FROM MACHINES TO SCREENS: THE FLATTENING EFFECT IN CHRISTIAN KRACHT’S *FASERLAND*

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ABSTRACT

TOBIAS MAG: From Machines to Screens: The Flattening Effect in Christian Kracht’s *Faserland*  
(Under the direction of Dr. Richard Langston)

In this thesis, I argue that Christian Kracht’s novel *Faserland* is a paradigmatic representation of the quandary of postmodernity facing Germany. I discuss the transition from modernity to postmodernity as it is manifested in this novel as a flattening or homogenization of the vertically-oriented, individuating concept of a Marcusean critical modernity. The transition is marked by a semiotic paradigm shift from the Marcusean construct of the Machine to what I refer to as the “Blue-Screen.” The central problem underlying this change is how Germany as a society is to adapt to postmodernity and its eradication of identity and individuality. While the behavior of the novel’s protagonist offers a potential coping mechanism in line with Félix Guattari’s concept of “Machinic Doping,” it is a solution that Germany is unable to utilize, as the postmodern implication of severing ties to the past is something that the nation cannot accept.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Following the exploits of a nameless protagonist over the course of his southward bound journey from Sylt, Christian Kracht’s 1995 novel *Faserland* details its protagonist’s struggle with the postmodern dilemma. The dilemma that I am referring to is the crossroads between modernity and postmodernity and the ensuing conflict between two radically different cultural paradigms. I am discussing these two terms as they pertain to this novel in the context of cultural phenomena in accordance with Jean-François Lyotard’s assertion that modernity as a cultural condition is characterized by constant change in the pursuit of progress. Concomitantly, postmodernity represents the culmination of this process, where constant change has become a status quo and the notion of progress has been rendered obsolete. If modernity is the project of building a rational society and adhering to an atomistic conception of individuality and identity, then postmodernity is in large part a direct reaction against this. The latter, as Frederic Jameson argues, is consequently marked by the increasing unavailability of any sense of personal style, leading to “pastiche” becoming a universal practice. (54) This conflict is manifested in *Faserland* in the form of its protagonist grappling with the collision of the conditions of modernity and postmodernity. Due to the impossibility of delineating a modernist perception of identity in a postmodern environment, the narrator must find a means of adapting to the subsuming of the former by the latter.
The postmodern dilemma that the narrator of *Faserland* faces is by no means purely an individually realized struggle. Postmodernism, as it has gone through various stages and incarnations in larger German society and culture, has had a rather problematic history for the nation. Some historians argue that the phenomenon of postmodernism first appeared in the 1960’s/70’s, others that it first truly took hold after the fall of the Berlin Wall and Soviet Empire in the early 1990’s. Andreas Huyssen, in his work *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, defines a specific characteristic of postmodernism that is crucial to understanding its historical precariousness in Germany:

[Postmodernism] operates in a field of tension between tradition and innovation in which the second terms are no longer automatically privileged over the first; a field of tensions which can no longer be grasped in categories such as progress versus reaction, Left versus Right, present versus past... (217)

As Huyssen demonstrates, the relationship between past and present has been wholly transformed through the advent of postmodernity, once distinctive temporalities now overlapping and coexisting. Germany’s problematic relationship with postmodernism thus in large part stems from precisely this condition. Since the Second World War was such a watershed event for the consummate German nation, the potential obliteration of the relevance of the past by the onset of the postmodern condition becomes especially troubling. After the physical and psychological devastation of World War II, the line between the two temporalities of past and present has been eroded. The horrors of the war have transformed the past into something foreign and incomprehensible, yet nonetheless a history whose presence has irrevocably extended into the present, one that the German nation was unable to abandon. The consequences of this past remaining very much a
factor in the construct of the German identity, postmodernism has historically been such a troubling conceptual framework for Germany due to the implications that it would have on the presence of the past in the nation’s collective consciousness.

In the wake of the absence of any tangible or distinctive national or individual identity in the world that the narrator inhabits, only a vague sense of anomie remains. The hallmark of the perpetual state of change brought on by postmodernity, this is the most pressing conflict facing the narrator’s attempt at acquiescing to this condition. Frederic Jameson perhaps most saliently discusses this aspect of postmodernism and the nature of its differentiation from that of modernism:

Postmodernism, postmodern consciousness, may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility, which consists primarily in the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications. Modernism also thought compulsively about the New and tried to watch its coming into being (inventing for that purpose the registering and inscription devices…) but the postmodern looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same. (i)

As Jameson notes, the hallmark of postmodernity is the idea of constant change. The motivation of postmodernism therefore rests not in fitting these changes, the “New,” into some manner of paradigmatic classification, but rather in merely observing and accepting their existence. Not trying to rationalize or categorize them apropos some overarching modernist framework, postmodernism accepts the vast amount of change occurring in contemporary society in and of itself. It is the transition from the former to the latter schemata that the narrator must navigate, particularly with respect to the construct of identity, and his eventual means of doing so lies in adapting himself to the postmodern condition.
The protagonist of Kracht’s novel is essentially seeking some degree of coherent understanding or definition of identity (both on a national and individual level) as it exists in the environments that he traverses, yet he can rarely formulate or explicate his quandary in a cohesive manner. Driven across a series of social scenes revolving around a repetitive cycle of parties, interspersed with crude or obtuse sexuality and various forms of substance-abuse, the narrator inevitably becomes upset or wholly disgusted with the aforementioned types of environments that he finds himself in. As no clear concept of where his journey may end is offered, his only solution to that which arouses in him malaise or discontent is to journey onward, to repeatedly abandon people, places and circumstances and start anew. Accepting the hegemonic nature of the postmodern condition, his means of coping with it lies in embracing the ability of his itinerancy to perpetually create moments of contentment.

The narrator’s central conflict is thus defining or staking out any meaningful or definitive sense of identity in the postmodern era, whether it is constructed along the lines of nationality or more atomistic and individualized social and/or political distinctions (i.e. punk, yuppie, conservative, liberal, etc). It is my contention that, contrary to assertions by literary critics such as Fabian Lettow, his clinging to certain aspects of modernity and his perpetual escapism mark not discontentment or resistance to postmodernism, but rather an acceptance and even a potential embrace of it (if a gradual and perhaps reluctant one). Frederic Jameson’s characterization of postmodernism as inevitably retaining shreds of its antecedent serves to explicate the Faserland protagonist’s often two-sided and
seemingly contradictory approach towards the postmodern condition.\textsuperscript{1} His means of coping with postmodernity is to periodically escape it by indulging in fantasies of the modern; his recurring itinerancy serves as a method of extraction from this illusion so as to avoid becoming lost in it. Though the effects of this coping mechanism may be short-lived, they can always be recreated indefinitely.

THE QUANDARY OF IDENTITY

Herbert Marcuse’s engagement with modern technology and rationalization provide an indispensable background for understanding the Machine as the semiotic paradigm of modernity. Modern technology and the connective concept of the machine have, Marcuse points out, very real and significant societal implications:

Technology, as a mode of production, as the totality of instruments, devices and contrivances which characterize the machine age is thus at the same time a mode of organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships, a manifestation of the prevalent thought and behavior patterns... (138-139).

As Marcuse here remarks, technology and the concept of machination underlie and effectively structure the consummate societal framework of the modern age. The factors most crucial to understanding the true overarching impact of these mechanisms on society are for Marcuse the manner in which they have transformed the standards of rationality and individuality. According to Marcuse, modernity has historically obliterated individuality through its extensive rationalization and mechanization of society. The subordination of all individual subjectivity and distinction to the larger machine apparatus is demonstrated in the following passage:

\textsuperscript{1} “[Postmodernism] must be at internal distance from itself, must include the foreign body of alien content...Shreds of its older avatars- of realism, even, fully as much as of modernism- live on, to be rewrapped in the luxurious trappings of their putative successor.” (xii)
Individuals are stripped of their individuality, not by external compulsion, but by the very rationality under which they live. [...] Man does not experience this loss of his freedom as the work of some hostile or foreign force; he relinquishes his liberty to the dictum of reason itself. The point is that today the apparatus to which the individual is to adjust and adopt himself is so rational that individual protest and liberation appear not only as hopeless but as utterly irrational. (145)

Modernity has in this light effectively extinguished individuality in favor of complacency and efficacy amidst the larger social apparatus. This rational apparatus, by standardizing and mechanizing the world so as to achieve the utmost level of expediency and efficiency, encourages the self-subordination of the individual. The dominion of the machine over our lives is very troubling for Marcuse, as it has fostered an attitude of submissiveness that has greatly strengthened the mechanisms of social control, which in the past facilitated the rise of fascism.

The nature of individualization under the framework of the machine age is, however, two-sided. While Marcuse regards modernity as having characteristically negative implications for individuality, developing it is, in theory, still possible. Marcuse delineates two modernities, one affirmative, one critical. The former is the reality of his contemporary society, in which individuality is suppressed in favor of adjusting to the larger social apparatus. It is in the latter modernity that the potential for individuation within this superstructure remains:

The machine individualizes men by following the physiological lines of individuality: it allocates the work to finger, hand, arm, foot, classifying and occupying men according to the dexterity of these organs. The external mechanisms which govern standardization here meet a “natural” individuality; they lay bare the ground on which a hitherto suppressed individualization might develop. On this ground, man is an individual by virtue of the uniqueness of his body and its position in the space-time continuum. He is an individual insofar as this natural uniqueness molds his thoughts, instincts, emotions, passions and desires. (160)
The potential for individuality that Marcuse here delineates is essentially the product of autonomous self-definition. The “natural uniqueness” of which he writes becomes the basis for establishing individuality in that it distinctively forms one’s sense of identity. The uniqueness of our bodies facilitates individuation in the basest physical sense. The machine, inescapably exacerbating these “physiological lines of individuality” in its quest for efficiency and classification, always presents a basis from which psychological individuality can be developed. The machine, in seeking to classify and therein fit the individual into its predetermined social framework, inherently presents the possibility of resisting the subordination that this categorization otherwise facilitates. However, crucial to creating individuality in this environment is our realization or awareness of the possibility of doing so. While this potential for individuality within the machine apparatus exists, it is up to us to utilize it.

In accordance with Marcuse’s view of a one-dimensional society, it is my contention that this idealized form of individuality is never realized in *Faserland*. In the novel’s setting of 1995 reunified Germany, however, individuality is threatened in a very different manner. Through the pervasiveness of mass-marketing and reproducibility, the de-individualizing effects that Marcuse speaks of have become augmented. Marcuse’s potential solution of going underground, of creating individuality apropos autonomous self-definition, is now impossible. The aforementioned aspects of the postmodern condition flattened the vertically-oriented differentiating structure underlying critical modernity into a horizontal, homogenous plane. This horizontality is comparable to an affirmative modernity, but it is under postmodernity taken a step further. That is to say, the potential for creating a unique identity that affords one a distinct sense of belonging
or definition within larger society has entirely vanished. Due to the ubiquity of commodification under postmodernity, all manner of identities are now up for sale, therein eroding any differences or distinctions between them.

In Kracht’s novel, most of the people that the protagonist encounters operate under the illusion that they have created some sort of meaningful, distinctive identity when in fact the opposite is true. The reason for this disconnect is that most of the society that the narrator encounters is still operating under the illusion of the machine, when this social framework has in reality been supplanted by the very different paradigm of the “blue-screen,” which I discuss in greater detail in the second chapter. The primary means by which I contrast and define these two paradigms are the notions of depth and surface, respectively, particularly in regard to the concepts of image and identity as they are distinguished in modernity and postmodernity. Near the close of the novel, the narrator engages in a lengthier diatribe on the “German Machine,” a construct that he conveys as paradigmatically modernist. The particular passage in which he delivers this speech is crucial to my argument, as he here comprehensively frames a trend that he observes and avoids throughout the novel. His construct of the “German Machine” is thus not bound merely to the passage in which he consciously articulates it. Its presence becomes retroactively apparent in the earlier observations he makes regarding consumerist-influenced behavior. The reason why he finds the machine to be an archaic concept in the novel is that the concept of identity has been radically transformed through the onset of postmodernity. The narrator finds this aspect of the postmodern condition troubling because the society he travels in seems to remain unaware of it, living in what he effectively perceives to be a delusory state. The crucial difference separating the narrator
from this society is his consciousness of the true nature of the condition under which they are all living, though it remains to be seen exactly how he is able to attain this awareness. As the narrator’s very formulation of the concept of the “German Machine” hinges on the definition of identity, I first delineate its conceptual differences between modernity and postmodernity.

Marianne DeKoven in her *Utopia Limited* very pertinently frames the culture of modernity as being characterized by “metanarratives of large synthesis, unity and coherence that encompass all areas of human social, cultural, political and psychic life…They are characterized by truth-quests- believing in the knowability and determinacy of truth- for depth, reality, and knowledge beneath deceptive, illusory surface” (13-14). Although DeKoven invokes the concept of depth to describe modernity in a broader sense, her contention nonetheless illustrates the nature of the concept of depth that I am associating with the modernist perception of identity. The nature of depth in this regard was that under modernity, identities such as that of a punk, hippie, liberal, etc. still entailed a specific ideology underlying their associative surface images. As DeKoven observes, there was always some connective truth or reality beneath these surface images. For example, people dressed as hippies expectedly believed in “free love” and the other traditional ideologies of the hippie movement, as opposed to dressing as hippies solely out of compliance with contemporary fashions or trends.

The concept of “identity” in the manner that I am using it is meant to infer a sense of self-definition, of situating and attempting to distinguish oneself within the overarching social fabric. This is achieved through broader concepts like nationality or regionality, but it can also exist on a more individuated and personally-defined level. The
latter modality dominates according to the narrator, primarily in terms of consumerism (i.e. creating a sense of self-definition vis-à-vis various commodities, whether a “punk” haircut or a Barbour Jacket). It is defined by any behavior that grants the subject a more atomized sense of individuation within society; for example, driving a certain type of car, listening to a certain kind of music, dressing in a certain manner, and so on. This behavior is how the narrator defines the concept of the (German) Machine, and it thus becomes the form in which this construction is embodied within the novel. What is machine-like about this behavior is that it functions under the notion that there is a static, clearly-defined blueprint or framework governing the construction of national and individual identity, one that enables the appropriation of socially constructed images into authentic and definitive identities. In other words, this behavior operates under the previously established notion that there is still a vertical structure underlying the social framework, that Marcuse’s concept of an autonomous self-definition is still possible. Under this framework, the specific aspects of one’s behavior, manifested in acts such as voting, clothing, consumerism, afford one a very particular place in the social fabric. Wearing a leather jacket and having tattoos, for example, would create a punk or outsider identity, while voting for the SPD and driving a fuel-efficient car would create the identity of a liberal. In the social framework of the Machine, every behaviorism has a clear and foreseeable impact on the construction of identity, and every such impact imparts a greater measure of individuation to this construction.

The term “identity,” if defined along these lines, entails a characteristically modernist definition in that it ascribes to a differentiation of spheres, to the notion of
distinctiveness via classification.² It is for this reason that the concept of identity is such a problematic concept for the narrator as he traverses postmodern environments. As Lawrence Grossberg contends in his We Gotta Get out of this Place, the very nature of identity has changed through the advent of the postmodern condition such that modernist definitions thereof have become antiquated:

What was once thought of as an “identity crisis” has become an advertising slogan: “Is there a real me or am I just what you see?” Or more accurately, the question Who am I? seems to have become either Who am I to judge? or Where am I? as if one can no longer invest in any stable identity. David Leavitt describes his generation (college students in the 1980s) by declaring, “At least we don’t pretend we’re not wearing costumes…At least [we’re] not faking it.” What they are not faking is the fact that they are faking. (215)

What Grossberg here makes evident is that the modernist perception of identity as it was previously established is no longer sustainable. As images and, consequently, identities, have become readily reproducible, they have lost the significance that they once held. The image created by a punk haircut or clothing, for example, no longer necessarily conforms to the values originally attributed to a punk identity. It has been transformed into a commodity, readily available to anyone willing to take it on. This manner of image is subsequently recognized as superficial, as its potential to be easily reproduced and mimicked has robbed it of its former sense of authenticity. People who would under modernity have a uniquely defined identity, such as that of a “yuppie,” could now consciously choose to take on what was thought to be a radically different or contrasting identity, such as that of a “punk,” by conscious choice. Trends such as wealthy suburban youth wearing characteristically “punk” or “outsider” clothing have obscured the defining

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² Marshall, Barbara. (111)
lines for identity under modernity. Due to the capacity for “faking,” the very possibility of a distinctive, stable identity has been undermined.

This phenomenon of “faking” and the ensuing implications for self-definition are similarly articulated by Dick Hebdige in his seminal study in modern semiotics Subculture: The Meaning of Style. Detailing the process by which outsider subcultures such as the punk movement are incorporated into the mainstream, Hebdige’s observations serve to elucidate the source of the identity crisis discussed by Grossberg:

As soon as the original innovations which signify “subculture” are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become “frozen.” Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise. […] Punk clothing and insignia could be bought mail-order by the summer of 1977, and in September of that year Cosmopolitan ran a review of Zandra Rhodes’ latest collection […] of variations on the punk theme. The article ended with an aphorism-“To shock is chic”- which presaged the subculture’s imminent demise.

(96)

What Hebdige here describes is the act of stripping subcultures and styles of their original significance apropos commodification. Once a style is appropriated by the mass-market, it ceases to foster any unique or individualized sense of identity. The possibility articulated by Marcuse of creating individuality in the form of autonomous self-definition therefore no longer exists. The very idea of a uniquely personalized style or identity has been rendered obsolete, as all manner of styles and their associative identities are now up for sale, readily obtainable by anyone wishing to acquire them. By being put on the open market as purchasable commodities, these styles are often entirely removed from their original context. The punk identity can be appropriated by the very social sphere that it has tried to pit itself against, its clothing and image transformed into a trend. As such
styles and images are transfigured into a context of normalcy, the possibility of forging an individualistic or outsider identity becomes very problematic. The question arises as to how one is to formulate a meaningful identity (i.e. one that provides one with an atomized sense of distinction within the larger social framework) amidst the ubiquity of simulation in postmodernity.

The form of “identity crisis” (Who am I?) that the narrator of *Faserland* initially faces is thus a product of the shift in the conceptualization of identity under the transition from modernity to postmodernity. Under the latter condition, the possibility of “faking” identity has become accepted as inescapable, even commonplace. This is not to say that identity has altogether ceased to exist as a concept under postmodernity, but rather, as Grossberg points out, the nature of its definition under modernity is no longer relevant within the context of the postmodern condition, it no longer functions as it once did. Identity, both in the individual and national sense of the term, has become a more amorphous concept, one that is difficult to uniquely situate and define, as its parameters have become increasingly unstable and poachable. What was formerly a rebellious and socially exilic identity has been altered into a superficial image, one that is readily obtainable and purchasable. The ideological distinctions between Doc Martens and a punk haircut and Polo shirts and a Barbour Jacket have all but disappeared, taking with them the possibility of creating an “outsider” identity vis-à-vis image, as both have become equally attainable by conscious choice. If punk was once considered the underground counterpart to the mainstream yuppie identity, then this vertical modernist orientation has been flattened into horizontality under postmodernity. Punk is no longer any less-mainstream than the yuppie identity it originally sought to differentiate itself
from. These terms are no longer stratified, but rather exist on the same, singular, horizontal plane. The depth that distinctive identities such as that of the “punk” or “outsider” once had has been flattened as their respective defining images have been reduced to superficialities due to the onset of reproducibility and mass-marketing techniques under postmodernity. The consequence for the concept of identity as it exists under the machine-like social framework of modernity is that it can no longer be taken seriously or regarded as representative of reality.

The implications that the condition of postmodernity has for individual identity extend to the concept of national identity as well. The German identity has become similarly vulnerable to tampering through the distancing of simulacra from their referents apropos modern techniques of reproduction and marketing. That is to say, the German identity has become just as commodified as previously mentioned identities such as those of punks or hippies, thereby eroding any authenticity it may have once had. This concern is voiced by the Faserland narrator regarding an in-flight magazine, in which he feels Germany is being presented in an overtly false and artificial manner:

Da stehen immer so Artikel über Uhrmachermeister aus Bayern drin oder über den letzten Kürschner in der Lüneberger Heide. Und das Ganze wird dann erbärmlich schlecht ins Englische übersetzt, und so stellt dann die Lufthansa der Welt Deutschland vor. (60)

His concern, as is evident from this passage, is that the aforementioned techniques of mass-marketing isolate certain anachronistic, relatively obscure images that are hardly representative of contemporary German identity and nonetheless present them as idiosyncrasies. The very definition of national identity in this regard is vulnerable to constant change; its parameters are becoming ever more indistinct and malleable. It is this effect, in and of itself, more than the actual loss of a “German” identity that is so
troublesome for the narrator. By no means holding the German identity sacred, what plagues him is the fact that he can no longer position and thereby define himself in relation to it. The narrator therefore repeatedly harangues those who adhere to the consumer culture as a means of self-definition. Due to the pervasiveness of simulacra throughout postmodernity, they actually achieve the opposite effect. This is one step worse than modernity’s de-individuating machine, because the very existence of an underground, of vertically-oriented differentiation, is entirely obliterated. Though he himself is a part of this culture, it is his cognizance of this phenomenon that sets him apart from those who take it at face-value. To reiterate Grossberg’s argument, the narrator is aware of the nature of this effect, aware that the image this consumer culture grants him is essentially a fake, but what can he do about it? It remains to be seen whether he really has any way out.

THE GHOST OF THE MACHINE

This “faking” of identity is closely connected to the *Faserland* narrator’s construction of the “German Machine.” He associates this concept with a critical modernity in that he ascribes to it the notion of maintaining a fixed and uniquely defined sense of identity. In this section, I will make clear his formulation of the concept of the Machine, as well as why this has become such a problematic concept for him in the postmodern condition. Associated with a sense of stability and a static and clearly-defined sense of identity, the Machine presents a potential antithesis to the aforementioned effects of faking and reproducibility that are characteristic of the postmodern condition. However, when we look further at the narrator’s commentary on
this concept, it becomes evident that this possibility is no longer sustainable in the postmodern environments that he traverses.

The Machine is a concept that is regarded by the narrator near the close of the novel as something paradigmatically German, albeit potentially extinct. The elegiac manner in which the narrator frames this entity indicates not only the death of the concept of the “German Machine,” but also the associative the demise of modernity and any real notion of the German national identity along with it:

Ich weiß auch nicht, warum ich sie kaufe. Vielleicht, weil Deutschland auf einmal nicht mehr da ist. Es ist so, als habe sich das ganze riesengroße Land verflüchtigt, und obwohl die Menschen hier auch noch Deutsch sprechen...scheint es mir so, als ob Deutschland nur noch eine Ahnung wäre, eine große Maschine jenseits der Grenze, eine Maschine, die sich bewegt und Dinge herstellt, die von niemandem beachtet werden (149).

If, as David Harvey argues, “place” became the locus of social identity under modernity, fixing social relations into a static, seemingly secure state, then in the wake of the phenomenon of machination, the modernist construction of “place-bound identity” has fractured and dissolved. This sentiment is reflected in the above passage by the narrator’s referring to the “German Machine” as a mere “Ahnung,” an archaic abstraction that has become devoid of any tangibility. The modernist understanding of national identity, following the form of individual identity previously discussed apropos Grossberg, has become similarly irrelevant due to the pervasion of reproducibility and homogenization under postmodernity. It is important to note that, as Harvey reminds us, attachments to “place-bound identity” may begin as movements in opposition to the encroachment of apparent global homogenization, but they also become part of the very fragmentation which this process can feed upon. (303) Distinctions that were once rationally and clearly defined, i.e. Nazi, liberal, gay, straight, conservative, rich, middle-class, etc., have now
broken down entirely. We see this disintegration at work in *Faserland*: “Von den Kellnern würde ich erzählen, von den Studenten, den Taxifahrern, den Nazis, den Rentnern, den Schwulen…das wäre aber alles eigentlich auch etwas, das der Vergangenheit angehören würde…” (153). The previously listed types of classifications, along with their implications, have become products of the past; stripped of their modernist referents through the advent of the postmodern condition. Through the effects of reproduction and commodification previously detailed by Grossberg and Hebdige, they have become vague signs without any current social referent.

If the previously described machinic entity is to be understood as being representative of the modernist perception of identity, then it is made clear by the narrator of *Faserland* that it has been supplanted by some other entity. Alas, he cannot bring himself to properly elucidate it. Upon standing outside of Germany, the space which he regards as its framework, the narrator is, near the close of the novel, at last able to express comprehensively the machinic paradigm whose existence he previously conveys in isolated instances. These instances appear in the form of myriad criticisms leveled at what he perceives to be robotic, typically consumerist behaviorisms, from the flaunting of Barbour Jackets and Polo shirts to driving sports cars and popping champagne corks: “Ich sage ihr, daß ich Mercedes aus Prinzip nicht gut finde...” (14) ...“Wie sehr ich Menschen hasse, die einen Champagnerkorken ordentlich knallen lassen, damit sich alle umdrehen” (22). The conformism to the ever-growing consumer culture is ridiculed by the narrator because it represents the nature of constructing identity through the simulacra that displace authenticity in postmodernity. Aside from frequently dismissing trend-induced behavior as compulsive and robotic, the narrator disparages it chiefly on the basis of its
appropriating an original source and subsequently imbuing it with a wholly different and often contrasting context.


(120)

Images, ideas and even identities as they are defined and understood under modernity have now become malleable and adaptable, fusing and likening formerly distinctive concepts to the point of indistinguishability and indifference. As was demonstrated by Hebdige, signs that were once thought to represent a very specific identity have lost their signified. These signs have become appropriated by all manner of identities, the defining lines between them growing ever more blurred. This passage illustrates the narrator’s recurring frustration with the archaic machinic framework to which German society nonetheless adheres. His criticisms of consumer culture thus signal an acknowledgment of the anachronistic and consequently useless nature of modernist constructs of the depth of identity in what is in actuality a flattened postmodern environment.

Modernity, framed in terms of his conceptualization of the “German Machine,” is ultimately realized by the narrator of Faserland as a ghost or phantom limb, an invisible, no longer existent entity whose effects are nonetheless still imagined in a society that operates under its framework. The adherence to these effects is conveyed by the narrator as virtually ubiquitous in Germany, although he realizes that the societal reality has in actuality moved beyond modernity:

Ich würde ihnen von Deutschland erzählen, von dem großen Land im Norden, von der großen Maschine, die sich selbst baut, da unten im Flachland. Und von den Menschen würde ich erzählen, von den Auserwählten, die im Inneren der Maschine leben, die gute Autos fahren
müssen und gute Drogen nehmen und guten Alkohol trinken und gute Musik hören müssen, während um sie herum alle dasselbe tun, nur eben ein ganz klein bißchen schlechter. Und daß die Auserwählten nur durch den Glauben weiter leben können, sie würden es ein bißchen besser tun… von den Gewerkschaftern, die immer SPD wählen, als ob wirklich etwas davon abhänge… (153)

Although ostensibly a primarily consumerist critique, there is a much deeper undercurrent to the narrator’s construction of the concept of the Machine. The people, the “Auserwählten” who are still able to live under this framework are those who remain under the impression that the depth of identity still exists. By depth, I mean the possibility of investing in some sort of modernist, stable, differentiated identity, in the notion that one’s consciously determined appropriation of signs can provide a meaningful and comprehensive answer to the question Who am I?

The concern underlying the above cited passage from Faserland is that the characteristic of depth has ostensibly ceased to exist in the postmodern condition. This concern of the narrator’s applies specifically to the transformation of the concept of identity, as the definitive images traditionally associated with specific identities have become truncated from their original referents. In the postmodern condition, they are defined only through their surface- or face-value; the spectacle, the image itself has become everything. While the Machine exists for the narrator throughout the novel as an archaic framework, a phantom, he recognizes it as one that the larger part of society seemingly still nonetheless adheres to. It is manifested in the form of businessmen buying champagne, yuppies driving Mercedes, hippies wearing Birkenstock sandals and taking drugs, all in the belief that there is some deeper significance to behaviors and signs, that they are uniquely defining themselves and therein setting themselves apart from the crowd.
This promise of depth underlying ostensible superficialities is what is specifically modernist about the ghost of the Machine for the narrator. The existence of the Machine is realized through people’s belief that acts such as voting, consumerism, physical appearance, etc. present substantive means of self-expression, that they define one’s individual identity, one’s very sense of place in society. This concept, as well as its troubling aspects, is poignantly illustrated in the Faserland narrator’s description of a man that he encounters on a train to Hamburg:

Ich sehe mir den Mann an […] und er hat tatsächlich so ein kleines Bärtchen, so einen Lenin-Bart, wie ihn jetzt die Leute im Mojo-Club tragen, aber er meint das gar nicht modisch, sondern völlig Ernst, obwohl die Jazz-Freaks im Mojo-Club das ja eigentlich auch ernst meinen… (25)

The notion of making a meaningful statement through something as superficial as a facial-hair style is precisely what the narrator ascribes to his construct of the Machine in his aforementioned diatribe. In the framework of the Machine, images such as the “Lenin-Bart” that he discusses in this passage have static, clearly defined connotations, i.e. being old-fashioned, conservative, etc. In other words, carrying such a style of beard entails a significant depth of meaning and identity.

However, the beard style that he muses over in this passage is ascribed to two seemingly contradictory identities (i.e. the right-wing conservative and the liberal hipster), yet it is treated as equally authentic for both. That is to say, the appropriation of this style by the “Jazz-Freaks im Mojo-Club” is just as valid an assertion of identity as the style in its original conservative context. By ascribing to such a clearly de-contextualized image of identity in the postmodern condition, the “Jazz-Freaks” construct just as relevant an image of identity, even though it exists at a right angle to the original. This is why the narrator sees the Machine as being ultimately untenable; the distinct
binaries and the associative depth of meaning underlying images of identity have been melded, flattened under postmodernity. As identity has become a pure surface phenomenon, Lenin-beards are now up for grabs. This episode perfectly illustrates Lawrence Grossberg’s contention that “faking” and superficiality have under postmodernity supplanted the authenticity and depth of modernity.

It is salient that the narrator uses what is a decidedly modernist and anachronistic concept to frame the postmodern dilemma that he is facing. He thereby acknowledges the fallacy of the conceptualization of identity that the Machine entails. Whether or not any solid notion of a German identity ever even existed remains questionable in the novel, which the narrator conveys in the following excerpt:

Das wäre aber alles eigentlich auch etwas, das der Vergangenheit angehören würde, dieses Erzählen da oben an dem Bergsee. Vielleicht bräuchte ich das alles nicht zu erzählen, weil es die große Maschine nicht mehr geben würde. Sie wäre unwichtig, und da ich sie nicht mehr beachte, würde es sie nicht mehr geben, und die Kinder werden nie wissen, daß es Deutschland jemals gegeben hat, und sie wären frei, auf ihre Art (153).

As this passage demonstrates, the narrator regards the society that he is currently immersed in as still operating under the ruse that this construct actually exists, still viewing it as a framework for self-definition. The existence of the machine is described by the narrator as largely dependent on his and others’ recognition thereof, signaling an important moment of cognizance. The narrator in this passage conveys a realization that there is no longer a way back to Marcuse’s critical modernity, where identity and individuality are still feasible concepts. As he contemplates abandoning this concept and the associative notion of a depth underlying the construct of identity, the narrator likewise implies altogether abandoning modernism. He instead accepts postmodernism and its connective approach to constructing identity.
The narrator initially regards Switzerland, the counterpart to Germany’s destructive past, both in its wartime neutrality and its escaping physical destruction, as a possible solution to his woes, a potentially permanent escape from the troubling aspects of the condition of postmodernity. “Vielleicht ist die Schweiz ja eine Lösung für alles,” he wonders (151). He finds that the banality, emptiness and inherently inauthentic nature that he is struggling to escape have become entrenched in German society to the point that they have become its very defining characteristics, and thus regards Germany as an almost uniformly postmodern space. However, it quickly becomes apparent to the narrator that Switzerland by no means presents a permanent solution to his crisis, as he begins to recognize the presence of behaviors that he initially thought this idyllic environment was free of.

The narrator’s self-induced separation from the world which he inhabits is accompanied by a growing sense of insouciance and nihilism that gradually pervade his mindset. The result of this pervasion is that the narrator finds his environment to be less and less compatible with a critical, Marcusean modernist worldview. By viewing the postmodern world through a modernist lens, he perceives a current of artificiality underlying virtually all of society. Consequently, he comes to regard it with a growing sense of disaffection, as the desire to appear trendy and to embody the western consumer/popular culture has despite its artifice become the predominant driving societal motivation, the principal remaining means of self-definition. It is for this reason that the narrator is distrustful of any well-defined ideology, however idealistic it may present itself as. He regards any such ideology as thinly veiled conformism to a common super-structure; the people around him, regardless of what they claim to stand for, are all
defining themselves according to the parameters of a differentiating Machine that no longer exists, that no longer has any real relevance. This gradual realization is one of the factors most directly contributing to the narrator’s eventual acceptance of and resignation to the postmodern condition.

**THE SOLUTION OF MACHINIC DOPING**

Having linked the concepts of Machine and modernity, there remains the question concerning what effect they have on the individual, particularly in respect to the definition of identity. In an interview with Jean-Francis Held (first published in 1984 in *Les Nouvelles*), Félix Guattari framed the effect of living under machinic systems as having a “doping” quality, not unlike Marcuse. Machinic systems imbue us with a sense of clear self-definition (i.e. one conforming to the precise and atomized parameters of the concept of identity as it is conceived under modernity) that we become dependent upon. “For us, machinic dope works more in favor of a return to the individual, but it seems nevertheless as indispensable to the subjective stabilization of industrial societies” (103). Giving us the sensation of being vertically positioned (whether temporally, socially, spatially, existentially, etc) within the social fabric (that is to say, giving us a sense of differentiation within it), the effects of machinic subjectivity are soothing and reaffirming, thereby facilitating a sense of complacency with the larger societal apparatus: “We must begin by enlarging the definition of drugs. All the mechanisms producing a machinic subjectivity, everything that contributes to provide a sensation of belonging to something, of being somewhere, along with the sensation of forgetting

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3 Guattari does point out that the existential aspects of machinic doping, while doubtlessly existing in some form, are not easy to detect, as usually “only the surfaces are visible.” (101)
oneself, are ‘drugs’” (101). Guattari’s argument that modern identities are analogous to drugs is merely a different formulation of Marcuse’s theory concerning the complacency-inducing effect of affirmative modernity. The danger of a dependency on these drugs parallels locking into Marcuse’s Machine and therein sacrificing any notion of individuality or autonomy through submissiveness to the apparatus. For Guattari, those who cannot get out of the machinic process risk self-destruction, as all addicts do.4 When the outmodedness of the system in this regard becomes apparent to us, we are faced with a very serious dilemma, one that has the potential to destroy us if we are not able to extricate ourselves from the dangers of modernity.

This concept of machinic doping, including its ensuing effects and potentially self-destructive consequences, are of central importance to Faserland. Throughout much of the novel, the narrator engages in a variety of drug-usage. While the controlled substances that the narrator utilizes assume various physical effects, they serve an identical ontological purpose.5 For the narrator, the usefulness of any manner of drugs is that they facilitate an at least temporary flight into affirmative modernity’s de-individualized identities; in so doing, he also submits to postmodern flattening. He manages to avoid giving in to addiction in that his escapes are always followed by a cognizance of their ephemeral and fantasy-like nature, by an awareness of postmodernity as actual reality. Repetitive movement or behavior (i.e. his frequent and cyclically-oriented escapism) is for the narrator just as much a drug in terms of its effects as alcohol

4 Guattari (104).

5 Although Guattari describes the effects of machination as drug-like, he addresses the ambiguous nature of exactly what constitutes a “drug-effect” and distinguishes the various sources that it may stem from: “Repeated pain and certain very ‘engaging’ activities incite the brain to secrete hormones, endorphins, which are much harder drugs than morphine. Is this not then some form of self-intoxication? […] One can use excitement, cold, repetitive movements, strenuous work, sports, fear.” (102)
or cigarettes. The resultant feeling of belonging somewhere or to something is how he copes with the postmodern condition; he is able to deal with postmodernity by periodically escaping it.

By balancing his use of drugs, he manages to utilize their effects for an extended period of time without allowing them to completely subsume him. As Guattari points out, machinic doping can be quite beneficial, even necessary, in that it can foster revolution in a society where progress has otherwise become obsolete:

> It is necessary to make oneself exist “within” the process […] Subjective formations concocted by dopings can either get things moving again, or kill them slowly over a low flame. Behind all this there are possibilities for creation, changes of life and scientific, economic and even aesthetic revolutions. New horizons or nothing. Within the grasp of the immense undertakings to stratify and serialize our societies, there are subjective formations roaming about that are capable of getting the power of the process going again and promoting mutant singularities and new minorities. The visibly doped sectors shouldn’t merely be defenses of acquired territories; the residual crystals that constitute machinic dope can penetrate the entire planet, reanimate it and relaunch it. A society that has reached the point of being so locked in should open up to this, or it will burst. (104-105)

Guattari presents machinic doping as a potential postmodern solution to the modern/postmodern dilemma that the narrator of *Faserland* faces. This doping affords one the possibility of artificially recreating the effects of a vertical modernity in a horizontal postmodern environment. What is necessary to avoid the catastrophically self-destructive possibility of machinic doping is the ability to extricate oneself from it so as to avoid becoming trapped in the addictions of modern identity. Crucial to avoiding subsumption in this fashion is an awareness of its artificial or illusory nature, an ability to regard it from outside. If the reality of the condition of postmodernity is entirely rejected, then the process becomes delusory and inevitably gives way to self-destruction. It is
precisely the ability to recognize and acknowledge the postmodern reality that enables the narrator to utilize the process of machinic doping as a coping mechanism rather than simply fall victim to it. Eventually regarding his circumstances with a degree of critical clarity, the narrator avoids completely surrendering himself to being dominated by the environments that he finds so ontologically troubling while managing to some degree adapt to them.

His addiction to machinic dope constantly pushes the protagonist of *Faserland* to re-experience the fleeting moment of euphoria that it grants him. He therefore manages to get his “fix” from a variety of sources. The various forms of aforementioned controlled substances are clearly among them, allowing the narrator initial feelings of comfort in environments that would otherwise repel him. These environments repel him because, in the narrator’s eyes, acquaintances such as Nigel and Varna think that they are modern when they are in actuality postmodern. The narrator desires to be modern, but he realizes that modernity has vanished, that fulfilling this desire is no longer possible. He instead uses the postmodern to different (differentiating) ends in order to acclimatize himself to it. For example, at either his friend Nigel’s party or at the student party that he is spontaneously invited to by Eugen in the Max Bar, he initially feels rather comfortable and even satisfied by his surroundings, evident in his notably optimistic remarks about

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6 This is made particularly apparent in the narrator’s description of Varna as deluded and phony. He ridicules her conviction in the liberal identity that she so consciously adopted: “Varna war so billig, so vorhersehbar, so liberal-dämlich…[die Unterhaltung ging meistens um so sachen wie]: Daß man ja eigentlich doch die Grünen wählen müßte, oder man müsse ein Beispiel setzen und kein Auto mehr fahren, nach der ultra-dämlichen Devise Think globally, act locally, und so weiter…Die Frau war einfach dumm.” (73-74). Varna is under the illusion that the identity she has adopted is indicative of an autonomous self-definition and distinctiveness, when she is in fact merely superficially rehashing trite liberal slogans that are as commodified and mainstream as any other identity.
The girls that he meets at this party are postmodern, but, unlike Varna, they are aware that they are postmodern. They are as superficial as any other acquaintances that he makes throughout the novel, but they are not in denial of it. This recognition and acceptance of the nature of the postmodern condition makes these environments tolerable for the narrator at least for a short while. He is thus able to at least temporarily lose himself in the superficiality of these environments, to put his reservations aside and accept them for what they are.

This ability to revel in these sorts of surface conditions that are characteristic of postmodernity is the crux of the narrator’s usage of machinic dope. Not only conventionally defined controlled substances, but also repetitively oriented actions such as compulsive consumerism or constant itinerancy create this effect. For example, the narrator, just before his flight from Hamburg to Frankfurt, finds comfort in the feeling of anonymity that he experiences as he is walking through the metal detector (52). Similarly, as he subsequently walks into a Rondell store to purchase food, he feels an immediate impact: “Plötzlich geht es mir besser” (53). This feeling is expressed not after eating the items he has bought, but merely after taking the items and placing them in his grocery basket. Consumerism grants the narrator one opportunity (among many) to momentarily acquiesce to the postmodern condition. The acquiescence that he finds in this consumerism is the greater sense of self-definition that it affords him; “I buy, therefore I am.” The “doping” effect created by consumerism lies in its simulation of a

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7 For example, at Nigel’s party, after a girl makes a rather vacuous comment about Angelo Badalamenti: “Plötzlich merke ich, daß dieses Mädchen, das ich ganz zufällig auf dieser blöden Party treffe, alles verstanden hat, was es zu verstehen gibt” (45). Similarly, at Eugen’s party, he describes his affection for Nadja as the result of her being “auf eine erfrischende Art dumm” (101).
false modernist sense of identity or belonging within the postmodern condition. This enables the narrator to cope with postmodernity by briefly embracing it.

The acclimatizing effects of this “doping” behavior must inevitably remain ephemeral. The narrator can never completely lose himself in this environment. If he did, he would fall under the very category of complete superficiality that he so frequently derides. This adherence to a modernist machination has, in actuality, been supplanted through the advent of the condition of postmodernity. This contradiction continually haunts the narrator. At the aforementioned parties or in the airport, the euphoric nature of his doping invariably wears off and he subsequently becomes distressed by environments which he moments earlier found acceptable. This is evident in the two previously discussed parties which the narrator attends, apropos Eugen’s unexpected sexual advances towards him and the orgy involving his friend Nigel that he encounters in a similarly unexpected manner. These instances are so alarming for the narrator because they represent alarming glimpses of what is beneath the surface environments that he finds himself in. They confront him with the fact that the only thing to be found beneath the surface is more surface. This is highlighted by the narrator’s apparent inability to make sense of the scene that he witnesses as he walks in on the orgy, describing the scene mostly in terms of juxtaposing randomly observed signs (a random assortment of individual body parts, various pieces of furniture, used condoms). There is no hint of eroticism, love or affection underlying the incident he witnesses, merely signs. The scene
that he experiences is one of pure spectacle, devoid of any meaning, which is why the narrator has such trouble processing and dealing with it.\footnote{This absence of meaning is notably demonstrated by the narrator in his observation of the tattoo of a mole on the leg of the “Stüssy-Mensch,” which he frames as completely devoid of any possible logical significance. (50-51)}

The ontological revelation that the postmodern world is one of pure surface is encapsulated by the narrator as he flees from the scene he witnesses at Nigel’s party. Getting into the first taxi he can find, the narrator instructs the cabdriver to take him to the airport. En route, he reminisces about his childhood experiences flying with Alitalia. In this recollection, he conveys a deeper sense of awareness of his environment:

Ich errinere mich, daß ich immer furchtbar gern geflogen bin [...] Ich durfte immer ins Cockpit und dort den Steuerknüppel halten, obwohl ich schon damals wußte, daß die Piloten auf Automatik geschaltet hatten, ich das Flugzeug also nicht ganz alleine flog, wie die Piloten mir ständig versicherten. [...] Ich habe es mir von den Piloten nie anmerken lassen, daß ich die Wahrheit wußte: Es ist nur Autopilot. (51-52)

These ruminations on his childhood traveling experiences underscore the narrator’s problem with the larger society that he finds himself in. Namely, that it is operating according to a machinic system that has long since been made inconsequential as a result of the paradigm shift towards postmodernity.

As this passage demonstrates, once his buzz inevitably wears off and he is forced to confront the reality that he is presented with, the narrator is cognizant of his environment, either directly through commentary on Germany (i.e. when he is on the plane to Frankfurt) or veiled through metaphor (as he does in the above passage). This periodic awareness is crucial to the narrator’s navigation of the postmodern dilemma. The narrator finds a way of using his otherwise futile reliance on the conventions of modernity against themselves, of using them in a manner so as to adapt to the postmodern
condition. He accomplishes this by making his home in a perpetually recreated state of transience, by always demarcating, tearing down and starting anew, by mixing into his usage of machinic dope moments of clarity and perspective. As we will see, his true solution to the postmodern dilemma lies not in finding a place where the condition of postmodernity hasn’t taken hold, but rather in embracing the condition by immersing himself in the state of constant change and overlap that it represents.
CHAPTER 2
THE BLUE-SCREEN

If depth pertains to a modernist concept of identity and self-definition, it remains to be seen how this depth has eroded under the condition of postmodernity. The previously discussed commodification and subsequent flattening of identity are indicative of the postmodern paradigm of what I call the “blue-screen.” In the following chapter, I establish in greater detail the nature of postmodernity, its flattening effect, and its emblematic figuration in the blue-screen. I frame this argument apropos the onset of new mass-media technology, which, being a crucial vehicle for commodification and the consumerism, is closely linked to the dissipation of depth under postmodernity. The Faserland narrator, alluding to the presence of the blue-screen throughout the novel, comes to acknowledge the inescapability of the flattening effect and ensuing homogenization of identity that it represents. It is my contention that ultimately, rather than try to resist or escape this condition, he finds a way of adapting himself to it vis-à-vis Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s rhizomatics.

If the machinic framework and the corresponding depth governing modern ontology have become obsolete, then the nature of postmodernity remains to be grasped. What David Harvey characterizes as a “time-space compression” or “conflation,” (240) we experienced quite literally as a flattening effect, one that has facilitated a sense of fluidity in that different spatialities and temporalities now overlap, melded together into indistinctiveness. The verticality of modernity has become a surface phenomenon.
Harvey, in raising the question of how to get behind these surfaces and identify essential meanings, posits that postmodernity, with its resignation to bottomless fragmentation and ephemerality, generally refuses to contemplate it. The reason for this resignation is that under postmodernity, actual depth no longer exists. This phenomenon is reflected perfectly in Kracht’s *Faserland*. The spatial and temporal characteristics of fragmentation and ephemerality that Harvey speaks of are the postmodern condition endemic to the reality of *Faserland*. If the (German) Machine is understood as the quintessential semiotic organization of modernity, then its postmodern predecessor is the “blue-screen.”

Devoid of any distinctiveness or difference, the vacant, humming television screen is the quintessential representation of pure surface. The screen is inexorably tied to that of new media. The shift in semiotic paradigms from machines to screens mirrors, I argue, the transition from modernity to postmodernity. To grasp this, we must engage the state of mass-media technology, in particular its effect on and the consequences for the individual as well as society as a whole. The hegemonic nature of new media under the condition of postmodernity shapes not only our perception but, by extension, our very existence. This conundrum was first expressed by Marshall McLuhan in a seminal passage from his *The Medium is the Massage*:

> All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the massage. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments. All media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical. (26)

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9 Harvey raises this issue apropos Raban’s question concerning the navigability of urban life. (59)
Media completely pervade every aspect of our world. According to McLuhan, there no longer exists any real distinction between media and message; they are one and the same.\textsuperscript{10} That is to say, the actual content that is broadcasted by the media has become irrelevant as the resulting effect on humanity is the medium itself. It is only the form of the medium itself (i.e. print, television, etc) and the resultant sensory effect that it has on the human faculty that has any relevance. The meaning that any new medium can impart is thus inextricably bound to its surface characteristics.

Media are not merely influential on human behavior, but are just as well mimetic of it. New media have become very real, tangible environments which humanity must navigate. McLuhan characterizes media as “environments,” but the nature of these environments as well as their concomitant ontological impact remains to be defined. McLuhan pertinently articulates his definition of these environments and what is necessary for engaging them, as well as the underlying nature of the transition from modernity to postmodernity as follows:

Environments are invisible. Their ground-rules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns elude easy perception. Survival is not possible if one approaches his environment, the social drama, with a fixed, unchangeable point of view. (10) The public consists of separate individuals walking around with separate, fixed points of view. The new technology demands that we abandon the luxury of this posture, this fragmentary outlook. The method of our time is to use not a single but multiple models for exploration– the technique of the suspended judgment is the discovery of the twentieth century… (69)

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\textsuperscript{10} McLuhan here has adopted the term “massage” to denote the effect that each medium has on the human sensorium, inventorying the effects of media in its various forms in terms of how they “massage” the sensorium. The terms “message” and “massage” are therefore essentially interchangeable in the context in which McLuhan uses them.
The inherent complexity of postmodern environments prohibits them from being understood apropos the “truth-quest” approach that DeKoven ascribes to modernity. Postmodern environments are defined not by the modernist perception of verticality, but rather by the dissolving and melding of significance and information into a horizontal, virtually homologous, amalgamation. A fixed approach or viewpoint is therefore no longer a possibility for attaining any degree of epistemological understanding. Our only means of coping with the nature of the postmodern condition is to inscribe upon ourselves the fluidity that these environments require.

The impact of new media that McLuhan details in the above passage is emblematic of the flattening effect endemic to postmodernity. Creating an environment of singularity in which distinct semiotic definitions can no longer be established, the postmodern world is one of pure surface, one in which message and meaning are merged into a superficial uniformity. The manner in which the postmodern condition is portrayed in *Faserland* is in accordance with this characterization, which is manifested in the concept of the blue-screen. I invoke this term as it applies to contemporary film and media technology, specifically in respect to the lighting effects that they commonly use. This effect pertains most notably to the HMI light (Hydrargyrum Medium-arc Iodide), which, due to its composition of rare earth halides, produces a rather large green spike in its emission spectrum. This green spike, although slight, tends to result in much harsher and more obtrusive color reproduction on film or video. As a result, this green “curse” is very often corrected, diffused, muted, “washed-over” with a gel, which, as TV spot director Terry Bedford points out in an interview with Marshall Blonsky in his *American*  

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11 See chapter 1, pg. 9.
*Mythologies*, is most commonly blue.\(^\text{12}\) The ubiquity of this “blue-effect” in contemporary media becomes especially significant when taking into account McLuhan’s aforementioned theories on the nature of media. As this aesthetic effect has become a defining characteristic of these media, it has also by extension become a defining characteristic of the very environments that we exist in.

The importance of the effect of the color blue on film technology and the ensuing consequences are further explored in Blonsky’s work, framed in the context of the revolution in advertising and associative advent of HMI technology occurring in the late 1970’s. HMIs burn at 5400 degrees Kelvin, slightly short of the temperature of the sun, but their color is the complete contrary of the sun, a cold, flattening blue. In older technology, dust or smoke was used in order to create tones, to create a sense of depth by muting color so that the colors appearing on the screen were not so overpowering; it effectively gave us the possibility of seeing distinct hues, of experiencing separate, distinguishable sensations. After the revolution in lighting effects that is mentioned in Blonsky’s work, this idea of depth or distinction was abandoned; as TV director Michael Oblowitz says in Blonsky’s work: “We want to see color for what it’s worth.” The resultant effect, perhaps best framed by Blonsky and Oblowitz in the following section of *American Mythologies*, makes it evident that it has very real associative societal implications:

You’d expect light and hot…but in fact it goes the opposite. It’s like a cold star, cold, cold light and that’s what’s so sexy, the fact it’s cold, dead. Necrophilia lights.” As if the world they lit were dead and all its three-dimensional guts bled out on some God’s embalming table. “They make everything flatter,” Oblowitz relishes. […] In our brave new world the

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\(^{12}\) Establishing the ubiquity of this effect, Bedford, in pointing to a film strip, notes: “This has probably got half blue gel on it.” (142)
blue sun wipes out tonal difference, it forecloses the calling into being of distinct hues and separate sensations. Our eyes are able to see many colors and warmths, except that our eyes are trained not to see them any longer. […] Today’s blue light triumphantly succeeds in drawing the objects of its gaze onto a single picture plane…features, body parts, items of clothing, cars cans, often colored red- this furniture of the world that otherwise would be jumbled melds. Heterogeneous in your life, these objects form a glossy skin for the camera lens, a single object for consumption by an eye turned away from the real in love now with pure surface. (142-143)

Taking into account the significance of the effects of this color as they are discussed in the above passage, blue has become a semiotic representation of the very condition of postmodernity. A flattening and diffusing color, facilitating a sense of uniformity through indistinctiveness, blue is the color of pure surface, the color through which all realities are pulled into a state of singularity. Separate sensations, clear categorizations, distinctiveness, these are all the ways of the old, relegated to extinction by the nascent of the blue-screen.

A semiotic representation of this blurring effect, the “blue-screen” takes on a very specific connotation for the narrator in Faserland. Throughout the novel, objects colored blue are associated with conformity or acquiescence, from Karin’s Barbour Jacket and Mercedes to the street signs in Germany, and are summarily criticized by the narrator in a manner that effectively associates the color with his broader societal lamentations. “Eben, als wir über Barbourjacken sprechen, hat sie gesagt, sie wolle sich keine grüne kaufen, weil die blauen schöner aussehen, wenn sie abgewetzt sind. Das glaube ich aber nicht. Meine grüne Barbourjacke gefällt mir besser.” (13-14). Although the jackets are virtually identical save for their color, the narrator regards this as a defining characteristic, using it so as to attempt to separate himself from the diffusing effect which the color blue represents. This manner of blurring or whitewashing effect is perhaps most pertinently
framed by the narrator in the following passage wherein he finds himself using a restroom whilst on a train to Hamburg:

Ich sehe mir beide Kabinen an; eine ist innen Rosa, die andere Hellblau, also entscheide ich mich für die blaue, obwohl die rosafarbene sicher sauberer ist. […] Also trinke ich einen großen Schluck Wein und zünde mir eine Zigarette an und versuche, auf einen Punkt zu starren, aber meine Augen drehen sich immer wie von selbst weg und mir wird leicht übel, und ich überlege ernsthaft, ob das an dem vielen Hellblau liegt…(26-27)

The blue color of the restroom in this passage facilitates a sense of vertigo in the narrator when he tries to focus on a single, distinctive point. The effect of blue is contrary to the act of focusing or distinguishing; it melds and flattens everything into a singular plane. Green, on the other hand, marks the region of the optical spectrum wherein a light adapted eye typically has its maximum sensitivity.\(^\text{13}\) In this region of the spectrum, the eye’s ability to focus and make distinctions is at its peak, contrary to the lower wavelength region of blue. It is for this reason that in color psychology, green is commonly associated with facilitating a sensation of individuality, while blue is associated with facilitating calmness and complacency.\(^\text{14}\) It is consequently no surprise that as the narrator tries to pick out a focal point amidst the blue backdrop, he cannot help but feel dizzy and nauseated as his eyes begin to wander aimlessly across the homogenous blue surface.

Melding, flattening, \textit{obliterating} distinction, the color blue serves as a manifestation of the cultural quandary of the condition of postmodernity. The entire world, along with any existing constructions of identity, is now blue. What was once separate and distinct was painted over with the same hue, melded into an indissoluble

\(^{13}\) Wyszecki.

\(^{14}\) Birren.
unity. The ubiquity of this effect can be seen in the narrator’s positing that it may even extend to Karin’s eye color: “Karin hat ziemlich blaue Augen. Ob das gefärbte Kontaktlinsen sind?” (14) For the same reason that he initially finds blue displeasing, he often voices a preference for the color green. As was previously mentioned concerning the presence of the “green spike” on film and the optical effect of this color region, green serves as the semiotic counterpart to blue, creating an effect of contrast and distinction. Manifested in a number of commentaries made by the narrator throughout the novel, this becomes particularly apparent in his remarks on road signs in Switzerland and Germany:

Meine einzige Erinnerung an die Schweiz ist eine Autofahrt mit meinem Vater. Ich war vielleicht sechs oder sieben, und wir fuhren am Genfer See entlang, nach Genf. Die Autobahnschilder waren grün und nicht blau, wie in Deutschland... (151)

It is pertinent that the narrator frames this distinction between green and blue in terms of nationality, associating blue with the postmodern space of Germany and green with what he initially regards as the characteristically modern space of Switzerland. His aesthetic preference for green over blue reoccurs throughout the novel, also appearing in regard to his aforementioned commentary on Barbour Jackets. As can be seen in the narrator’s almost nostalgic recollection of green road signs as opposed to blue ones, he initially laments the whitewashing presence of the blue-effect, yearning for a past that no longer exists.

The contrast between the verticality of modernity and the flattening effect endemic to postmodernity that underlie this green/blue dichotomization is also manifested in other observations made by the narrator. Notably, upon his arrival in Zurich, he is imbued with an initial sense of optimism, not only because the city denotes a preservation of the past, but also because past and present are more clearly linked.
Switzerland for the narrator embodies a more linear temporality, one without schism, a seemingly idyllic modern environment in which the present preserves the past and distinguishes itself from it rather than subsuming it. It is for this reason that the narrator initially ponders if Switzerland may provide some sort of permanent solution to his crisis: “Vielleicht ist die Schweiz ja eine Lösung für alles...” (151). This optimistic sentiment is similarly represented in the narrator’s commentary on various Swiss edifices:


This passage creates a definite sense of linear progression and distinction between past and present. The former is inscribed onto the higher parts of the buildings while the latter is manifested in the lower parts. However, the past is not simply whitewashed over by the present, but is juxtaposed with it in the form of conspicuously contemporary businesses built into older buildings. In Germany, as the narrator notes, “wäre das alles viel schlimmer” because the pornographic theaters would most likely not be built into older structures, but rather exist as entirely new edifices, indicative of the ubiquity of popular, mass-marketable (and thus postmodern) images subsuming the presence of the past under the all-encompassing effect of the blue-screen. The superficiality of businesses such as the “Pornokino” would be augmented in Germany, as they would be built on and defined through their surface image alone. To the protagonist of *Faserland*, the present in Switzerland appears built on the foundations of the past, thus imbuing it with a sense of depth. There is a truth or historical reality in the sense of DeKoven’s earlier definition of the term “depth” underlying this architectural trend observed by the narrator. In these buildings, he perceives the maintaining of a relation between the two temporalities
without obfuscating their distinctiveness. However, as he searches for Thomas Mann’s grave near the end of the novel, the narrator ultimately becomes aware that the condition of postmodernity is by no means confined to national boundaries. As he thereby realizes the presence of the blue-screen in Switzerland after all, he must find some way of acclimatizing himself to the postmodern condition that the blue-screen embodies, a process that I will discuss in the subsequent section.

THE RHIZOME

Following his visit to the graveyard at the end of the novel, we are left with the narrator taking a seemingly compulsory boat ride out onto a lake under an azure sky. This uniformly blue environment is nothing less than a symbolic culmination of the blue-screen having engulfed the world. The ending is especially pertinent for understanding the narrator’s assimilation to the condition of postmodernity, not because it signals a change in his behavior or a moment of epiphany, but because it is representative of the coping behavior that he displays throughout the novel. In his voyage out onto the Zürichsee (as well as throughout most of his stay in Switzerland), the narrator is afforded an extended period of cognizance vital to his successful utilization of machinic doping. In this state, he displays an acuter sense of awareness of the nature of the postmodern condition, as well as how he is to navigate it. The periodically recurring awareness that modernity is a false reality allows the narrator to acclimatize himself to the postmodern condition. He attains these glimpses of recognition through Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatics. By

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15 Whereas Richard Langston argues that the narrator has a “eureka moment” in Zurich, I contend that this is merely a fragmentary glimpse of realization that he periodically displays throughout the novel. In this respect, I would argue that Faserland is not a Bildungsroman.
maintaining a transitive state, he is able to counteract the addictive quality of machinic
doping and utilize it as a coping mechanism.

The ending does not signal a defeatist change in the narrator’s behavior, but rather
a perpetuation of everything he’s done thus far. While Anke Biendarra reads the open
ending of the novel as being indicative of a preparation for suicide, the close to what she
essentially interprets as a morality play, such a finite and definite conclusion exists at a
right angle to the novel as a whole (178-179). According to Biendarra, the narrator’s
quest for self fails because of his flawed decisions to indulge in consumer culture.
Although Kracht’s novel does, as Richard Langston posits, “[demonstrate] the futility in
seeking out an alternative modern identity in a postmodern space” (62), it is not a
morality play in the sense of warning against the consequences of seeking self-definition
apropos consumerism. The novel goes beyond merely demonstrating the futility that
Langston observes and delineates a way of coping with this quagmire. The ending of the
novel emblematizes the narrator’s method of survival; his escape is inherently short-
lived, his operative realm always the surface. As the closing line of the novel reads:
“Bald sind wir in der Mitte des Sees. Schon bald,” (158) the protagonist anticipates not
the arrival on the other side of the lake, but the arrival in the middle. That is to say, he
anticipates the lack of a final destination, of any meaning to his journey, seeking only to
prolong his traversal of an environment of pure surface. This is representative of his
behavior throughout the novel, as he invariably abruptly leaves one locale for the next.
This spontaneously recurring flight is how the narrator periodically breaks off his usage

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16 Fabian Lettow makes a similar observation, likening the ending of the novel to a metaphorical
representation of Charon and the river Styx. The event free of any blatantly ominous portents, Lettow may
be attempting to draw an ultimately unsustainable connection between the narrator’s search for the grave of
Thomas Mann and Mann’s actual works, in this case Tod in Venedig.
of machinic dope and thus avoids being engulfed in addiction. The aforementioned closing lines of the novel thus serve as an acknowledgement that this postmodern surface is the only space in which he can hope to exist.

A real manifestation of the blue-screen, this wholly azure environment represents the narrator’s self-immersion in the condition of postmodernity. Rather than preparing to suicidally submerge himself in the lake, the narrator intends to keep himself indefinitely afloat and on the move. Indicative of a continuation of his effort to cope with this condition, the ending is marked more by a sense of optimism than it is pessimism. If the ubiquity of the blue-screen is what the narrator of Faserland is trying to cope with, then forever skimming the surfaces of his environment entails his means of both submitting to and escaping the postmodern condition that the blue-screen represents. Always moving and unsettled, the narrator’s behavior adapts to a world that is pure surface.

Signaling an acceptance of the dominion of the blue-screen, the narrator’s immersion in the surface environment of postmodernity is closely tied to the constant itinerancy that the narrator displays throughout the novel. He is able to utilize the latter as a means of facilitating the former in that his transience absolves him of forming a meaningful connection with his environments, breaking him from addiction. The nature of his experiencing these environments largely superficial apropos ephemerality, the protagonist of Faserland very much embodies Deleuze and Guattari’s construct of the rhizome. Having no true beginning (no roots), middle (no trunk) or end (no leaves), the rhizome is always in the middle, between things, inter-being; it is always in process. There is no particular shape that it is predetermined or expected to take and no particular
territory to which it is bound. Deleuze and Guattari pertinently frame the nature of this state of intermezzo:

The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without beginning or end… (25)

Apropos his constant movement, the narrator himself forms a rhizome, “increasing his territory by deterritorialization, extending his line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency.” (11) The narrator is defined entirely through his lines of flight; they underlie and determine the nature of his very life. This is evident in the narrator’s citing the best moment of travel as being *in-between* two modes of traveling:

Diese Moment ist fast das Beste am Fliegen, wenn man aus dem Bus steigt…und an der Treppe steht eine Stewardeß… Das ist so eine Art Übergang von einem Leben ins andere oder eine Mutprobe. Irgend etwas ändert sich im Leben, alles wird für einen kurzen Moment erhabener. (55)

As this passage demonstrates, for the narrator, even better than a journey in and of itself is the transition from one journey to another, a “line of flight” in the purest sense. Eternally cutting roots and making new connections, discontinuity and the short-term his primary states of being, the narrator thereby makes the surface his antidote to addiction. His complicity always critical to a degree (as is demonstrated through the self-aware nature of the commentary that he delivers in the above-cited passage, as well as his perpetual need to get himself out of addiction), the narrator never seeks to prolong a single line of flight, but rather to always create them anew.17

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17 Hutcheon (2).
Initially a means of extricating himself from this assimilatory process, Switzerland is perceived as a permanent respite from postmodernity, one wherein the flattening effect inherent to this condition seemingly has not yet taken hold.\(^\text{18}\) Feeling relatively at peace with the new environment that he finds himself in, the narrator is at least momentarily free of his constant desire to move and start anew, as he has apparently found an environment in which flight no longer seems necessary. The narrator subsequently flirts with the idea of staying in the seemingly modern space of Switzerland, as it might prove to offer a tangible modern end to his escape from postmodernity.

However, the view of Switzerland as a sanctuary from the condition of postmodernity turns out to be a mirage. The protagonist gradually realizes that the haven or solution to the crisis that he faces is manifested not in any concrete destination, but rather in an interminable cat-and-mouse game of flirting with forms of addiction and fleeing from those spaces before they can envelop him.

Entering the cemetery after the sun has already set, the protagonist’s search for Thomas Mann’s grave is an encapsulation of his entire journey. Not only must he search in near darkness, but he also has only a vague sense of what Thomas Mann’s grave looks like, nor does he have an idea of where in the cemetery it is located. His supply of matches, his only light source, steadily shrinks until they run out altogether. Just before he leaves the graveyard and completely abandons any hopes of finding the grave, he

\(^{18}\) This argument is made by Richard Langston as follows: “…the beautiful object, the focal point of Kant’s pure aesthetic judgment of taste, is experienced as being finite, possessing distinct beginnings and endings, and inhabiting a space that makes these delimited boundaries possible. What this means for Kracht’s protagonist and his quest to construct his sense of self is that Switzerland is an Euclidian field, a place where here and there exist…In contrast to the modern Euclidean places of Switzerland, Germany is a postmodern space…the Federal Republic…exists for the protagonist largely in terms of an imploded territory in which distinct, autonomous places and the kilometers of road, rail and airspace separating them become an endless series of spectacles blurring together the here and the there as well as the then and now.” (56-57)
comes across what he believes to be a large black dog, or, more precisely, the shadow of one.\textsuperscript{19} The presence of the animal is thus portrayed as indistinct and obscured to the point that it becomes questionable whether the dog even exists outside of the narrator’s imagination, in contrast to the defecating dog that is presented at the beginning of the novel.\textsuperscript{20} Nevertheless, the narrator tries to convince the reader that he can not only sense the dog defecating, but is certain that it is doing so right on a gravestone: “Der Hund setzt sich hin, und er kackt tatsächlich auf eines von den Gräbern. Das kann ich genau erkennen, ich schwöre es.” (157) He becomes even more alarmed when the thought enters his mind that the dog may have defecated specifically on Thomas Mann’s grave, and, in a very modernist reaction, subsequently tries to chase it away despite having no real sense of where either the dog or the grave might be located. At the end of the novel, the defecating dog exists purely as a mental construct of the first-person narrator.

Considering the prototypical link between Thomas Mann and modernity, this internally manifested fear of the narrator’s represents the possibility that a search for modernity may be in vain, that what he is searching for may not only no longer exist, but also may be a figment of his imagination. The scene in the cemetery serves as an encapsulation of his larger journey because it reveals that his goal, the modernity that he chases after throughout the novel, exists only in the form of an illusion. The narrator has thus come to realize that space outside of postmodernity no longer exists, that the world

\textsuperscript{19} “...eigentlich ist er nur der Schatten eines Hundes, der sich bewegt.” (156)

\textsuperscript{20} The latter is clearly seen and described by the narrator, right down to the “winzige goldene Kühe” (14) that are pasted onto his collar. His language free of conditionality, the latter event is portrayed as an objective reality, the act of defecation clearly taking place in the external world. Whereas Biendarra argues that this event establishes a sense of circularity when linked with the dog defecating at the beginning of the novel, I am treating the seemingly congruous instances as more indicative of a progression in the narrator’s mindset, representative of a dawning realization regarding the potential demise of modernity.
has become a postmodern space, a blue-screen that he has no choice but to make sense of. Both literally and figuratively skimming the surface of a uniformly blue environment at the story’s end, the narrator’s method of coping is very much dependent on avoiding the possibility that there may no longer be any real depth beneath the surface of the postmodern world by never delving beneath it. Fleeting addictions and flight are his only means of coping with his environment; his journey is consequently fated to be one without end. His only option lies in forever chasing the cold light of the now blue sun, of assenting to the effects of the blue-screen.

An allegorical representation of his larger journey, structurally analogous to a Russian nesting doll, the failed search for Thomas Mann’s grave at the close of the novel signals a dawning upon the narrator that what he seeks is forever fleeting, that his journey is one without a tangible conclusion. By maintaining a state of critical complicity, the narrator forever skims the surface of the condition of postmodernity without becoming entirely addicted to it. The moments of contentment that arise whenever he arrives in a new location are fleeting, but he reproduces and thereby perpetuates them by incessantly starting anew. The initial bouts of optimism that accompany his complicity with every new location that he enters invariably give way to the malaise and discontent that accompany his periodic criticality, thus compelling him to once again move on.

CONCLUSION

Is the coping mechanism that the Faserland narrator adopts a feasible solution to living in the flattened world of postmodernity? Can an entire society truly successfully employ this strategy as a means of navigating the postmodern condition? Guattari not
only argues that machinic doping has the potential to be utilized on a mass-scale, but that this has in certain societies already occurred:

The example of Japan, considered on a large scale, is significant. The Japanese make the best of an archaic, or let’s say pseudo-archaic structure. This is the counterpart to their being on machinic dope, and in this way the society does not dissolve into dust. They have remade a feudal territoriality out of their traditions, by perpetuating the alienated conditions of women, by absorption into repetitive work on machines...These are also conduits for subjective positioning—well, not really “for,” but that is the result: it works! The Japanese structure their universe and order their emotions within the proliferation and disorder of machines, while hanging on to their archaic references. But above all, they are crazy for machines, for a machinic kind of buzz. (101)

Japanese society, according to Guattari, balances its usage of machinic dope by preserving its archaic social structures while concomitantly locking in to the complacency-inducing effects of Marcusean affirmative modernity, therein avoiding destruction at the hands of addiction. The Japanese, like Americans (Guattari notes: “Americans are the champions of doping, they have thousands of ways to do it, and invent new ones every day” [103]), are examples of using machinic dope to one’s advantage; they effectively engage in the same behavior that the Faserland narrator utilizes to deal with the postmodern condition. By using doping so as to reinvigorate the process of stratifying our societies, there exists the possibility for recreating the individualizing effect that modernity potentially offers.

This begs the question as to why Germany, and, to a larger extent, Europe, seems unable to make use of this process, unable to adapt to postmodernity. Why does the

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21 Perhaps it is for this reason that the narrator displays an admiration for Japanese-style clothing that he observes various women wearing in Switzerland: “Die Frauen haben alle so komische Himmelfahrtssnasen, und sie tragen alle Kleidung, die japanisch aussieht. Alles erscheint mir hier ehrlicher und klarer und vor allem offensichtlicher” (151).
protagonist of Kracht’s novel appear to be such an anomalous figure in the environments that he traverses? Guattari sheds some light on this in the following passage:

And while the whole planet is undergoing fantastic changes, France makes faces at the great machinic dope. It is the anti-dope…Europe too. Perhaps machinic processes call for large spaces, large markets or great old royal powers. […] [They] subjectivize themselves, and remake their existential territories with dopings, but complementarity between machines and refuge values is not guaranteed. (103-104)

The reason for Germany’s ultimate rejection of postmodernity lies, as was discussed in the introduction, in the schism created between past and present by the onset of this condition. Simultaneously unable to abandon their national past or preserve it as the Japanese do, the Germans have no means by which to control or offset their addiction to the Marcusean affirmative modernity that machinic dope represents. Germany is thus left with no choice but to live in a deluded state, in denial of the existence of the postmodern condition. As Guattari notes, machines and refuge are not necessarily complementary concepts; on the contrary, the refuge that they offer can easily metamorphose into a prison if the critical threshold of the process is passed. If the buzz wears off, if the illusion becomes mistaken for reality, then the process fails and machinic doping becomes a dependency rather than a coping mechanism.

Germany, facing a more complicated scenario than the rest of Europe that Guattari speaks of, is caught in the Catch-22 of either accepting the postmodern condition or remaining trapped in addiction to machinic dope. Adapting to postmodernity as a society implies to an extent consciously severing ties to the national past in some degree, a troubling possibility that German society has remained rightfully unwilling to accept. Whether there exists a consciously chosen way out of addiction for Germany remains to be seen. It may well be that its only way out of this quagmire rests, as the narrator
theorizes, in future generations being born free of the very concept of the German nation and its associative past. The only means of breaking the cycle could thus lie in time eventually rendering the very notion of Germany altogether antiquated.
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