

Liquid Laughter: A Gendered History of Milk & Alcohol Drinking in West-German and US Film Comedies of the 1950s

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Abstract:

This paper aims to present a Gender History of the social dimension of laughter. It intends to demonstrate, by scrutinizing several West-German and US film comedies of the 1950s, that romantic comedies of that era firstly served as a tool in a process of (re-)establishing heteronormative and patriarchal gender systems; secondly, we will outline that this development was highly contested and depended on constantly referring to forms of gender subversion and deviance.

Prologue

1 Using feature films as primary sources has become a more and more common research option in international historiography during the last years. In the New Cultural History especially, images in general and feature films in particular form prominent parts of its program which aims at a fundamentally different perspective of history (Daniel). Nevertheless, writing history by analyzing film comedies is still a rare practice, for established academic rules seem to enforce a certain "seriousness" and "relevance" of employed source materials. Such mass media forms of "only entertainment" are usually dropped from the scholarly agenda. This paper questions this convention and aims to present a Gender History of the social dimension of laughter. It intends to demonstrate, by scrutinizing several West-German and US film comedies of the 1950s, that romantic comedies of that era firstly served as a tool in a process of (re-)establishing heteronormative and patriarchal gender systems; secondly, we will outline that this development was highly contested and depended on constantly referring to forms of gender subversion and deviance. We interpret this emphasis on male and/or female deviance and its recurring presentation as abject in the films not only as the often described "backlash" of the 1950s, but as evidence for existing subversive elements in both national gender systems. Subordinating and marginalizing these subversive elements was not self-evident or even "natural" but the result of repeated and arduous efforts to reterritorialize them into the heteronormative structure. Yet, our objective does not include a comparative approach in the strict sense. Instead of looking for differences and similarities, we postulate and take as given corresponding aspects in both post-war societies which derive from the immediate wartime situation and its influences on the gender system.

2 For such an approach, it is necessary to accept movies as part of historic gender

discourses, as media that simultaneously produce these discourses in their multi-relational reference to other social factors and contribute to their social distribution in the processes of audience reception. With the help of literary theory, New Historicism as articulated by Stephen Greenblatt, Moritz Baßler and others, and a definition of discourse as formulated by Michel Foucault, we understand movies as texts which form a fabric of individual discursive layers. Moreover, feature films themselves formulate new, different, enhanced meanings in addition to the existing discourses (Baßler, 14). In our view as cultural historians, a theory that combines the historicity of texts with the textuality of history constitutes a productive answer to current questions concerning how fiction informs reality and vice versa. We consider this question to be wrongly posed because neither fiction nor feature films can escape their historic and discursive setting; as movies are composed of discourses, and are themselves only understandable in historic discursive structures (Perinelli, 46). This also means that texts/movies always tell us more than they intend to. Given their multi-dimensional complexity, movies might serve as valuable tools for historians to gain new perspectives and pose different questions in the framework of cultural history.

The Joke

3 What we state for films and their discursive production of social reality is especially true for comedies and their function of modifying hegemonic discourses. In our opinion, it is primarily the joke, as described by Sigmund Freud in *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, which enables people to regress from logic while remaining understandable (Grotjahn); it allows the transgression of social borders without the fear of sanction. The joke is thus able to transmit a new (or yet denied) meaning and provides an opportunity for safe passage from the utterable into a sphere of social taboo.

4 According to Freud, the joke expresses an otherwise repressed unconscious aggression which has worked its way to the surface, something Freud calls joke-work. To pass the censorship of the pre-consciousness, this aggression needs to disguise itself through symbolization. In other words, the joke helps to articulate a tabooed desire. It thus serves to set free the energy needed to suppress aggression and leads to increased pleasure through laughter.

5 Additionally, the joke is a fundamentally social technique because it needs a certain social setting to be effective: firstly, the person whose aggression is to be expressed, secondly, the victim against whom the aggression is directed, and thirdly, a person who checks whether the aggression is adequately symbolized and disguised in order to hurt enough to be effective

without transgressing social conventions too much. The third person's laughter is the touchstone of the social arrangement: if she or he laughs, the first person is allowed to join in. The joke-work of the first person ultimately depends on the third person who judges whether the second person might be victimized through that joke.¹

6 Cinema serves as an apparatus for such forms of social transmittance, in which the audience and its role in constituting legitimate laughter additionally enhances the described setting. The audience takes the position of the third person and judges whether a joke is funny or not. A laughing spectator legitimizes the aggression and the fictitious victim of the film becomes a real victim in his or her head. This image thus finds its way out of the cinema into the field of everyday social discrimination. Should the aggression not succeed in disguising itself as a joke and is judged as not funny, the joke only provokes feelings of shame, embarrassment, guilt, and disgust.

7 This paper suggests using the Freudian argument for a historical analysis of feature films. It raises particular questions, e.g. who laughs about whom and who collaborates in the process of making a joke successful. Moreover, it may be brought to light which aspects were not considered funny or which remained in a zone of taboo. From a present-day perspective, it might also be interesting to see the differences of what was considered funny during the 1950s and today or vice versa. In the following, we would like to raise these questions with regard to West-German and US film comedies in order to scrutinize the contemporary social relevance and the social effectiveness of this genre.

Romantic Comedies

8 Comedies were and remain popular both with film producers (as they are easy and inexpensive to realize) and the audience. One reason for this genre's success might be its first-glance harmlessness. Critics attest subversive capacity to explicit satires or "black" comedies, but generally "comedy is often taken to be the epitome of light relief or 'just entertainment'" (King 2). This corresponds with the underestimation of film comedies in historiography which we want to challenge by closely examining the represented gender relations.

9 From a perspective of Gender History, we are first of all interested in the romantic comedy, which focuses on the establishment of heterosexual relations despite several obstacles and difficulties. Many of these films stress an individualistic worldview in which "the love" between two social actors is endangered by social and cultural conventions but nevertheless proves to be invincible. Implications of social dichotomies add dynamic to the

¹ Freud describes several different forms of joke-work. Here, we focus only on the mentioned one.

plot, but a happy end is certain. This setting provoked the ever-recurring assessment of romantic comedies as "escapist entertainment," but it also stimulated not only our analytic curiosity but also the interest of Geoff King:

Their implicit "don't take it too seriously" helps, potentially, to inoculate them against close interrogation: those who subject comedies to ideological analysis are more likely than most to be criticised for making too much of works of "mere" entertainment [...] If romantic comedy can have ideological implications, in its imaginary reconciliation of both characters and thematic oppositions, these need to be located in the specific socio-historical contexts in which it has been produced, particularly in terms of prevailing notions of gender relationships. (56)

10 Like melodrama, the romantic comedy usually and typically revolves around gender conflicts, and female protagonists very often occupy a central role in the plot. But while melodramas were rather frequently analyzed by historians, romantic comedies were not (Byars; DiBattista). On a primary level, this paper draws from ideas formulated by film historian Kathleen Rowe:

Making fun of and out of inflated and self-deluded notions of heroic masculinity, romantic comedy is often structured by gender inversion, a disruption of the social hierarchy of male over female through what might be called the topos of the unruly woman [...] When romantic comedy fully realizes the potential of this topos, it dramatizes a resistance to the law of Oedipus, a carnivalization of sexual identities and gender hierarchies that posits a new and more inclusive basis for community than the social order it takes as a point of reference. (1994, 41-42)

11 Following and expanding her thesis, we want to show that subversive and affirmative elements of comedies are strongly interconnected in a necessary and multi-layered relation of exchange with one another and social discourse. For historians, an analysis of this exchange in periods which were like the post-war 1950s characterized by a dynamically charged gender system is especially rewarding.

Post-War Gender Systems

12 Historiographies dealing with the United States and West Germany take it for granted that in the 1940s certain "traditional," hetero-normative notions of femininity and masculinity lost their hegemonic status and influence due to the effects of the Great Depression and the Second World War.² One reason for these developments lay in the fact that the social division of labor on both home fronts were to a far lesser degree divided along gender lines than before the war. The spheres of production and social participation and those of reproduction and domesticity became more and more blurred. They no longer reflected a clear binary order

² We adopt the term heteronormativity from Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge 1993.

of gender.³ One consequence of this deterritorializing development was a new class structure in the USA and in West Germany, for in both countries the middle-class segment of society expanded largely and established or stabilized its cultural hegemony.

13 With regard to Germany, this decisive development occurred faster, more directly, and more clearly because National Socialism was overthrown by the allied forces and thus all relevant social constellations were open to immense change. But in the USA as well, concepts of class, status, and social mobility changed or were perceived differently during depression and war.

14 We interpret the accelerated reconstruction of the heteronormative gender order in both countries during the 1950s as the resolute attempt to stabilize the social setting in general. Whereas the new class arrangement was a desired development, the gender notions advocated by the war were not, and the restabilization of heteronormativity was a crucial part of keeping a precarious order working. But this strategy of arresting one social development to accelerate another was contested and difficult to achieve. As we want to show in our sources, achieving a return to heteronormativity as a hegemonic norm not only rested on permanent discourses of exclusion and normalization, but also on permanently citing and displaying deviant notions of femininity and masculinity. "Roll back" was a social fact of 1950s gender systems but in the long run, this decade was much more fractured, contested, and dynamic than is commonly attested. The alternative gender concepts important during war years were remarginalized but remained present as the "other" in popular discourses. They thus formed a basis from which the social revolts and the so called sexual revolution of the 1960s could arise.

15 Film historian Christopher Beach presented an interesting approach to scrutinize class and gender questions in movies relationally. He deals with 1950s Hollywood comedies and puts forward the thesis that economic success and failure as well as upward and downward mobility were to a large degree reflected on women's bodies in an unprecedented amount. Class, according to Beach, was staged as a fetishized female body. Simultaneously, the male body lost its clear signification of class belonging and represented in its physical uniformity the blurring of social stratification in one large middle class; the "Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" epitomizes this image. Through fetishization the woman's body served as the main signifier for both her own class and that of men. Furthermore, economy was itself inscribed onto women's bodies. In naturalizing these effects, this phallic fetishization now constitutes

³ We do not want to suggest that accelerations of gender systems are always caused from its "outside." Here, we want to underscore the enormous importance of depression and world war, which of course were highly gendered phenomena themselves.

the specific truth we nowadays routinely recognize as a woman. The man as social no-body or invisible-body corresponded to this setting. He seemed to have no characteristic features, he formed the "normal matrix" which for so long remained outside of scholarly attention. It is our aim to make these interrelated processes of both capitalistic and gender production visible in the film comedies we examine (Beach; Cohan).

Two Plateaus

16 For developing and transmitting these discourses and strategies during the 1950s, the cinema apparatus in general and romantic comedies in particular were highly influential. It was a suitable platform to disarticulate the partial gender inversion of the early 1940s.

17 The jokes present in 1950s romantic comedies focused on the reproductive man and the productive woman. This setting is represented via several distinctive social characters, like the single mothering father, the childless non-reproductive woman, the passionless man, the desiring woman, the anti-authoritarian weak man, the authoritarian strong woman, the jobless single man, the working single woman, the regressive boy, the old spinster, etc.

18 To analyse this aggressive operation in romantic comedies, we will elaborate on the metaphoric appearance of particular liquids, milk and alcohol, in order to open interesting windows for interpretation. These metaphors were never the actual theme of the movies but nevertheless platforms or agents for signifying specific developments. As we will see, alcohol on the one hand symbolizes unproductive masculinity and thus signifies liquidation,⁴ flight, transgression, helplessness, illness, disability, and denial. On the other hand, it also stands for an independent, strong and non-reproductive femininity, which is associated with success, power and sexual passion instead of family and children.

19 In the comedies, alcohol becomes a borderline at which processes of transformation take place. As much as excessive alcohol consumption challenges the rules of heteronormativity, for it leads to sexually inactive men and women, complete abstinence is no better an alternative, for it signifies sexual immaturity. Milk carries out the exact counter-running movement. It gains its importance because it occupies the place of alcohol and takes over alcohol's functions. As for consuming alcohol, drinking milk in the movies also allows for flight — a flight, however, that in the 1950s did not end in liquidation but in complete regression, in a restabilization of personality and thus of the gender order. This regression was determined in solely Oedipal terms, resulting in patriarchal subject positions.

20 With the help of milk's healing capacities, controlling the liminal processes of alcohol

⁴ "Liquidation" means to become fluid in a non-fluid fixed order and thus can tend to life as well as to death. Economically, it stands either for access to cash-flows or for becoming illiquid.

drinking became possible. Certain characters were more or less forced to drink alcohol, to satisfy their desire for liquidation, but only to prove that they have naturalized their gender formation. In this sense, both milk and alcohol symbolized an exit from a certain order, its denial through non-productivity. But in the end, the metaphor of healing through milk consumption served to overcome the deviant gender arrangements which are usually described as "crises" in historiography; it focused on re-installing man's position in the phallic order. Using the point of male denial as its departing range, milk offered simultaneously total non-productivity for men and success for women. But although this at first glance affirmed the deviant gender arrangements of the war years, in the end these metaphors re-introduce men back into the patriarchal position. This is the aim of these movies; it is their humorous way of disarticulating subversive gender arrangements.

21 While the joke renders the "wrong" gender setting as disdainful and sets free necessary energy, the metaphors of milk and alcohol open the field of counter-inversion. Although both fluids liquidize the protagonists of the films at first glance, milk ultimately serves as a solidifying device. Alcohol liquidates order, while milk re-installs the man as hegemonic in the capitalistic and patriarchal order. That is what it is all about - to be fluid in the discourse of patriarchy or to liquidize it - milk versus alcohol.

Milk and alcohol within selected movies

22 For exemplification, we will analyze several movie sequences. It would be easy, though, to bring up many more examples in which gender is symbolically negotiated through these two drinks and their related foods. Moreover, it would be far more difficult to find comedies (as well as films of other genres) of the 1950s not marked by this subject matter.

23 In *The Girl Can't Help It* things come into flow.⁵ On her way to her new agent Tom (Tom Ewell), Jerri Jordan (Jayne Mansfield) passes a number of men, who become literally fluid in her presence. While the paperboy exhales air and whistles after her, the massive block of ice in the hands of a worker vaporizes in only a few seconds as she walks by in her short dress. In Jerri's presence the elements change their physical condition from firm to fluid. The image of orgasm becomes evident: everything expands, volatilizes, flows. When the milkman in front of Tom's house faces Jerri, it becomes unambiguous that milk not only connotes femininity but stands for male body secretions as well. In the immediate presence of Jerri, the

⁵ Directed 1956 by Frank Tashlin. The plot shows a down-and-out gangster (Edmond O'Brien) who hires an alcoholic press agent (Tom Ewell) to make his blonde bombshell girlfriend (Jayne Mansfield) a recording star in six weeks. But what is he going to do when he finds out that she has no talent? And what is going to happen when the two fall in love?

milk bottle in the milkman's hand bursts its cap like a bottle of champagne its cork and spews the milk; the bottle ejaculates.

24 Jayne Mansfield's body stands for the success and the wealth she aspires.⁶ Her body turns into a signifier of a higher class and so becomes an economic sign. In her tight skirt she resembles the phallic form of the milk bottle in the hand of the milk man. In this scene Jayne Mansfield is so over-fetishized that the male gaze cannot control her anymore. On the contrary, she anticipates the male gaze and exaggerates it in such a way that the fragmenting gaze returns. The men become magnetized and fixed as if Medusa had glanced at them. In this phallic congealment, evoked by the fetishization of Jayne Mansfield, masculine engendering can succeed (as a joke).



Fig. 1.: Milkman

25 Hence the metaphor of milk is not only phallic. When the eyeglasses of a neighbor in the stairway break into pieces at her sight and leave him blind, we can sense a second meaning of the figure Jerri: blind as Oedipus Rex after the sexual act with his mother, the motherly figure is heralded. In fact, Jerri holds two milk bottles upon her already demonstrative chest and with that refers to its nurturing and maternal function. Moreover, the picture emphasizes the relational proximity of the categories gender and race: the milk bottles

⁶ Moreover, she does not only go for a career, but represents it. In her first conversation with Tom she states "I am a career" whereupon Tom replies "You are a career? I thought most girls want a career." The equalization of Jayne Mansfield and economic prosperity in *The Girl Can't Help It* also takes place in the movie *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* In the opening credits a voice-over introduces the appearing image of Tony Randall "this is Rock Hunter" followed by the image of Jayne Mansfield "and this is success."

in front of her breasts indicate the platinum blonde Mansfield as a desirable white woman and a mother, being at the same time fetishized, lactified, and maternized. The racially motivated lactification heightens her value as signifier, which she embodies, which she *is*. The categories race, class, and gender directly interfere in this scene and display themselves on each other.

26 Marked in such a triple way she enters Tom's apartment and starts nursing him. In the early morning, the heavily alcoholic agent suffers from a strong hangover. With the bottles still pressed against her front, she introduces her motherly role by telling Tom that as a youngster she used to care for her father and her seven brothers. The way she recalls her childhood memories is funny and seems absurd against the background of her initial foolishness. She then begins her cure with hot tomato juice against the remaining alcohol in his blood to re-establish his physical health. The burning red juice acts as an antidote to alcohol.



Fig. 2.: Jerry

27 Afterwards, Jerri refers to her "real," that is "natural" motherhood underneath her make up: "Pretty is just how good you apply your base," she explains to the slowly recovering Tom while fixing his breakfast. She de-fetishizes herself in order to switch over from the sphere of a phallic celebrity to the sphere of a domestic housewife and mother. In order to do so, she debunks her sexualized femininity as a mask. This means that she removes the

fetishized mask to express a hidden but true womanhood. But — and here is the joke — this quasi natural femininity of Jayne Mansfield is portrayed to be as phallic as the modelled one. As she bends over the table towards the eating Tom, she allows him a deep look in her plunging neckline and continues: "I am equipped for motherhood." She makes clear what exactly equips her for motherhood, namely her breasts that are or could be full of milk. Thus the film negotiates a concept of natural femininity that is at the same time domestic/maternal and fetishized.

28 The "underlying" and "real" womanhood in the movie is perceived humorously and provokes our assumption that it does so because it comes into conflict with a non-phallic and non-maternal reality of women in the fifties' society that did not correspond with this concept of gender. The phallic form of female nature is the joke of that scene. It even may only have been representable as a joke because it did not match the common discourse of gender identity of that time. Hence we can understand the strategic impact of this comedy in the (re)construction of a patriarchal gender system that lost its discursive self-evidence.

29 The West-German movie *Wenn der Vater mit dem Sohne....* was aligned with this very project as well.⁷ Unlike Jayne Mansfield, who appears motherly by nature, the social father Teddy is not provided by nature to nurture, in other words, he is not "equipped for motherhood." When after five years Ulli's mother surprisingly contacts Teddy in order to take the boy with her to the USA, Teddy desperately kidnaps the unaware boy and flees with him to Italy. After having cared for Ulli almost all the child's life, he understandably does not want to separate from him. On their way south they have to stop in the Swiss mountains and Ulli becomes hungry. Hence Teddy tries to milk a cow in a pasture. In this footage, milk emerges in the realms of intact nature, in the context of purity and rural environment. But the father is unable to give milk to his son: after a number of ridiculous and funny attempts of milking, the cow shatters the bottle with its tail. The loving, nursing, and caring man appears absurd and unnatural and consequently it is mother nature herself who hinders his efforts. The plot heads for the necessity of an exchange between the provident but awkward single-father and the so far absent but nevertheless biological mother. After the exchange took place, Teddy himself gets cured from his incapacity to work that had stricken him after the death of his own son during the war. When finally Ulli is placed in the proper position with his mother, Teddy can also find his place in society and carry on his profession as a famous clown.

⁷ Directed 1955 by Hans Quest. The widowed Teddy (Heinz Rühmann) raises little Ulli (Oliver Grimm) who as a baby was abandoned by his mother, who emigrated to the USA directly after the war. Not knowing the facts, the boy sees his father in Teddy. Years later his mother wants to take him back and bring him to the States. Thus Teddy flees with the boy to Italy. Finally the mother catches up with them and Teddy now understands that a child is better off with his mother: he lets Ulli go.



Fig. 3.: Rühmann

30 Parallel to Teddy's story, the course of Peepe (Carl-Heinz Schroth) proceeds. The always boozed best friend and former colleague cannot stand milk and seeing a glass of it makes him literally sick. Like Teddy, Peepe is unable to work and a social outsider. However, at the happy end of the film Peepe marries Teddy's landlady Frl. Biermann (Fita Benkhoff). Unlike Jayne Mansfield who was placed outside of the "natural" order as a "single star celebrity," the deviant figure, Frl. Biermann is ridiculed as an old maid. The movie portrays Frl. Biermann's initial sexual desire for Teddy as completely ridiculous and her attempt to make him drunk and to seduce him as sheerly hopeless and embarrassing — as a joke. Consequentially, the development of the relationship between Peepe and Frl. Biermann relationship runs the other way around. In the last scene we see Peepe sitting in front of a glass of milk, even drinking it. Doing so, he reports to Teddy, who returns childless, which tragedy happened to him when he was totally drunk: "Frl. Biermann did marry me. Since then all I drink is milk, to prevent worse." Symbolized by milk, Frl. Biermann takes over the maternal role for Peepe and in doing so reconstructs him as a responsible man. Moreover, she too gets "cured" from her initial desire and thus becomes reterritorialized within her "natural" identity. Hence her welcome-kiss for Teddy is not ambiguous or ludicrous anymore. Neither Fräulein (miss) nor Bier (beer) nor Mann (man) anymore, she becomes Peepe's wife.

31 In *Father of the Bride*,⁸ Stanley (Spencer Tracy) cannot sleep at night as he thinks

⁸ Directed 1950 by Vincente Minnelli. The harassed Stanley Banks (Spencer Tracy) father of his beautiful daughter Kay (Elizabeth Taylor) experiencing his only daughter's expensive wedding. He tells the story of the

about his daughter Kay's (Elizabeth Taylor) projected wedding. As he looks at a childhood picture of Kay showing her next to a horse, he starts to worry about losing his beloved daughter. The girl on the photo holds the rein of the horse, and we understand that he needs her as a foothold much more than she needs him. Stanley's wife Ellie (Joan Bennett) tries to calm him down by offering him a glass of warm milk. But it is not her milk he wants to drink; he cannot regress with her. He can merely dump his fears on her to find some sleep again. But in his subsequent dream the angst returns as a nightmare of Kay's wedding, which depicts how he loses control over the whole situation in church. He sinks into the carpet of the long aisle, becomes unable to walk anymore, pedals and crawls on all fours, until his clothes fall off and everything around him becomes vast. The father again becomes a little naked baby — he regresses.



Fig. 4.: Pepe

32 Stanley wakes up startled from this picture and totters down in the kitchen, to his surprise finding his daughter sitting there and drinking milk. She pours him a glass of milk and as they start talking, his fear leaves him and flows through the milk over to his daughter. Here the *mise-en-scene* places the milk bottle exactly between them, vertically parting the frame. As a border, the bottle divides as well as connects father and daughter. It stands for the liminal process of passing fluids and therewith for the psychic content going back and forth between both. While Stanley's condition gets increasingly solid, Kay's becomes more and

announcement of her engagement and all the ceremonial requirements and events leading up to the wedding over a period of three months.

more flowing. Taking on the theme of his dream, now it is her who fears not to be able to walk down the aisle of the church. Meanwhile her father can assure her his encouragement to lead her safely to the altar. At the end of this scene he is reterritorialized in the position of the father, while she is in the position of the helpless girl: his regression floated through the milk towards her.



Fig. 5.: Fob

33 In *Father of the Bride* — just like in the other comedies — the dysfunctional man gets "cured" by the female protagonist. Accordingly, she finds the way from her significant position in society back into the dominated order of the recently reconstructed man. Kay's walk down the aisle is no longer propelled by her very own desire, but organized as a classical patriarchal handing-over of the bride by her father. Milk is the symbolic medium for that exchange.

34 Alcohol plays a contrasting role. When Stanley and his wife Ellie drive to the parents of their future son-in-law Buckley Dunstan (Don Taylor) for a first visit, Stanley's urge for a drink gets stronger with every minute and a quick stopover at a bar is prevented only by Ellie. After they have arrived, however, Buckley's father offers drinks, and Stanley gets more and more drunk. He talks endlessly about Kay's life from its very beginning. His attempt to keep hold of his daughter by telling her entire life story appears funny. The more he drinks, the more the object of his talk slips out of his narration and thus Stanley himself slips out of it. At the end, he dozes off on the couch of his hosts and totally deceives himself of the fact that he is going to lose his daughter to their son.

35 The fear of losing his daughter holds yet another meaning. On their way to the Dunstans' house Stanley blusters about their assumed lower class. He alleges that the Dunstans are trying to climb up the social ranks by uniting their son with his daughter. As they arrive, he has to admit that things run rather the other way around. Despite the fact that Buckley is a whole generation younger than Stanley, the vibrant fiancé already belongs to a higher class. It becomes clear that it is not the achievement of Stanley's work but rather the alliance of his daughter with Buckley's family that could enable Stanley's family to scale up economically. Kay's desirable femininity — not his labor — becomes the signifier of his class. For the moment Stanley flees this insight with the help of alcohol. Until his daughter re-establishes him in the already mentioned kitchen/milk scene — the turning point of the plot — he remains helpless. Only then does he find the strength to detach from his daughter and to act according to the symbolic order.

36 But as long as the path to a "natural" gender system is still barred, milk is inedible in all these movies. That is also the case with Violet (Joan Blondell), the lady's companion of the film diva Rita Marlow (Jayne Mansfield) in *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*⁹ She likewise is a heavy drinker who can stand neither the taste nor the look of milk. Her bemoaned love was a milkman, whom she recalls by his big and little bottles of milk. Here it is not only the milk, but explicitly the form of the bottles itself that reminds her of him. Especially the linking of her love with the little phallic bottles emphasizes once again the symbolic content of this picture. Milk is configured as maternal/female as well as phallic/male; is at the same time breast milk and semen. When she finally does find a new love — Henry Rufus (Henry Jones) — the former, heavily drinking colleague of Rock Hunter, their happy end is pictured by the drinking of a shared glass of milk. The footage is organized similarly to the kitchen scene in *Father of the Bride*. Recently promoted senior boss Rufus sits in his brand new office together with Violet. Between them on the desk stands a glass of milk and the two drink from it with straws, while the voice over tells us that "we see Rufus, put on a milk diet by his new fiancée Violet." Again, they symbolically exchange bodily fluids and thereby perform a gender inversion that re-installs them in a classical way. Here, too, milk stands for the overcoming of alcoholism and moreover for a completed Oedipal phase, i.e. for the man the participation in economic success and for the woman the fulfilment of love and participation in male

⁹ Directed 1957 by Frank Tashlin. In this spoof of the TV advertising industry, Rockwell Hunter (Tony Randall) is the low man on the totem pole at the advertising company where he works. That is, until he finds the perfect spokes model for Stay-Put lipstick, the famous actress with the oh-so-kissable lips, Rita Marlow (Jayne Mansfield). Unfortunately, in exchange, Rock has to act publicly as Rita's "Loverboy," about which Rock's fiancée Jenny (Betsy Drake) is not very happy.

subjectivity. To achieve this, Violet abandons her own societal productive position, which was her employment with Rita Marlow.

37 We can see the very same process with the film diva herself. When Rock Hunter visits her in her hotel suite, Rita plays with him. She practices kissing and wriggles in her tight dress next to him on the sofa. As he spills a drink on his clothes, she hands him a far too big shirt and trouser of her ex-lover, the simple-minded bodybuilder Bobo Branigansky. Rock literally disappears in the giant garments while Rita is trying to catch him like a child. As Rock starts panicking, she enjoys the game. Symptomatically she calls him her baby and says that "mommy" is going to get him and bring him into bed. This extreme regression appears as the necessary interlude for his development towards "real" manhood that marks the happy end constellation of the movie. Thanks to Rita Marlow, at the end of the film Rock Hunter is a self-contained man, economically promoted and therefore enabled to marry his fiancée Jenny. And again, like Kay, Violet, or Frl. Biermann, Rita Marlow gets her "real" love, who is neither a "loverboy" like Rock nor a male celebrity like Bobo, but an older or respectable man.

38 Milk as well as alcohol indicate in all these movies an escape and an exit from a specific regulation that is not endurable anymore. Milk stands for regression, for determining the Oedipal scheme and resetting the patriarchal order. In the films, the female protagonists organize the initiation into the symbolic through the Oedipal handing over of the symbolic phallus to the deviant men. Moreover, with Oedipalization comes an upward social mobility, something the male protagonists were incapable of before. The female body in the comedies of the 1950s signifies all this. It carries out a double function by installing men as well as women (back) in a binary gender system. Hence the function of women in romantic comedies of that period is exceptional: they own the phallus at the same time as they represent it as a fetishized body; they embody the social status of the men as well as their very own.

39 In contrast to milk, drinking alcohol beyond normal bounds acts against a heteronormative gender order and indicates its dissolving. However, it is not that easy: not only the excessive consumption of alcohol but also the lack of alcohol tolerance is ridiculed in the movies. In *Kindermädchen für Papa gesucht*,¹⁰ for example, the female employees joke about their timid boss Kurt Jäger: "This Jäger isn't a real man, he doesn't smoke and he

¹⁰ Directed 1957 by Hans Quest. The cousins Peter (Claus Biederstaedt) and Kurt (Gunther Philipp) own a chocolate factory. While Peter is a true playboy, Kurt is a shy character who can neither confess his feelings for the adored Sabine (Susanne Cramer) nor at least start a little conversation with her. To help his cousin, Peter engages Sabine as a nanny in Kurt's house. The only problem is, that neither of the two men has a child. With a lot of chocolate they bribe the eight year old naughty Heinerle (Peter Fischer) to play Kurt's son. After moving in, Sabine of course falls in love with Peter. But Kurt now becomes increasingly interested in his secretary, Inge (Carla Hagen), and finally marries her.

doesn't drink, he just doesn't know what to do with a woman." Instead of alcohol, he constantly drinks valerian and eats chocolate in order to calm down. When he falls in love with a customer, he hires her as a nanny for his non-existent son. The hint is clear and even without the comment of the old house maid we know that it is him who is in need of a nanny, because he never really grew up. On the other side there is Jäger's young secretary, Inge, who is helplessly in love with her boss. But Jäger cannot understand her many and evident signals. In his childish way he cannot sense her sexuality. At the end, Inge makes him very drunk and Jäger finally discovers not only the enjoyable euphoria of his first drink but also discovers women. After asking Inge, if she, too, were not "something like a woman"¹¹ she answers "it really took you a long time to find out." But — thanks to alcohol — Kurt knows that "today is the day of discoveries." Spirited, he kisses Inge and immediately asks her to become his wife. Through the mastering of alcohol he now is a real man. Like in *Wenn der Vater mit dem Sohne...*, here it is again the woman who is trying to release the man's desire by means of alcohol. It seems to be the female part in the movies to express an active sexuality whereas the men are short of desire and have a fear of it.



Fig. 6.: Kurt Jäger

40 This is as well the case in the German film *Mein Mann das Wirtschaftswunder*.¹² The director of a heavy industry company, Alexander Engelmann (Fritz Tillmann), wants to remarry for the sake of his daughter. In his opinion Julia (Cornelia Froboess) needs a mother

¹¹ "Sie sind doch auch so eine Art Frau?!"

¹² Directed 1960 by Ulrich Erfurth. Fritz Tillmann and Heinz Erhardt play two fellow soldiers, Alexander Engelmann and Paul Korn, who built up a highly successful company with the money of their former military unit, stolen in the last days of the war. But in the family, things are doing less well: Alexander's teenaged daughter Julia (Conny Froboess) is only interested in film stars and gets dismissed from one school after the other. To bring back some steadiness in his family, the widower decides to marry the famous actress Ilona Farkas (Marika Röck), whom his daughter adores. Unexpectedly, the business relation becomes a real love.

that can handle the tomboy and unruly teenager. Therefore he proposes to the famous actress Ilona Farkas (Marika Rökk), of which his daughter is a big fan. He suggests to the Hungarian film diva to hire her. Despite the warning words of his best friend, accomplice and chauffer Paul (Heinz Erhardt), that no-one can "buy a woman like one buys a milkshop," he signs a marriage contract, whose first paragraph prohibits "corporal contact." When they propose a toast on the agreement, his daughter Julia remarks amused: "When men come with champagne, they always demand something." This ambiguous statement becomes funny in the next picture, where the cork shoots out of the bottle and Paul — totally startled — apologizes with the spraying champagne in his hand: "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean it." Funnily, this *Missgeschick* becomes a metaphor of his orgasm.



Fig 7.: Sekt

41 Indeed, both men are far from any kind of sexual suggestion. When Ilona Farkas gets unerringly drunk at her wedding and dances to the fierce gipsy music, Alexander is overstrained by the situation. After her dancing, screaming, smashing of glasses, singing and artistic jumping is over, Ilona arranges to get locked in the bedroom with Alexander. While she undresses in front of him, he starts panicking and hysterically searches for an exit. When he climbs out of the window and hangs on the ledge like "grapes on the vine," she remarks cheerfully that she will "harvest him when he is ripe." His fear and reluctance of sexuality is staged in the most explicit way at the end of the movie. In the basement of his house, Ilona teases Alexander that he would not know how to kiss anyway, even if he wanted to. From

there on he embraces her confidently in order to prove that he can kiss. But in the crucial moment he chickens out and confesses that she is right. Thereupon, he rushes out of the house into the next bar, getting extremely drunk.

Everything flows

42 Two functions of alcohol regarding the men in the movies emerge in the analyzed sequences: we find a fear of sexuality and a naiveté towards women, symbolized on the one hand by a dilettante dealing with alcohol, and, on the other hand, by its excessive indulgence. Alcohol appears in all the plots as an examination that puts the boundaries of gender into question. If men control their physical and psychic boundaries, i.e., if they are not afraid of partial defragmentation and if they always find their way back from a drunken state to their predetermined gendered form, their manhood is considered to be intact. According to this, especially masculinity emerges as an instable battlefield.

43 However, the opposite is true with the women. The drinking woman¹³ on the screen can stand much more alcohol than her male counterpart and seems to be self-confident and determined. According to psychoanalysis, the regular female gender identity in hetero-normative systems has to be imperfect and unstable because it lacks the symbolic phallus that is the symbolic signifier. It first becomes fixed by the allocation of men's subjectivity or by phallic self-stratification through fetishization. But this "normality" no longer exists in the comedies of the 1950s. In fact, the female protagonists rule their gendered boundaries, they are subjects of themselves, not of somebody else. They can drink dauntlessly, and doing so, actively express their sexual desire,¹⁴ but are also presented as ridiculously deviant in the films.

44 The autonomous drinking women are a good laugh just as the men are who are too shy to drink or who drink too much. The happy end constellation aimed at by the romantic comedies of the 1950s is an inversion that exchanges the sexual, societal, and economic positions of men and women. While alcohol is the frontier of that liminal process, milk stands for the river that crosses this border and carries the binary codes of gender. In all the movies the role of these two liquids is used in the same manner without even explaining it with a single word. Only the lust for, or respectively, the incapability to consume alcohol or milk is

¹³ Furthermore, the drinking woman often is presented as dark and exotic. Take Alma (Thelma Ritter), the janitress of Jan Morrow (Doris Day) in *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959) as an example. She drinks with Brad (Rock Hudson), who loves Jan, until he literally faints. Just as the "hot blooded Hungarian" Ilona Farkas in *Mein Mann das Wirtschaftswunder*, who gets drunk and dances furiously to the gipsy band.

¹⁴ As subjects they desire someone else as an object of their desire, instead of - as Freud puts it - desiring to be desired, i.e., to be the object of another subject.

expressed, but their meaning seems to be self-evident. It is this self-evidence that refers us to the productive effect of these drinks because their subtext is able to disguise its meaning and hence cannot be easily interpreted. On the contrary, it seems odd to examine the function of this little liquid story and to give it discursive importance.

45 By analyzing romantic film-comedies as organized aggression against a certain historical occurrence of different gender identities and practices of the 1950s, we could detect a hard struggle to reconstruct a hetero-normative gender system. Within the cinematic apparatus, only the joke could cross the discursive border easily and call for the acknowledgement of the existing deviant identities. One of the techniques was to create a little and almost invisible side story to the main plot, in which this inversion could take place: the story of the consumption of milk and alcohol. In this marginalized, disguised, and comedic sphere any severe proposition could be stated. For a better understanding of historical processes, an analysis of sources of popular culture seems to be necessary if not indispensable. In addition, we should turn even more to such cultural products which are too easily marked as solely entertaining and foolish. As we hope to have shown, especially these media are holding an enormous potential for historical interpretation.

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