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# ÉMIGRÉS AND INVADERS: LAURENCE RICKELS INTERVIEWED BY JAMES REICH

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LAURENCE A. RICKELS



GERMANY  
A SCIENCE FICTION

Laurence Rickels is our foremost analyst of popular culture's repressed content, the sublimated presence of an uncanny canon of anti-classics that haunts our scene, in B-movies, in exploitation narratives, science fiction, camp, highly stylized and hysterical productions at the seam of juvenilia, trash, and high conceptual art. This methodology was developed at University of California, Santa Barbara, where he taught comparative literature, German, and film classes, and continues at the European Graduate School where he is Sigmund Freud Chair and Professor of Psychoanalysis. Where his parallel contemporary Slavoj Žižek's deconstructions have focused on blockbuster surface products, Rickels has taken his own analysis deeper, in eclectic case studies from Ed Wood Jr.'s *Glen or Glenda*, Andy Warhol's *Frankenstein*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and *Bambi*, to Thomas Pynchon, *The Devil*, and Philip K. Dick. The science fiction writer was to become Rickels' Daniel Paul Schreber in the definitive study *I Think I Am Philip K. Dick* (2010). However, it was the earlier work *The Case of California* (1991) that established his central thesis: *Germanicity*, or the latent German content in American pop culture, particularly in its Californian productions, the unconscious manifestations of this intercourse, and the aesthetics and anxieties born of these.

One of less than eight thousand inhabitants of Cherokee, Iowa at the time of his birth in 1954, Laurence Rickels was not yet a year old when James Dean's Porsche Spyder collided with Donald Turnupseed's Ford Tudor in California, killing the twenty-four-year-old actor. Dean's melancholy, provocative performances are, of course, vital to the commercial, pop cultural construct of youth, delinquency, and the nascent/permanent teenager. But Dean's death in September 1955, after the release of *East of Eden*, but before the release of *Rebel Without a Cause*, is also one junction in the greater history interrupted/suspended youth visible in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) or in the eighteenth century figure of Thomas Chatterton where Romantic adolescence gained its first poster-boys and copy cats. In the passenger seat of James Dean's German sports car was sometime Luftwaffe pilot Rolf Wütherich, who survived, violently ejected -or perhaps abjected- from the vehicle...

Both of us, in several senses, émigrés and invaders, Laurence Rickels and I appeared together at City Lights Bookstore in 2015 upon the release of his most recent book, *Germany: A Science Fiction* (<http://amzn.com/0990573338>) (Anti-Oedipus Press) We talked about the construction and suspension of adolescence and youth, V-2 rockets, the presence of Nazi scientists and projections of science fiction on the West Coast. This interview is an extension of that conversation.

**JAMESREICH:** *When we were together in San Francisco, you mentioned that you felt*

*that your own adolescence had been postponed, somehow. Would you care to elaborate on that? How does your current work reclaim adolescence?*

**LAURENCE RICKELS:** My students at the Academy of Fine Arts Karlsruhe have seen the occasional blockbuster movie but were never on a steady drip of B-pictures, as were my students in California when, beginning in the 1980s, I worked to get what interested me the most, psychoanalysis, across. I developed a style of instruction that relied on clips from B-movies, souvenir-prompts for the students who were fluent in the local products of the commercial film industry. Since I was new to the group or adolescent culture of the movies, the clips were for me triggers to interpret on the spot and thus introduce my spontaneous self into the lectures. When I imported this style to Germany, the students were alienated, fragmented, and confused by the film clips, which did not function for them as souvenirs or metonymies. So I began showing at the start of the 4 hour lecture-cum-seminar an entire film so we could be on the “same page.” That worked. When I told this story of my pedagogical readjustment to Katy Schimert, a New York artist whom I met, however, during her stint as instructor in Santa Barbara, she responded: Maybe your new students have whole experiences. What I’m trying to say is that maybe European identification in the States (which was my destiny), at least from the 1950s through the 70s, blocked access to local cultures of adolescence. It was as another “émigré” in California that I commenced catching up with my deferred (and protracted) adolescence.

Because I entered upon schooling a year early, I was by the start of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade the still prepubescent witness to the onset of puberty in my classmates. That experience can be fixating: in some sense I am always this witness as I contemplate and study adolescence. Fellow theorists of the Teen Age (like Larry Clark and Mike Kelley), or for that matter like those sexually attracted to young boys close to the cusp of pubescence (Michael Jackson and Oscar Wilde), came to their topic of interest through some manner of prematurity, exclusion, and delay.

When I was in fact a teenager, the secondary school I attended was ratcheted up the developmental scale into another college campus through the anti-war movement – and undocked from “High School.” Following my European destiny, however, I didn’t identify as Hippy but instead as Marxist – and joined the Communist Party of Western Pennsylvania (the only local chapter and no doubt an FBI mail drop). For the duration of this season of change, my fellow students, too, were interested in upper-middlebrow films (in which Hollywood excelled for a season extending into the 1970s) and exponents of European art cinema. My senior year I even made a short movie, *The Great Pancake Race*, which was my homage to Fellini – and, it seems to me now, my first (albeit unconscious) study of

group or adolescent psychology. In *Germany: A Science Fiction* I was given the opportunity to interpret more fully (or slo mo) the teen staple of Cold War sci-fi, which I instrumentalized at a fast clip for my Santa Barbara scene of instruction beginning in the 1980s.

**REICH:** *Can you describe the first occurrence of Germanicity in your thought? When did you know that it would become a dominant theme?*

**RICKELS:** Via a college exchange program I went to study in West Berlin. I went as an English major and returned a Germanist. I mainly attended lectures and classes in philosophy and religious studies while at the Free University, but took exams in German philology so I would have something to transfer back in the States. However, the whole layout of my studies in Germany seemed a fit with the modern history of German letters, which did not observe the boundaries between disciplines. Back then there wasn't any idea yet of interdisciplinary study in the States and to major in English literature meant to marry a century, a genre, and an author – and to forsake all others.

However, my research interest in Germanicity commenced upon my move to California. *The Case of California* is the work of ambivalence that I had to erect upon my outright alienation as foreign body on the Coast. I was reading the Frankfurt School philosophers since my time in West Berlin. What came first in my reading, the history of the émigré response to California or my own recognition of the idealism that messed up the advertised sensuality of its beach culture (about as sexy as a German nudist colony)? When I confronted the smiley, or rather my inability to identify with its happy face, I remembered what Nietzsche wrote about the Archaic Greek smile and the suicidal depression it masked. I was thrown back upon Goethe's *Werther*, which I suddenly recognized as the Bible of the invention of adolescence in the hot spot of identification unto doubling or suicide (which the novel's first reception acted out). I began reading German culture through California, which has become by now the signature of my thought.

**REICH:** *When William Gibson describes "ray gun gothic" as a style, a camp futurist art nouveau, he is certainly describing a significant aspect of modernist American design (cars, diners, hotels) where science fiction was a latent presence. Germany: A Science Fiction continues your work in revealing the ways in which European futurism was a latent/unconscious presence in Californian culture, even as a sublimated Nazi presence... Thinking of the American fixation on the 'alien' and 'enemies within', is there an unconscious desire for invasion in America?*

**RICKELS:** We first met in the lobby of my SF (San Francisco) Marriott Hotel, which was Reagan-Gothic, the 1980s revival of art deco. Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, arguably the highpoint of German science fiction (alongside Lang's *Woman in the Moon*), styles with a fantastically amplified art deco. When the Nazis carried sci-fi forward unto realization, the focus was on certain techno-mass-psychological features, like the robotic double and the rocket, but not so much on the look of *Metropolis*. Of course Nazi design and architecture amounted to a specialized version of or alternative to international art deco, but not recognizably related to anything on the Lang film sets (other than the stadium in the pleasure garden of *Metropolis* where the privileged teenagers hang and work out). The iconic "Metropolis" look came back in the 1980s, in *Blade Runner*, in music videos, in architectural design and interior decoration, in the redesign of Disneyland's Tomorrowland, and in the gentrification of Manhattan. From that point of return onward, the art direction in SF movies alternates between James Bond 1950s-60s modernism and "Metropolis" (Lang's fantasy-elaboration of his first view of Manhattan from the ocean liner).

If the desire for invasion is U.S. it is the desire that comes complete with the routing of the Nazi menace. This is the crux and consequence of US WWII propaganda. Violated losers rally to face an insurmountable foe and, against all odds, prevail. To win as losers means not to be Nazi (by definition the condition of winning as winner, unstoppably winning). It is imperative that we not be Nazi. All the horror films based on Ed Gein, whose styling with corpses was inspired by sensational accounts of camp commandant Ilse Koch's predilections, refer to the unthinkable horror that the Nazi symptom could emerge in the very heartland of America. The imperative, however, keeps the Nazi threat active. From the US perspective the Nazi symptom lurks in every threat to "national security." The only way losers can win over professional winners/fighters is to fight to the death. The heroism of US citizens in combatting terrorists, up in the air or on the train to London, derives from this license to kill. The psychological significance of capital punishment in the US fits in here. In Germany today you would be charged with murder if you went beyond stopping a criminal assailant and fought him instead to the death. But a loser can only defeat a winner by killing him.

**REICH:** *You've also identified your own sense of alienage within that landscape in terms of geography and sexuality. How important is that sense of alienage, even performance and slippage of identity, of play within your daily existence? And how do the environments of Berlin and California affect this?*

**RICKELS:** It is crucial to relate ambivalently (with criticism and affirmation) to one's environment, at once the delegation of one's home and the ongoing test situation. Following my three semesters in West Berlin I was able to entertain ambivalent relations with German culture. When I arrived in California, the culture shock was such that I knew I needed an immunizing dose of ambivalence. It followed that I borrowed from my earlier rescue assignment (and I was, after all, professor of German literature at UC Santa Barbara) for the new on-location construction.

*The Case of California* has been misrepresented as equating California and Nazi Germany. It's true that the Frankfurt School revamped critical theory via a closer look at the Californian culture industry, which it recognized as the continuation of the "reversal of psychoanalysis" basic to National Socialism. Importantly, psychoanalysis mediates the so-called equation. If the Nazi symptom was seen to wash up onto the twentieth century's other coast, then the compacting of adolescence in the Third Reich between childhood and young-adult heroism broke upon an open future, the future of an experiment that is still on. The misapprehension of *The Case of California* blocks from view its critical reconstruction of a psychoanalysis-compatible theory and genealogy of adolescence ("the Teen Age").

Adolescence suggests hope. My culture shock was provoked by the midlifers who were still teenagers. The age-appropriate teen is imbued with promise: time is on his side. But if he only ages then he has failed forever. Adolescence is an experiment that must fail in one's own lifetime – which is why we enter adulthood and opt for various kinds of staying power over prematurity. We could remain teens forever without the failure in our faces only if technology replaced aging with cloning, reproduction with replication, and wisdom with time travel.

Already in the third volume of *Nazi Psychoanalysis* I wrote about ancestral science fiction (by Laßwitz, Verne, and Wells) and the science fiction written in the 1930s and 40s, notably in Germany. In my lecture class at UC Santa Barbara, "Psy Fi: German Science Fiction," I enjoyed juxtaposing the psychoanalysis of psychosis with clips from Cold War SF movies. In *Germany: A Science Fiction* I return to "California" to catch up with the 1950s teen-dating staple. The B-literature of Heinlein and company is also investigated in its proximity to the unconscious. One recurring complex I attend to here is the repression of the V-2 rocket. In these science fictions what is bottom line is, one, atomic power and, two, the psycho-genealogical momentum the Civil War supplied as lost war and cause to be carried forward. Thus US science fiction outflies German cryptofetishism, which ultimately lost its lost cause the second time around. I analyze the history-

wide identification with lost causes via *Macbeth* (and Freud's reading of those "wrecked by success") all the way back to the Trojan War (in its role as Rome's Greek-free origin-story).

When I decided to switch coasts in 2011 it wasn't so farfetched to recognize a psychoanalytic opportunity for reckoning with denial. From the Anglo-American perspective the jury is still out in the case against Germany. Fact is that Germany has been a major part of the world economy and its politics since the start of the Cold War. The integration I write about has been underway (and denied) for many decades. Philip K. Dick's *The Simulacra* saw clearly what was otherwise denied: the future state USEA, the union of the United States (really California) and Germany in which Israel is the silent partner, is the clear-text of the Cold War, which otherwise kept the recent past in deep freeze through the oppositional staging of its world conflict. That what's left in the meantime is an ongoing Middle East crisis is at least closer to the truth.

In Dick's science fiction the traumatic history in the recent past is represented by a new problem, that of the psychopath (or android) in our midst. The psychopath is untreatable, unreachable, and inconceivable – is the embodied failure of interpretation for every discipline of psychological assessment. The imperative not to be Nazi becomes the imperative not to go psycho. The psycho is our dread double at close quarters. In the language of object relations: there but for the grace of the good object go I. The doubling commences in adolescence, where various measures taken to feel real, acting out and so on, are akin to psychopathy. There is however a cure for adolescence, namely the passage of time. Hence adolescence figures as inoculum against the society-wide problem or prospect of our psycho-doubling. In the course of adolescence, the wish that parental guidance be gone at a time when the expiration date is already upon the parents and one's own ability to fulfill death wishes is full grown leads to the onset of the ability to mourn. Winnicott argued that Nazi Germany solved the problem of adolescence by turning the teen into the cultural superego. Adolescence, which had always been submitted to the control release of preparation for war, was completely elided in the march to total war. The child is the father of the fighting man. The between state of adolescence is eliminated. According to Winnicott the Nazi young adult thus skipped the death-wish static otherwise so formative and entered instead a wary state in which the menace to be addressed comes not from the older generation but from one's peers or siblings (the paranoid state of Big Brother). In *Germany: A Science Fiction* the psychoanalysis-compatible illumination of the Teen Age, its philosophy and genealogy, attends my reading of the main topic: the post-WWII integration of Germany.



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