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## ***Male Fantasies*, Violence, Representation: Interview with Professor Klaus Theweleit\*\***

### **Keywords**

*Male Fantasies*, Freikorps, Abu Ghraib, historical violence, socio-political currents, contemporary society

### **Abstract**

In the interview with Klaus Theweleit, Marina Gržinić focuses on two distinctive lines of discussion. The first is on the book *Male Fantasies*. The 50th anniversary of this influential psychoanalytic study on the psyche of male soldiers, specifically the Freikorps, who were paramilitary groups in post-World War One Germany, is approaching in 2027. The second is about violence in general, particularly in the context of historical violence, of which the events at Abu Ghraib in 2004 are an example. Theweleit's analysis of violence, especially through the lens of his critical theory, provides a framework for understanding these events not just as isolated incidents but as manifestations of deeper socio-political and psychological currents. The interview examines many levels of Theweleit's work and thinking from that moment until today, reflecting on and returning to instances of historical violence and their bearing on contemporary society.

## ***Moške fantazije*, nasilje, reprezentacija: intervju s profesorjem Klausom Theweleitom**

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### **Ključne besede**

*Moške fantazije*, Freikorps, Abu Ghraib, zgodovinsko nasilje, družbeno-politični tokovi, sodobna družba

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### Povzetek

Marina Gržinić se v intervjuju s Klausom Theweleitom osredotoča na dve različni smeri razprave. Prva se nanaša na knjigo *Moške fantazije*. Leta 2027 se bliža 50. obletnica te vplivne psihoanalitične študije o psihi moških vojakov, natančneje pripadnikov Freikorps, ki so bile paravojaške skupine v Nemčiji po prvi svetovni vojni. Druga smer govori o nasilju na splošno, zlasti v kontekstu zgodovinskega nasilja, primer tega pa so dogodki v Abu Ghraibu leta 2004. Theweleitova analiza nasilja, predvsem skozi optiko njegove kritične teorije, ponuja okvir za razumevanje teh dogodkov ne le kot osamljenih incidentov, temveč kot manifestacij globljih družbenopolitičnih in psiholoških tokov. Intervju preučuje številne ravni Theweleitovega dela in razmišljanja vse do danes ter se vrača k primerom zgodovinskega nasilja in njegovemu vplivu na sodobno družbo.



On May 18, 2024, I conducted a long, thought-provoking interview with Professor Klaus Theweleit at A.K.T; delving into the impact of his book *Männerphantasien* (*Male Fantasies*).<sup>1</sup>

*Männerphantasien* is a seminal two-volume work by German cultural theorist Klaus Theweleit, first published in 1977. The book was later translated into Serbo-Croatian in 1983. *Muške fantazije* was published in former Yugoslavia (a state in which we lived at the time and that does not exist anymore) as four separate volumes. It deeply resonated with the punk and subculture scenes in Ljubljana. *Muške fantazije* had an important impact on theorization inside the Slovenian intellectual scene that promulgated out of the punk music scene, LGBT scene, new media, and influenced writings on visual theories as well as on art and culture production in that period. The English translation of the book, *Male Fantasies*, was published in 1987.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The interview was organized through A.K.T; Pforzheim, and upon the invitation of Janusz Czech, program director of A.K.T; Pforzheim. Thanks to Prof. Klaus Theweleit, Janusz Czech, and Jovita Pristovšek.

<sup>2</sup> Most important editions of Klaus Theweleit's seminal book are *Männerphantasien*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1977–78); licenced paperback editions by Rowohlt (1983/1994); Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag (1995); Piper (2000), new edition by Matthes & Seitz (2019); *Muške fantazije*, 4 vols. (Zagreb: Grafički zavod Hrvatske, 1983); *Male Fantasies*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987–89); Polity Press (1987).

We are approaching the 50th anniversary of this influential psychoanalytic study of the psyche of male soldiers, specifically the Freikorps, who were paramilitary groups in post-World War One Germany. In *Male Fantasies* Theweleit explores how their experiences and psychological makeup contributed to the development of fascist ideologies and practices. Theweleit delves into the inner lives of these men, lives which were often characterized by brutal violence and extreme nationalism. He examines their fantasies, fears, and desires, using psychoanalytic theory to understand how these factors shaped their behavior and attitudes. The work places the Freikorps within the historical context of post-World War One Germany, a period of political and social upheaval. Theweleit examines how the trauma of war and the instability of the Weimar Republic influenced the psychological development of these men and their turn towards extremist violence.

The interview examines many levels of Theweleit's work and thinking from that moment until today, reflecting on and returning to instances of historical violence and their bearing on contemporary society. Theweleit's analysis of violence, especially through the lens of his critical theory, provides a framework for understanding these events not just as isolated incidents but as manifestations of deeper socio-political and psychological currents.

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**Marina Gržinić:** Professor Theweleit, thank you very much for participating in this interview and for being willing to answer some questions related to your seminal work, *Male Fantasies*. This will be one line of questioning. Another line of questions I would like to explore is about violence in general, particularly in relation to the historical violence exemplified by the events at Abu Ghraib in 2004.

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Why this interest? In 1977, the German version of your remarkable work was published, and in 1983, the Serbo-Croatian translation was released in Zagreb. That translation had a profound impact on all of us involved in the subculture or punk scene in Ljubljana. We engaged extensively with your thesis, as presented in the four volumes of the book published in Serbo-Croatian in 1983.

**Klaus Theweleit:** Yes, originally there are two volumes in the German publication.

**Gržinić:** Yes.

**Theweleit:** Serbo-Croatian. It is every chapter one book.

**Gržinić:** It's very interesting. Then in 1987, the English translation was published.

**Theweleit:** Yes, a translation in two volumes.

**Gržinić:** I would like you to reflect on when you started researching the specific topic that would later be published as *Male Fantasies*. What was the time period? What motivated you to delve into the discussion of Germany, fascism, and the Weimar Republic with such a unique research methodology? Was it something personal, or was it the state of affairs in West Germany that influenced how you developed your methodology, research, and the questions you posed?

**Theweleit:** No, it was not at all the state of things in Germany. There are several sources for the beginning of this work. One is that I joined the SDS, *Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*, in 1967 after the murder of a student named Benno Ohnesorg by a policeman. He was wounded in Berlin during the visit of Shah Reza Pahlevi from Iran. I was politically interested before, but not active in any way. I was only involved in artist groups, student theater, music, and similar activities. However, that moment made me realize that something had to be done to prevent Germany from becoming a police state again, a development that reminded many older people of the Weimar era and fascism in Germany.

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I looked around the university and found this group, which I saw as the clearest and most radical. I had read leftist authors like Hans Magnus Enzensberger and literature from people who had fled Germany and survived what we now know as the Holocaust, though we didn't use that term then; we just spoke about the Jewish people. From around the age of 14, I had been aware of what the Germans had done during World War Two, especially in Eastern Europe, Poland, Ukraine, and Russia, thanks to some rare, good teachers.



My parents grew up with a deep-seated hatred, and they were taught to hate the Soviet Union, which they equated with the Russian people. I was born near the Russian border in East Prussia, north of Ukraine, south of Lithuania. After the war, I realized through overhearing their conversations with friends that they harbored this intense animosity toward Russia. They resented having to flee, feeling that they had been forcibly expelled from their homeland.

I absorbed much of this bitterness, and it took me some time to fully understand what they were talking about. Eventually, I learned about the atrocities committed by the fascists and the Nazi army, not only against working-class people but also against Russians and Jews during World War Two. I discovered that more Russians were killed in the war than any other group and that Jews were exterminated not only in concentration camps but also through the destruction of their villages and mass shootings.

When the Nazis conquered a city, they often targeted Bolsheviks and Jews, sometimes massacring tens of thousands in a single day, either by shooting them or burning them alive. This was a horrifying revelation that shaped my understanding of the past; and my objection to the parents' hatred.

When I was 14, I had heard enough to talk to my father about it. I said, "You wanted to invade Russia, and now you complain that they come for you in East Prussia?" He looked like he wanted to kill me. Eventually, I realized it was futile to continue those conversations. He would always say, "You didn't live then, so you don't understand."

My parents were young, married, and had six children. Life was good for them in the 1930s, with trade flourishing in Germany and East Prussia. There were nearly no Jews in northern East Prussia where we lived.

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We had to flee East Prussia when in 1944–45 the Red Army advanced. My father, who worked in the railway service, wasn't there, so my mother had to escape with six children. I was three years old, my younger sister was just one, and my eldest brother, who was 13 years older than me, was 16. We fled from East Prussia to northern Germany. My father was one of the last people to leave East Prussia, from a town that is now known as Kaliningrad.

My father was the illegitimate son of an East Prussian estate holder and was raised by an aunt. My parents cared deeply for their children; that was their primary focus in life. However, my father considered himself primarily a railroad man, body and soul, as he put it, and only secondarily a family man. He was a man of responsibility for the family, but he was also a staunch fascist.

From an early age, I began to question how someone could care for six children while being indifferent to the murder of six million Jews. They showed no empathy when discussing the dead Russians, but when talking about Russian partisans killing German soldiers, my father would start crying.

How does that work? My father was a completely authoritarian figure, typical of German fathers of that era, who believed in disciplining children harshly. He wasn't religious, but he would cite the Bible to justify beating his children, saying it was necessary. The brutal beatings he administered as a matter of course, supposedly for my own good, were my first lessons in understanding fascism. My mother's ambivalence—believing the beatings were necessary but trying to temper them—provided my second lesson.

I didn't fully realize at the time what I realized later: that my parents really were sort of nuts, as well as their friends; as well as really most of the adult persons; people with "split minds." He was violent, even towards his own children, yet they also supported us. My father, who struggled due to being an illegitimate son, was determined that all of us should attend university and achieve more than he did. Only two out of six of us reached that level; the others left home early to pursue professions. I, growing up among them, had to find out in a way how this "contradiction" worked: being caring and "killing" persons at the same time. To talk with them about it was impossible. The beauty of life only was to be found among my group of friends. From the age of 14, I rarely spoke to any adults, up to the age of 25. Later I said, all people of my generation should have felt the necessity to become psychoanalysts having grown up with parents like that.

When I got to university, I quickly noticed that the professors were not on the same intellectual level as the students. We grew up with rock-and-roll, jazz, American cinema from 1956 on, Elvis Presley, James Dean. These influences were central to our lives. We read American literature, including Henry Miller, whose works were officially forbidden in Germany at the time.

When I started studying languages—English and German—I was deeply disappointed by our professors, who were completely out of touch with what we had grown up with. They didn't know the movies, comics, literature, music, which were the elements of life in which we lived.

**Gržinić:** It's very precise what you are saying, all these kinds of different stories, as an input.

**Theweleit:** Thanks. So—you couldn't learn much from the professors; they were from a different world. I was just 21, and knew so much more than all these adults from the world, who didn't want to know; and even the professors at the university who taught methods on how to read literature. Okay, we didn't need methods. We knew how to read.

There was one professor who knew Kafka, other ones focused on baroque lyrics, classics, and such. That was not our thing. I was totally Americanized through films, jazz, Black literature. From the European things we only took the so-called "French theater of absurdity": Ionesco, Tardieu, Vian, things like that. After some years, in '65, I began to think about what to do with my studies. I wanted to become a teacher, just a school teacher. You needed some papers from seminars and so on, an exam in the end. I realized I couldn't do that in the city of Kiel, because I knew so many people. I was involved in what you might now call the underground or Bohemian scene. I couldn't take a step in that city without meeting someone who would drag me into a café, a cinema, a pinball hall, or a nightclub until 3 or 4 in the morning. I realized I would never finish my studies if I stayed. I had to leave.

Fortunately, I also was a football player; my weak knees, more intelligent than me, helped with that; one got heavily damaged. I had to undergo an operation, which left me in the hospital for six weeks. That gave me a lot of time to think.

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**Gržinić:** You made your decision to leave Kiel.

**Theweleit:** I had to leave. Yes. My girlfriend had to stay longer for some exams. She followed me a year later. During that year in Freiburg, I completed all the necessary papers. Being alone there allowed me to focus and finish my conditions for getting into the final *Staatsexamen*.

Then, that tragic event happened, I mentioned initially, and I decided I had to act politically in response. This decision turned me into a political activist for the next three years at the university, involved with SDS (Socialist German Student Union). As a result, everything we did against the authorities led to court cases. There were about twenty on the desks of the “District attorney” and a big file of “records” on me within *Verfassungsschutz*; the West thing of what in the East was “*Stasi*,” *Staatssicherheit*.

After those three years, it was clear to me, I couldn’t pursue my dream of becoming a teacher. They wouldn’t let me. The term *Berufsverbote* wasn’t yet coined, but soon it became officially impossible for people like me to get into the state’s service: *Beamter*. So, with the help of a friend, I transitioned to working in radio. My friend was a singer, well-known not only locally. Through this connection, I worked at the station for three years.

**Gržinić:** As a journalist.

**Theweleit:** As a freelancing journalist, I had to use a pseudonym because I was a well-known political figure in Freiburg and couldn’t publish under my real name (after one year I was allowed). The SDS had dissolved in the meantime. Monika Kubale, my lover, who had come to Freiburg, lived together with me. In 1972, we decided we wanted a child, and she gave birth to our son, Daniel. Monika had finished her studies as a psychologist and had found a job at the university’s youth psychiatry clinic.

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We faced the dilemma of who would care for the child. Since I was considering leaving my job at the radio station due to internal intrigues and job insecurity caused by station consolidations, we decided that I would stay home to care for Daniel. This arrangement allowed Monika to keep her half-day employment in the clinic, and I was quite happy to leave the radio job to start work on my dissertation. We shared the care-job also for our second son, Max, for the next twenty years.

Monika and Dr. Margret Berger, pioneers of clinical psychoanalytical work with children, were the ones who gave me the most support whenever I, a person with no clinical experience, ventured to reformulate accepted psychoanalytic views on the fascistic type. I was working with nothing but patients’ reports—

male soldiers wrote their memoirs in that form without realizing it—and with the terror enacted by these men. I am especially indebted to Margret Berger and Monika for their generally positive reaction to my thoughts on the ego-structure of the not-yet-fully-born (vol. 2), as well as for their references to new psychoanalytic literature.

From time to time, I would find a manila envelope in my mailbox. The envelope held one, sometimes two, steno pads in which Erhard Lucas had relayed his reactions—concise and friendly, or sharp when he found something he didn't like—to portions of the manuscript I had shipped off to him in Oldenburg. *Male Fantasies* began as a chapter on “White Terror” for Lucas's three-volume book *Märzrevolution 1920*.<sup>3</sup> He was a friend from the vanished SDS-group and had been working as a historian on the German Revolution of 1918–19—Liebknechts and Rosa Luxemburg's attempt to turn the German monarchy into a socialist republic—and had become a history professor in Oldenburg, northern Germany. As he continued his work about the Kapp Putsch affair of 1920, an attempt of German right wing officers to gain political power in Berlin, which resulted in a counterblast, the proletarian March Revolution mainly in the Ruhr Valley, he delved into the brutal actions of the Freikorps against the proletariat, especially their violent acts against women.

He would describe scenes of unimaginable cruelty, asking why these men would commit such horrendous acts, such as using bayonets to stab pregnant women and then laughing and celebrating the bloody mess they created.

When the project grew beyond its initial scope—it was clear after a while that I was going to produce much more than a chapter to his book—he followed its progress in the way I would have wanted a trusted critic and colleague to do. This book, *Male Fantasies*, is dedicated to Erhard Lucas, without whom it would never have been written.

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**Gržinić:** Your thesis is particularly strong because of your approach to depicting violence. You make the violence palpably clear, not merely symbolic or representational. You argue that this violence is not driven solely by hatred of Jewish people but stems significantly from violence against women.

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<sup>3</sup> Lucas Erhard, *Märzrevolution 1920*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt: Rotern Stern, 1973–78).

**Theweleit:** Erhard Lucas was unable to deal with the descriptions of such cruelties. He knew my wife was a clinical psychologist, and he knew I was involved with psychoanalysis. At that time, the Bohemian groups I belonged to were heavily into psychoanalysis, analyzing each other late into the night, talking, drinking, and so on. It was a common, albeit dubious, practice. I was accustomed to psychoanalytic thinking also through my wife's work with children in the hospital clinic.

Erhard had gathered these texts and asked someone to write about them, but he was not satisfied with the results. As incorporating Freud and other analysts, but they had never dealt with such cruelties among their patients, their analyses felt distant and irrelevant. When we read those analytical texts, we felt they had nothing to do with the cruelties described—they explained nothing.

If you want to understand what is truly in the bodies, you need to consider the connection between the body and the brain. This idea was echoed in public intellectual discussions in film, music, and theater. The prevailing traditional thought was that our brain directs us, but I knew—god knows from where—that in reality, our ideas and actions emerge from our bodily experiences. The brain maps this and reacts to reality, but it all starts with the body, and that's where the focus should be when discussing these matters.

I told my friend that I needed more material; the descriptions of the deeds alone were not enough. He agreed and pointed out that there were lots of things written down in the papers, autobiographies, and descriptions of their fights. He provided me with titles and other relevant information.

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As I read them, I realized I needed to construct a completely different set of thoughts. They weren't just writing about what happened; there was something deeper. What did the term "red flood" mean to them when they named Communism and Bolshevism with terms like that; also "swamps" or "mud," when describing a group of protesters? How did they come to talk about the "bloody mess" they saw in the bodies of women?

Their language was revealing—when they spoke about proletarian wives, who had no weapons at all, as *Flintenweiber* with guns hidden between their legs; or about Jewish individuals as "poisoning the German blood," even though there

were nearly no Jewish people among the Ruhr valley workers. It showed something significant about their perceptions and prejudices, mostly just “projections.” It became clear that to understand these men and their actions, I had to delve into how their words revealed their deeper fears and beliefs.

I realized that to make sense of it, I had to write about the genesis of their thinking, their actions, and their identities, and that required examining those materials closely. As I delved into them, I at first noticed the peculiar ways of talking about women. They described their own women as clean, white, angelic figures, but never giving their names. Why? It became a sort of detective’s search to find a way for the solution of many secrets and hidden crimes. This intrigued me, and I became passionate about writing.

On the other hand, they depicted Jewish women, Communist women, and later Black women, especially during the occupation of Germany by French Moroccans after World War Two, in a very negative light. I realized that this was driven by fears rising in them. They were afraid of death, sure; but why all this dehumanizing language to express that fear; and from where this really high amount of hatred against people, socially below them? When there were strikes they didn’t simply refer to groups of workers as blue-collar laborers but used terms like “Republican slime” to describe them.

It became clear that their language about “slime” and “mucus” was a projection of their own fears and anxieties. I realized they were talking about themselves—their own internal mess and bloody horror. These insights made everything make sense after a while.

**Gržinić:** Barbara Ehrenreich, when writing the introduction to the English translation of the first volume of *Male Fantasies: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (1987), noted that this book would resonate with a lot of the American public. Ehrenreich considered how to present the Freikorps (“Free Corps” or “Volunteer Corps,” irregular German paramilitary volunteer units, in the early 20th century) to American readers and how to explain who they were. The dictionary definition may not capture the essence of what the Freikorps represented at the time. This is a question I pose to you: how would you describe them in that time? Secondly, your recent thoughts suggest that the fascism we see today exists in similar societal segments.



**Theweleit:** Yes, many of those people later became members of Nazi movements. However, I decided early on not to use the term “fascists” because the various forms of fascism around the world differ from each other. Even Italian fascism is distinct.

I found the term “soldier,” specifically “the soldierly man,” to be more fitting. What does this mean? That there is a certain male body structure and certain ways of feeling and talking associated with it. I followed this line of thought, and the first clear exploration of it appears in the first part of *Male Fantasies*. This part examines how these men dealt with women, how they talked about women, and the way they honored their wives. Often, these wives remained nameless and also lifeless in their writings. They are the *good* women—the “white” women, I named them—often in the shape of “caring” sisters in hospitals.

Their feelings toward all other women were conflicted by their heavy fear of sexuality. These men were disturbed by women who did not adhere to traditional roles, such as having children out of wedlock, a trait they also saw in peasant women. Still, they don’t keep their own rules. They get children without being married. They revered their wives but harbored fear and resentment towards “red women” (communist or revolutionary women) and their perceived sexual freedom. To counteract their fears, these men clung to symbols of masculinity and authority—everything that stood erect, like flags, rifles, and guns. Their language was filled with metaphors of uprightness and rigidity, reflecting their desire to impose order and division in response to their anxieties.

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Psychoanalysts call this the castration complex, but I realized it was much more than that after closely reading their texts. It’s not just the fear of being castrated; it’s the fear of bodily dissolution. In situations like strikes or other conflicts, these men felt their bodies were threatened with being dissolved into a mesh or swamp—something fluid. This fear of fluidity, expressed in terms like “red flood” (communism), permeated their thinking.

But there was more to say about their fears (and their sort of joy). Through examining their writings, I noticed they only expressed happiness and enjoyment when describing acts of violence—killing not only women but also enemies like leftists, Communists, and Jews. This revealed a deeper psychophysical pattern. One significant insight was their response to empty spaces or places after com-



bat. This feeling of “empty space,” I discovered as one of the central ways of acknowledging their world. When they fired their guns into a group of workers or protesters and they disappeared within seconds, running away, hiding themselves, and only a few scattered bodies remained on the ground, they would burst into laughter. This momentary release represented a fleeting sense of freedom, of being freed for a moment, which equals—in psychoanalytical terms—the feeling of a body wholeness, which they longed for but were not able to achieve in “normal” civil situations.

This observation led me to integrate concepts from female psychoanalysts, poets, and psychoanalysts working particularly with the treatment of children. Understanding these men’s fears and behaviors through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, developed by female analysts’ treatment of children, provided deeper insights into their inclination to destructive actions and the underlying psychological mechanisms.

Melanie Klein and Margaret Mahler were pioneers in the field of infant and young child research, unlike Freud and the first generation of analysts who didn’t deal much with small children. I learned a great deal from my wife, Monika, who worked in the hospital. Margaret Mahler’s book, *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant: Symbiosis and Individuation*, published in 1975, I got to know by Monika, was particularly important.<sup>4</sup> Mahler developed a deep interest in the pre-oedipal era, focusing on motility and affective-motoric communication between mother and child. Her psychoanalytic work in New York—she was a Hungarian immigrant—became groundbreaking. Mahler treated several children suffering from childhood psychosis; some of them only able to express their bodily states in acts of violence; often self-destructing actions. She also explored how normal infants attain a sense of separate identity in the presence of their mothers. Mahler’s work resonated with psychoanalysts I knew, especially those at the hospital where my wife worked. They read it, and Monika noticed similarities between Mahler’s descriptions of disturbed, destructive children and the soldiers I was writing about. She encouraged me to read Mahler’s work, pointing out that the behaviors and fears I was describing in the soldiers were akin to those in the children Mahler studied.

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret S. Mahler, Fred Pine, and Anni Bergman, *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant: Symbiosis and Individuation* (London: Hutchinson, 1975).

This insight was crucial. It bridged my observations with psychoanalytic theory, particularly concerning the concept of the fragmented body. Mahler's work provided a framework for understanding the deep-seated fears and behaviors of these soldiers. Their fear of bodily dissolution and the violent reactions it provoked mirrored the developmental struggles Mahler described in those children. This connection became the foundation for my analysis and the writing of volume two, allowing me to delve deeper into the psychophysical roots of their actions, and human behavior in general.

**Gržinić:** This comparison is important because it highlights a significant point.

**Theweleit:** It leads to the notion of the “fragmented body.” Understanding and describing this concept is a central focus of the second volume.

Today, it is evident that the primary emotion of right-wing extremists is fear. Their entire ideology is constructed around central fears. One might ask where this fear originates. It stems from different ways of a traumatic upbringing; there can be many ways. How the military deals with it you can see—for American soldiers—in films like *Full Metal Jacket* by Stanley Kubrick. Soldiers face extreme drills and suppression; you can really call it a sort of torture, which is thought to enable them to develop a sort of bodily armor, which makes them strong warriors against outer enemies, but also—which is even more important—gives them shelter against their inner fears. Akin to the psychological structure of children who come from abusive backgrounds.

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These children may have been beaten by parents, uncles, or teachers, or sexually abused—not just women, but boys as well, and not only within the church. Such experiences prevent individuals from developing the foundational abilities necessary to cope with the world.

Psychoanalysts argue that for a person to function well, they must appropriately channel their energies from birth onwards. This development depends on nurturing interactions, primarily from mothers, sometimes from siblings, and rarely from fathers in previous generations. Without this nurturing, a *libidinal cathexis of the infant's skin*, as psychoanalysts call this, will not happen, or only very insufficiently. By this cathexis individuals learn to extend their sense of

self beyond their physical boundaries, enabling them to interact effectively with others.

Melanie Klein and others have noted that the building of a psychic balance involves internalizing the people with whom you interact. You must take these people inside you in a caring and empathetic way. This internalization process helps you develop your feelings and thoughts. However, this process is disrupted in individuals who were tortured, beaten, mistreated, not taken seriously, or laughed at during childhood.

Today, such trauma does not necessarily come from the military or physical beatings. There are many ways to disrupt a person's sense of self, leaving them feeling fragmented and not at home within their own bodies. These fragmented individuals often project their inner turmoil onto others, seeing them as enemies. They inflict their inner chaos onto these perceived enemies, creating a cycle of destruction.

The concept of a "fragmented body" refers to this inner chaos—a disorganized and painful mix of emotions and bodily sensations, without clear distinctions between different parts of the self; without clear distinctions between what is outside and what is inside of the body. This internal turmoil tends to leave individuals in a sort of trance, disconnected from their bodies and unable to live cohesively.

**Gržinić:** Is there a specific difference in the fragmentation of the body from that period to today? I think it's worth explaining. Do you see any major differences between the past and the present? There is a lot of discussion about how we now live in a democracy and a neoliberal system, which is not as harsh or authoritarian as in the past. Is it possible to disentangle these fragmented bodies and provide a new interpretation?

**Theweleit:** Yes, that's the main point. In my perception, it's essentially the same: a centrally fragmented body and a fear of one's own inner self. This is evident in contemporary fascist writing, whether it's from American groups, the

Incel people,<sup>5</sup> or right-wing German politicians, African warlords who command child soldiers in Congo, the Indonesian males who killed nearly one million so-called “communists” in the 1990s. They all speak (and laugh) in a similar way.

After having been Americanized (and as I felt: civilized) through music and films, I was quite sure that the hatred and fear of women among men would diminish; that the sticker “Make Love Not War” would have had a real impact on people all over the world. Like many others in 1968, I believed, for example, that religions would vanish in the run of the next 20 years, etc.; that such issues would no longer exist. That was a complete error. Right-wing extremists have not much changed and their use of language is nearly the same everywhere.

I don’t engage in detailed personal analyses with them today, but I observe their writings and see the same irrational fear of women who have done nothing to them. The perception that women are closer to emotional behavior is enough to instill fear in these men. They view women as part of a dissolving world, and this fear of being physically and mentally dissolved is the same as it was 100, 500, or even 5000 years ago. They are driven by fear and the need to assert themselves, often resorting to violence when faced with emotions or situations they can’t handle. This inability to cope without violence is the brink where you can identify fascists or rapists. They can’t deal with reality non-violently, and this is evident in their speech and actions. Historical examples like Hitler and the German people in the 1930s show that it’s not just rhetoric—if these people gain power, they act on these impulses. It’s no use dismissing their words as mere talk; we know they will act on them if given the chance.

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**Gržinić:** They will do the things we are talking about because they need this behavior to feel alive.

**Theweleit:** You can feel pity with that, but that doesn’t help you from being killed. Today we have groups, or people committing violence in Germany, like the 27-year-old German man who went on a shooting in the city of Halle in Saxony, who scarcely can speak in an understandable way; his deranged speech

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<sup>5</sup> The term “incels” is a portmanteau for “involuntary celibates.” It emerged from a Reddit group in which tens of thousands of users, most of them young men, commiserate about their lack of sexual activity, many of them placing the blame on women.

contains the words “feminists” and “Jews.” He tried to enter the synagogue of Halle, failed, and killed some random people: one woman, one man, making a video of it, to be seen live on the Internet, similar to the New Zealand shooter and several others. He cursed himself for being so unsuccessful in his killing action, murmured something into the camera to accuse “feminists” and “Jews,” and cursed himself for his failure, having been unable to complete his action.

**Gržinić:** What do women, what do “feminists” have to do with it?

**Theweleit:** Nothing. The language of certain men, disturbed like that, obviously is not able to have any real perception of a real woman’s body. It’s a more-than-thousands-of-years old male structure of bringing women into their speech as creatures who have nothing in mind than the wish of dissolving the pure beautiful bodies of “poor boys like me.” Such men—like the American incels—often claim that women aren’t *good enough* for them. As a matter of fact, they don’t know any women. They are terrified of emotional and physical intimacy, which they can’t handle; their way to love is violence.

**Gržinić:** Which groups of women could be considered the most targeted with hatred in contemporary neoliberal societies, akin to the “red women” who were central for exercising maximum violence by the historical Freikorps? Today, the biggest violence seems to be directed at migrants and transwomen. Women whose roles and rights are so disregarded that they are almost nonexistent in society and demonized by laws and norms, effectively making them “invisible.” Despite their “invisibility,” these women face significant violence and discrimination. So, from today’s perspective in contemporary multicultural, neoliberal, global capitalist societies, who could be these women? How can we identify those who are the primary targets of extreme violence and hate?

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**Theweleit:** I think we have some new developments in this. Those you call “invisible” queer women, migrants, etc., they often show up in public, at least in societies where it is possible to do that without being killed on the spot. They talk openly, organize demonstrations, ritualize Christopher Street Day [annual European LGBTQ+ celebrations against discrimination], etc: the pubs where they meet are no longer secret places, they are open for others, etc. I feel this to be extremely important. Not only for those people (of all sexes) who get into a visible existence but for all of us. Because it helps to leave the common positions

of “binarity” which till now are structuring nearly every conflict, ethnically; in religions; in the military, and the civil life. But realities are *not* binary; they are diverse. They are without borders—when you don’t fence them in—in endless surprising ways.

**Gržinić:** Why always “the Jews”?

**Theweleit:** One thing is clear: the roots of anti-Jewish sentiment in Christian culture began developing around the fourth or fifth century *Anno Domini*. Before that time there wasn’t such widespread antisemitism. When people of today express antisemitic views, wherever in the world, it mostly appears unjustified and unfounded. (I don’t speak of the Hamas/Gaza-situation of the moment.) But there is sharp evidence that Hitler’s mission and the actions of the Germans during the Shoah have left a lasting impact. Now, whenever right-wing American groups or individuals express hatred towards Jews or other groups, it necessarily echoes Hitler’s antisemitism. Essentially, any ideology or action in the world that calls for the eradication of a special group of people or of a “nation” I would see as a form of “antisemitism.” It includes all. Hitler’s legacy has broadened the term to encompass such extreme prejudice and hatred. “Jews” remains to be a primary target for expressing the demand for elimination.

**Gržinić:** I want to ask you about the references you mentioned. For example, in your analysis, how significant was the influence of the Frankfurt School, and how much did Deleuze and Guattari contribute? You use the concept of the production of desire, but you conceptualize the production of death instead. This is a one-to-one correlation, and it’s not just symbolic; it’s very real.

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**Theweleit:** For the writing of *Male Fantasies* Deleuze and Guattari were more important, especially for volume two. There were new views on the construction of the Ego and the drives, *desire*. Adorno and Horkheimer’s New York-study on the “authoritarian character” was more a sort of background [text], which I wanted to give a shift in the direction of “psychoanalysis of the child,” broadening their mainly sociological frame.

**Gržinić:** Could you elaborate on how you used these references to present the brutalities that were occurring, the violences against women then and now?

**Theweleit:** For this a deeper or wider look into the man/women-relation in European history was/is necessary. My second book, *Buch der Könige* (Book of Kings),<sup>6</sup> was trying to go in that direction. I didn't have in mind to stick to the Nazi-stuff "for the next twenty years" (as my publisher's prophetic view read the future). Another form of violence had come to the center of my perceptions; a sort of violence, appearing in the disguise of "Love"; the subtitle of the book was "Orpheus and Eurydice," with the word "and" crossed out. Through a poem by Gottfried Benn, "Orpheus Tod," and Claudio Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo* (it's the very first opera ever composed in Europe, Mantua, Italy in 1607). I realized, that Orfeo's well known turnaround on the "stairs" on the way up from Hades to the living, Eurydice walking behind him—and now losing her again—was not directed by his overflowing "love," but by the (hidden) motive of leaving her in Hades, in the underworld. Monteverdi makes it completely clear that the "love" of his Orfeo is in the connection to his instrument; his medium of expression, the lyre. He names it *mia cetra onnipotente*, my omnipotent lyre, getting a high position at the court of the ruler, the Duke of Mantua. He is able to give birth to "new worlds," taming wild animals, and so on. Politically, it's always in the power of rulers to grant access to historically new media.

I discovered, there were hundreds of couples like that in European (as well in American) art history; couples with women in the Eurydice-position. These women—in the couples of writers often typists—would transcribe handwritten or spoken materials overnight for the next day's production. They were intelligent and clever, often raising one child from these relationships. Then after five to seven years, the men would typically leave these women and find another one to take their place, when "her work" had been done, and the production of the man changed its direction; with a new woman then repeating the cycle. Very few of those women in the "Eurydice-position" have a sort of escape with other women or men. Several of them committed suicide, some died in psychiatrics, or got mad. The model is: the European artist "loves" his medium of expression more than his partner. He loves his camera, his guitar(s) or her typewriter; his wife becomes a tool. Art history calls them "muses," having "inspired" the artist. I called them *mediale Frauen*, medial women. Once he has gotten what he

<sup>6</sup> Klaus Theweleit, *Buch der Könige I: Orpheus und Euridike* (Basel and Frankfurt: Stroemfeld and Roter Stern, 1988).



needs from her, he moves on, which is a form of killing, too. A model that is valid until 1945 (at least), I think.

**Gržinić:** It is actually a horrifying circularity. You take all the life from someone else—in this case, the women—to build your career. It’s a terrible cycle.

**Theweleit:** The mathematics of relationships conceals an imbalance. One plus one here never results in equality, especially between men and women. One grows, the man often, while the other part stagnates or grows down. When the woman is replaced, there’s a fleeting moment of balance, but the cycle repeats itself.

**Gržinić:** It’s fascinating how you predominantly explore the passionate commitment of female researchers, contrasting with the dismissive attitude of men who say, “It’s not my concern, it’s yours.” I appreciate how you frame this issue. One could argue that from this interpretation of data, we uncover a portrayal of masculinity. This portrayal reveals a toxic pathology, a consequence of these relationships.

**Theweleit:** There are certain implications that stem from it, beginning with the writing of *Male Fantasies*. I wasn’t just “connected” with my partner loosely; we choose to continue our journey together; and we still do. In those discussions of the 70s, caused by the growing feminist movement, the focus shifted from more “political” issues to personal ones. It was a moment where personal development seemed impossible without meaningful relationships. The traditional position of the male artist has always revolved around the concept of genius. They see themselves as the creators of the world, shaping the future of mankind. This mindset, propagated by artists like Gottfried Benn, Thomas Mann, Ezra Pound, Knut Hamsun, Picasso, hundreds more of that kind, is one of the foundations of toxic masculinity. The only way to counter this is by developing equality in relationships—not just in rights and responsibilities, but in every day life; nurturing children, cleaning the dishes, and so on. Only then can we truly evolve as a society, allowing for the birth of new perspectives without marginalizing anyone.

**Gržinić:** Is it possible to apply your analysis to the current times? I agree with this, but my concern is how we address the reluctance to acknowledge the growing signs of fascism in our present reality. These developments are evident and



cannot be dismissed lightly. Let's revisit this moment where it's often said that in democracy, historical facts like fascism cannot be ignored. In your case, I've noticed some hesitation. Do you believe we should use the same terms because it's necessary? I'm interested in your perspective on this dilemma, which is posed by the media, science, and other fields.

**Theweleit:** We face an absolute dilemma. You see, one thing is, you never truly know enough about the world around you and the world elsewhere. Different societies have varied perspectives. These insights come from different times and levels of understanding. Over the past 30 years, globalization has reshaped our world. Many developments since then have become more visible due to the widespread use of electronic devices. Informations dealing with our lives are broadcasted and shared globally. Technological advancements in Africa and parts of Asia, like India, have propelled societies forward by centuries. People from diverse backgrounds can access information about global events, big and small ones, about democracies or things happening in China. Family structures, too, exhibit similarities, with male dominance prevalent in many societies. However, it's crucial to note that this dominance isn't necessarily patriarchal. I often stress the fact that in male-dominated societies, it's often middle-aged men who hold sway, while the elderly are often sidelined, except for special occasions. Notably, many of the most famous killing figures in world history, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, or Lenin, weren't successful in living up to the mark of 60.

The issue lies with young—like Alexander—and middle-aged men, revolting and then dominating their societies, then colonizing and suppressing the rest of the world. The average age of the most violent and raging Nazi killers was below 40. This type of guy more or less had become isolated in the civil and military conditions of life after World War Two. That situation has changed since the 1990s due to the electronic revolution. Without the Internet, such individuals wouldn't have been aware of each other's existence and actions. They lacked insight into each other's lives, confined to their own spheres, often ruminating on personal vendettas, a habit that persists in some individuals today. However, now they possess a potential audience of billions when they communicate their ideas, or whatever you would like to call it. That's a substantial influence. I hear the journalistic world talking about *virtual reality*. Are they crazy, altogether? In the reality of the real world it's not *virtual* at all; it's as real as every other reality is; it's

our everyday reality. “Virtuality” doesn’t exist at all. It’s perplexing how people cling to the “virtual” façade . . . perhaps to deceive themselves.

**Gržinić:** Recognizing the growing polarization in many societies, with ideologies veering left or right, fostering extremism, suggests that half the populations live in a perpetual state of inner turmoil. This isn’t necessarily due to physical abuse, but rather a manifestation of societal pressures.

**Theweleit:** Yes. That became in a sharp way clear to me, when reading the results of recent research among young men in various [Arabophone] nations. They didn’t feel just “down” and “unhappy” when they got into the situation of unemployment, when they had no jobs. They experienced this as a sort of emasculation, using the term “castrated” to describe their plight. They were not “men” any longer when not able to provide financially for their families. Moreover, gender dynamics further exacerbate these tensions, perpetuating discord and offering violent outlets, be it through militarization or civil conflict. The young Swiss director Milo Rau—momentarily the most famous theater man in Europe—gathered his first three theater plays, dealing with violence in our societies, under the headline “Civil Wars.”

**Gržinić:** You guess, we are in situations of something like permanent ideologic “civil wars”—not fought with guns, but “civil” deadly weapons.

**Theweleit:** It looks like that. Populations of many countries—not only the US—seem to be split into two distinct factions. One group exudes optimism, foreseeing upward trajectories, while the other languishes in despondency, besieged by the specter of Nazism—a resurgence previously deemed improbable, yet attempted. Post-World War Two, democratic educators dismissed Nazis as mere imbeciles spouting incoherent rhetoric. However, their lingering influence belies such simplistic characterization. These people aren’t merely dim-witted; they’re driven by unacknowledged or unaddressed fears, fixated on attaining power rather than confronting their anxieties. Dialogue seldom penetrates their ideological fortresses; attempts to reason with them are futile. So it’s absolutely idiotic to invite them to talk shows and hope you can unmask them. That doesn’t work, hoping of unmasking their extremism is a fruitless endeavor, akin to reasoning with a neighbor who trivializes asthma. Instead, fostering open discussions in schools, clubs, and community groups offers a more constructive ap-

proach. Engaging with individuals, irrespective of political affiliations, through avenues like sports, music, public city places, dance halls can dismantle ideological barriers and nurture empathy—a strategy particularly effective with adolescents from the younger generations.

**Gržinić:** I want to address 2004, specifically the Abu Ghraib case, which is deeply connected not only with technology but also with unbelievable violence. This case exemplifies similar processes that you described: laughing and having fun by torturing others. During an interview with you, in 2004 you stated that the torturer derives the most satisfaction from the amount of pain they can inflict. The more pain they provoke, the more they extract from it a sense of life. The torturer's inflicting of pain as a revenge, retaliation, gives to him an extra sense of vitality because this act of revenge revitalizes the torturer's own sense of power. This is not about the biopolitics of Foucault, where life is central and the state intervenes. Rather, it is about death and pain that we can frame with Mbembe's necropolitics.<sup>7</sup> You articulated precisely how this pain empowers perpetrators. I would like you to revisit this because it remains a significant phenomenon today. While the events of 2004 were shocking, such horrors have since become normalized. We now witness similar atrocities both in civil society with psychotic killings and on a much broader scale. How can we understand that pain and destruction continue to empower these torturous perpetrators?

**Theweleit:** Revenge. Retaliation is the crucial word. Especially two terms were central for Margret Mahler's analysis: dedifferentiation, and deanimation. She says, in the so-called psychotic state, this is what those persons would try to attempt: the soldiers' work. They devivify others, deanimate them, especially by dedifferentiation, which states, all "the rest" of human people, especially all women, are just the same; the *same shit*. This obviously is going on all the time. I was shocked, and scared, when realizing this. Then, in the 1970s, I thought, this was over. It was not.

In the 90s I was reminded, through Abu Ghraib and similar horror scenes that torture is a material process. It is not merely the act of torturing another but an exchange of life force. The torturer extracts life from the victim until death;

<sup>7</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

that's a point, Elaine Scarry added: the torturers continue to live on by taking life from their victims. At the climax of that installation they reach a point of becoming real. They can't feel any empathy with the victim, because, in a way, they gain a sense of life out of that procedure; which, although fleeting, gives them a temporary illusion of being alive; a sort of life which they cannot find without violence. This sort of becoming alive, gained in this violent way, does not hold long. This state doesn't last long. The torturing of others cries for permanent repetition. The fragmented body is directing the process. If you examine the nature of torture closely, you can absolutely see this. Which can make you "understand," why one might find laughter (of relief) at the bottom of such a grim context.

**Gržinić:** Symptoms of horrible bodily states.

**Theweleit:** Which keep them from getting into any empathic feeling with the tortured ones. Torturers of this kind are completely overwhelmed by the power of their actions. They give shelter. A *bad conscience*? Maybe when they are alone, or having bad dreams after the war is over, or when they are not able to sleep at night. Some of that happens. In the moment of torture, many people have to focus on the immediate situation to realize that the process involves an exchange of life; the torturer gains a sense of power or life by taking it from the tortured.

**Gržinić:** Before I move to the last part, I want to ask what is to be done? Is it possible to change this? This question arises from the deep rethinking you've offered us. These fragmented bodies are becoming more prevalent, partly because of technology. You are right—those far distant recognize each other.

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**Theweleit:** That's very hard to tell—what we can do. You can take the rather clear view of Ruth Klüger who said: Cats scratch, dogs bite. Humans kill. Means, you can't do anything about this state of humans and their actions. There are good reasons to speak like that, especially for a woman who survived Nazi concentration camps. Hasn't it been like that all the times? Look at the Greeks in Athens, killing slaves for fun. Young people of the Renaissance nobility were allowed to kill unarmored people just to get used to the process of becoming dominators. To become grown-ups. Those in power always had "the license" to kill. The legal right of having fun with it.

Is it really part of “human nature” to have to kill? I prefer to think it absolutely depends on their relationships. If they don’t have the chance to develop relationships within a civil society, caring for one another, then it’s very difficult to change their behavior. For example, the neo-Nazis who change sides, exit their group: they did it, as far as I know, because of personal relationships. As long as the power of their group encloses them, gives them a false sense of identity and security, it’s very hard to escape from that. So, we have to work at constructing a sort of society where people can grow, which is a challenging task when half the population is on the brink of poverty. You can counteract this economically and by building institutions—schools, by a proper police, administration—but this necessary work in the institutions, to make them as democratic as possible, cannot be done without providing people with “enough money” for such tasks. We see the contrary: necessary materials are kept [in short supply], and billions are being spent on the military.

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