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GERMANY: ALLEGORY OF THE UNMOURNABLE

Rickels, Laurence A. *Germany: A Science Fiction*. Fort Wayne, Indiana: Anti-Oedipus Press, 2015. 274 pages. Cloth: \$29.95. Paperback: \$14.95. Kindle: \$9.95.

In the most straightforward, chronological sense, *Germany: A Science Fiction*, Laurence Rickels' latest installment in his fascinating career-long Frankfurt School-inspired media genealogy of twentieth-century, western fantasies of death and Un-life, picks up where his last book, *SPECTRE* (also published by Anti-Oedipus), left off. By following the blood-spattered trail of mass cultural fantasies of spectacular violence and psychopathy in Ian Fleming's Cold War fiction, *SPECTRE* set the scene for a more general assessment of postwar sci-fi. But, in other ways, Rickels' current work repeats departures from earlier in his career. Slightly less obviously, it represents a sequel both to his Philip K. Dick study *I Think I Am* (continuing commentary on Dick works like *Ubik*, *The Man from the High Castle*, and *The Martian Time Slip*) and *Nazi Psychoanalysis*, in terms of its Cold War extension of certain intra- as well as inter-psychical (as well as intra- and inter-national) projections that have a substantial symbolic and cultural basis in the legacy of Germany in the aftermath of the war. In this sense, it also pushes forward the agenda of Theodor Adorno's observation (after Leo Löwenthal) that fascism, as well as the fascist imaginary of the American culture industry, is "psychoanalysis in reverse" (Adorno 166) which Rickels' *Nazi Psychoanalysis* attempted to re-shift back into the drive of a

psychoanalytic interpretative framework. Finally, sharing with *The Case of California* the titular promise of access to the concept of the place as the phantom double of the place itself, as in the sense of a 'haunt' or haunting, *Germany* also, under cover of this casework, concerns the study of what has most consistently and insistently come up for study in his corpus since *Aberrations of Mourning*: the means by which, at the limits of psychopathology, the analysis of cultural fantasy can reveal the secrets of mourning, most particularly, the question of art's capacity for it, granted the conditions of historical trauma and its violent recurrences.

For clarification purposes it should be said that, despite the title, *Germany: A Science Fiction* is not primarily about German science fiction, a fact that may cause some initial disorientation among literally minded readers. It concerns as much the postwar legacy of 'Germany'—Germany the phantom projection—in its English language reception or translation, as it does any native product of her soil. But some projections are too big to fail to be real: in the course of Rickels' studies of science fiction in cultural productions all along the spread of high, low, and middlebrow, he follows the path of a traumatic wound that won't stop (not) writing itself, that of the war's catastrophic recent past that postwar science fiction attempts to escape, overcome, or reflexively absorb.

*Germany* gives us a good case of this: the signifier 'Psycho' in action, horror, and science fiction genres. The Psycho, which condenses the pop-psychological profile of psychopathy with psychosis, with, in more generalized form, the monstrous 'madness' of psychopathology itself, is a contemporary shibboleth for radical evil. But it is not, for all that, merely a replica of the Devil. According to D.W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic studies of delinquency and the antisocial tendency, psychopathy (what psychiatric nosologies called the 'antisocial character') was a pathological formation whose structure was explicable when situated in the context of the Freudian theory of adolescent psychology. With the recrudescence of sexuality in adolescence, the eroticism that had become repressed during the latency period of childhood returns with all the turbulence of its complex attempts to negotiate the social network of its inauguration into adulthood. The psychopath is the stand-alone misfit who cannot integrate into the libidinal matrix of a group network but comes to embody the traits of the group performatively and projectively. To a certain degree, every teenager is an 'antisocial character,' performatively registering the social by means of a resistance both

inimical and integral to its smooth functioning.

But, as Rickels repeatedly showcases in his readings, the psychopath is committed to his own, solipsistic enjoyment only apparently: behind the scenes, it is the desire of the normative social order as a group-formation (which for Rickels is always adolescent in constitution) that compels his violent acts. Contrary to the prevailing psychiatric notions concerning criminal psychology, it is not the absence of the morality-laden superego but the moral dimension in its most exacerbated form that drives the psychopathic character. Hence the apparently paradoxical formulation Winnicott gives of the juvenile delinquent as performing, precisely through his violent pranks and actings-out, a symbolized hope for the return of the lost object, as if in anticipation of a strong moral leader-type figure who could annul his profound deprivation (Winnicott 309). The connection between this psychopathological 'character' (which began to be considered by psychoanalysts as a non-neurotic pathology shortly after WWII) and fascism is more than apparent, as Rickels attempts to show through readings of key science fiction literature and cinema, such as in the work of Dick (e.g., *The Man in the High Castle*, an alternate history where the Nazis won and psychopathy is the norm), Wernher van Braun (the former Nazi rocket scientist turned influential American aerospace engineer who dabbled in science fiction about rocket travel to other worlds as fetish-fantasies that forwarded to the American future the reversal of Germany's losses in the war), and in films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (exploring the dehumanized 'blank' stare of doubling, as in the psychopath). It could be said that each of the fictions in Rickels' treatment presents an allegorizing logic meant to contain the disaster of the failure to mourn. In two senses: of the 'disaster' in and as the repeated failure of mourning, and of the disastrous *real of mourning as failure*, a constitutively impossible obstacle to mourning's ownmost possibility. Rickels is as unequivocal as Sigmund Freud in this regard: because death is, for the unconscious, an impossibility, it is always and again in the context of the encounter of mourning that this impossibility is repeatedly staged, as both the limit and condition of possibility of subjectivity. Death is, at closest approximation, an endopsychic allegory.

For Rickels, Walter Benjamin's concept of allegory and Freud's term for the inside-out projection of the unconscious, the "endopsychic perception" (Freud 258-9), are deeply compatible: in either case, we are dealing with sublimation that features an

autoanalytic component. As in Schreber's delusional system or in Freud's writings on animism, the very logic of the exteriorization of the unconscious necessarily involves the possibility of its reversal or retracing as a self-critical movement.<sup>1</sup> For Benjamin, as well as for subsequent appreciators of his theory like Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, this is the abyssal ground of allegory, the conditions of its interminable reproducibility *and* decomposition. What Rickels theorizes as what he calls "endopsychic allegory" is thus a way of thinking about the way psychoanalytic criticism can be done.<sup>2</sup> For Rickels it is analogous to the specific concentration of psychical labor that is proper to psychoanalysis, as in the working-through of a memory or the work of mourning.

A minor point made in passing about the legacy of another former Axis power illustrates the advantages of Rickels' approach.

Regarding the coverage of Fukushima, a Japanese colleague living in Berlin argued that the notion of "catastrophe" was not available to her culture. The simple but subtle correction gives a clue to the intense beauty of the rolling destruction in Honda's original *Godzilla* (1954). The atom bombing happens to recur without end. If crisis were not an opportunity for turning back and around, it wouldn't be such a rallying point for the Western mind. In the absence of repentance, however, even the perspective that builds on catastrophe cannot bestow a turning point to the spread of *Godzilla's* atomic breath/death. (182-183)

Like the Japanese colleague's corrective, the point Rickels subsequently makes, for all that's spectacular about its sensational content, also gives us a "simple but subtle" alteration of perspective regarding the history-wide Western relation to death, namely that it's hung up on the tendency to presuppose the radical possibility of 'undoing' the catastrophe it also sponsors. Rickels quietly points out that it is a vain fantasy; "the atom bombing happens to recur without end." But this is not a text that lingers in the languor of despair (the easy way out of decadent neoliberal nihilism or scholarly melancholia); this impossible fantasy of turning around from the catastrophe that has already happened is, as in the case of its Benjaminian provenance, ultimately the refuge of the perspective that harbors the radical possibility of the New as an unheard-of alternate scene of history. In this sense, Rickels' work continues to

seek where it cannot help but find, to our uncanny bewilderment and edification, the catastrophe in our midst.

#### NOTES

1. See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (1913), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIII, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1960), p. 91 note, and Freud's account of the function of delusional projection as an attempt at therapeutic recovery from catastrophic loss in Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* in "Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)" (1911), in *The Standard Edition*, Vol. XII, pp. 70-71.

2. See Laurence A. Rickels, *I Think I Am: Philip K. Dick* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010), 19-45.

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