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Readings of (Non-)Consumption in Jan-Ole Gerster's *OH BOY* (2012)

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This thesis consists of a series of close readings of consumptive acts in Jan-Ole Gerster's debut film, *Oh Boy* (2012). I argue that the analysis of consumptive acts enables the viewer to develop a more nuanced understanding of the characters and their relationships to one another. Furthermore, these consumptive acts shift our understanding of other themes present within the film, such as the characters' confrontations with their past and with feelings of guilt. Confrontations with the past have played a large role in many scholars' and interpreters' understanding of the film, as it encourages in some ways reading *Oh Boy* as an allegory for post-unification Germany. The analyses undertaken here dedicate less attention to the film's allegorical function and investigate to a greater extent another theme that can be found throughout, the tension between the private and the public. This tension occupies a central position in these readings as its interactions with acts of consumption are striking.

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Introduction

Whether it is of food, alcohol, caffeine, or the narratives of others, Jan-Ole Gerster's debut film *Oh Boy* is a movie about consumption. Despite their centrality, consumptive actions have played only minor roles in many interpreters' understanding of the film. What I illustrate throughout this project is that consumptive behaviors—particularly those of the protagonist Niko Fischer (Tom Schilling)—bare insight into the characters' capacity and/or willingness to connect with others. Furthermore, consumptive behaviors frequently overlap and interact with the thematization of personal confrontations with the past in interesting ways.

The interaction between consumptive actions and the figures' confrontations with their past is notable because, for many interpreters, two of *Oh Boy*'s central themes are *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and post-unification German identity. What ties these among other themes together is the tension between the private and public. This tension can be best understood through what I will refer to as the characters' "degrees of openness." Both the characters' degrees of openness and this tension are made visible in part by the figures' interactions with one another, but also through the figures' consumptive actions.

A figure who exhibits a higher degree of openness could be characterized by their pursuit of reciprocal connections with others, i.e., by not only a willingness to share details of their own lives but also an apparent interest in an other sharing about themselves. These degrees of openness are, even in these fictitious scenarios, never static but constantly in flux, responsive to the subject's situation. Furthermore, these fluctuations in a figure's degree of openness often overlap with, are signaled by, or are influenced by their consumptive actions.

Notably, while the majority of the characters have what appear to be high degrees of openness, the protagonist, Niko (Tom Schilling), has a significantly lower one. For much of the film, Niko intentionally maintains the tension between the private and public and only selectively connects with the people around him. As one could perhaps imagine, his closed-off disposition (or low degree of openness) often puts him at odds with others, and these collisions of differing degrees of openness frequently determine the course and development of the film. In many instances, the difference is problematized, shaping the film's conflicts. In other instances, however, opposing degrees are what constitute the comedic in a scene. In yet other instances, these same oppositions lead to an exchange that is both problematic and comic, and the spectator is called to reconcile the serious with the funny.

This project consists of a series of close readings through which I will interrogate how consumptive actions interact with degrees of openness and the figures' confrontations with the past. In doing so, I will offer a more complete understanding of the figures and their relationships to one another, as well as deepen our understanding of the portrayal of consumptive actions as a central yet under-investigated element of the film.

There are a number of texts that have influenced the ways in which I think about *Oh Boy*. Some of the works upon which I draw in my analyses include Marco Abel's *The Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School*, to which *Oh Boy* only partially if at all belongs;[1] Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, from which the notions of optimistic attachment and

[1] See Jill Twark and Robert Blankenship's "'Berliner Sonderschule': History, Space, and Humour in Jan Ole Gerster's Oh Boy (A Coffee in Berlin)."

relations of (cruel) optimism are particularly relevant;[2] and Nora Peterson's *Involuntary Confessions of the Flesh*, which, although only tangentially related,[3] has influenced the way I conceptualize the body and has led me to consider it more closely as a channel for (potentially unintended) communication.

Summary of *Oh Boy*

Oh Boy's narrative revolves around the events of a particularly stressful day for Niko Fischer, a law school dropout living in Berlin off of an allowance given to him by his father (Ulrich Noethen), who is under the impression that Niko is still a student. Within the first half of the movie, he and his girlfriend (Katharina Schüttler) break up; a state psychologist (Andreas Schröders) refuses to reinstate his license for repeated intoxicated driving offenses; and when his father learns that Niko is no longer in school, Niko is cut off financially. Throughout the rest of the film, Niko meanders about Berlin in a series of episodic interactions woven together by Niko's futile efforts to get a cup of coffee.

Ultimately, the events of the film lead Niko to enter a bar by himself late at night. An old man, whom we later learn to be Friedrich (Michael Gwisdek), sits down next to him and tries to engage Niko in conversation. When asked about where he is from, Friedrich begins to share a number of anecdotes from his childhood in Berlin, recalling

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[2] Berlant uses these terms to explore people's continued attachment to good-life fantasies, even though "the evidence of their instability, fragility and dear cost abounds" (Berlant 2). The fantasies of the good-life that are dissolving include "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality," and the liberal-capitalist promise to foster "relations of reciprocity" that seem fair and contribute to an individual's effort lead a fulfilling life (2).

[3] Peterson explores the relationship between the subject, body, and text in early modern France and suggests that the body serves as a "*zone frontère* between the internal and external" and acts as a "locus of truth" (Peterson xxi).

the omnipresence of the *Hitlergruß*, boisterously imitating the gesture to Niko and the bartender, calling out, "heil Hitler hier, heil Hitler da." The bartender asks him to stop, which he does, and their conversation continues eventually coming to Friedrich's memory of Kristallnacht. After both characters sit in silence for a brief moment, Friedrich pays his tab and gets up to leave. But when Friedrich steps out onto the sidewalk, he immediately collapses and is taken to a hospital. Niko goes with him, stays overnight, and is informed the next morning that the old man has passed away. The film's closing shot is of Niko silhouetted in front of a window in a café, where he is finally served a cup of coffee.

Context

In 2013, *Oh Boy* received a total of six German Film Awards for best film, best director, best male main (Tom Schilling) and male supporting actors (Michael Gwisdek), best screenplay, and best soundtrack (Cherilyn MacNeil, The Major Minors). Reception outside of the academy varied dramatically, and amusingly so. Critics who had positive responses to the film include Hanna Pilarczyk, who called the film "Ein Glücksfall für das deutsche Kino"; Oliver Hüttmann, who named it "eines der mutigsten, witzigsten, sinnlichsten Deutschen Kinowerke seit Jahren"; and Thomas Caldwell, who described the film's protagonist, Niko, as a "highly sympathetic, identifiable and likeable character."

In contrast, several viewers—particularly in the United States, who experienced the film in its subtitled English form titled *A Coffee in Berlin*—had less favorable opinions. These viewers took especially issue with the construction of *Oh Boy*'s protagonist. Morgan Wilcock, for example, lamented those qualities such as "chronic

dissatisfaction, self-absorption, financial dependence, [and] laziness" are unsuitable "when it comes to generating the lead character of a film." David Ehrlich wrote critically that "accepting the film on its own terms requires viewers to embrace the same egocentrism that [the film] is urging Niko to transcend" and was frustrated by the "didactic look at the torpor of people tormented by the luxury of indecision."[4] Harshest of all is perhaps Peter Keough, who wrote that "Niko's problem is not just that he's spoiled and lazy, but that he's a wimp about it. He only maintains viewer sympathy because everyone else in the film is so obnoxious."

Whatever the viewers believe about the protagonist, their responses appear to unite on the idea that *Oh Boy* is foremost a narrative about cultural memory, national identity, and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Most of these viewers read the film's protagonist as a proxy for Germany, arguing that his efforts to confront feelings of guilt, to construct his identity, and to articulate a plan for his future each resemble the tasks faced by Germany post-unification.

This is a position we see undertaken in Patrick Ploschnitzki and David Gramling's comparison of *Oh Boy* to Max Frisch's *Stiller.* In their discussion of the film's penultimate scene, Niko's conversation with Friedrich (Michael Gwisdek), they read the characters as representatives for their respective generations.

[4] Ehrlich's criticism resembles that brought against many films of the Berlin School, namely the "allegedly limited horizon of experience—i.e., mostly that of adolescents and young adults—that these films offer their predominantly adult viewers" (Abel 27). As Abel argues is the case for films such as Thomas Arslan's 1994 *Mach die Musik leiser*, apparently mundane films in fact "encourage us to participate in the young men and women's lack of orientation and take seriously their inability to articulate clearly a (positive) vision for their own lives—an inability that derives not from a lack of caring...but from the difficulty of reframing the point of view through which they behold their circumstances of their lives" (37).

> Another possibility is that Friedrich functions [...] as a metaphor, a reminder of re-emerging right-wing extremism in Germany [...] Friedrich symbolizes the past 'creeping up on' Niko. In turn, he [Niko] would then become a figure mirroring today's young Germans. In fact, Niko's slowly increasing interest in the old man's story would mirror the interest of millennials in the German past. (529)

Readings such as this one center the film's allegorical function, giving primacy to Niko and Friedrich's representation of two distinct social groups in Germany in 2012. Similarly, Robert Blankenship and Jill Twark are interested in not only the intergenerational dynamics but also the relationship between the past and the present in general within the film. They argue that the film "provides a complex set of commentaries on German identity, cultural memory, and the ways in which Nazi barbarism is represented and perceived by young Germans... By the film's end, [Gerster] offers a complex interpretation of how German identity cannot escape being constructed by means of such connections" (366).

The central question of Blankenship and Twark's analysis is the degree to which *Oh Boy* belongs to or deviates from the Berlin School, a trademark of which is a sort of presentism that arose in response to earlier "heritage films" that "seek to transform painful memories into evocative and gripping narratives" (Rentschler 11). According to Blankenship and Twark, "whereas the heritage films of consensus distance the past from the present, and many Berlin School films distance the present from the past, *Oh Boy* highlights the interaction between both time periods" (366).

Blankenship and Twark's reading of the film clearly parallels in some ways Gerster's own comments about the topic. After a screening at the University of Notre

Dame, he said that "Because it is a film about a young man in search of his identity, I thought that the German struggle with finding their new identity should be part of the film" (Nanovic). As Gerster has made clear in numerous interviews, *Oh Boy* is actively listening to the echoes of German history and is "about the fact that even today, a generation that doesn't have anything to do with that war still has to deal with the identity of being German" (McCracken). But this is not done out of an "obligation," as one audience member inquired at the Notre Dame screening, but out of necessity, illustrating "how this history is still present" (Nanovic). As Blankenship and Twark put it, Gerster "allows [the past] to percolate through the present" (365). Gerster's treatment of the past was set by many viewers in positive light. Pilarczyk, seemingly critical of the presentism to be found among films of the Berlin School, wrote poignantly that the film "wendet seinen Blick auf die Geschichte der Stadt und legt nach und nach frei, wie die Fixierung auf die Jetztzeit die Geschichte verdrängt und ständiges Abgelenktsein auch nur ein Weggucken ist."

This "percolation" of the past through the present also resonates with the ways in which I will I discuss this film. The analyses undertaken here shift the focus away from the historical allegory discussed above and instead foreground the narratives at hand. This aligns inadvertently with Gerster's suggestion that *Oh Boy* is "not just about a generation of young people living in Berlin in 2012. It was important to me that it has a little bit of a timeless character" (Nanovic). In scrutinizing *Oh Boy*'s portrayals of consumption, one is led to take seriously Niko's apparent listlessness, uncertainty, and his grappling with guilt, memory, and longing, without the expectation that his experiences are representative or allegorical.

This project is organized in a way that is similar to the episodic structure of the film, in that it is divided into sections in which I discuss Niko's relationship to and interactions with other figures. Both between and within the two sections, the discussions of various characters are ordered not by their chronology in the film but by the objects of consumption that play meaningful roles within the respective episodes. I also note that, while the section titles highlight particular objects of consumption, discussion of each object leaks into and informs other analyses, as multiple acts of consumption are often portrayed within the same scene or set of scenes.

Julika, Karl: The Non-Consumption of Food

Because of its centrality in the film, most readings of *Oh Boy* include some analysis of the role played by coffee/caffeine. And this is certainly an object of consumption that I will discuss at length. But to begin, I will highlight an aspect of Niko's consumptive behavior that is not discussed in the literature: Niko does not eat anything throughout the course of the film. My reading of Niko's non-consumption of food will begin with an analysis of his relationship to Julika (Friederike Kempter), a former classmate of Niko's who was bullied for her weight. What we will observe is that his non-consumption of food offers reason to shift the assumptions we may make about his relationship to Julika.

At the remark that Niko does not consume food throughout the film, one might assume that either Niko is implied to eat "off camera" or no character consumes food, as is true in countless films. But this is not the case. Niko's non-consumption of food is explicitly thematized at several points, in that he refuses each of the numerous

opportunities he has to do so. For instance, the grandmother of Matze's apparent drug dealer offers to make him sandwiches, but Niko refuses each of her offers. Niko's non-consumption is most striking, however, when juxtaposed with another character's consumption of food. In either case, this observation bears significant weight when considering the trauma Julika experienced due to the bullying she endured for her weight.

Julika is introduced in a restaurant scene during which she approaches Niko and a friend of his, Matze (Marc Hosemann), after recognizing Niko from their time in school. When Niko does not immediately recognize her, Julika explains that they were classmates until, in the ninth grade, she transferred to a boarding school for "übergewichtige Kinder." Throughout their relatively short conversation, Julika reveals that she had a crush on Niko, despite his and other students' mistreatment of her. While the extent to which Niko participated remains unclear, the bullying that Julika suffered from her classmates led to emotional torment and a fight with self-harm ("man weint Nächte lang, man verletzt sich selbst, einmal hab' ich sogar versucht mich umzubringen").

Niko and Matze are shocked at Julika's experience, in no small part because Niko is, to whatever extent, responsible for Julika's suffering. Unable to respond, Matze and Niko exchange blank, panicked expressions until Julika concludes "Schwamm darüber" and changes the subject. As a testament to her efforts to put the past behind them, she changes the subject to a performance-art show in which she is later participating and offers them tickets. While Niko hesitates, Matze, an aspiring actor, eagerly accepts and promises to attend.

As some scholars have argued, this scene is important to the film as it is a moment in which Niko is forced to confront his "untethered" nature and the harm he has done. Ploschnitzki and Gramling argue that "Niko is until this day studiously unaware of the long-term harm he personally had done to Julika in the wake of his bullying" (520). Though they later contradict themselves somewhat by suggesting that he "is to some degree aware of his having caused harm" (520), I argue that Niko is acutely aware of the harm he has caused and that this becomes apparent only when reading the film's portrayals of consumption. Furthermore, numerous elements of this scene encourage the viewer to read the film through this lens.

When the scene first opens, a waitress sets a plate of food in front of Matze but not in front of Niko. She turns to him, asking in English, "you really don't want anything at all?," before informing him that the coffee machine is broken (as he has made one of many unsuccessful attempts to get coffee). The absence of food on Niko's half of the table is emphasized in several ways. Visually, there is a stark contrast illustrated by Niko's and Matze's sides of the small table, given that Niko's side will only ever be occupied by a lone glass of water. Furthermore, we recognize this emphasis aurally. First, it is noteworthy that the server's question is in English—it is the only line of dialog not in German throughout the film. Secondly, we recognize the emphasis on Matze's food via the noises that he makes while eating: when the shot changes and the waitress is shown walking away, the camera reveals Matze scraping ketchup from a glass bottle using the handle of a metal fork. While Niko does not comment on Matze's eating, he is shown sizing up his friend's meal, glancing between the plate and Matze with furrowed brows and a judging expression, as can be seen in figure 2. The centrality of food is even further

emphasized in the placement of the camera: as can be seen in both figures 1 and 2, this scene appears to be arranged as a typical shot/countershot. However, when the camera is looking toward Niko it is not positioned above and behind Matze's shoulder, as one may expect, but seemingly atop a table, as if occupying the food's perspective.

Fig. 1. Still from Gerster, *Oh Boy* (21.05)

Fig. 2. Still from Gerster, *Oh Boy* (21:12)

This is only one of a few instances in which Niko's aversion to consuming food is dramatized. While clearly possible, I find it quite difficult to overlook the fact that Niko's

reunion with Julika, someone whom he bullied for her weight, begins in a restaurant in which he both chooses not to order food and shows disgust at his friend's eating. Made evident by his non-consumption of food and he and Julika's shared background is an embodied recollection of the harm he has caused. Furthermore, I argue that this apparent aversion to food is the internalization of the fatphobia that necessarily informed the former bullying.

Here, fatphobia can be read as an ideology that Niko has taken on after participating in bullying Julika. The way that Lois Althusser describes the function of ideologies is helpful in that, as he suggests, one does not first foster and only then act according to a belief: rather, there is a "material ritual" through which an ideology or belief is established. In the case of Niko and of *Oh Boy*, bullying—an action that is by definition routine—functions as this material ritual. Furthermore, Althusser's argument that it is not real relations of power but an "imaginary representation of the real world" that is portrayed in ideology is pertinent (451). Through the ideology of fatphobia, an individual's "power," or status as an equal human being, is dependent not on one's real status as a human being but on one's body's likeness to thin bodies.

Suggesting that Niko is already aware of the harm he has caused may shift our interpretation of the film, in that this first conversation with Julika is no longer a necessarily pivotal moment. Instead, the restaurant scene becomes one of a number of Niko's confrontations with his past. Julika, a person who is inseparable from the actions about which Niko feels guilt, makes visible the grappling with the past that Niko otherwise would conduct internally. That these internal confrontations with the past are drawn out, made visible, by his consumptive actions calls to mind Peterson's involuntary

confessions of the flesh. A key feature of involuntary confessions is of course that the subject's body has revealed something that would otherwise have been kept internal, as is the case here.

That Niko would prefer to keep this processing of the past private illustrates the low degree of openness that he embodies in this scene, but this is not the extent of the evidence we have for his closed-off disposition. Rather, we first see this when Julika initially approaches the table. For whatever reason, Niko is unwilling to share information about himself, and when she asks what he has been doing, he can only offer a muttering non-answer that he uses to reverse the question ("ich mach'... hmm. Und du? Erzähl du!"). More importantly, his low degree of openness is evident in his and Matze's non-response to Julika's experiences. While they both technically consume Julika's narrative—they clearly listen and are discomforted by it—Niko is unable to incorporate her narrative. The difference between the consumption and incorporation of a narrative lies in the extent to which the subject, Niko, engages with or "takes to heart" what is being said. In this case, while he listens to what she is saying, he is unable to respond with substance or to attempt to make amends for the actions about which he feels guilt.

What we will observe when considering both this and the later interaction with Julika is that Niko is unable to make amends with her in this moment because of his low degree of openness. This is true despite that fact that, as is betrayed by his non-consumption, he is aware of the harm he has caused and familiar with the guilt he feels for those past actions.

The unsuccessful reconciliation of their shared past in the restaurant stands in notable contrast to the conversation they have much later in the film after the

performance-art show. After her performance, Niko goes outside to smoke a cigarettewhere Julika joins him moments later.[5] During their conversation, both characters embody a high degree of openness. This begins with Julika, who describes the feeling of performing on stage, celebrating in particular the "gutes Gefühl" one experiences "wenn du dich so vor ein paar Fremden total offenbarst."

Julika's celebration of performing inherently embraces a high degree of openness, and this attitude resonates with Niko so sincerely that he shares, for the first time in the movie, the uncertainty he feels and his struggle to understand who he is. He says to Julika, "kennst du das, wenn man so das Gefühl hat, dass die Menschen um einen herum irgendwie merkwürdig sind? Aber wenn du ein bisschen länger darüber nachdenkst, dann wird dir irgendwie klar, dass vielleicht nicht die Anderen, sondern, dass man selbst das Problem ist." The grappling with feelings of guilt that Niko has otherwise conducted internally is disclosed in this exchange not unintentionally by his consumptive actions but consciously and illustrates a significant turning point in his relationship with Julika.

In suggesting that in both interactions with Julika Niko is attempting sincerely to make amends, reconcile feelings of guilt, and foster an authentic connection to Julika, I have distanced this analysis from existing interpretations of *Oh Boy.* As mentioned earlier, Ploschnitzki and Gramling suggest, for instance, that the exchange in the restaurant is the first to make "Niko aware of his guilt and unearned impunity." These

[5] As can be seen in other moments of *Oh Boy* as well, the consumption of nicotine overlaps here with a moment of introspection, and Niko appears to instrumentalize cigarettes to supplement self-reflection. While I will not discuss the portrayal and consumption of cigarettes at length, it is worth noting that Niko's use of cigarettes parallels the role cigarettes have played in western cultures as discussed by Wolfgang Schivelbusch. In a different form of this project, the social histories of alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine could play greater roles in the analysis.

scholars also argue that “Having left his girlfriend in the beginning of the film, the only reason Niko spends time with Julika is to confirm his decision to leave that relationship and feel better about himself” (524). First, as I will discuss later, it is worth noting that the film’s opening scene is more ambiguous than these scholars suggest. But the greater dissonance between Ploschnitzki and Gramling’s interpretation of the film and my own is, second, that my analysis reads Niko’s efforts to make amends as genuine.

The conversation that began on the sidewalk is interrupted moments after Niko shares the uncertainty he is experiencing when a group of teenagers ask first for cigarettes but then begin to harass Julika. When she sticks up for herself and insults the belligerent young men, one of them threatens to hit her. Niko steps in to defend her and is hit in the face in the process. The teenagers scramble away as Julika helps Niko up from the ground, and the two return to the venue to tend to his bleeding nose.

As mentioned, Niko’s disposition in this scene stands in stark contrast to the low degree of openness he embodies throughout the rest of the movie. His willingness to share private information about himself leads to a momentary, but successful, reconciliation with Julika. While in the bathroom, Niko first blames Julika for provoking the teenagers, suggesting that she should have just ignored them. But Julika reminds him of how often she tried to ignore his and others’ comments from when they were in school, how long it took for her to move on, and explains that she therefore no longer ignores anything. Her high degree of openness continues to resonate with Niko, and he finally apologizes for the bullying.

Their reunification ends shortly thereafter when Niko interrupts their kissing to say that he was uncomfortable with having sex as it would be a sort of "Vergangenheitsbewältigung." That he does not want to have sex with Julika is another reason I disagree with Ploschnitzki and Gramling's suggestion that he is using Julika to "confirm his decision to leave" the relationship at the beginning of the film (524). Julika, furious and insulted, sends him out of the bathroom. While their connection to one another comes to a quick end, the viewer still has reason enough to see Niko's confrontation with feelings of guilt as successful in that he, for the first and only time in the movie, is open about himself and makes a clear effort to address feelings of guilt.

Another scene in which Niko's non-consumption of food is apparent is the introduction of his neighbor, Karl Speckenbach (Justus von Dohnányi). While this exchange takes place earlier than the scenes just discussed, it is best understood when seen in light of Niko's relationship to Julika. Niko and Karl's conversation is important to this thesis for several reasons: it offers further evidence of Niko's aversion to eating, introduces a second and important object of consumption, alcohol, and centers the tension between the private and public and degrees of openness.

Aware that Niko had somewhat recently moved into the apartment building, Karl brings him a bowl of meatballs that his wife made as a housewarming gift. Throughout their conversation, Karl tries desperately to befriend Niko, asking him questions about his private life and sharing details of his own. Meanwhile, Niko makes numerous efforts to maintain both an emotional and physical distance from Karl. What we observe is that Niko's efforts to close himself off from Karl are undermined by the two objects of

consumption in the scene: the first is the bowl of meatballs presented as a "Begrüßungsgeschenk," and the second is a flask that Karl offers Niko.

The social/emotional gap that Niko aims to establish, and Karl aims to close, is communicated materially in the figures' body language and the way each acts in the liminal space between the hallway and Niko's apartment. For instance, when Karl first arrives, Niko takes on a defensive posture: he only opens the door halfway and keeps a hand on both the door and the frame. In this way, as is shown in figure 3, Niko uses his body to maintain the division between the inside and outside of his apartment, maintaining the tension between the private and public. Just as Niko's posture communicates his low degree of openness, Karl's illustrates the opposite. As can be seen in figure 4, even when he first presents the meatballs, he is pressing his way into the apartment. Karl's efforts to close the emotional/social gap between himself and Niko continue as he makes numerous attempts to look into the apartment, standing on his toes and cocking his head to peer past Niko.

Fig. 3. Still from Gerster, *Oh Boy* (14:23)

Fig. 4. Still from Gerster, *Oh Boy* (14:39)

While the presentation of the meatballs destabilizes Niko's defensive posture, even more clear is how discomforted Niko is when Karl cajoles him into eating one ("die sind echt gut. Probieren Sie mal"). When Niko hears this, he can do little more than stare blankly at Karl with his furrowed brows and condemning gaze. Almost without breaking eye-contact, Niko retrieves and takes an infinitesimal bite of a meatball, barely chewing and almost refusing to swallow. Karl, however, accepts Niko's affirming hum and fails to observe that Niko silently gags on the meatball in disgust, apparently on the verge of vomiting.

The disgust that Niko experiences at this point is made most evident at the end of this scene. After Karl leaves his apartment, the shot changes and the camera looks over Niko's shoulder as he pours the meatballs into the toilet. At first blush, the meatballs appear as a comedic prop: they smell and taste so terrible that Niko flushes them instead

of throwing them away.[6] But the comedic in this scene draws our attention away from an action that should be taken seriously. And this aligns quite clearly with how Gerster has discussed the role of the comedic in *Oh Boy*. He said at the screening at the University of Notre Dame, "I think humor is a good way of describing something serious, and the other way around. Sometimes I think a serious thing is the best way to describe something humorous" (Nanovic).

Eventually, Karl's efforts to get into Niko's apartment, satisfying his curiosity about both Niko and the contents of his apartment, succeed. In no small part this is due to the meatballs: on the one hand, being cajoled into eating a meatball was off-putting for Niko; on the other hand, in "accepting" the housewarming gift, Niko inadvertently takes part in a social contract because of which he is expected to invite Karl into his apartment. But Niko is clearly willing to break this contract, in that he states curtly after eating part of the meatball, "wie gesagt, ich bin gerade erst eingezogen. Ich kann gar nichts anbieten."

It is at that point that Karl grinningly reveals a flask and, when the shot changes, the two of them are seen standing in Niko's living room. The object that finally eases the tension, bringing Niko closer to connecting with someone else, is therefore not exclusively the meatballs but a flask. The narrative would be different if Karl brought, say, wine, beer, or even a bottle of liquor. The flask is an intentionally illicit object whose

[6] While this observation does not play a significant role in my analysis, it is worth noting that the camera seems to suggest that something out of place occurs in this scene. When it is no longer looking over Niko's shoulder, the camera peers around the corner of the bathroom door, evoking the sensation that the viewer is perceiving an action that would otherwise be kept private. This raises intriguing questions about the extent to which the viewer breaks through divisions between the private and public.

purpose is often to make the consumption of its contents as inconspicuous as possible: the alcohol's container, therefore, problematizes its consumption.

This is important to keep in mind as we turn our attention to the content of the rest of their conversation. Once inside the apartment, Karl snoops through a number of the open (and closed) boxes stacked along the walls of Niko's apartment. Eventually, he comes across a photo of Niko with Elli, the woman from the beginning of the film, in Paris. Karl assumes that they are still together and makes comments about Niko and Elli being in love and the potential that they would soon have children. But Niko does not correct Karl's assumptions, remarking only that "es ist ein älteres Foto" and then reversing and deflecting the comment about children.

Niko is either unable or chooses not to articulate that he and Elli have broken up. At first blush, it appears that this is because Niko plainly does not want to be open with Karl, as is evident by his body language and his effort not to invite him into the apartment. Beyond this, in not disclosing the actual state of his relationship with Elli, Niko is able to avoid newly confronting the fact of their breakup.

The role of the flask in this scene is interesting. At first blush, alcohol functions as a social lubricant: it persuades Niko to allow Karl into his apartment; enables him to listen to and consume Karl's narrative; and it propels an assessment of both men's pasts. But the extent to which Niko's degree of openness has actually increased is limited: while he listens to Karl's experiences, he does not fully engage with him or incorporate said narrative; and, as discussed, it is also abundantly clear that Niko remains closed-off and he refuses to reciprocate Karl's vulnerability.

This function of alcohol is seen throughout the film, including both the second scene with Julika, after the performance-art show, as well as the conversation with Friedrich towards the end of the film. What most strikingly unites each of these narratives is that they are retrospective: Karl shares the guilt he feels about the decline of his marriage; Julika addresses with Niko the way bullying has shaped who she became; and Friedrich, as I will discuss below, tells Niko about his childhood during the Nazi regime.

Elli, Walter, Friedrich: Caffeine and Alcohol

While the function of alcohol to enable the consumption of retrospective narratives is not limited to the exchange with Karl, it is not the only role that alcohol plays within the film. And this fact encourages close analysis also of the other instances in which alcohol is consumed in this film. Before then, however, we first need to consider an additional object of consumption, caffeine. Alcohol and caffeine are particularly interesting when juxtaposed with one another because of their opposing literal and symbolic functions within the film. The opposition of these two objects is explicitly thematized in a few scenes, including Niko's conversation with Friedrich at the end of the film, but is cumulatively made evident throughout the movie.

If we recall the restaurant scene discussed earlier, one thing that we may notice is that Niko's attempted consumption of caffeine overlapped with the first conversation he has with Julika: as his quest for caffeine was incomplete, so too was his reconciliation with the feelings of guilt associated with their shared past. If we see Niko's many attempts to procure caffeine as signals of his efforts to garner forward momentum, then we can make quick sense of the ultimate shot of the film in which he finally has his cup

of coffee and Niko's quest to reconcile feelings of guilt and move forward comes to an appropriately ambiguous but presumably positive conclusion.

We can attribute additional weight to this object of consumption, however, and better understand Niko's relationships to others and to himself in revisiting this object. What is notably overlooked is that, while Niko will spend the entirety of the movie trying to drink coffee, he declines his first, sure opportunity to do so at the outset of the film.

In the opening scene of *Oh Boy*, Niko is getting dressed in a dark apartment early in the morning, apparently attempting to sneak away from the still-sleeping woman in the bed, who, as we later learn from the conversation with Karl, is his girlfriend Elli (Katharina Schüttler). When she wakes up and sees him preparing to leave, she asks him to stay a little longer and offers to make them coffee. But unlike every future opportunity Niko will have to consume exactly that, he declines. And when she asks to make plans for later that day, he declines again. Instead, he offers vague, misleading statements about how busy he is. Elli realizes that Niko is lying about his "viele Termine" and, clearly wounded, gets up from the bed and leaves the room, leaving Niko silhouetted alone at the foot of the bed.

This first scene takes place before the title card, isolating it from the rest of the film. And, on its own, there is relatively little insight to garner from this initial exchange, as the scene is otherwise filled with an ambiguity that invites the spectator to fill in the blanks with assumptions and speculations about the characters' connection to one another. At first blush, for example, one may have the impression that Niko is waking up in a bed with someone with whom he has no existing relationship—this assumption could

perhaps contextualize or justify why he is evasive and avoids making plans for later that day.

Only when the audience learns later on that Niko and Elli's relationship entailed some longer-term investment from each of them does the significance of the film's opening scene become clear, granting emotional weight and gravity to the breakup that took place at the outset. Furthermore, depending on our initial assumptions, this reveal may have shifted significantly what we had previously thought about either character or the movie. Certainly, this (re)shapes how we read Elli's response: the implication of a longer-term connection between the two characters could suggest that Elli's response is grounded in familiarity: she is particularly wounded because his evasive actions were not new but habitual.

The extent to which the evasiveness of Niko's behavior could be described as habitual is another element of the character that is only revealed throughout the course of the film. It is most clearly made evident, however, through the conversation with his father, Walter. During that exchange, we learn that Niko began and broke off a variety of activities as a child—capoeira, piano, guitar, trumpet, fencing—and that Walter continues to be bitter about what he perceives as a series of lost investments. Incensed that Niko has done nothing but "nachgedacht" for the two years that he was still accepting money for law school, Walter asks him finally: "warum überrascht es mich überhaupt, dass du dein Studium abgebrochen hast?"

What may have appeared as a small detail—that Elli and Niko's relationship entailed a longer-term commitment—becomes an anchor and orientation point for this segment of the reading. What we first observe is that the end of his relationship and the

missed opportunity for a cup of coffee establish a symbolic weight granted to coffee as an object of consumption. Furthermore, the opening scene begins to reveal that Niko's apparent preference to remain unbound from those around him, and whether he chooses to connect with others, is determined to some extent by an evaluation of the social obligations that would be assumed in doing so.

This clarifies to an extent Niko's refusal to engage with Karl, whom he would have to invite into his apartment. But a clearer example of this can be found when Niko and Matze visit the set of a movie, in which Matze's friend is playing the lead role. There, Niko declines a role within the film—he avoids making a commitment to the project—but otherwise shows a higher degree of openness when no obligations are associated with doing so.

The first interaction between Niko, Matze, and Matze's actor friend Phillip (Arnd Klawitter) takes place inside of Phillip's trailer. There, at Matze's request, Phillip offers to ask the director for "ein paar freie unbesetzte Rollen," but, as mentioned, Niko declines without hesitation. When Philip begins his dramatic retelling of the film within a film's narrative, however, Niko embodies a relatively high degree of openness, responding when prompted by Phillip to guess what happens next, allowing himself to be interested by the project. In the scene to follow, just before filming resumes, Niko and Phillip talk about how each of them met Matze, and Niko listens to Phillip's praise of the talent their mutual friend displayed during acting school.

What these scenes with Phillip further cement is the notion that Niko's engagement with others is enabled in part by the absence of commitments assumed in doing so. And, in effect, the openness that Niko exhibits in this moment is so much

higher that he consumes multiple levels of narratives: the fictitious narrative of the film within a film both in its retelling and when displayed on a view finder; the real narrative of Phillip's experience portraying the character; and the real narrative of how Matze and Phillip met one another. Niko's willingness to incorporate others' narratives illustrates a higher degree of openness, even though he maintains distance by opting out of commitments and obligations. He can disengage without consequence whenever it suits him and, in fact, does so when his father calls at the end of that scene.

Niko's conversations with Phillip contextualize the evasiveness that he shows when interacting with Elli, and his consumption of narratives when embodying a higher degree of openness offers an interesting intersection between consumptive actions and openness. But to return to the more concrete objects of consumption, I want to shift our attention to the exchange that follows the scenes with Phillip, the conversation between Niko and his father Walter. It is at this point in the movie when Niko learns that Walter discovered he dropped out of law school and that his bank account has been closed. This exchange is important because we see for the first time in the film that alcohol operates as a sort of *Ersatzkaffee*.

After he leaves the movie set, Niko goes to a golf course where he meets with Walter and Schneider, Walter's assistant. Shortly thereafter, they return to the clubhouse for drinks where Niko asks for coffee. Walter, however, interrupts him and, arguing that that it is "viel zu spät für Kaffee," orders schnapps for the three of them. This is the first of a few instances where coffee is substituted with alcohol.

How Niko comes to consume alcohol, however, is just as important as the act itself. It is noteworthy that Walter encourages (almost coerces) the consumption of

schnapps in place of coffee, because Walter is necessarily aware that he will, at some point, have to inform his son that he is cutting him off. Throughout the conversation, Niko is unable to respond to his father's criticism with any substance or to make meaningful amends. Their conversation comes to an abrupt and bleak conclusion after Walter says to him, "das Einzige, was ich noch für dich tun kann, ist nichts mehr für dich zu tun."

The fact that Walter necessarily anticipated the possibility that the exchange would take this course is hard to ignore because it signals that the schnapps Walter orders for Niko is being posed explicitly as a substance to be consumed in response to bad news. And this is clearly dramatized by Walter, who drinks his schnapps in one go after standing up to leave. Based on the bleak conclusion of their conversation, it is clear that alcohol is not portrayed, at least for Niko, as an efficacious tool. Rather, alcohol represents an obstacle for Niko to overcome, in that it literally keeps him from consuming caffeine and is introduced at a time when he fails to be honest and to make amends with his father.

Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* comes to mind, in that Niko fosters a relation of cruel optimism to alcohol. However, as opposed to the fantasy of "the good life," at hand is some other fantasy, one perhaps of masculinity or of adulthood. In either case, two important elements of this fantasy are (1) the consumption of alcohol in response to negative experiences and emotions and (2) an image of what it means to be a successful, masculine adult. In the conversation with his father, Niko is forced to confront feelings of guilt for being dishonest with Walter, and Walter leads him to do so with alcohol, whereby Niko emulates the masculinity/adulthood that Walter performs. In actuality,

Niko's consumption of alcohol hinders his ability to reconcile past actions and to move forward.

The substitution of caffeine for alcohol can be found again in the scene in which Niko meets Friedrich. Even at the end of this particularly long day, when Niko first enters the bar, he tries to order a coffee. This time, however, upon finding that the machine has already been cleaned and retired for the night, he orders alcohol in its place on his own accord. Pensively sitting alone at the bar, Niko lights a cigarette, presumably to reflect. Again, his efforts to consume caffeine signal his efforts to reconcile negative emotions and to garner some forward momentum.

After a fleeting moment of silence, the old man we later learn to be Friedrich drunkenly approaches Niko to begin a conversation, complaining that he understands "kein Wort von dem, was die [Menschen] alle reden." Niko remarks that he would prefer to be alone, but Friedrich ignores him and continues complaining until they take a shot together. For a moment, they do not say anything to one another, but Niko breaks the silence by asking Friedrich, "Sie sind nicht von hier, oder?," and his question incites a series of anecdotes from Friedrich's childhood.

In this scene, alcohol operates in both of the ways that have been identified earlier. For instance, though alcohol is not truly the reason he cannot consume caffeine, its consumption in place of coffee is reminiscent of its earlier function as an obstacle to Niko, in that it is consumed primarily because coffee is unavailable. But alcohol also functions as it did in the exchange with Karl, in that Niko's consumption of alcohol leads him to engage with Friedrich, to listen to his stories from childhood and to consume retrospective narratives.

The narrative of note is Friedrich's memory of Kristallnacht and the implicitly communicated guilt he feels for having worried most about whether he would be able to ride his bike on the street if it were filled with glass. At the end of this anecdote, Friedrich pays and leaves, but he immediately collapses onto the sidewalk when he leaves the bar. At this point, Friedrich is taken to the hospital where Niko stays overnight, learning the next day that Friedrich has passed away and that there are no relatives or kin to inform of his death. Both the finality of Friedrich's death and the severity of the guilt he shared with Niko leave a significant impact on Niko. In much the same way that Julika's high degree of openness resonated with Niko, Friedrich's openness also resonates with Niko, and the impact he had on him leads to the film's final moments.

While *Oh Boy*'s closing scene is quite ambiguous, the viewer has plenty of reason to believe that Niko has, to whatever extent, reconciled with his past actions and initiated the forward momentum that was sought throughout the film's narrative. The viewer can only come to this conclusion in reading an act of consumption, in accepting the symbolic weight attached to caffeine.

Conclusion

This project is unique in its interrogation of the consumptive acts portrayed in *Oh Boy.* Through these portrayals and the roles played by objects of consumption such as alcohol, caffeine, and food, *Oh Boy* offers its viewers context for the ambiguity present in the film and provides details that deepen one's understanding of the figures and their relationship to one another. Readings of consumption and non-consumption entail the potential for a number of contradictions and inconsistencies, both those explored and

those only briefly mentioned. It is not, however, a single symbolic function of any particular substance for which I argue; rather, this project aimed to highlight the plurality of roles that objects of consumption play and the interaction between them.

The line of thinking presented in this project could be applied to a variety of other texts. One could, for instance, continue with close analyses of Gerster's second film, *Lara* (2019), where one could consider the role played by nicotine and alcohol in the protagonist's life. Another film that comes to mind is Werner Herzog's *Woyzeck* (1979), in which consumption is one of numerous ways in which agency is signaled, in that the protagonist is forced to eat nothing but peas as part of a medical experiment. One could also branch away from film and instead take Büchner's fragments of *Woyzeck* (1879) to conduct similar analyses. Reading such works through a lens of consumption emphasizes the notion that the body can be a channel of communication and one that has the potential to shift our understanding of a text's themes and figures.

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