European rituals of initiation and the production of men

This article examines how male rites of initiation in Europe have been replaced by adjustments to lifecourse events located within the enlarged sphere of entertainment. These adjustments foster new forms of attachment and separation. Based on an interpretation of European films and informed by ethnographic fieldwork, it argues that contemporary European masculinity no longer relies on violent, transformative, collective rituals. This violence still exists, however, experienced vicariously within Europe, while actual violence is largely displaced outside the West. Masculinity nonetheless survives, as a counterconcept to femininity to give expression to the comic, the lost, the confused, the contingent, the unnecessary, the needy, the playful.

Key words masculinity, ritual, violence, play, attachment

Anthropologists of Europe encounter two obstacles in theorising the relation between ritual and the subject in Europe. First, most anthropological insights on ritual come from the study of non-European cultures. These insights have since been used to inform the analysis of ritual in the European past, but not the European present, which is seen either as deritualised (Berger 1967; Borch-Jacobsen 1994), at best mere ‘entertainment’ (Caillios 1961), or alternatively, the concept of ritual is applied to extremely diverse repetitive behaviours in large-scale events without asking the more rigorous questions that had been posed about its social significance for the lifecourse of individual subjects in non-European contexts.1

The second obstacle is that the study of ritual has largely focused, independent of theoretical orientation, on public selves and public meanings. The diverse and fruitful perspectives of Clifford Geertz, Stanley Tambiah, Sally Falk Moore, Pierre Bourdieu and Talal Asad all paid little attention to distinctions between this public persona

1 This paper was initially delivered as a talk at a conference ‘Emotions in South Asian and European Rituals’, organised by Axel Michaels and Christoph Wulf, 4–6 January 2010, Goa, India, and as the Daphne Berdahl Lecture, Department of Anthropology, University of Minnesota, 8 March 2010. It is also informed by a seminar I taught at Princeton in Fall 2009 on contemporary European rituals and the production of the individual. I want to thank the participants for their engagement with these issues. Anthropologists often dispute the view of deritualisation, claiming instead that ritual form is merely changing, taking on other features, and in Europe becoming more regional or ‘secular’ in its configurations. On this issue, the fate of the ‘Jugendweihe’, the East German secular ritual of coming of age, has been well documented (Borneman 1991; Mohrmann 1986; Wolbert 1998). Boissevain (1992) notes that after several decades of decline, since the 1970s there has been an increase in regional public celebrations or, more generally, in ‘ludic activity’.
or social self, the ego as an agent with a will, and the subject as arising out of an unconscious to which s/he has minimal access. While not denying that the person has an inner life, these scholars nonetheless shrank from making the inner life or psyche an object of knowledge. One argument went that if the people with whom one speaks are themselves unable to access reliably their own inner life, then outside observers’ claim to do so must be even more suspect. To the extent the actual experience of ritual is taken into account, scholars often employ a rudimentary notion of the internalisation of norms to describe the subject’s relation to the ritual (Elias 1978).

This second obstacle is exacerbated by a general rejection by anthropologists, if not social scientists more generally, of advanced psychoanalytic approaches. Especially in the United States, this rejection was strengthened by the popularity of Foucault’s knowledge/power paradigm, and of subaltern or post-structuralist approaches that stress the primacy of political factors in accounting for social process. Moreover, due to its universalism, psychoanalysis is often dismissed even before understanding its claims, and, due to its Western origins, perversely assumed to be temporally limited and ethno-centric, hence inapplicable, even in the West. There are, of course, exceptions to these trends, but not, to my knowledge, in the study of contemporary European rituals.

This article begins addressing these obstacles by examining how the function of male rites of initiation in Europe has been replaced by adjustments to lifecourse events largely located within the growing sphere of entertainment, and how these adjustments foster new forms of attachment and separation, which in turn index changes in European masculinity. My focus will be on German society, but I will generalise when appropriate to all member countries of the European Union (Borneman and Fowler 1997). Although my interpretation is informed by ethnographic fieldwork, I will instead use film here to illustrate some ethnographic facts, and I will make a general theoretical argument rather than argue from the vantage of specific people or cultural domains. Finally, I will speak of films that try themselves to represent reflexively an analysis of masculinity rather than those that merely produce the effects of vicarious identification that I am interpreting.

Most important for my analysis is the view, expressed succinctly by Roger Caillois (1961: 99), that in Europe the festival has been succeeded by the vacation. ‘The essence of ritual’, he writes, ‘is to oppose an intermittent explosion to a dull continuity, an exalting frenzy to the daily repetition of the same material preoccupations, the powerful inspiration of the communal effervescence to the calm labors with which each busies himself separately, social concentration to social dispersion, and the fever of climactic moments to the tranquil labor of the debilitating phases of existence.’ Defined in this way, rituals are closely associated with rites of passage and are in the ‘dominion of the sacred’ (1961: 99). By contrast, ‘the vacation [is] a phase of relaxation rather than hyper-stimulation, an easing of social activity rather than intensification, a flight from one’s care and worries, isolation from the group instead of communion, the ebb of social life rather than its flow’. On a larger scale, the cycles of disorder and order that ritual marks are replaced by ‘alternation of peace and war, prosperity and the destruction of the fruits of prosperity, regulated tranquility and obligatory violence’ (1961: 127).

**Godard’s ‘Weekend’**

Film is perhaps the most important contemporary popular medium for the imagination of reality and the consumption of reality as entertainment, as well as for vicarious...
identification with these alternations between peace and war, prosperity and destruction of its fruits, tranquillity and obligatory violence. For the producers of film, the medium offers an opportunity to mirror, obscure or intensify reality, while for the viewers it offers both relaxation and hyper-stimulation without affect, a removal from the mundane world of work that is not to be mistaken for ritual in a strict sense, which stimulates precisely in order to produce affect. Nonetheless viewing film is an experience of a simulacrum of rituals. Films are both consumed as entertainment and also offer an imaginative representation of entertainment as it relates to male rites of passage.

Let us begin with Jean-Luc Godard’s film ‘Weekend’, which, on its release in 1967, found immediate resonance with audiences throughout Europe. I will use this film to illustrate the cultural logic of masculinity in France at a specific point in time. I will focus on its depiction of the bourgeoisie’s inability to experience anything outside of itself, that is, lacking in the emotional intensity of experience or affect that is a classical attribute of ritual experience. The emotional tone for the film, the mise-en-scène, is set by the preparation for a weekend, an outing – the new middle classes’ dream of entertainment that Caillois theorises as replacing ritual. Godard begins with the preparation for a trip to the country of a childless married couple (Roland and Corinne), who plan on murdering the wife’s father to claim an inheritance, with each spouse planning to kill the other in order to have it for themselves. A pre-pubescent boy dressed like an American Indian shoots toy arrows at Roland and makes fun of his possessions, claiming his car and his wife are worn out. This so unnerves Roland that he backs his car into the boy’s mother’s car, but instead of worrying about the damage to her car, he kicks it, simulating punting – a nod to soccer. The boy demands they exchange ‘particulars’ (‘parties privées’, transl. genitals), and Roland threatens him back, ‘I’ll kick you in your private parts!’ When the boy begins to cry, Roland offers him a bribe to shut up so he can flee in his car, but he stops when the mother arrives and shouts out his licence plate number. This is followed by a chaotic scene in which Corinne holds the boy so that Roland can spray paint his mother, who then escapes and hits tennis balls at Roland. As the couple finally drive away in their car, the boy’s father appears and threatens them with a rifle.

The rest of the film consists largely of digressions and puzzling interruptions, but culminates, if there is such a point, in a by-now famous automobile accident and interminable traffic jam, in which people amuse themselves, unconcerned with the dead and injured on the side of the road, some sitting on the roof of their cars, tossing a ball back and forth, or playing a board game in the road. Such a traffic jam and accident might be thought of as part of the ritual of the weekend trip, an escape from the stress of work on weekdays in order to rejuvenate oneself and re-enter the production cycle of capitalism. In this weekend trip, however, the banality of the everyday, relaxation, entertainment and the carnage of the accident are indistinguishable experiences and lack the intensive affect of ritual. The weekend trip is a joyless and fearless affair, experienced in isolated play rather than in communal effervescence, during a traffic accident and jam that unnerves precisely because it produces no emotion that needs conversion or transformation. The injuries and deaths that are part of the accident seem to stimulate nothing in the psychic life of the couple.

2 On the relation of affect to emotions, see Freud (1926, 1915), Freud and Breuer (1895) and Green (1973).
It is highly doubtful that those people who drive by the dead bodies littering the road do not see them. It is probable that they see them and look away so as to avoid the intensity of emotion that accompanies any proximity to death. What must those who drive by the carnage, including Roland and Corinne, do in order to avoid this intensity? Given the strong desire expressed elsewhere in the film to experience aliveness – by living out one’s sexual urges (both Roland and Corinne are having affairs) and by killing Corinne’s father, people must suppress or repress the affect associated with death. They must contain the experience of the traffic jam and accident by relegating it to a controlled inner space, such as the unconscious.

Compared with the classic notion of ritual in which an experience outside the social self is presented, there is in the movie no outside oneself. Although people in automobiles flee from their cares and worries for a weekend, those worries accompany them during the flight, remaining interior to the weekend. The ‘regulated tranquility and obligatory violence’ that Cailliois claims has replaced our classic notion of ritual is experienced in a temporality not of generations or seasons or years but gleichzeitig, within the same event or weekend.

From here I want to zoom in on the adolescent boy and his mother, who are juxtaposed to Roland and Corinne, the childless couple, which will take us into questions of changes in the Oedipal dynamic and of genealogy. The boy is presented only in relation to his mother, stuck in a stage of pre-Oedipal attachment. With his toy arrows he attacks Roland, who could be a father substitute, but Roland instead tries to ignore the boy, and is punished for this (he backs into the boy’s mother’s car), before he offers compensation by substituting money for care (in the form of a bribe). The boy quite understands that Roland’s two attachments – his wife and his automobile – exclude him, and that their relationship is reduced to playing games – in this case, simulated hunting, soccer and tennis. His second initiative, after shooting arrows – to demand to see the man’s ‘particulars’, can be understood as an enigmatic sexual advance where the motives of his message are not fully conscious; but Roland understands this advance only in the sexual register, and he responds with the threat of castration: ‘I’ll kick you in your particulars!’

Presenting the bourgeois family from 1960s France as fractured into two social units – the pre-pubescent boy and his mother, and the heterosexual couple – is quite prescient. This portrayal of alternative family constellations was already by 1967 capable of being represented clearly on the screen. The conflict between these two social units has since become even more acute. In Germany in 2006, for example, only 1% of households included three generations, and 37% of all households were single person (49% in large cities), with the number of youth who live with single parents or unmarried partners increasing to 23%. In 2007 there were 1.6 million single mothers with 2.3 million children. That means that over 70% of youth continue to grow up in the traditional nuclear family form. But of this 70%, less than 30% live in families where the fatherly and motherly functions are shared equally by the heterosexual couple (Dammash 2008).

Throughout Europe today, the mother is still largely responsible for emotional attachment and care, the father, when present, for the development of autonomy. Women are still largely responsible for early childhood, and nearly all of the institutions responsible for the care of children and youth are run by women, with the one exception of sport. Even schoolteachers are now predominantly women, whereas through the 1960s men dominated that profession. Moreover, today the boy’s entrance into adulthood and into a particular symbolic order appears not to be clearly demarcated.

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by age or activity, that is, his entrance is not ritualised, at least not under the tutelage of a father or other adult man.

Miniscule numbers of European men participate in the traditional male rituals of hunting or warfare, and the latter domain is now open to women. The usual explanation in anthropology and psychoanalysis for rituals of initiation has been that girls can become women without the need of ritual elaboration; their identification with the mother and the feminine is continuous and, whatever problems this may present for the development of female autonomy, they are created without great resistance (Chodorow 1978; Godelier 1986). But it is more difficult to make boys into men; they require a more radical separation from their mothers and initiation into a male-identified order (Greenon 1968: 370–4; Klein 1975: 306–43).

We can now return to Godard’s film ‘Weekend’, and ask what it means to be initiated into the symbolic order of France, mid 1960s. For the boy, there is no clear Oedipal phase that facilitates separation from his mother and positive identification with a father. That problem is not even one that Godard poses, either for the boy or for the film. Yet the boy is the product of a symbolic order that has already undergone a major transformation and is now quite unlike that which we think of as the traditional West. What he learns and enacts is play of a peculiar kind. While the boy plays with toy arrows, his actual father eventually appears on the scene, but with a rifle, and only after the intruder-couple is safely in their automobile. In other words, the boy’s father is already marginal, and Roland refuses to think of himself in any paternal role. Absent is a male adult who embodies the (Western) psychoanalytic ideal of an adult capable of care and attachment, one whose aggressions are held in check and who is open to love. In fact, the boy’s play is not of father with son but of boy with boy, with a formal equality established in the threat of mutual castration. In Germany, this would be called a relationship between buddies (Kumpel).

Military service and mass rituals as rites of initiation

The fate of masculinity in postwar Europe has been a major theme in much social analysis, and especially in analyses of Germany. Studies published in 1979 by Klaus Theweleit on the Weimar era, and in 1975 and 1985 by George Mosse on the Nazi period, have led the way. The foci of Theweleit and Mosse were on the historically significant symbols for their respective periods: Theweleit on the primacy of military service, and the importance of rituals of fear and excitement, of killing and near-death experience, in the production of men prepared to act out the kind of violence that characterised the two world wars; Mosse on the creation and politicisation of mass rituals and their relation to manhood. Yet, as we know, this form of male initiation into adulthood and these mass rituals integral to the generation of patriarchal or male-dominated social

3 Theweleit (English translation, 1987) focused on the fascist consciousness and bodily experience of former members of German paramilitary groups following World War I, Mosse (1985) on mass rituals and how the German ideals of manhood such as respectability, beauty, solidity and self-control during the Nazi period produced counter-types considered threats to manhood. On Cold War restructuring of the German family and nation, see Borneman (1992) and Herzog (2005); on the historical ascription of gender in modern Europe, see Hausin (1976).
orders were thoroughly delegitimised by the two world wars, and they have been unable to reproduce themselves in these same forms. The changes have been dramatic: European military initiation rituals are hardly intended to make men hard, misogynist and ruthless; European soldiers are consistently disciplined for shooting on duty instead of resorting to lesser means of violence, and largely called upon to fight in the service of peace-making missions: and the rituals of contemporary mass mobilisation are less about creating political party loyalties and partisan followership than anarchic cultural celebrations with little at stake, of such nonsense as ‘Friede, Freude, Eierkuchen’ (Peace, Joy, Pancakes), the slogan given to Berlin’s 1991 Love Parade, the largest demonstration in Europe throughout the 1990s (Borneman and Senders 2000).

In 1991, I had a conversation with a French historian from the elite École Spéciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr, who described to me the problem that young recruits had seen so little death and dying in the 1970s and 1980s that their teachers felt they were unprepared for actual fighting. One of the remedies for this was to take them to traffic accidents to experience the sight of dying first-hand. That lack of experience, too, has changed for some European soldiers since Srebrenica in 1995, Kosovo in 1999, and the invasions of Afghanistan in 2002 and Iraq in 2003. However, the last wars requiring mass conscription by European states ended with the French withdrawal from Algeria in 1962, and the Portuguese withdrawal from Angola in 1975. From the 1960s through the 1990s, most European countries began to offer alternatives to compulsory military service, and most men have chosen some form of national civilian service over military training. This means that the vast majority of European men experience the current military incursions, invasions and occupations from a distance, through television, film and video games. That is, nearly all European men experience violence and warfare – the traditional fighting genres – fully mediated by new visual technologies in feature films, documentaries and docudramas, which increasingly depict explicit and realistic if not real images of fighting, killing, blood and violence.

The elimination of violent male initiation rituals

What do we make of this twofold change? On the one hand, the elimination of the elaborate and violent male initiation rituals – warfare being the most central – that have been important in the European past and for anthropological theorising of the social and the production of men. On the other, the increased vicarious participation in violence through televisual mediation, the reliving of an experience now purged of its emotional excesses. Both changes are part of a larger cultural-legal transformation of authority as vested in the father generally. In Roman family law, the doctrine of patria potestas identified the father as having authority not only over his wife and own children, whom he could decide to adopt or not, but also over more remote descendants in the male lineage. He controlled the inalienable rights to their persons and property, including the right to take their lives. Today this basis of law in male authority, specifically the authority of the father, has been largely eroded. The father in the Roman sense is clearly dead (Borneman 2004). The mother–child dyad, in turn, has replaced the father-function and its responsibilities, as defined in early Roman law, and it represents the modular domestic unit with a claim to legal protection.\(^4\) Where does this transformation leave the son?

\(^4\) Within Europe, the Scandinavian countries, with Sweden in the forefront, present the greatest exception to this pattern, as fathers rather than mothers increasingly take the state-paid child
In Europe today, traditional male initiation rituals – the hazing of school fraternities or right-wing cults, certain kinds of occupational apprenticeships, military-style boot camps – still exist, but mostly as socially frowned-upon survivals, without the same general function of transforming boys into men. There are bureaucratic rituals of identity, such as obtaining an individual identity card or driver’s licence to enter the culture of the automobile, or marking the completion of a higher education degree or an apprenticeship in a guild, or, at times, vacationing with peers as a group without adult supervision. However, because most of these rituals are understood as voluntaristic, matters of individual choice involving transformative processes that can be disavowed or reversed, these kinds of initiation can hardly be considered ‘ritual’ in the anthropological sense, unless one empties that concept of its content. The same goes for ‘new’ rituals involving public theft in department stores, hooliganism outside stadiums after soccer games, heavy drinking among young men (and sometimes women), drug-taking in raves, or high-risk sport such as paragliding.\textsuperscript{5} The most important difference here is the lack of social coercion to drink, take risks, fight, steal, etc., and hence the lack of a positive social sanction for the excess. In fact, fathers have little to do with these ‘new’ rituals, and most often they disapprove of them. Such new masculine rites indicate a desire for fun and adventure, but also a yearning for some kind of ‘traditional’ ritual to mark a transformation into manhood.

Whatever the theoretical status of such voluntaristic rites, it is highly questionable that the banning of violent male initiation rituals has led to a general reduction of violence originating in the West. Most forms of domestic violence within the West (e.g. wife-beating, marital rape, corporal punishment of children) have indeed declined in the last 40 years (Urbaniok 2005: 143–57), as have all categories of sex crimes outside of war zones, but this decline has been accompanied by an increase in reporting them, as well as an increase in the lethality of instruments to kill as well as in proxy-type wars around material resources essential to the West fought outside the West. A similar observation led the Budeszentrale für politische Bildung to support the publication in 2006 of a collection of essays on old and new forms of violence and on attempts to prevent violence in Germany today (cf. Heitmeyer and Schröttle 2006). The authors find it difficult, however, to draw any unambiguous conclusions about the sources and incidence of violence following the collapse of the Cold War order. At best, we can say that most of this violence circulates, as part of a chain of events and continuous displacement of original wounds.\textsuperscript{6}

One line of analysis not followed by the authors in the Heitmeyer and Schröttle volume is to ask, along with Georges Bataille (1957), about the alternation between care year, so that mothers can continue to pursue their careers. This change is still too recent to understand exactly how this is changing the child’s image of the father or the mother. At a minimum, one can assume that this development refigures the content of gender and calls into question traditional ideas of gender complementarity.

\textsuperscript{5} I thank Gunter Gebauer for the suggestion to consider these new male risk-taking adventures. Among the several studies in the early 1990s of rites of male initiation in Germany that have retained some of the traditional forms while adapting to changing political and social contexts, see the films by Ballhaus and Heinrich (1993) of a Catholic village in Eichsfeld in the former GDR, Backhus and Hauschild (1993) of a ritual on an East Frisian island in the North Sea, and the ethnography of Hüwelmeier (1997) of a village in southern (West) Germany.

\textsuperscript{6} See Ghassem-Fachandi (2009) on how ethnographers are peculiarly positioned to the study of violence as it occurs in fieldwork.

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the productive labour of work and expenditure through violence. There seems to be an attempt to relive the experience of violence but purged of its emotional excesses. Although very few European boys are initiated into manhood through violent rites, most nonetheless do have a vicarious experience of violence, which often takes place in real or fully imaginary sites located in causes assumed to involve the non-West. This experience is in the domain of entertainment – primarily in film, television reporting and video games. The West’s participation in this displaced violence (of course, not all of which is to be attributed to the West as originary site) is partly driven by the ideological goal of protecting the figures of Women and Children from all violence, including young boys or girls from the violence of initiation rituals.

The relation between the ongoing violence of war against the largely Muslim non-West, and the ongoing attempt to cleanse Europe itself from forms of male violence is one instance of this displacement, and it deserves more attention, as it directs us to attempts to configure the boundaries between the social body and the various aspects of the self. The collective European ego and its willed aggression is still active, of course, as all non-Europeans will readily maintain, though the public person in Europe will readily disavow any conscious role in the resulting violence. This disavowal is in part a product of the machinations of an unconscious subject who is struggling to secure new social boundaries following the end of the Cold War and the redrawing of its geopolitical divisions. Such boundaries are not, to be sure, merely a result of Western place-making. The non-West, global South, or whatever one might call the Other, is also actively, consciously and unconsciously, involved in demarcating and securing itself. In fact, a more accurate understanding of this relation would not posit two geopolitical units external to each other. The global South and Europe are already internal to each other’s self-definitions, manifested in the exchanges of labour, consumer products, material resources, technologies, children and tourism, as well as of violence itself.

The location of women in this exchange is central. Some of the most frequent justifications from the West put forth for the two big wars in this new millennium – in Afghanistan and Iraq – have been about the necessity to defend women from men in their own cultures, as if the entire world’s women were already internal to the West’s conception of its collective body. From within the Arab Middle East, some of the most emotionally charged opposition to the secular West is framed as resistance to changes in kinship in the West and its provocative public face, such as the legalisation of homosexuality and the goal of gender equality (Borneman 2009). Of course, not only non-Western religious and tribal authorities argue against a Western secularism that supposedly liberates sex and relaxes controls on its expression; a minority of voices in the West has consistently argued this, too, though the loudest of these voices come not from Europe but from the US. While contemporary religious and tribal authorities outside Europe tend to focus on the threat of homosexuality and of female sexuality and its need of protection (or suppression, depending on the perspective), Western media and scholarly framing of violence inside Europe increasingly draws attention to its relation to male sexuality generally.

Prior to the 20th century, defloration (zu entjungfern, literally ‘to take away youth’) on the evening of marriage often served as a comparable female rite of passage, but it was rarely celebrated collectively to the same extent as male rites (see Gay 1993: 95–115, 288–352).

On alternative ideas of the lifecourse and new forms of differentiation between Europe and the USA, see Borneman (2003).
This attention has effects, and has indeed contributed to the above-mentioned marked decline since the 1970s of violence against women and children within Europe. In Germany, and to some extent throughout Europe, criminological discourse today tends to classify the sexual abuse of children as a crime against sexual self-determination, rape as a crime of violence, and pornography as an economic offence. Since the decriminalisation of prostitution and homosexuality in the 1970s and 1980s, these two 19th-century offences have lost much of their sense as social transgression and are no longer important for criminological classification.9

Over the last several decades, however, while the number of sex crimes has remained constant, public reporting of them has increased and public attention on them, especially on the most spectacular cases, has been radically disproportionate to their numerical significance. Moreover, there is strong popular support for lengthening prison sentences for sex crimes involving situations where males might take advantage of their power or privilege, independent of questions of cost, efficiency or the likelihood of a repetition of the crime (Dünkel 2005; Böllinger 2007). In 2002, for example, of the more than 6 million criminal acts, only 0.8% were sex crimes (PKS 2002, Table 1, cited in Stolte 2005: 174).10 Yet, increased public interest and media reporting of such violations, especially of transgressions of intimacy with children, has been accompanied by the criminalisation of new forms of adult male behaviour of many sorts. Today the prison population of Europe is well over 95% male. While actual arrest or imprisonment for sexual behaviour may seem statistically insignificant for European men, this threat has a phantasmatic quality and serves as a cautionary tale (Berkel 2006). As boys make the transformation from childhood to adulthood, they do not experience initiations that clearly separate them from their childhood attachments, nor do they learn in ritual the clear parameters of normatively approved object relations in a new symbolic order. What they do learn both in the everyday and in the ‘ritual’ order of entertainment is to valorise youth in itself as a stage of highly sexualised vitality to be prolonged indefinitely, and cautionary tales about the dangers lurking in erotic attachments to other humans.

**Masculinity as entertainment**

The elimination of rituals of initiation in their traditional mode does not mean young boys are without orientation for a lifecourse in which they also form attachments. I want now to suggest, briefly, and this is my final argument, that such attachments are no longer structured by the principles of paternity and genealogy that were integral to the more traditional rites of initiation, but by new principles of entertainment – play, fun, pleasure, eternal youthfulness. Nothing much marks the coming of age in the emerging symbolic order, because one never is supposed to arrive an age (cf. Erdheim 1995). Rather, one should altogether avoid ageing, along with processes of entropy that point

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10 In 2003, those sentenced for child sexual abuse, rape and sexual assault comprised 1% (7,333 of 736,297) of all sexual delicts, 0.4% of all crimes. Between 1960 and 1983, ‘pedosexual crimes’ declined, and have since remained relatively constant, with a very slight increase after 1987. Police-reported rape increased in the 1950s, then remained constant until the 1980s before again declining (Urbaniok 2005: 143–57).
toward decomposition or to any radical discontinuity between life and death. In short, the register of entertainment for men functions as a simulacrum of ritual, rites devoid of the powerful coercive threat of social exclusion.

The single most common form of collective, potentially affect-laden initiation for young European men has to do with learning the game of soccer and identifying with specific soccer players and national teams. Most of this participation operates in the phantasmatic mode, as imaginary play, with few real consequences for such life course events as generational inheritance, employment, partnership, death or adulthood in itself. These life course events are, I would maintain, increasingly bureaucratically administered, experienced incrementally as life course adjustments, with no important ritual components that require either a male or female or even adult initiation (Kohli 1985).

To get a picture of how European masculinity has arrived at this gestalt, compare the imaginary worlds of two filmmakers, Rainer Werner Maria Fassbinder, born in 1945, and Pedro Almodóvar, born in 1949, both infants terrible of their time and respective countries, Germany and Spain, both gay men who consistently staged homosexual desire and strong female characters as disturbances to any vestiges of a normative Oedipal complex regulated by the father. Both were responding above all to the collapse of symbolic orders out of which developed the fascist political regimes Nazi Germany and Franco’s Spain. Fassbinder and Almodóvar follow each other, chronologically and thematically, in taking up the legacy of fascism for issues of separation and attachment, as they try to re-present a specifically European masculinity. Homosexuality and gender equality were the key issues for this masculinity, not only as challenges to the symbolic order generally, but also as critical weapons to question the social function of male rituals of initiation and to reconfigure these rites as entertainment.

Fassbinder worked in the attack mode from his first two feature films Liebe ist kälter als der Tot (‘Love is Colder than Death’) and ‘Katzelmacher’ in 1965 and 1966, to his last, ‘Querelle’, in 1982. He aggressively criticised the violence of bourgeois institutions based on a normative order that marginalises outsiders while hiding its own criminal past. The homosexual presents no redemptive possibility for him, but it does reveal, as perhaps no other figure could, the unconscious subject of a masculinity that, although it had lost its normative legitimacy, survived in corrupt forms in a postwar consumerist political order. In this context, male desire works as complicitous with its own deformity, unknowing, often dishonest and sadistic, lurching from object to object in search of an elusive satisfaction. The women in Fassbinder’s films are not loved or particularly loving. They tend to remain attached to adult males who abuse them, and in their steadfastness they are often the only figures to offer any redemptive alternative, reflecting the durability of the love/hate relationship of someone, like Fassbinder himself, raised by a single mother.

Almodóvar, who, by contrast, was raised in a nuclear family, takes for granted Fassbinder’s critical work and the cultural and sexual freedoms for which he fought. Coming to the scene later, he sees himself less as complicitous than as transformative, and embraces a gay camp aesthetic, seeking to entertain while unsettling. His first film ‘Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap’, made in 1980, foreshadows the outrageous bedlam of his later films. It features three women who humorously struggle to create solidarity and the promise of a future of the sort that men used to obtain in rites of initiation, and in this struggle they refigure their relationship to established orders. In all of his films, Almodóvar creates transsexual characters who adopt female
personas, and male characters who are either gay or sexually confused, yet open to a wide range of unorthodox relationships. His father figures, by contrast, are either dead, senile, absent fantasies, or beside-the-point. Desires meet as forms of comic expression rather than resolutions that can be fulfilled. Reproduction is an accidental outcome of desire rather than its justification. Abusive relationships are transformed into caring ones in the motherly mode.

The authorities of the Church and State constantly make appearances in Almódovar’s films, but, unlike the entrenched hypocrisy they represent in Fassbinder’s films, they sanction new relationships that are oblivious of the genitalia of the participants – even women become bullfighters. What all this means for male coming-of-age is that the seriousness of the social order is replaced by play, improvisation, warm-hearted irreverence toward all authority. The Law of the Father is replaced by decentred encounters in which desire is continuously displaced. A sort of transmigration of souls makes it possible for boys and men to incorporate the feminine and identify with, if not become, transsexuals. To be sure, this comic order does not do away with heterosexual male desire, even in its macho mode. Almodóvar is fond of hyperbolic expressions of desire, of desire’s polymorphous potential, and women remain one essential object of male desire, although not dependent on the male and not the sole object of his desire. Heterosexual desire no longer functions as determinative but is rendered non-threatening within a new, post-Oedipal symbolic order.

In sum, what Almódovar depicts is a European masculinity that in all its transmutations departs quite radically from its 19th- and 20th-century forms in that it no longer relies on a violent, transformative, collective ritual. As the various symbolic orders of intimacy and selfhood are increasingly subsumed into the rationality of consumer-capitalist, bureaucratically administered lifecourse adjustments, male figures are no longer their guarantors. Masculinity survives, however, still, as counterconcept to femininity, as a remnant that today gives expression to the comic, the lost, the confused, the contingent, the unnecessary, the needy, the playful.

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11 Berkel (2009: 88) argues that new reproductive technologies, invasive surgical procedures, and forms of self-fashioning erode the incest taboo as the guarantor of ‘the heterosexual-generative constitution of the social order and culture’.


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