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## Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen 2018 – New Perspectives on Christian Kracht’s Work?

15./19./22. May 2018, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt

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## Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen 2018 – New Perspectives on Christian Kracht’s Work?

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In 2018, the *Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen* (lectures on poetics) experienced a highlight in their history. Swiss author Christian Kracht, who is known for his reticence to appear in public, was announced to hold the lectures. He rarely gives interviews and does not speak extensively about his work, which has received diverse critical attention, reaching from praise for intertextual density to the reproach of containing fascist ideas. Kracht has never commented on either of these in the past years. Expectations for the lecture series on 15th, 19th and 22nd May 2018 included that he might just not turn up or keep standing in front of the audience, saying nothing. Things went differently, but were no less impressive.

The auditorium was almost full, but there were still places left for the first of the three appointed lectures. Kracht arrives, wearing his well-known parka and a woolen scarf, as if it were a cold and rainy autumn day (it is actually warm and sunny outside). A projection shows a photograph taken by his wife Frauke Finsterwalder, which he will later refer to as “Knausgårdesk” and a comprehensible reason for people not to attend the lecture. The press takes photographs of him standing at the lectern – Kracht seems uncomfortable. The audience observes the scene, still waiting for their moment of uncomfortableness, which is to happen soon enough.

Kracht starts his lecture by provoking laughter in the audience by referring to his missing talent as a writer and to not being able to speak but rather read out the lecture’s text, because he perceives himself speaking the way an “autistic infant” would. He then starts to talk about his boarding school experiences in Canada. As a small, rather chubby child with blond hair and Swiss origin, he narrates, his fellow students call him “Heidi” (audience laughs again). No more laughter is heard as soon as Kracht starts to explain how in late 2017, during the Weinstein affair, he became aware that his perception of abuse as a child by the school’s reverend, Keith Glead, was actually not invented by him (as he had believed for a period of 40 years). During the rest of the lectures, Kracht will come back to analyzing how this traumatic childhood event has shaped his writing. As the most literal

example, he refers to having included the very name of Gleed and a description of the scene of abuse in his 2008 novel *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* (*I Will Be Here in Sunshine and in Shadow*, not available English translation so far), when the protagonist remembers his childhood. Perhaps as a direct result, the first lecture has received more attention by the press than any complete series of the *Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen* held between 2001 and 2015 (cf. Dürr, Claudia. “Dabeisein ändert alles? Die Aufregung um Christian Krachts Poetikvorlesung in der Mediennachlese.” <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/dabeisein-aendert-alles>, 15.07.2018, accessed 28.11.2018).

In introducing Kracht to the audience, Prof. Susanne Komfort-Hein (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt) had emphasized the “Vorbehaltlichkeit” of Kracht’s work, how it can be perceived from many different angles and how it challenges its readers, oscillating between fact and fiction as well as between aesthetics and politics. With his lecture, as the panorama of reviews shows, Kracht poses the same challenge to the audience.

Most journalists use the shocking content of Kracht’s report as the main topic of their texts. Some use quotes or paraphrases from the lecture as headings. And some of the reviews ask whether Kracht’s account of abuse can be trusted to be true: it has been suggested that we have to be “careful” in believing him. This is certainly a result of the perception of Kracht as an author who likes to challenge his readers, of an author whose works have been read as putting first emphasis on aesthetics and intertextual play, resulting in some interpretations of his texts which only marginally touch on the political aspects they entail. Again, in this lecture, the words he forms into sentences to tell these terrible events create a distance, an aesthetic barrier. Is this the reason for which the factuality of the account of abuse is questioned – the reason for which it is suspected to be a radical play with the audience?

Aesthetics and politics as well as their staging are densely intertwined in Kracht’s work, and his *Poetikvorlesung* follows this pattern. For us, the audience, it is a narration of a memory that he says he has of his childhood, which we may believe (why shouldn’t we?) or not believe (why should we?). It is our decision, which will be framed and influenced by all the ‘truths’ and ‘lies’ and other kinds of perception we have had of the author that linger as preconditions and connotations. But since he has stated it, it is in the world and we have no choice but to deal with it in some way. We can decide to believe or not to believe – but each decision puts us in danger: the danger of being guilty of naivety, on the one hand, and the danger of playing down the confession of a major act of violence towards a child, on the other. It is exactly the creation of such dilemmas that is also characteristic of Kracht’s novels.

Whether Kracht has deliberately chosen to confront the audience with this difficult decision and if he wants it to be understood as his exclamation of #metoo or not remains unclear – at least he refers to the debate by mentioning the Weinstein case. The doubts about the truthfulness already point out another level of discourse connected to accounts of abuse (not only by or of people who ‘enjoy’ broad public attention).

The journalists present at the first lecture therefore had a massive responsibility to deal with, since recordings of the lecture were not allowed (the magazine *Der Spiegel* was even commanded to take long quotes from the lecture off their website, cf. Claudia Dürr). They were the ones to report to the public, they were the first ones who had to decide – at least how to present the lecture in writing. Claudia Dürr suggests a productive way of coping with this task: she recommends the audience accept the whole picture in all its complexity between the account of abuse, conventions of the genre of *Poetikvorlesung*, the happening or event characteristic of the staging, and the ban on quoting longer parts of the lecture. Only then, she suggests, can we decide which role we want to take, how we want to talk about what happened in the auditorium of Goethe University.

What else does Kracht see as having influenced his writing? Literature, of course: Thomas Mann, Simmel, Stanislaw Lem, Dos Passos, García-Marquez, Tolkien, Le Guin, Pynchon, W.G. Sebald, T.S. Eliot, and Allen Ginsberg, among others, and US-American television series: *Star Trek*, *Flipper*, *Lassie*, *Bonanza*, and many more. For each of his three latest novels he names two authors who have served as inspiration: Yukio Mishima and Georges Batailles for *Die Toten* (The Dead), Erich Kästner and Thomas Mann for *Imperium*, and H.P. Lovecraft and Philip K. Dick for *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten*. Another influence, as the lecture series’ title suggests: “Emigration”. After having traveled and lived in diverse parts of the world, Kracht currently lives in California. It is a place in the world, he says, from which he can deal with “Adolf Eichmann’s language” from a distance and through the words and works of writers and artists. Kracht narrates that he has even tried to adopt English as his language for writing in order to escape German, but without success.

What he strives to include in his writing, Kracht explains in the second lecture, is what he calls “kognitive Dissonanz” (cognitive dissonance), by which he refers to elements in cultural artefacts that point to a meta-level of the narration. Elements which are meant to shift patterns of perception, which create an overlapping and blurring of things perceived, such as one pair of Converse in an otherwise historically authentic film about *Marie Antoinette* (the one by Sofia Coppola). Kracht refers to another example from his work, which has also been noted by Christoph Kleinschmidt: the sentence “Auf dem Bild regnete es, oder es regnete nicht” in *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* (Köln 2008, p. 46) seems out of place at first, but at the same time it is an allusion to Wittgenstein and a problem

in the philosophy of language (cf. Christoph Kleinschmidt: “Von Zerrspiegeln, Möbius-Schleifen und Ordnungen des Déjà-vu. Techniken des Erzählens in den Romanen Christian Krachts.” In: Id. (Ed.). *Text und Kritik Heft 216: Christian Kracht*. München 2017, p. 51; id.: “‘Auf dem Bild regnete es, oder es regnete nicht.’ Christian Krachts *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* als literarische Welterschließung im Zeichen der Sprachlogik Wittgensteins.” In: Stefan Bronner, Björn Weyand (Ed.). *Christian Krachts Weltliteratur. Eine Topographie*. Berlin 2018, p. 173-185.).

Kracht starts the third lecture with a reading of an early review of his debut novel *Faserland*. The audience and then Kracht himself laugh at the fierce wording of the text which makes clear that its author disliked the novel – mostly because of its dandyish protagonist and narrator. For the first time, Kracht explicitly defends himself against the manifold ‘misreadings’ of his work, also complaining that he does not understand why an author should not be a shy person at the same time.

Many voices suggested that Kracht’s research from now on must distinguish between pre- and post-Frankfurt readings of this corpus because of the revelation of the abuse (cf. Beate Tröger in *Der Freitag*, Kevin Kempke and Miriam Zeh in *Der Merkur*). Christoph Schröder of *Die Zeit* suggests another perspective: While Kracht’s revelation of a biographical motivation might add meaning to his texts for an audience on the surface, he might have also secured freedom for himself as a writer by speaking up. Christoph Schröder (in *Die Zeit*) has described the genre of the *Poetikvorlesung* (established in 1959 in Frankfurt) as a non-academic ritual taking place in an academic space, as authors are supposed to read their own work from a biographical perspective – which has been detested for decades in literature studies (cf. Christoph Schröder: “Flucht in die Offenbarung.” In: *Zeit Online*. <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/literatur/2018-05/christian-kracht-vorlesung-frankfurt-abschluss>, 23. May 2018, accessed 28.11.2018). Kracht fulfills the standards; Schröder has even suggested that this hasn’t been done in such a conventional way in a long time. But Kracht also refers to the genre explicitly and suggests that everything that takes itself too seriously is open to being parodied – such as the *Poetikvorlesungen*. And parody, he states, can be a cure for abuse. At the concluding reading at the Literaturhaus Frankfurt on 23rd May, it seems as if nothing happened: he reads without pause from *Die Toten*, no questions invited, no discussion.

Ijoma Mangold of *Die Zeit* summarizes: “Das ist Christian Kracht in Reinform: Pose, Exzentrik, heiliger Ernst und existenzielle Verletzung relativieren sich nicht, sondern steigern sich aneinander” (Mangold, Ijoma. “‘Das hast du dir eingebildet.’” In: *Die Zeit* 22/2018, 24.05.2018, p. 35. “This is Christian Kracht at his best: pose, eccentricity, holy seriousness and existential offense at the same time, which in their combination grow stronger together instead of putting each other into question”, my translation). This effect is a challenge for the audience, because it allows for complexity and because we are asked

to decide and take a position. And this is the reason why Kracht's literary voice, on full display even in his lectures, is one of the most important of our time.

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