

Contextualizing Ideological and Aesthetic Identities in the Contemporary Right Wing

A Study of Andres Veiel's *Der Kick: Ein Lehrstück über Gewalt*

JASMINE JACKSON-IRWIN*

Part journalism, part memoir, and entirely non-fiction, Andres Veiel's *Der Kick: Ein Lehrstück über Gewalt* (2008), details the murder of Marinus Schöberl at the hand of two young right wing sympathizers, Marco and Marcel Schönfeld. Originally a documentary filmmaker, Veiel composed *Der Kick* after extensive research of Marinus' murder, including interviews with family members of both the victim and perpetrators, and a review of records associated with the case. Veiel offers readers a brief synopsis of *Der Kick* in the opening pages of the text:

In der Nacht zum 13. Juli 2002 wurde der sechzehnjährige Marinus Schöberl von dem Brüderpaar Marco (dreiundzwanzig) und Marcel Schönfeld (siebzehn) sowie ihrem Kumpel Sebastian Fink (siebzehn) grausam misshandelt und schließlich von Marcel Schönfeld nach dem Vorbild des Bordsteinkicks aus dem Film »American History X« umgebracht. Obwohl es Zeugen und Mitwisser gab, blieb die Tat monatelang unentdeckt.¹

Through a clear and concise narrative recounting Marinus' murder, along with an in-depth examination of Potzlow, the rural, working class community in former East Germany (approximately 100 kilometers northeast of Berlin) where the crime occurred, *Der Kick* demonstrates the tangible impact of right wing ideologies on youth.

Given the distinct setting and circumstance of the narrative, the text possesses a unique ability to teach through an explicit example, not experience, of brutality. Moreover, the text grants readers insight into how right wing individuals and groups manifest their identities in distinctly intellectual or physical capacities. Both Marco and Marcel fail to engage with, or even understand, the

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1 | Andreas Veiel: *Der Kick: Ein Lehrstück über Gewalt*. München 2008, S. 10. Henceforth citations of this text will be given parenthetically.

political ideologies at the core of the right wing movement, and consequently craft an identity centered around superficial elements of the movement, such as their physical appearance and behavior. Although participation in the right wing movement may indicate a sort of political engagement, the Schönfeld brothers prove that some participants have little investment in politics, preferring instead to focus on the social and cultural experiences of belonging to the right wing.

The question of national identity and what it means to look, think, and act ›German,‹ pervades contemporary Germany. Part of the discussion surrounding the question of identity wonders whether Germans can be proud of their heritage, politics, and even sports teams, without being *too* proud. Often, the easiest solution for many seems to be an outright rejection of any form of national pride, thus immediately labeling prideful Germans as radical or right wing. The 2006 FIFA World Cup marked a publicly evident shift in German national identity, and many advocated for Germany's newfound spirit as an example of »positive nationalism«² or a more »unverkrampft« attitude.³ Conversely, more critical voices, such as former NPD watchdog blog *Publikative.org*, repudiate these claims, arguing instead that any form of nationalism should be viewed as a threat, and that German patriotism in particular must be viewed with skepticism and caution. Furthermore, *Publikative.org* maintains that, because proponents of this new form of patriotism present it as »nett und unpolitisch,« the general public should be even more critical.⁴

In the case of extreme right wing nationalism, the political and social motivations are much more transparent, as are the outward signs of participation. Many members of the right wing scene have created a physical identity indicative of this political identity, including black combat boots (»Springerstiefel«), leather bomber jackets, and of course, a completely shaved head. While this archetype may seem exaggerated, even the smallest elements of the neo-Nazi »uniform« are steeped in symbolism: white shoelaces symbolize the superiority of the white race; Fred Perry t-shirts with their »88« symbol are an homage to the »Heil Hitler« salute (»H« is the eighth letter of alphabet).

While the right wing certainly possesses clear visual cues to suggest the political ideology of the movement, *Der Kick* questions this assumption by portraying youths who adopt the imagery and outward appearance of right wing radicals, but forsake a vested interest in (and arguably, understanding of) the linked political ideology. For young people like the Schönfeld brothers and their peers, the physical adornments of right wing radicalism – »Springerstiefel«,

2 | Ingo Neumayer: What Remains of the »Summer's Tale«? Norbert Schütte on the Outcome of the 2006 World Cup. In: Experiencing Germany Panorama. Goethe Institut, July 2011. Web. 01 Oct. 2013.

3 | Christoph Müller/Adrian Oeser/Maximilian Pichl: Der Wahn der Normalität. *Publikative.org*. V.i.S.d.P.: Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, 21 June 2010. Web. 23 Sept. 2013.

4 | Ibid.

»Glatzen«, »Bomberjacke«, etc. – evoke a visceral sense of rebellion and social independence. Ultimately the youth of Potzlow are less invested in understanding an ultra-conservative political movement, but rather in mimicking the behavior of other self-identified right wingers and joining their community, thus showing those around them that they possess a determined, crafted identity. Simply put, social participation in the right wing scene proves to others a sense of belonging and purpose, their politically apathetic views notwithstanding.

Turning to the Schönfeld brothers, Marcel first entered the right wing scene due to Marco's involvement, and received extensive guidance from his sibling on how to be a true »Rechter«:

Mit zwölf hatte ich meine ersten Stiefel, von Marco. Mit Stiefeln kriegste mehr Ansehen. Am Anfang hamse mich fertig gemacht deshalb, Anfang achte Klasse, wegen der Stiefel. Springerstiefel. Die Anderen in der Klasse, die hatten so Hip-Hop-Sachen. Immer so ne Sprüche, Scheiß-Fascho und so was denn. Da hat ich dann gar keinen Bock mehr auf Schule. (34)

Marcel's commentary holds three important points: first, a larger number of students embraced a physical appearances influenced by the aesthetics of hip-hop culture. Despite hip hop's counter-cultural connotations, the fact that most of the classmates assume this image suggests hip hop is more indicative of mainstream pop culture and conformity, in contrast to the right wing; secondly, this embrace of the mainstream likely stems from a visceral disdain for conservative/right-radical culture; and finally, that »Springerstiefel« are immediate markers of the right wing identity (i. e. »Scheiß-Fascho«). The significance of the »Springerstiefel« or other signs of the right wing identity lie not in the political implications of assuming said identity, but rather, in the sense of community gained by adopting these physical trappings of the right wing identity. Marcel, like many other youth in the Potzlow community, seeks out this tangible yet radical apparel for the sake of their immediate shock value, but also for their signification of a defined community. By donning a pair of »Springerstiefel«, a young individual projects a recognizable identity, which in turn elicits camaraderie amongst similarly identified peers – all without requiring a wholly developed political opinion. The mere adoption of a physical identity demonstrates an emerging trend that favors aesthetics over ideology amongst the right wing youth of Potzlow.

Thorsten Muchow, father of Marinus' friend Matthias, described the Schönfeld brothers as »Hilfsschüler, und die haben viel zu viele Filme geguckt. Guck sie dir doch an, mit ihren Springerstiefeln. Ich weiß nicht, was das soll. Die haben nichts zu tun, nur Langeweile, und da kommen sie auf dusselige Ideen« (29). Muchow's comments – and skeptical tone – reveal the perspective of a parent who clearly identifies fault in the casual assumption of a radical identity. Similarly, his statement first introduces the reader to the possibility of a political

identity grounded only in its outward, physical manifestation. Muchow suggests that the perceived excitement and exoticism of the right wing grants the Schönfeld brothers temporary relief from their boredom and the stifling environment of Potzlow. Their interest in the right wing stems not from political motives, but rather from their desire to escape the mundane through the creation of a fantastic and inclusive new reality. By embracing and celebrating the tangible elements of the right wing, i. e. its physical aesthetic, behavior, language, etc., the Schönfeld brothers further establish their radical identities, despite limited comprehension of the movement's political ideology.

While community members such as Thorsten Muchow blamed the Schönfeld brothers of willful ignorance in adopting their radical identities, others viewed their behavior as part of a typical adolescent desire for individuality. An instructor of Marcel's described him as »ein ganz normaler Jugendlicher, der nach Orientierung gesucht hat« (41). He qualified his comment further by explaining that Marcel's skinhead seemed inconsequential because »[a]uf solche Dinge lege ich keinen Wert. Ich möchte nicht irgendwie 'n Feindbild schaffen« (42). At first the instructor's comments seem problematically ambivalent; however, his lack of true concern derives from skepticism of the legitimacy of Marcel's right wing identity:

Das sag ich heute immer noch: Leute wie Marcel, die haben doch von Politik keine Ahnung. Die wissen ja nicht was los ist, da kann ich sagen, du bist ein Nazi. Was er da zu Tina gesagt hat – Nigger auf'n Scheiterhaufen, die brennen besser wie Dachpappe – , da steht er nicht dahinter, das is einfach so blöd daher gesagt. Die haben da ganz andere Ausdrücke, die kennen doch keine anderen. Heute find ich's ganz toll, rote Schnürsenkel zu tragen, morgen ziehe ich mir andere ein. (42)

Although his critique reads less scathingly than that of Muchow, Marcel's instructor recognizes Marcel's stunted understanding of the impact his identity has on his peers and community. The instructor suggests that Marcel's language and appearance exist solely as reactionary anecdotes, not closely held beliefs. Similarly, Heiko Gäbler, an apprentice with whom Marcel had a mutual friend, claimed that Marcel adopted his questionable guise with misguided intentions: »Marcel is'n Mitläufer. Der denkt nich nach« (38). Both the instructor and Heiko ultimately believe that Marcel relies solely on his outward presentation to suggest an in-group identity, as opposed to using his appearance to reinforce a deep-seeded political opinion.

While the arbitrary murder of Marinus unmasks the Schönfeld brothers as illegitimate »Rechter«, both Marco and Marcel attempted earlier in their lives to engage in the political aspects of the right wing scene with questionable success. Marco claimed to have always felt like a »Rechter«, praising the socialist society of the German Democratic Republic for its lack of foreigners (55). However, Marco's statements quickly reveal a complete lack of understanding for the poli-

tics that he claims to so ardently support. Veiel addresses this misinterpretation of East German policy later in the text: »Grundsatz der SED-Politik war, dass sich die DDR nicht als Nachfolgestaat des NS-Regimes verstand« (249). Marco accused immigrants of taking up valuable space for German workers in the German economy, and even encouraged rebuilding the Berlin Wall in an effort to regain order and have »der Schmutz [...] weg« (55). Opinions like Marco's permeate right wing circles, and while many are truly ideologically committed to their rants, others use them as part of an elaborate, constructed conservative identity lacking political pretense. For example, Angela Becker, Marco's girlfriend during his adolescence, joined the right wing at a young age and viewed it very much as a surrogate family; however, »um politische Inhalte geht es dabei kaum« (79). In other words, many individuals embrace the identity of a »true« German nationalist for the sake of belonging to the right wing scene and having a crafted identity that appears political, even if, fundamentally, it is not.

As Marco delved further into the right wing scene, he sought to extend his involvement beyond physical appearance and into the political experience of the right wing. Nonetheless, his more substantial involvement in right wing ideology failed to translate into genuine political investment. Marco and his compatriots enjoyed right-extreme music and periodically attended demonstrations and rallies of the National Democratic Party (NPD). Marco, however, only attended in order to join his friends, and was politically ambivalent: »mit Politik beschäftigt er sich sonst wenig« (85). When Marco did attempt to take a political stand, it became little more than a recitation of »groben Versatzstücken aus dem rechtsextremen Zitatenschatz, vermischt mit Parolen aus den Liedern von Frank Rennicke und diverser rechtsextremer Bands« (85 f.). These mismatched samples of right wing group propaganda suggest an incoherent, underdeveloped political commitment, while also reinforcing the social and cultural ties Marco sought in his right wing affiliations. By embracing only certain elements of the movement (particularly more superficial elements such as physical appearance, music, protest, etc.), his true commitment to a right wing political agenda remains questionable at best. Angela commented on Marco's apolitical nature stating, »Nach außen hin trägt er Stiefel und schneidet sich eine Glatze, aber das war's dann auch schon« (86). Adopting a »Glatze« allowed for a minimal level of political engagement, while maintaining a salient commitment to the overall aesthetic of the right wing movement.

Although Angela initially referred only to Marco in her commentary, it becomes increasingly evident that one could also apply a label of superficiality to both Schönfeld brothers. The brothers' emphasis on their right wing style reveals a limited understanding of the deeper political implications of their actions. Over the course of the text, Veiel profiles the lives of the Schönfeld brothers prior to the murder in an effort to uncover the source of their violent behavior and the origin of their right wing fascination. As a young adult, Marco was arrested and ultimately imprisoned for numerous crimes, including burglary,

driving without a driver's license, aggravated assault, and trespassing, thus depriving Marcel of his primary support system. Moreover, Marco's incarceration no longer necessitated Marcel's strict adherence to his brother's right wing lifestyle: »Als er dann in den Knast kam, habe ich mich dann den anderen angepasst. Die Situation in Prenzlau hatte sich verändert. Viele ehemalige Rechte wurden eher Hip-Hopper und Technos. Denen habe ich mich angepasst« (41). For both Marco and Marcel, any personal connection to the right wing scene stems largely from their close relationship with one another, rather than a vested political interest in the movement itself.

Marcel's closeness to his brother certainly influenced his decision to take on a right wing identity, and, while Marco's incarceration left him with a sense of abandonment, it also granted him the opportunity to explore other forms of political expression. Marco's imprisonment initially exempted Marcel from wearing his »Springerstiefel« and his »Glatze«, during which time he »lässt sich die Haare wieder länger wachsen und legt die Stiefel ab« (97) and »mehrfach wechselt er die Farbe der Haar, die er nun auch länger wachsen lässt« (101). Although growing one's hair is not outwardly left wing, the abrupt transition from one extreme (skinhead and combat boots) to another (long, colored hair) suggests a significant change of physical identity, and consequently, ideology as well. Marcel visited his brother in prison with a crop of blue hair, causing Marco to wonder, »ob er jetzt auf Punk mache« (103). Having squabbled with punks in the past (81), Marco vehemently rejected Marcel's new, ostensibly leftist appearance.

Marcel's willingness to drop the trappings of neo-Nazism confirms that his political views do not equate with the presumed politics of his outward appearance. Simply dismissing the right wing appearance would be reason enough to question Marcel's political intentions; however, in abandoning the right wing for an outwardly left-wing identity Marcel disproves the belief that physical appearance corresponds to political activity. A much more determinate factor is the importance of the brothers' relationship with each other. In this case, it is most important for Marcel to mirror Marco's appearance of Marco. In a clear effort to appease his brother, Marcel later shaves his head entirely and buys a new pair of »Springerstiefel« (103) ten days before Marco's release from prison.

Given the unsubstantiated link between the Schönfeld brothers' and neo-Nazi political ideology, it is legitimate to wonder whether *any* form of political intention stood behind their decision to murder Marinus. During the review of Marinus' murder case, the district attorney offered a very critical analysis of the brothers, »Die Täter Marco und Marcel Schönfeld sowie Sebastian Fink hatten ein dumpfes rechtsextremistisches Gedankengut und den unbedingten Willen, das in Gewaltform auszuleben« (23). This initial statement leads the reader to believe that the prosecutor identified Marco and Marcel as threats to the community on par with a professed neo-Nazi or right wing radical. However, as he expands his commentary, the tone shifts dramatically:

Am Tatabend war weder ein Asylbewerber, ein Jude oder irgendjemand, worauf das Feindbild zutraf, vorhanden. Deshalb musste hier ein Kumpel als Notopfer herhalten, weil den Tätern kein besserer begegnete. Nach unserer Auffassung hat das Opfer Schöberl nach den ganzen Misshandlungen sein eigenes Todesurteil gesprochen, indem er gesagt hat: Ich bin Jude. Hätte er zu diesem Zeitpunkt gesagt, spinnt hier nicht rum, ich bin doch euer Kumpel Marinus, ich glaube nicht, dass der Tötungsakt dann über die Bühne gegangen wäre. Das ist kein Vorwurf, sondern einfach eine Feststellung. (23)

Although Marco and Marcel possessed a clear allegiance to the right wing scene, the prosecutor highlights that the Schönfeld brothers attacked Marinus for lack of a ›better‹ or more appropriate option. During the evening of the murder, Marinus repeatedly vocalized »Ja, ich bin ein Jude,« after which Marcel, Marco, and their friend Sebastian violently lashed out, insulting Marinus: »Du Jude, du Penner, du Assi und so weiter« (31). Identifying as Jewish amongst right wing enthusiasts remains an undeniably provocative and bold decision; however, the response from the Schönfeld brothers leads one to question whether Marinus' proclaimed Jewish identity was actually the problem at the root of the conflict. Indeed, that Marco and Marcel use ›Jew‹ as one of several pejoratives draws the theory of their singular political motivation into question. By accusing Marinus of not only being Jewish, but also of being homeless and asocial, the brothers effectively provide a criticism exclusively driven, not by racial or religious elements, but by socioeconomic factors, thus diverging from the stereotypical political motivation behind right wing identities.

Still, could Marinus' Jewish identity have served as sufficient impetus for the Schönfeld brothers' violence? Surprisingly, Marco confirmed that Marinus' Jewish identity had nothing to do with his actions:

Wenn ich gegen den wat gehabt hätte, dann hätte ich schon früher wat mit ihm gemacht. Jude, det habe ich schon zu viele gesagt, und die hab ich auch nicht umgebracht. Der war nicht der Grund. Ich wollt den nie umbringen. Ich hab ihn auch nicht umgebracht. Ich wollt ihn nur quälen und ärgern. ... Ich wusst selbst nicht, warum mein Bruder den da reinbeißen lässt, aber ich hatt natürlich auch nichts dagegen. Als Marcel darauf gesprungen ist, war es für mich auch ein richtiger Schock. (60)

Marco's testimony confirms that his aggression towards Marinus was entirely arbitrary and not rooted in any concrete ideological stance. By admitting that he had little interest in Marinus' religious affiliation, Marco derails the argument that right wing politics was the sole motivation of the Schönfeld brothers. Veiel ultimately reveals that the motivation for Marinus' murder stemmed not from the Schönfeld brothers' ideologically driven hatred of him, but rather, their inexplicable fascination with the »curb stomp« (»Bordsteinkick«) from the American film, *American History X*. The curb stomp, as learned from a film only loosely

relevant to the right wing, serves as a physical response to a conflict not rooted in any real political justification. Given the brothers' aforementioned indifference towards Marinus' religious identity, the violence of his murder served only one purpose for the Schönfeld brothers: youthful entertainment. Marco and Marcel self-identified as members of a radical community whose *raison d'être* was politically driven, yet as a duo, they remained chiefly preoccupied with superficial elements of the movement. The Schönfeld brothers' physical appearance, including individual acts of violence, elicit an immediate recognition of their right wing involvement, and are arguably more impactful than simply aligning with a particular ideological stance. This superficiality leads the reader to believe that Marco and Marcel, as well as their peers involved with the right wing, view the movement more as a pop culture movement or social scene than a legitimate political entity. Precisely this view informs Marco and Marcel's decision to participate in the right wing – for them it is a social and cultural statement devoid of solidified ideological engagement.

Through the experiences of the Schönfeld brothers, *Der Kick* illustrates a harrowing picture of how individual involvement within radical movements, particularly those of the right wing, can vary on the basis of individual acceptance, or even mere understanding, of political ideology. Veiel's account of Marco and Marcel's experiences suggest that youth involved in the right wing movement struggle with the dichotomy of aesthetics and ideology. Without any investment in, or understanding of, true right wing ideology, the Schönfeld brothers completely avoid the actual political groundings of the right wing movement, and instead adopt and celebrate the aesthetic elements of the movement in their physical appearance and behavior. They embrace the movement as a means of finding community, developing a sense of identity, and rebelling against the society of their small hometown. While initially the Schönfeld brothers' superficial understanding of their cause seems laughable and beneath critical analysis, the fact remains that, despite its superficial manifestations, Marco and Marcel involved themselves in a movement that is intrinsically political, and in many cases violent.

Given the constantly changing landscape of German politics, it remains to be seen how Germany will choose to engage with the far right wing movement. *Der Kick* serves as a cautionary tale, proving that even superficial involvement in the right wing can yield dangerous results. It remains imperative that contemporary German society assess the degree to which these movements, even in the most lighthearted or fad-like ways, may prove detrimental for democracy and social stability.