‘evil’, or grounds for condemnation in the case that it is both intended for and successful in helping others?

As the prior discussion on subjectivity has indicated, one cannot experience every aspect of a particular act of violence; we are limited in our exposure to that ‘object’, and, therefore, no one individual may be truly objective in his or her impressions and perspectives. This is perfectly demonstrated in the example whereby the Subject fails to perceive the theoretical flawlessness of the market as a *long-term* allocator of resources (excepting instances of true ‘market failure’) due to his or her *short-term* experience of that market. We never have the opportunity to objectively evaluate the power of the market system in its entirety because, precisely as the economist Sir

³² Žižek, pp. 204.

John Maynard Keynes pointed out, “In the long-run, we’re all dead.”³³ In other words, we do not – we *cannot* – perceive the capitalist system as a ‘thing in itself’ (i.e. as with everyThing else in the universe, we cannot perceive it ‘objectively’), but rather, only in its component parts; we experience the market as a chronologically arranged set of temporal ‘frames’. While these frames allow us to comprehend (some of) the relationships between individual elements within the market over a given amount of time –the parameters of this impression being our lifetimes, as well as some of the recorded lifetimes lived before ours – their division often prevents us from grasping its whole and ultimate function of maximizing aggregate utility. As Milton Friedman once indicated at Stanford in response to a question regarding the plight of the poor in the United States:

So far as poverty is concerned, there has never in history been a more effective machine for eliminating poverty than the free-enterprise system and the free-market. The period in which you had the greatest improvement in the lot of the ordinary man was the period of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Those of us in amongst this room are the heirs of that. We benefitted from the way in which our parents and our grandparents were able to come here, and, by virtue of the freedom that was offered to them, were able to make a better life for themselves and our society – them *and us*.³⁴

Thus, the violence inflicted upon people involved in the process of capitalism (in Friedman’s statement above: the work, sacrifice, innovation and opportunities of the older generations) is

³³ <http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/KeynesianEconomics.html>

³⁴ Milton Friedman on Capitalism and Poverty http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnwxUhb9w_M

necessary to ‘their’ (and/or their children’s) own ascendance out of poverty in all save relative terms of measurement (as compared to the capitalists ‘exploiting’ their labour in the first place, for instance, one might perceive the condition of being ‘impoverished’ to have been exacerbated as the wealth gap expands). It is in fact those individuals at the ‘bottom’ of capitalist socio-economic hierarchy who stand to benefit the most from the system, materially speaking.³⁵ The selfish egotism of the market is necessary to the improvement of the conditions of the impoverished over time, and only by accepting this sacrificial violence can one truly hope to fight poverty. Alternatively, to engage in altruistic economic policy undoubtedly inflicts *more* long-term suffering on the same category (class) of people.³⁶ This is, however, not the perspective of the individual actually experiencing capitalism over *time*. The disjointed experience of capitalism renders the system’s appearance chaotic, and in the short-term it may not seem logical to submit to its ‘inherent’ logic. As the question that was posed to Friedman in this instance suggests, the ‘thing-in-itself’ – here, capitalism – is often improperly or incompletely evaluated based on these kinds of short-term, partial and incomplete perceptions of it, which may result in the formation of any number of short-term, partial and incomplete ‘solutions’ to the problem (as it is perceived of immediately at hand).³⁷ Žižek summarizes this position in the following:

“Here is why egalitarianism itself should never be accepted at face value: the notion (and practice) of egalitarian justice, insofar as it is sustained by envy [“the true

³⁵ See Milton Friedman's book *Capitalism and Freedom*.

³⁶ Milton Friedman on Capitalism and Poverty http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnwxUhb9w_M

³⁷ For elaboration, refer to *Filthy Lucre: Economics for People Who Hate Capitalism* by Toronto philosopher Joseph Heath, especially all of “Part II: Left-wing Fallacies” (pp. 149-300).

opposite of self-love is not altruism...but envy”],³⁸ relies on the inversion of the standard renunciation accomplished to benefit others: “I am ready to renounce it, *so that others will (also) NOT (be able to) have it!*” Far from being opposed to the spirit of sacrifice, ready to ignore one’s own well-being-if, through my sacrifice, I can deprive the Other of his *enjoyment*.”³⁹

Žižek assumes in his implication of envy as the perpetrating factor of egalitarian thinking that all egalitarians fully understand that (material) equality requires that resources (or, if one denounces ideas of ownership, then at least the *use* of those resources) are actually *taken* from others. He does not substantiate that claim and, in fact, it directly contradicts the thesis of this section of the paper: people *do not* fully understand *anything*, much less the ‘true’ consequences of either capitalist or socialist resource allocation in their totality. This leads him to place the moral weight of ‘inefficient’ and ‘wasteful’ political-economic decisions squarely on the shoulders of egalitarians, their incentive allegedly derived from some sort of sense of envy. It is important to recognize the limitations of this position: while some individuals may be motivated by envy, others might have genuinely never been exposed to or experiences the concept of scarcity.⁴⁰ If ignorance is grounds for moral condemnation, Žižek is here himself liable in that he is ignorant of the fact of *other* people’s ignorance.

³⁸ Žižek, pp. 87.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 92.

⁴⁰ Such as the Stanford student who criticized Friedman’s position in the first place: well-dressed, well-fed, attending one of the top *private* educational institutions in the world, what egotistical incentive might he have for promoting egalitarian economic policies? Envy? Far likelier is that he simply fails to grasp the true function of the economy in its totality (alienated as he is from experiencing production and scarcity firsthand), and struggles morally with his limited perception of the violence incurred by the system, namely, poverty.

Regardless of what Žižek's own moral position is, his observations regarding the human perception of 'systemic' violence in capitalist societies are powerful: violence is not always *the* inherent evil; in fact, rejection of violence in the short-run can potentially exacerbate the pain it inflicts in the long-run. The short-run violence, immediate poverty, is therefore to be viewed in this instance as the more 'righteous' course of action, morally speaking, despite its categorization *as violence*: the alternative is simply to extend the duration of the poverty itself.

Returning to Carstens' denunciation of *Die verlorene Ehre*, we witness that he has clearly fallen into the same categorical trap. His identification of 'eine Rechtfertigung von Gewalt' is entirely correct, but entirely meaningless as the basis of any sort of moral critique. Violence cannot be inherently evil; at times it is also used in the best interests of the 'victim'. In the case of parental discipline of a child in the hopes that the child might avoid future suffering, for instance, violence may even be employed in the name of *love*.

Conclusions

Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.⁴¹

Carstens' reading of Böll's *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* as a justification of violence reveals his fundamental misunderstanding of violence itself. Böll's novel (and Schlöndorff's film) is really indicating that mediums of expression *including violence* are not the

⁴¹ King James Bible, Matthew 7:5.

source of evil. Just as any medium, violence may be used for purposes both good and evil; it is an ethically neutral category.

Böll's message carries special weight in the postwar German context. This moral mis-categorization of objects based on limited perception of the 'thing in itself' was, after all, also the root of the major social struggles of Germany's twentieth century history. It is the same discourse employed by the Nazi – support of the NSDAP in the prewar period rested on the general populace's limited understanding of the true nature of their economic suffering.⁴² The Nazi party was able to divert Germany's economic frustration against identifiable objects of traditional suspicion, such as Jews, homosexuals, communists and gypsies, only because the true cause of their suffering was masked from them. The causes of financial crises are always up for debate – they always will be, as no one can perceive the entirety of any object, let alone one as complicated as the global economy – but in this case it can be said with an enormous degree of certainty that the causes of the 1929 economic catastrophe in Germany are perfectly *unrelated* to any of the scapegoats listed above.⁴³

Then, with the dawn of the RAF in the 1970s and renewed outbursts of indiscriminate violence against civilians under the auspices of 'Marxist liberation', on the other hand, we bear witness to the physical manifestation of Žižek's mistake outlined in the previous section (re: 'If ignorance is grounds for moral condemnation, Žižek is here himself liable in that he is ignorant of the fact of *other* people's ignorance'). That is, student condemnation of the West German

⁴² Votes for the National Socialists surged from 810,000 in 1928 (before the 1929 financial crisis) to 6,409,600 in 1930 (Kolb, pp. 224).

⁴³ For an accessible summary of the causes of the 1929 depression in Europe and the rest of the world, refer to *Modern American Poetry: About the Great Depression*. <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/depression/about.htm>

hegemonic discourse in the 1960s and 70s was based on the assumptions that a) participants in the discourse preceding the Second World War had actually understood the full consequences of their actions in the first place, and b) that this new generation had fully understood the context in which those actions occurred. As Gerd Koenen writes in reflection of *his* ‘red decade’:

In accepting a general collective German guilt (which was not one’s personal guilt), one could accumulate a kind of moral superiority – which on the other hand served as a tool of constant moral devaluation of the parents’ generation, the collective or ‘establishment’ of the elders. This kind of mental secession was partly necessary, and even of vital importance. Yet, in many regards it was also a trap, a much too easy way to invent oneself as a member of a generation with a ‘higher consciousness’...⁴⁴

The idea that one can morally condemn another individual or group of individuals based on their ignorance – i.e., the West German students labeling their parents’ entire generation the “Auschwitz-/Tätergeneration” because on their ignorance (and the manipulation thereof) in the face of the 1930’s economic chaos – is hypocrisy. Ignorance is not grounds for moral burdening because, as Kant and Habermas’ writings on subjectivity have shown, we are *all* ignorant, and none of us can truly perceive objective reality. These acts of violence are being ‘justified’ by the perpetrators (the RAF) based on mere subjective projections of the victim, which were constructed by the perpetrator in the first place and then cast back onto the victim, and these projections do not – *cannot* – represent reality.

⁴⁴ Koenen, pp. 30.

Finally, securing the irony of moral judgment, Carstens' denunciation of Böll's book as having portrayed a justification of violence comes from the mouth of a former Nazi party member.⁴⁵ Carstens' decision years earlier to join one of the most violent political movements in human history renders his criticism of Böll terrifyingly laughable: this man is the embodiment of moral contradiction, and not just in reference to the internal hypocrisy of his commentary to his earlier Nazi participation, but perhaps to that as well of the broader events of the 1970s West German historical context in which *Die verlorene Ehre* was written and published as described above. This context is now experienced as a live, real-time satire, with every judgment and every criticism carrying with it such obvious malfunction that it can hardly be taken seriously any more. While satire, according to Adorno, requires "inhaltlich universalen Einverständnis...", Carstens' statement would seem to indicate that such consensus does not exist.⁴⁶ However, his words nevertheless *do* implicitly point to consensus-recognition of the meaning of the novel as was intended by Böll; i.e., that violence *can* in fact be justified – it is nothing more than a form/medium of expression.⁴⁷ It is not in itself 'evil'. Violence is a mere means to an end.

In conclusion, the process of projecting one's own subjective perspective onto that which one experiences in reality will inevitably lead to an interpretation thereof which is incomplete, and might even prove itself to be inherently backwards. This fact renders moral judgments ridiculous, regardless of whether or not they are necessary. The hypocritical judgments portrayed in Böll's fictional narrative mirror those of the historical-political context in which the piece was

⁴⁵ Der Spiegel: 08/06/1992 (Carstens' obituary).

⁴⁶ Adorno, 134.

⁴⁷ The construction of subjectivity does not necessarily render Adorno's theory of satire sterile. There can never be *total* consensus, obviously, because individuals may never share identical experiences or perspectives. However, the existence of culture and communication seems to indicate that relative consensus on meaning – at least to a functionally acceptable degree – is indeed possible. We will give Adorno the benefit of the doubt and assume this 'general consensus' is what he meant in the first place.

written, and the parallel internal contradictions of the two lend themselves to a self-evident (satirical) cultural critique. Given Böll's catholic background, such a stance may in fact be incredibly consistent – as the above reading from the Book of Matthew indicates, judgment is, after all reserved for God: man is born into sin. What Carstens ultimately fails to grasp about *Die verlorene Ehre*, then, is that the book/Böll is not picking the side of the RAF against the side of West German hegemonic society, or even vice versa: instead, Böll absolutely refuses to draw any line between them in the first place.

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