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Themenheft: Masculinity in Contemporary German Culture
Gastherausgeber: Muriel Cormican and Gary Schmidt

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In his introduction to a 2008 special issue of Seminar (44.1) devoted to representations of masculinity in German texts and films from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, Michael Boehringer writes: «[T]he much-discussed ‘crisis of masculinity’ that is purported to have taken its beginning at the turn of the twentieth century can be identified as a crisis of masculine hegemony, a crisis that continues today and finds its regressive expressions in the mythopoetic men’s movements of the 1990s or in the homophobic policies of movements of the religious (and political) right both in Europe and North America» (1–2). Five years later, this special issue of Colloquia Germanica also focuses on the concept of a hegemonic masculinity, most prominently on the textual and filmic evidence of its gradual erasure. The multitude of depictions, interpretations, and performances of masculinities circulating in German language texts and the German-speaking world today point to an opening up of possibilities, an embrace of difference, and a series of important cultural interventions in discourses on masculinity that might have a very real influence on how a German-speaking public deals with the intersection of the concept of hegemonic masculinity with concepts of homosexuality, transsexualism, femininity, feminism, ethnicity, transnationalism, nationalism, and the professions. The collection of essays in this special issue aims to demonstrate both the existing breadth of creative depictions and constructions of masculinities in contemporary German culture as well as the continued necessity, both textually and actually, of presenting, negotiating, and defending diverse interpretations and performances of masculinity. All essays in this collection focus on pop-cultural products of the last twenty years and together constitute a discussion and wide-ranging inventory of the kinds of questions asked and issues posed in literary and filmic texts about gender roles and performances in the contemporary German-speaking world.

Molly Knight’s essay opens the collection with a discussion of male protagonists and psychopathy in Christian Kracht’s Faserland (1995), Benjamin Lebert’s Der Vogel ist ein Rabe (2003), and Michael Haneke’s Funny Games
Muriel Cormican/Gary Schmidt

(2007). She considers what the commonality of a psychopathic masculinity across genres might tell us about a tacit cultural agreement that traditional markers of a renegade masculinity (toughness, self-sufficiency, resistance to society), taken to their logical conclusions, are becoming aligned with psychopathy in a way that «normalizes psychopathy» and «encourages the viewer or reader to excuse the character’s violent behavior as a product of his damaged masculinity.» These representations, she suggests, lament the erosion of masculinity’s place in society and the demonization of masculinity in that they focus on young men with no outlet for «masculine» behaviors other than violence and indifference.

Taking the cinema of Fatih Akin from 1998 to 2009 as an example, Muriel Cormican examines the intersection of discourses of transnationalism and masculinity over the course of Akin’s career as a filmmaker. Cormican’s readings do not shy away from criticizing covert and overt misogynous moments in the six films that she examines. She does not ignore, nor does she fail to appreciate, Akin’s critique of extreme examples of hegemonic masculinity but notes at the same time the tendency towards a restoration of a heteronormative masculinity in his films, even if in an ostensibly kinder, gentler form. Cormican’s feminist intervention into the reception of Akin’s cinematic œuvre offers an important addition to scholarship and criticism that has largely focused on the transnational aspects of his work while marginalizing the heteronormative masculinity that very often informs their transnational moments.

John Blair demonstrates how femininity functions as a foil in Stölzl’s Nordwand (2008), serving to highlight the relationship between a culturally accepted and validated masculinity and political and commercial co-option. Challenging critical readings that see Nordwand as an updated embrace of the Heimatfilm, Blair argues that Stölzl uses the traditional locale of the Heimatfilm and many of its standard dichotomies to reflect on the varied and contradictory constructions of masculinity thriving in cultural discourses prevalent in the early years of the Third Reich. He makes a case that Toni, the film’s protagonist, is often feminized by other masculine discourses in the film and is essentially overtaken and crushed by definitions of masculinity that he attempts to evade. Stölzl’s return to a particularly fraught era emphasizes the residues that continue to exist today in another political climate.

Kyle Frackman’s thoroughgoing discussion of the intersection of transsexuality and masculinity in Sabine Bernardi’s film Romeos (2011) relies theoretically on Foucault’s understanding of the relationship between confession and power. He argues that the film points to the confession (to oneself, to others, on the internet) of one’s desire to be other as the first step toward
access to the medical technologies that aid one in becoming other. His analysis of the film brings to the forefront the value that a transgender perspective has for understanding the complex relationship between the body, body image, sex, and gender. The film’s presentation of the gendered body as a work in progress for the female-to-male transgender subject can be interpreted as offering both subversive and affirmative representations of masculinity.

In an insightful comparison of Stephan Lacant’s Freier Fall (2013) to Ang Lee’s Brokeback Mountain, Gary Schmidt focuses on, among other things, the relationship between a hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity and changing notions of homosexual masculinities. Pointing out how both films «frame homosexual liaisons as the expression of a kind of raw, unfettered sexuality» and literally locate the homosexual act outside of traditional social structures (on a mountain peak or in the woods – in untamed nature), he concludes that in Freier Fall we can detect Lacant’s wrangling with a perceived conflict between male and female desires and spheres of activities that enables a rapprochement between gay and straight male sexuality in the form of a «queer masculinity» that remains an enigma to the female characters of the film.

All of the essays here, then, home in on textual details and moments that illuminate the varied masculinities in the German-speaking world (and hopefully beyond) today. Such details and moments exist, to be sure, in almost any cultural product because of the larger-than-life role that an individual’s gender, sexual orientation, and self-identification play not only in common conceptions of identity and humanness but also in practical, day-to-day interactions in all walks of life. Drawing attention to, discussing and analyzing these details and moments are in the end, we hope, not just isolated academic acts of textual criticism but also acts – however unspectacular – of intervention in political and ideological discourse. Both the cultural products analyzed and the analyses themselves have implications for our very real understandings of «truths» about gender, sexuality, sex, the body, identity, sympathy, empathy, and our humanity in general.