

## **“Hedonism and the White-Collar Novel – Aesthetics of Pleasure and Enjoyment in Times of Crisis”**

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*Summary*

My PhD project aims at analysing the role which hedonism plays in white-collar novels (Angestelltenromane) by retracing the aesthetics of pleasure and enjoyment in times of crisis. In a comprehensive theoretical chapter, I juxtapose basic tenets of hedonistic conduct with practices of (post-)modern living and working conditions as well as investigate the repercussions of crisis for the latter. I then draw a diachronic comparison of themes and motifs found in six white-collar novels from decisive periods of crisis during the last one hundred years (1929ff., 1973ff., and 2008ff.; Irmgard Keun [1931] : Gilgi. Eine von uns ; Hans Fallada [1932] : Kleiner Mann – was nun ?; Elfriede Jelinek [1972] : Michael. Ein Jugendbuch für die Infantilgesellschaft ; Wilhelm Genazino [1977] : Abschaffel ; Thomas von Steinaecker [2012] : Das Jahr, in dem ich aufhörte, mir Sorgen zu machen, und anfang zu träumen ; Philipp Schönthaler [2013] : Das Schiff, das singend zieht auf seiner Bahn). In order to do so, I employ hermeneutic-philological methods with an underlying (de-)constructivist and poststructuralist conception. Highly condensed and repeatedly edited, literary texts can be regarded as extremely refined cultural products negotiating social reality (as well as – to speak with Aristotle – possible worlds). Therefore, engaging in an exemplary qualitative comparative reading of individual representative texts appears especially useful, as it allows me to find out diachronic similarities and differences – which are always dependent on the discourse – of the genre chosen.

In a first step, I theorise crisis as a social construct. Both the dimension of power inherent in the construct of crisis and its political regulation mechanisms seem particularly relevant in this context. Besides theorems and studies from discourse linguistics, I draw on concepts of crisis as formulated in the fields of psychology, sociology and economics. Secondly, I provide an overview of the development of the white-collar discourse since the

beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to discussing white-collar workers as a “class between the classes”, I focus on the tensions between work and leisure time by employing theories from the fields of the sociology of work and cultural studies. I thus intend to retrace the living and working conditions of the white-collar worker in the different periods of crisis as well as to examine to what extent the white-collar worker could profit from the social partnership between capital and proletariat and in what way they received appropriate compensation for their support of the capitalist mode of production. Then, in a chapter on hedonistic philosophy, I present classical hedonistic philosophers – such as Aristippus and Epicurus –, more recent discourses as influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, but also latest developments as instigated by Michel Onfray, Bernulf Kanitscheider, Bettina Dessau and Robert Pfaller.

As central theories of my updated analysis of enjoyment, I build on Robert Pfallers concept of interpassivity as well as on Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek’s theories on positive and negative forms of pleasure. Furthermore, Michel Foucault’s ideas on asceticism and lust as well as on biopolitics serve as a starting point. I combine these approaches in a concept of social hedonism.

In an interim conclusion, I present the findings of my theoretical discussion. On this basis, I pose the question of the white-collar worker’s potential for pleasure and enjoyment in work and leisure time in the literatures of crisis following the years of 1929, 1966/73 and 2008/9. In order to answer this question, I perform an analysis of representative white-collar novels from the periods mentioned which constitute about two thirds of the whole length of my dissertation.

With regard to the findings of this doctoral thesis, the analyses have shown that social forms of hedonism are underrepresented in all the novels in the corpus. Instead, pleasure and enjoyment are always marked by egoism and narcissism. This can be explained because of the special situation of white-collar workers as a class between the classes, always challenged with the possibility of social advancement while at the same time fearing social decline in living and working conditions marked by a capitalist ethos.