

Gen(d)eration Next: Prose by Julia Franck  
and Judith Hermann

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In March 1999, critic Volker Hage adopted a term in *Der Spiegel* that subsequently dominated public discussions about new German literature by female authors—"Fräuleinwunder."<sup>1</sup> He uses it collectively for "the young women who make sure that German literature is again a subject of discussion this spring." Hage asserts that they seem less concerned with "the German question," the consequences of two German dictatorships, and prefer instead to thematize "eroticism and love" in their texts. Hage finds that in doing so they are "less fussy" and tell their stories "in a far less inhibited manner" than their male colleagues (7, 245).

Hage's use of the term "Fräuleinwunder" is problematic because it is at base a belittling one. Adding to Peter Graves' recent criticism (2002), I want to point out a few of the underlying issues. Most apparent is the term's patronizing undertone. It implies in an avuncular manner that the authors in question—who, in reality, are well beyond a "Fräulein" age—are still immature. Consequently, the expression seems to suggest, one cannot hold their texts to the same high literary standards that apply to an Ingo Schulze or a Thomas Brussig. More troubling, one should notice that the labeling process pertains only to female authors. Their male counterparts, instead of being categorized by others, invent themselves and form their own "Knabenclubs" ("boys clubs"), as Felicitas Hoppe has called them (206). The "Fräuleinwunder" discussion reveals that a generation of middle-

aged male critics seeks authors “for looks not books,” thereby perpetuating a mode of criticism that is gendered and sexist. There were hardly any common thematic or stylistic features shared by the female authors Hage chose for his review. The least common denominator was their physical attractiveness.

Despite the problematic nature of the term “Fräuleinwunder,” Hage’s article has drawn attention to a development that began in the mid-1990s. The success of female writers is hard to overlook. They are more visible in the public sphere, critics and readers alike discuss their texts with excitement; and the number of editions of their books often surpass even the wildest expectations of editors and literary agents. It is obvious that the artistic “products” of women have become an important factor on the literary market. Interestingly, they also contradict one of the basic principles of publishing—that the genre of the short story is neither popular nor easy to sell.<sup>2</sup>

In order to illuminate the literary and aesthetic criteria connected with the “Fräuleinwunder” phenomenon, my essay focuses on two representative authors at the center of it. Both Julia Franck and Judith Hermann were born in 1970, both grew up in Berlin—Franck in the East, Hermann in the West—and still live there, both have published popular collections of short stories and are well respected and successful.<sup>3</sup> Most of their stories take place in Berlin, and experiences of metropolitan life and society distinctly define their characters. However, there are no explicit references to a shadow the now dismantled Wall might cast or to the political implications of life in the Berlin Republic. Franck’s and Hermann’s prose illustrates the hypothesis that twelve years after unification, its aftermath has begun to lose its literary significance, at least for many younger writers belonging to a generation that did not experience a divided Germany painfully and thus consciously.<sup>4</sup> The same holds true for the question as to whether an author was socialized in the West or in the East. Except for one story in Franck’s collection—“Der Hausfreund” (The Family Friend)—we find no allusions to life before unification. One might call this a form of tacit literary unification; apparently, these two authors have arrived in the Berlin Republic with-

out feeling a particular urge to narrate how they got there. Instead, their interest in everyday life, relationships, and gender issues shapes their prose and literary depictions.

The aim of my investigation is twofold. By examining the aesthetic means that these two authors use, the effects social processes have on their narratives, and common features or differences that a careful reading reveals, I wish to introduce their work to a broader scholarly audience. Hage's claim that young female authors deal with eroticism and love in a "daring" manner provides the thematic focus of the investigation. Although concepts of gender have an effect on all societal discourses, I share the notion that they are differentiated and problematized mostly in literary texts, which portray, discuss, and reshape ideas about gender differences in complex and illuminating ways (cf. Röttger and Paul, "Vorwort"). What distinguishes Franck's and Hermann's stories about female/male relationships in the 1990s from other texts? Which narrative strategies do they use? In addressing these questions, the readings in this essay seek to investigate whether the "sex wars" portrayed by these two writers are the product of a new, post-feminist literary generation and serve as a starting point for future discussions of this issue.

Julia Franck<sup>5</sup> had already published two relatively successful novels<sup>6</sup> when her collection of short stories, *Bauchlandung. Geschichten zum Anfassen (Belly Flop. Stories to Touch)* came out in 2000. Some critics, taking the subtitle literally, consider this collection "erotic literature" and thereby reduce the variety of the stories to a label that promises to sell well (cf. Fitzel, Krause). It seems more appropriate to characterize Franck's narratives as "Körpergeschichten." In her stories, the body rules over the mind and determines the protagonists' behavior and actions. Descriptions of the body and its physical changes, of chemical reactions and interactions, distinctly define her characters and set her prose apart from that of other authors. Because she constantly foregrounds the physical, Franck undermines traditional social, psychological, and moral categories, thereby exploring new literary territories (von Matt 35).

At first glance, Franck's stories are "Alltagsgeschichten," everyday events told by female narrators of different ages, which range from a recollection of an unpleasant encounter ("Zugfahrt" [Train Ride]) to a child's narration of an illegal emigration to the West ("Der Hausfreund" [The Family Friend]) to the last meeting with a dying grandfather ("Schmeckt es euch nicht?" [Don't you like it?]) or a hardly known father ("Streuselschnecke" [Belgian Bun]). The other four stories deal with (erotic) relationships between the sexes.

All the stories in *Bauchlandung* take place in Berlin, which is recognizable through the mention of certain neighborhoods. Nevertheless, these are not "Szenegeschichten" like Judith Hermann's. Franck focuses instead on human interactions in everyday life, which she finds far more fascinating than "some scene or Berlin" (qtd. in Nolte 15). The topos Berlin is nevertheless significant because of the urban backdrop it provides its author. Isolated existence in the metropolis determines the experiences of the female characters and jumpstarts their narratives. In describing the quotidian, Franck repeatedly functionalizes surprising twists that thwart the reader's expectations of the outcome of the stories. The ensuing astonishment causes the reader to pause and reflect upon the text, which supports Franck's ideal of a critical, autonomous audience. This is a significant concern for her, as we will further investigate later.

Precise observations of the smallest, seemingly marginal details distinguish the narratives of these "big city miniatures." Franck's concentration on the minute seems almost merciless at times when she illustrates the characters' physical or emotional state with a painful accuracy that avoids psychologizing or explanation.<sup>7</sup> This "surface realism," which magnifies details microscopically and only hints at the protagonists' inner depths, is what distinguishes Franck's style most from the more pictorial and metaphorical style of Hermann. Franck illuminates her scenes in stark contrast and supports this impression through the dialogical style of her stories. The inability to communicate which we will observe in *Sommerhaus, später* is replaced in *Bauchlandung* by an ongoing dialogue between the protagonists, and the use of everyday language lends spontaneity to their communication.

The first story of the collection thematizes female sexuality in a way that demystifies stereotypes and questions the patriarchal order. In “Bäuchlings” (On Her Stomach), we find a nameless first person narrator observing her older sister Luise asleep among the remains of her birthday party. The doorbell rings, the narrator answers it, and Olek, Luise’s soon to be ex-lover, enters the apartment. He has come to inform his girlfriend that the dog she had left with him was run over by a car. Luise, hung-over and tired, is unwilling to speak with Olek and sends her younger sister to throw him out. In this short scenario, Franck reveals the ambivalent structure of the sisterly relationship. The younger sister’s deep affection and admiration for the attractive Luise extend beyond mere sisterly love. Her gaze is a lover’s gaze, her language that of longing. Luise’s every move and emotion registers with the narrator, their relationship is intimate-incestuous, and the older sister encourages these emotions by her provocative behavior:

She is lying on her back and strokes her breast with one hand, she smiles at me, then Luise turns around and shows me her behind. The shirt has slipped up and I see it, the white, round slopes, only parted by the silk panties. She seems to know that her gaze seduces me and observes over her shoulder how I follow her every move and endure every glance till now. (11)<sup>8</sup>

Luise dominates the relationship. An erratic, catlike moodiness and negligence not excluding physical and psychological injury (9) characterize her behavior towards her sister. She is equally cold towards her lovers. When Olek asks to speak with her, she refuses, saying, “I don’t feel like it” (10). Finally she agrees but her only reaction to the possible death of her dog is to throw out Olek in order to cry “a little” (15)—just to invite her sister to share an erotic bath with her, which ends the story.

Franck follows the literary model of the *femme fatale* to typify Luise. Her long, red hair contrasts with her pale skin, her fixating eyes seem to cast a spell on the onlooker, and her partial nudity is an integral part of her seductive game through the contrast of covering and unveiling. Her superiority and enigmatic nature, her coldness and emancipation from traditional female roles es-

establish a further link to the traditional motif.<sup>9</sup> Luise's role as *femme fatale* makes the younger sister's reactions plausible. Instead of seeing her cruel behavior as a character flaw, the narrator wishes to emulate her emotional and sexual independence, a desire that culminates in the fantasy of slipping into her sister's body. When Olek rings the doorbell, the narrator is looking for something to wear and chooses the leather halter top that Luise had left on the sofa, "I take it, the warm scent gets up my nose, I put it on. My breasts have room in its cups, when I walk they push against the leather" (7). The narrator also puts on Luise's pumps, which have a sexual connotation because of their leathery material and provide a new bodily experience. The clothes are too big for her – the role of the sexy *femme fatale* literally does not fit her. Nevertheless, Luise's clothing empowers the narrator sexually and leads to her attempted seduction of Olek. In the following scene, the ensuing sexual tension amplifies the blurring of bodily borders, signified by the hair that changes from Luise's red to the narrator's black curls:

Maybe Luise's hips are higher, surely they are softer—and her red hair smells differently than my black hair. . . . I imagine how he stands behind Luise, how his other hand follows the silk between her buttocks, glides down, slides hard between her thighs. . . . I have to smile, feel his breath, hold mine—and I see her curls in his hands, the curls that are suddenly black and mine, they catch his hands, and his prick, pull it inside of me. (14)

With the incest theme that underlies the sisterly relationship, Franck employs a second motif in a remarkably different way from the dominant cultural tradition that shaped ideas about incest in Western European societies. In both Freud and Lévi-Strauss, women are restricted to being the object of male desire in a patriarchal order.<sup>10</sup> Men erect the incest taboo against women who provoke competition and thereby threaten the brotherly community. As a cultural strategy, the taboo establishes the social order. For Freud, it means that men themselves avoid sexual contacts with certain women in order to ensure their group's survival; for Lévi-Strauss, the incest taboo is less a binding rule in that it prohibits men from having sex with their own mothers,

sisters or daughters. Instead, the rule requires men to give women to other men, to open one's own family to other groups. Women become signs, through which men can communicate with each other. With respect to family relations, which are the beginning of complex social structures for Lévi-Strauss, women appear as objects that can be exchanged like words. Through the exchange of women, communication ensues (Kolesch 92).

Franck undermines these ideas in two important ways. Firstly, "Bäuchlings" displays not a heterosexual but a lesbian incestuous relationship, which adds another layer to the taboo-breaking and presumably destabilizes social relationships even more.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, the sisterly desire establishes a cosmos of signs defined by the female body, gaze and language that men cannot access. The sisters demote their lovers—here Olek—to mere accessories whose primary function is to walk the dog and enhance female pleasure. Not women, but men are sexual objects—which inverts the patriarchal order.

The one-dimensional narrative perspective, in which the female gaze directs and manipulates the reader's perception, supports this reading. The narrator describes her own emotions and impressions of Luise in detail without passing any judgement—as if moral terms were incompatible with longing and desire. Categories of shame and guilt because of an incestuous relationship are insignificant; the younger one can display self-confidence, despite her sexual desire, "I love Luise. And, by the way: she is my sister" (7).<sup>12</sup> If sexuality is, to speak with Lévi-Strauss, the paradigmatic medium that determines social power structures, transgressing an incest taboo set by men undermines the patriarchal order.

On another level, Franck's prose also disrupts the feminist order because the author refuses to see herself as a successor of Women's literature of the 1970s. These texts, in her opinion, were written with a conventional understanding of women's roles in society and all too often portrayed them as idealized models. The female protagonists in *Bauchlandung*, on the other hand, are more complex; sometimes they realize their full potential and sometimes they are frustrated in their attempts to achieve established

societal ideals.<sup>13</sup> Franck believes that her texts mirror developments in modern women's self-conception not despite this ambivalence, but because of it. Her renunciation of moral judgments, combined with her use of the narrative perspective, provokes uneasiness especially among female reviewers. They often characterize her prose as cold and heartless and ask if her bad girls even have a soul (cf. von Matt, Döbler). These reviewers seem to find it difficult to set aside their political expectations when Franck consciously refuses to speak out in favor of the improved possibilities of women in contemporary society. When asked about the laconic style of her texts, which describe reality without projecting a utopian—feminist—ideal, she insists on the reader's autonomy to form his or her own opinion. The author asserts her wish to create texts as a "Resonanzraum" ("space of resonance") in which the reader is challenged without having to follow preconceived notions of a psychologizing morality.<sup>14</sup>

There is a close link between Franck's statements and the mode and themes of her narratives. In contrast to Hermann's stories, relationships between the sexes in *Bauchlandung* are not dominated by external factors such as (failed) communication or structural imbalances of power but by the all-defining poles of sexual attraction and repulsion. The narrators proclaim their everyday life an "erogenous battle zone" (Wirtz) in which erotic adventures present themselves in virtually every situation. They pursue sexual encounters offensively and share their motivation candidly with the reader. Interestingly, their endeavors show they are just as libidinous as men.

The first-person narrator in "Für Sie und für Ihn" (For Her and for Him), for example, searches for a situation that can provide instinctual release in her isolated metropolitan life: "and when I can't get rid of myself, when I want to talk to somebody, like today, when I am fed up with walking back and forth in my room, I go downstairs and buy myself the attentiveness of the barkeeper" (53). In exchange for money one finds human attention or at least a sympathetic listener and as a juicy extra the prospect of sex. The narrator captures the barkeeper's attention by telling him a story about her colorless and very boring neigh-

bor. In the last four pages, her narration climaxes in a detailed description of this neighbor's sexual encounter, which she observed earlier from her balcony.

Taking her statement, "I can hardly wait to confide [in the barkeeper], to tell him what I have just observed" (53), the story can be read as one about narration. Telling stories offers comfort in an anonymous metropolis where neighbors do not greet each other from fear of overstepping the boundaries of privacy (58). Narration brings order to the modern, alienated human existence, which inspired Robert Musil to the analogy that the rules of life were also the rules of narration.<sup>15</sup> Hence, "Für Sie und für Ihn" has a tight structure mimicking a sexual encounter. The expositional foreplay (53-54) precedes a wealth of details about the architecture of the building, the neighbor's features, his living situation, and his habits (55-60), which serve as retardation before the story reaches its supposed climax (61-63). The narrator's detailed portrayal of the neighbor contradicts her claim not to be interested in him (57, 62) and allows the reader to draw the conclusion that her own life is apparently rather lonely; it is in fact so sequestered that her surreptitious surveillance takes on an obsessive quality and becomes a focus of her existence.

The surprising twist at the end, which breaks the erotic spell and renders the possibility of real sex improbable, is reminiscent of the principle in the *Arabian Nights*. The narrator becomes a modern Sheherezade, whose narrative mainly serves as s(t)imulation and a way of venting instinctual drives, but it never fulfills its inherent promise. The barkeeper does not get a chance to act out his fantasies, and the reader—who might have secretly wished for the description of yet another erotic scene—is confronted tacitly with his or her own voyeurism. Franck's strategy is to stir erotic imagination only to debunk it systematically. Through this demystification process, her prose distinguishes itself from racier texts labeled "erotic" literature.

Before the story reaches its climax the barkeeper has to serve another guest—who turns out to be his former girlfriend. The narrator uses his absence to wonder whether the color of a drink depends on its consumer's sex: "Clear stuff for men? A blurry,

creamy pink for women? Is there such a thing as alcoholic drinks for *Her* and for *Him*? As with perfumes?" (61) At first, this passage appears to be an irritating digression, but in fact Franck skillfully uses a detail from the narrator's vision to comment on gender stereotypes. Who says, she seems to ask, that objects, behavior patterns, or stories *for her* and *for him* really exist? The text plays ironically with ideas and clichés about gender and illustrates how they are socially and culturally constructed. While the opening situation deconstructs the myth of the sexually passive woman, the ensuing story also refutes the notion that women like unambiguous, fluffy love stories. Like "Bäuchlings," the story does not openly denounce men, but it does not give them much credit either. The narrator aims instead at certain stereotypes about male behavior, which she uses for her own purposes. Interestingly, the ambivalence visible in the woman's actions ultimately relativizes any preconceived notion of gendered behavior and shows women to be as corrupted as their male counterparts.

In order to redirect the barkeeper's attention from his former girlfriend back to herself, the narrator entices him with a particularly detailed description of the couple's sexual activities, using an unambiguous, semi-pornographic language. This leads—as one might expect—to the effect she had hoped for; it motivates the barkeeper to suggest a date later in the evening. The narrator can now weigh the advantages and disadvantages according to her own pleasure principle: "Involuntarily I have to think that he has a paunch and no ass but because he asks me so nicely, I say: 'Sure, love to, shall I wait for you here?'" (64). It is still the man's responsibility to make the first move, but the protagonist's reaction contradicts the stereotype of a sexually passive woman who would never be interested in a man just for carnal reasons. Instead, the narrator's voyeuristic gaze perceives the nameless barkeeper not as an individual but assesses solely his potential for sexual entertainment. Affection or attractiveness are marginal; more important is the prospect of a mutual profit that might shorten an otherwise lonely Sunday evening (64).

The atmosphere in Hermann's stories is a lot less charged with unfulfilled desires and sexual callousness, but the non-com-

mittal curtness ruling relationships between friends or lovers can be found here as well.

*Sommerhaus, später* closely interweaves nine narratives through their succession and thematic focus.<sup>16</sup> All of them are variations on one topic, which the narrator in “Hurrikan (*Something farewell*)” [Hurricane (*Something farewell*)] describes as a game called “Imagining a Life Like That.”<sup>17</sup> On some level, all of Hermann’s narrators—who, except for one, are identifiably female—have to come to terms with how to play it. In trying out various draft forms they postpone an active, defined life and are oriented towards the “later” invoked by the title story.

The elegiac tone of Hermann’s narratives conveys the resulting ambiguity most convincingly. Critics describe her style as old-fashioned and ascetic and stress that the tempo of her stories seems too slow for the fast-paced 1990s (Bucheli). Her writing is, in its sober realism, clearly influenced by American authors like Ernest Hemingway or Raymond Carver.

As in *Bauchlandung*, most narratives take place in Berlin. The city itself does not play a dominant role in Hermann either, but her characters are tied very closely to the metropolitan setting Berlin provides. Most of them are part of the thriving milieu of a post-unification bohemia— theater people, writers, painters, video artists, and the groupies that cling to them. The author illustrates this milieu ironically without ever denouncing it; after all, it is her own world that inspired her to write.<sup>18</sup> More importantly, her goal is not to realistically depict lifestyles in a unified Berlin but to evoke their underlying feeling (Schlette 88).

Thematically, Hermann’s characters circle around the important issues that define a person’s emotional life: love and the loss of it, relationships, dreams, and (disappointed) hopes. The prominent motif linking all the stories is the search for happiness; a feeling that the characters recognize as such only after it has already evaporated: “Happiness is always the moment before. The second before the moment in which I actually should be happy and don’t know it,” says Marie in “Camera Obscura” (149). A void of meaning characterizes most protagonists’ existence; they drift through their days and nights rather aimlessly. For them, life

itself becomes an ambivalent project. It is exciting due to the myriad of possibilities it offers, but at the same time it feels exhausting and emotionally draining: how is one to decide which option promises the most exciting, “beautiful” life?

Hermann’s stories illustrate a phenomenon thematized in many contemporary prose texts—event hunting, a random drifting from one happening to the next, any of which might help to cover up the feeling of emptiness inside.<sup>19</sup> In this respect, Hermann’s characters illustrate social changes that have led to what Gerhard Schulze has called the “Erlebnisgesellschaft.” In an “event society,” the project of a “beautiful” life becomes the marker for a successful existence, and subjective experiences play an important role for the construction of the social fabric. A choice is not made because of its inherent meaning but according to its “event value,” which promises entertainment and excitement (*Erlebnisgesellschaft*, passim).

The changes in a society that organizes itself around events and promotes consumerism on all levels affect not only the position of the subject but also its social relationships. In “Bali-Frau” (Bali Woman), two friends drag a nameless female narrator to a party at the Berlin Volksbühne theater because her friend Christiane has fallen for the “scruffy older-man sexiness” (103) of the famous director who staged the play. The narrative of the night’s events is interspersed with memories and reflections about a failed relationship, in an interior monologue directed at the boyfriend who did not want to come because he “[had] taken the wrong drugs” (100). The narrator contrasts the attempt to understand why her own relationship has fallen apart with the frame story of her friend Christiane:

I looked at the director and thought of the countless directors and playwrights and actors and stage designers who had sat at my and Christiane’s kitchen table, had used our shower, had slept in our beds; I thought of their voices on our answering machine, their nighttime banging on our door, the smashed glasses and unread letters; I thought that there was always something that wasn’t quite enough, and this time, too, something wouldn’t be enough; I thought of you, of the frost flowers, of the smell of smoke; I thought, We’re not enough, either. (103)

The repetitive experiences that do not offer satisfaction—personified in the changing lovers—infuse the text with melancholic weariness, which the rhythmical language supports with its grammatically redundant anaphora and conjunctions (Schlette 88). The ambivalence of the last sentence makes the failure of that particular relationship seem like an existential inadequacy; at the same time as it is coded and hence difficult to understand. Just as the interest in the various lovers was always lacking, the real affection for the boyfriend does not suffice; “we” are not enough—for what? What the narrator cannot express is nevertheless present in the story from the first sentence: “There are times when winter reminds me of something. A mood I was once in, a desire I once felt? I don’t exactly know” (99). Maybe there is no need to name it; in the fabric of Hermann’s stories, the sought-after happiness is always only present in the moment in which we are unaware of it.<sup>20</sup> Hermann leaves it up to the reader’s imagination to fill in missing details, whereas Franck uses a dialogical style of narration, as we observed earlier.

The narrator’s emotional fatigue grows over the course of the party, which spirals increasingly out of control. A girl bangs her head on the dance floor until she bleeds, an actress and a stage worker have sex on the sofa, somebody throws glasses against the wall, and the narrator’s staggering friend Marcus Werner, “high on coke and drunk” (108), keeps shouting the same unintelligible sentence into a megaphone. Excess is, as Schlette observes, the last attempt to extract something special from the quotidian, which makes it all the more ordinary (89). The narrator realizes the absurdity of the scene but stays nevertheless, because of the “lack of obsession” and the “entschlossene Gleichgültigkeit” (“determined indifference”) that characterize all of Hermann’s protagonists (Köhler 53). Although they lack the defined concept for their lives that is commonly associated with a “successful” existence, they bear this fact patiently and with a calm melancholy. The motto of the book captures the prevailing tone of the stories in a line by Tom Waits—“The doctor says I’ll be alright but I’m feeling blue.”

Hermann's characters are part of an extensive event culture in which everybody is supposed to continually experience something special and as such, they are taken in by the illusion that happiness can be found in nightly adventures.<sup>21</sup> However, these always just seem new and promising but turn out to be repetitive and ultimately meaningless. Furthermore, the fear of missing something is always present, which prevents the desired happiness from being achieved and instead produces *a priori* disappointment, as Schulze observes: "Orientation towards the event becomes a habitual hunger that no longer permits satisfaction. In the moment of fulfillment, the question of what should be next already arises. Hence, gratification does not ensue, precisely because the search for gratification has become a habit." (*Erlebnisgesellschaft* 65). The narrator's imaginary dialogue with her boyfriend shows that she is not free of the pressures imposed by this society when she asks herself, "Are you jealous? Just a tiny bit? A little curious and nervous, wondering where? Where are they going now?" even as she answers unequivocally: "You would have gone home" (109). The narrator is engaged in a circular search for excitement, which leads her to favor the party over the possibility of staying with her boyfriend, "I would have turned [the TV] off and looked at you: it could have been so easy. I just couldn't make up my mind; then I took a deep breath and ran after Christiane and Markus Werner" (102). The possibility that this imagined time together could have been another chance for the relationship has no particular significance; for Hermann's characters, deep emotions cannot change the melancholic belief that life is just the way it is. Love is even unmasked as a chimera: "I know that things had never been any different, I just happened to have been wrong one time" (115).

The dogma of "anything goes" and the fear of committing to anything play an important role in this context. While Andrea Köhler answers the question as to whether Hermann's stories are love stories ambiguously, she stresses the "kleistische Unbedingtheit" (53) with which the characters hold out, hoping that the right person will come along eventually (*Sommerhaus* 107, 111). However, Köhler's observations understate the charac-

ters' inability to identify such an opportunity. Since love can be conquered only at the risk of conflict, it harbors a wager that none of the protagonists is willing to make, despite the subtle differences between the sexes. At first glance, men seem more active and resolved, but their actions are evasive and thus show how overwhelmed they really are. In a manner reminiscent of Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas, Stein in the title story burns down the summerhouse when his loved one does not come; the painter in "Sonja" proposes to another woman because the realization of his love and need for Sonja frightens him, and he therefore loses his muse of the same name. Male determination un.masks itself as helplessness in the end.

This observation leads to an interesting question: does Hermann take the side of her female protagonists as strongly as Franck does? The category "weibliches Schreiben" does not play a significant role for her, nor does she show an unconditional solidarity with her female characters.<sup>22</sup> Instead, her narrators observe closely and rather mercilessly the shortcomings of their fellow females, especially when their behavior is stereotypical and gendered. Like Franck, Hermann's characters do not assess behavior in an openly critical way because a moral judgment would run counter to the principle of ambivalence ruling their lives. They express criticism only in subtle nuances. For example, in the eyes of the narrator, Christiane's attempt to seduce the famous director is staged and precisely calculated; her beauty, illustrated as a "cheerleader face" with "ice blue eyes" and a "frosty and thin-lipped" mouth, seems artificial and in its coldness reminiscent of the ice queen in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale (99, 104, 109).

Like "Bali-Frau," "Camera Obscura" thematizes the seamy side of event culture and at the same time, reflects gender-specific behavior and raises the question of whether such behavior perpetuates social power structures. Do women make themselves the object of a "male gaze" and male power plays? The story introduces the reader to Marie, much-courted starlet of Berlin's bohemian circles, who, thanks to her beauty, can choose from a multitude of admirers. At first glance, the text narrates an intellectual

version of *The Beauty and the Beast*. Marie is infatuated with an up-and-coming video artist, a local celebrity in the Berlin art scene who remains without a name in the story. The aura that his fame lends him seems to be his most appealing quality for Marie, given that although he is said to be “incredibly intelligent” (148), he is also ugly and dwarfish. He reminds her of a small animal, “a black, hairy, creepy little monkey” (152). Marie questions her own sanity for going out with him but supposes that she desires “the glamour of his fame” (148). Furthermore, she feels challenged by his apparent sexual indifference towards her (161, 152), which motivates her to change the dynamic of their relationship by being more active and asking him for a date. The sexual connotations linked to her “high-heeled boots” are the reader’s clue that she will try to seduce the artist.

From the moment Marie enters his apartment, she is “self-conscious and nervous” (153); the artist’s condescending self-satisfaction thwarts her attempts to gain control of the situation (152, 154). Suggesting that they should play a little bit with the computer, he points the gleaming black eye of a web-cam at her face, which appears as an image on the computer screen, “The parting in Marie’s hair, Marie’s forehead, Marie’s eyebrows, her eyes, her nose, mouth, chin, neck, the top of her breasts, an eerie black-and-white Marie-face” (155). Through the woman’s procedural coming-into-being, the story reveals the prominent discourse underlying the text, which is a technical one. The title “Camera Obscura” alludes to the history of the photographic medium by forging links between the first primitive camera developed in the 16th century—literally a “dark room” that the photographer had to enter—and the technological advances of the computer age. Technology has male connotations: The video artist owes his fame to developments in digital photography and masters them brilliantly; meanwhile, Marie appears as the personified stereotype of the proverbial female ignorance about technical devices. In her imagination, the camera grows out of the artist’s forehead like a Cyclops’ eye, which terrifies her deeply. Her panicky reaction links her to primitive people for whom photographic reproduction symbolizes a robbery of the soul; the fe-

male response hence aligns itself with a discursive tradition in which hysteria and superstition become a synonym for femininity.<sup>23</sup> The impassive male, on the other hand, adapts so well to the computer that he becomes one with it. Consequently, his reaction to her fearful emotional response—"hideous . . . fishlike, terrible, dreadful"—is to point out soberly that the image "hasn't fully formed yet" (155). For Marie, the computer generates an image that assumes an uncanny life of its own and does not do justice to her individuality and beauty.

In a world dominated by reproductions and visual satiation, original phenomena lose their claim of authenticity and authority, and this loss has repercussions for perception and human interactions. The sexual encounter between Marie and the artist is unemotional and distanced; their kiss, transmitted onto the screen by the camera, is "sober" and appears "with a time delay and silent" as "a gray repetition of an instant." (154, 156) Human attributes—how does this kiss taste? Which emotions does it cause?—do not register with the protagonists. Instead, the text foregrounds the possibility of reproducing this moment, which is the signature of a perception that undervalues the unique.<sup>24</sup> Sensations of excitement disappear behind the alienating medium of the web-cam; sex becomes an act entirely devoid of meaning that leaves the participants lonely. The deepest emotion Marie can feel is "an ache in her back." (151)

The story has previously established Marie's usual attitude in such situations as being distant and adopting a wait-and-see policy towards her life in order to protect her from disappointment and emotional turmoil. The computer as a relay station between her and the artist makes this behavior impossible: "Instead of seeing herself as usual from a sort of bird's-eye view, she looks at the screen, at this silent, strange entwining of two human beings, and it is bizarre" (156). A medium that the discourse of the story had established as male through the fusion of artist and camera influences her perception. To experience herself through the "male gaze" alienates Marie even further from the situation because reality is funneled through the apparatus, then constructed—interpreted—*anew*. The artist's arousal dominates the dynamic of

the scene and genders it in a stereotypical fashion. The language supports this by contrasting active and passive verbs to describe male and female reactions respectively.

Despite these observations, the impassive language use prevents a reading of Marie as the victim of male domination. Although she bears the artist's advances only reluctantly, she does nothing to stop him either. She accepts sex as part of the exploitative deal she has made with him; her beauty upgrades the existence of the grotesque dwarf, who in return lets her partake of his popularity and fame. Hermann alludes to their sexual encounter only nonchalantly in the last paragraph of the story. Her narrative style, which is based on a "Kunst der Aussparung" ("art of omission," Kanz 40), makes it unnecessary to depict sexuality as openly and callously as Franck does. Nevertheless, "Camera Obscura" shows how sex is a means to an end for her female characters as well. As such, the story is another version of the power play between the sexes and delineates how both protagonists perpetuate gender-specific social patterns with their stereotypical behavior.

Marie is the prime example of female characteristics present in all the stories. The women in Hermann are silent and beautiful creatures, they smoke and drink to excess, are constantly freezing, and lack decisiveness.<sup>25</sup> The depiction of only one type of woman might be negligible considering that *Sommerhaus*, *später* was Hermann's literary debut; after all, stylistic and thematic refinement usually go hand in hand with a writer's development. Nevertheless, the almost ethereal frailty of Hermann's female characters is bothersome because it stands in sharp contrast to the experiences of a modern female reader. This irritation is deepened by the fact that only men show creative potential—the director in "Bali-Frau," the painter in "Sonja," or the video artist in "Camera Obscura." The women take an admiring role towards them, which lends Marie and Sonja the quality of groupies. Despite the ironic distance created through the narrative voice, Hermann to a certain degree reproduces stereotypes of relationships in which women appear weak and men strong. She systematically lets down the reader who wishes the female characters to be openly active, decisive, and independent; only close readings

can reveal subtle nuances in her narratives. Does she then fall behind the achievements of earlier generations of writers whose aim was to render invalid an order that privileged the male and his desire (Baackmann 152)?

Indeed, the options of female protagonists in Hermann are restricted to either evasiveness—as in “Sommerhaus, später,” “Sonja,” or “Hurrikan”—or to the “bird’s eye perspective” of Marie. Their strategies do not prevent them from being hurt. Despite this, women in Hermann are not dependent emotionally; they might be passive, but know how to distance themselves, even if only by disappearing. As such, they are self-confident individuals who attempt to attain their goals—if they have to, by using their sexual attractiveness. My interpretations have shown that these goals are not embedded in a “master plan” of life but pertain only to a day-by-day perspective. The women’s unemotional stance is not a reaction to male dominance but a response to the way they perceive life *as such*. The “impossibility of a lasting encounter,” as Hermann calls it, produces an attitude of melancholic ambivalence.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, the ability to communicate and act meaningfully is extremely limited in all protagonists, whether male or female. Different strategies of “survival” mark gender-specific differences. Men act more decisively and determinedly, but their behavior does not lead to a happier, more successful life than the women’s approaches. A critique of the relationship between the sexes is expressed only through subtleties in the narratives, which identify gender roles as linguistically prefigured societal or cultural constructs. As a result, the stories level gender differences to such a degree that it seems inadmissible to blame the women’s unhappiness on conflicts between the sexes or to portray women in a victimized role.

As the above comments have shown, both Franck and Hermann concentrate in their stories on the depiction of the quotidian, which is their backdrop to depict—among other topics—relationships between women and men. Although the two authors use different aesthetic means and create a very distinct tone in their narratives, their common denominator is the precise, sober realism with which the characters approach and nar-

rate their lives. For these streetwise metropolitan creatures, the notion of "romantic love" seems almost ludicrous, but even milder versions of it are no longer perceived as an earth-shattering experience. "Does everything always have to be love all the time?" (*Bauchlandung* 110) asks one female narrator in Franck, and this theme applies to Hermann's protagonists as well.

What results from this attitude of existential coolness are a fundamental loneliness and a feeling of strangeness in the characters that no new adventure can soothe. Life in an urban society clearly defines them; it affects and causes their jaded psychological condition. However, their experiences are not specific to Berlin but could easily have taken place in Hamburg, Munich, or Cologne as well. As such, Franck and Hermann's literary take on the urban landscape differs considerably from that of other female authors of their generation. For example, in Inka Parei's *Die Schattenboxerin* (1999), the topography of unified Berlin functions as "Seelenlandschaft" ("landscape of the soul") of the anti-heroine Hell. The novel clearly locates its events in the neighborhood north of Rosenthaler Platz, which is a place for the poor and outsiders. This gray, dirty and run-down territory first provides a setting for Hell's rape; henceforth it mirrors the damaged psyche of the female protagonist. Unlike Parei, Franck and Hermann soberly narrate the toll that not the city itself, but a metropolitan event society takes on human relations. As such, *Bauchlandung* and *Sommerhaus, später* exemplify a development that scholars have described as "a reinvigoration of literary forms and traditions in which elements of mass culture combine with a critical distance from social reality, and yet a concern with lived experience and the senses" (Finlay and Taberner 136).

Apart from the labeling process that ensues from the media's heightened attention towards Franck, Hermann, and other writers categorized as "Fräuleinwunder," the important factors for their success are the aesthetic means with which these texts narrate daily experiences and relationships. They render their prose representative of a new generation of German writers. In this context, critics repeatedly pointed out that especially Hermann, but in her wake also Franck, brought the "sound of a new generation"

(Hellmuth Karasek) to contemporary German literature. At first glance, this is a surprising finding since both narrate short stories that one could use as textbook examples of the genre. Insights into the emotional state of their characters are as sober as they are restrained; apparently neither of the authors is interested in trenchant psychological explanations but leaves it up to a critical reader to unearth them laboriously. The realism of the surfaces and the lack of psychologizing descriptions anchor this prose in the tradition of the (American) short story.

The distinct "sound," the aesthetic novelty that explains the attraction of this prose for its readers lies in the carefully measured dose of pop-cultural accessories that are sprinkled onto the texts. They lend the timeless realism a contemporary aura that provides the possibility of recognition: "We listened to Paolo Conte on Heinze's boom box, swallowed Ecstasy, and read aloud the best parts from Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*" (*Sommerhouse* 201). This strategy enables the reader to identify easily with the protagonists and their perspective on the surrounding world. Hermann in particular functionalizes music to convey a certain mood: "For every route Stein had a different kind of music: Ween for the smaller country roads, David Bowie for downtown Berlin, Bach for the avenues, Trans Am only for the autobahn." (188). These popcultural accessories serve to situate the text in a specific bohemian culture of the 1990s, just as much as the depiction of certain local scenes. This might also be the reason, together with the promiscuity and liberal drug use displayed in the texts, why critics marveled at the everyday experiences of the protagonists, which, as Burkhard Spinnen declared on the cover of *Sommerhaus, später*, seem "foreign and wondrous even to a forty year old." Whether or not this is true is inconsequential; nevertheless Franck and Hermann are representative of a new generation of writers who have introduced not one, but many "sounds" into contemporary German literature.

Thematically, the new element is not the depiction of gender relations per se, since there has always been a wide array of literary texts thematizing communication problems between the sexes. As this essay has shown, the important aspect is the writers'

attempt to identify gender-specific contrarities as social constructs, which ultimately leads to the relativization of gender differences and roles in their narratives. In this regard, *Bauchlandung* and *Sommerhaus, später* appear as products of a new, post-feminist generation that is motivated to portray relations between the sexes and between women more ironically and distantly than its predecessors.

Without wanting to encourage a biographical approach to the analyzed texts, it is important to note how much both authors base their material on their own reality of life. As members of a generation of writers born in the 1970s they did not experience first-hand the discrimination against women that other generations before them had to grapple with on a personal and social level. Instead, they profited from a liberalizing of gender roles, from which ensues a more ambiguous—and less political—attitude towards differences between the sexes. Such a modified consciousness is the framework within which not only Franck's and Hermann's literary contributions but also those of other female authors of the so-called "Generation X" are situated.

Chapter three of my dissertation *P(R)OSE@millenium.de: Modelle intellektueller Aktivität und Tendenzen der deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur in den 90er Jahren* (University of Washington, 2003) provided the basis for this article. I am indebted to the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach, Germany, for granting me a dissertation fellowship in summer 2001 and spring 2002, when the chapter on Hermann and Franck took shape. I also thank the members of the Graduate Student Writing Colloquium in the Department of Germanics at the University of Washington for their comments on an early draft of this essay, especially Viktoria Harms and Morgan Koerner, who helped me with the English translation.

## Notes

1 American soldiers coined the term "Fräuleinwunder" after 1945, thereby expressing their admiration for the women in postwar Germany. Since Hage's article, countless reviews in the "Feuilleton" sections used the word when dealing with female authors. The same

holds true for discussions on television. See for example “Das Fräuleinwunder. Reihe Literatur im Foyer. Discussion with Zoe Jenny, Felicitas Hoppe, Karen Duve et al.” June 24, 1999. Mainz: Südwestdeutscher Rundfunk. Hage followed up with a second article six months later in which he claimed that the term “Fräuleinwunder” had become “almost proverbial.” Volker Hage, “Die neuen deutschen Dichter.”

2 Critics have argued that Ingo Schulze’s novels *33 Augenblicke des Glücks. Aus den abenteuerlichen Aufzeichnungen der Deutschen in Piter*. Berlin: Berlin-Verlag, 1995 (*33 Moments of Happiness: St. Petersburg Stories*. New York: Knopf, 1998) and *Simple Storys*. Berlin: Berlin-Verlag, 1998 (*Simple Stories*. New York: Knopf, 2000) marked a turning point after which the traditionally less favored form of the short story became more popular with authors and publishers alike.

3 Hermann received the “Förderpreis des Bremer Literaturpreises” in January 1999, the Hugo Ball Prize of the city of Pirmasens in October 1999, and finally the prestigious Kleist Prize in November 2001. The jury at the Klagenfurter Tage der Literatur in 2000 awarded Franck the 3sat-Förderpreis for “Mir nichts, dir nichts,” the last story in *Bauchlandung*.

4 Other authors illustrating this phenomenon are Karen Duve, Tanja Dückers, Elke Naters, Maïke Wetzel, Christian Kracht, Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre and David Wagner.

5 Franck grew up and lived in the GDR until the age of nine, when the socialist administration granted her family an exit permit. After their time in a reception camp in West Berlin, they moved to Schleswig-Holstein. In 1982, Franck returned to West Berlin by herself, where she grew up with family friends and has remained ever since. See her essay on childhood in the GDR and her interview with the Berlin *Tagesspiegel*.

6 Franck appeared on the literary stage in 1997 with her novel *Der neue Koch*. With her second novel, *Liebediener* (Cologne: DuMont, 1999), she became known to a wider audience and received mostly positive reviews. This novel was translated into Italian and Dutch and, by August 2002, had appeared in four editions.

7 Good examples are “Zugfahrt,” “Schmeckt es euch nicht,” or “Mir nichts, dir nichts.”

8 The translations of Franck's stories from the German are my own. Quotes refer to the fourth edition and will appear with page reference after quotations.

9 "The adjectives [that help to illuminate the concept] include beautiful, erotic, seductive, destructive, exotic. To these we may add self-determined and independent. In addition, throughout the examples runs the theme of an indifferent and chilling remoteness from human feeling. [The femme fatale] is not only amorous and lovely, but indulges her sexuality without concern for her lover of the moment. . . ." Allen (1983), 4.

10 Cf. Freud's "Totem und Tabu" and Lévi-Strauss' *Die elementaren Strukturen der Verwandtschaft*.

11 At least in Freud, where female homosexuality means stalling at an early developmental stage instead of developing a "mature femininity." "Über die Psychogenese eines Falles von weiblicher Homosexualität [1920]."

12 The fact that the narrator acts consciously out of her own free will sets Franck's depiction of sexuality apart from other examples of incestuous desire. Cf. Kolesch (1996), 82.

13 Franck comments on the irritation that her depictions cause, particularly among female readers: "While a female reader looks for the 'other' in a book by a male author, she looks for herself or an ideal of her female self in the book of a female writer. Sometimes it seems to me that the literary depiction of a woman who does not live up to moral or emancipated ideals is perceived as being offensive. A female reader of my books might be disappointed if she hopes for a 'heroine'—her own expectations might hurt or humiliate her. I do believe indeed in heroic acts, but not in heroes, therefore I cannot invent any." "Ich glaube an Heldentaten" (2000).

14 My transcription of a television interview, in which Franck talks about her biography, Berlin, poetics, and women's literature. "Alpha-Forum" (2000).

15 "Die meisten Menschen sind im Grundverhältnis zu sich selbst Erzähler. . . sie lieben das ordentliche Nebeneinander von Tatsachen, weil es einer Notwendigkeit gleichsieht, und fühlen sich durch den Eindruck, daß ihr Leben einen 'Lauf' habe, irgendwie im Chaos geborgen." ("Most people relate to themselves as storytellers. . . they

love the orderly sequence of facts because it has the look of necessity, and the impression that their life has a 'course' is somehow their refuge from chaos.") Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Qualities*), 650.

16 *Sommerhaus, später* was Hermann's first publication. The extraordinarily successful book made her an overnight star when it was published in 1998 and received extremely positive reviews. After nine months, the collection had appeared in ten editions and has sold over 250,000 copies by now. These numbers were unheard of for a debut. In February 2003, Hermann published another collection of stories with Suhrkamp called *Nichts als Gespenster*, which has been tremendously successful as well.

17 Quotes follow Margot Bettauer Dembo's translation.

18 "After all it is my cosmos, my world. I did write about a few friends, and myself, and I really cannot say that I constantly live my life in a somnambulist, sad, and exhausted fashion. And I do live similarly to my characters." Claussen (1999), 193.

19 Another literary example illustrating this phenomenon is Tanja Dücker's novel *Spielzone* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1999). Following the principle of montage, Dücker drafts a picture of Berlin's local scenes, grouped around Thomasstrasse in Neukölln and Sonnenburgerstraße in Prenzlauer Berg. She portrays a multitude of subcultures, which unfold before the reader as a kaleidoscope of the characters' lives, their relationships, and (sexual) preferences.

20 Hermann's aesthetic program is to keep emotions open, to convey an idea of something without having to express it: "When things are defined, they end: This applies to [my writing] or my life." Lenz and Pütz (2000), 232.

21 "Growing program pamphlets, calendars of events that get out of hand, an increasing festival tourism, boom of the multiplex cinemas, erotic fairs, car shows, poetry readings: More events per time unit, wherever one looks." Schulze (1999). 81-82, 80.

22 "Fräuleinwunder." *Frankfurter Rundschau* 22 April 1999, 10.

23 Starting in the eighteenth century and then especially in the Freudian succession, women experience their gender identity as pathological through the discourse that draws a parallel between hysteria and femininity. Hermann (1999).

24 Cf. Walter Benjamin: "Die Entschälung des Gegenstandes aus seiner Hülle, die Zertrümmerung der Aura, ist die Signatur einer Wahrnehmung, deren 'Sinn für das Gleichartige in der Welt' so gewachsen ist, daß sie es mittels der Reproduktion auch dem Einmaligen abgewinnt." ("To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction.") *Kunstwerk (Work of Art)*, 143.

25 Critics commented repeatedly on the consistently laconic narrative tone and a certain redundancy of themes. Cf. Berthold (2000) and Stopka (2001).

26 When asked in a television interview if her texts were "love stories," Hermann answered: "[They] are more about a certain form of speechlessness, or about the impossibility of a lasting encounter. . . . The protagonists meet briefly, only to part again. This might not even have to do with love; it is the form of interpersonal communication that I experience." My transcription of *Bestenliste*.

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