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Arctic Rolls and Gender Roles: Female and Male Eating Disorders in Karen Duve's *Regenroman* and other texts

Abstract

The following article examines disordered eating in men and women. It discusses the novel *Regenroman* [*Rain*] by German writer Karen Duve focusing on gender roles, food consumption and the interconnection between female bulimia and male binge eating in the two protagonists. The essay aims to show that the highly gendered issue of eating and wider aspects of food consumption in contemporary societies require an approach that engages with the fundamental link between perceptions of both male and female eating behaviour as part of a broader construction of 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. Duve's fictional exploration in *Regenroman* and in other texts employs realism counterposed by parody and the grotesque, and undermined by shifting, conflicting perspectives. Her texts offer, this article argues, the discursive space to explore the topic of disordered and gendered eating innovatively.

Keywords: gender, male eating disorders, bulimia, binge eating, the grotesque, narrative perspectivism, feminist cultural critique.

Beyond the field of texts focused on medically recognised pathological eating disorders, there are a wealth of narratives about food and food consumption throughout centuries and across literatures. They range from gluttonous devourers of all things fleshy in medieval literature, through Baroque connoisseurs, Romantic seekers after special nourishment, and modern hunger artists to post-modern picky eaters.[1] However, it is mainly thanks to feminist engagement with the topic of food consumption that the deep links between the perception of women's bodies and female eating disorders have been highlighted and the socio-cultural, political and aesthetic contexts that de- and prescribe women's roles in Western societies explored. Bagley, Calamita and Robson (2018) and other studies are testimony to the wide spectrum of critique in women's writing that has been and still is advancing engagement with fictional, auto-fictional, and autobiographical texts exploring anorexia nervosa, binge eating, bulimia nervosa and other clinically defined feeding and eating disorders. This focus is mainly on girls and women, but, as part of a re-evaluation of gender, often also opens other perspectives. It is clearly still the case that *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (Orbach 1978); that this feminist issue surely necessitates *Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (Chernin 1981); and that women and girls struggle particularly under the *Unbearable Weight* (Bordo 1993) of perceived or real expectations of others and themselves with regards to body shape, looks and 'properly' feminine behaviour – to name just three seminal texts that have advanced research in the field since the 1970s.

Men and boys who show signs of eating disorders appear only rarely in contemporary fictional and non-fictional texts, despite the growing engagement with disordered eating in general, and the constantly rising figures in the western world of boys and men diagnosed with eating disorders (Colin and Lemberg 2014: 195). Eating disorders and transgender is even less explored (Witcomb et.al 2015: 287-93). Critical awareness of eating disorders as an issue for boys and men – in addition to girls and women – is only very slowly emerging in popular discourse, in medical science, and in the arts and humanities.[2] This is not exclusively due to the relatively small number of males with diagnoses compared with females.[3] This article argues that one key reason for the lack of awareness in popular as in medical and literary discourse is the gendered perception, embedded in prevailing notions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity', of eating disorders as 'female disorders' (Herzog, Bradburn and Newman 2014: 45). Sander Gilman's 2004 *Fat Boys. A Slim Book* is one recent example in the emerging field exploring male disordered eating. In his introduction Gilman reverses Orbach's title *Fat is a Feminist Issue* when answering the opening rhetorical question 'A Woman's Issue?' with 'Fat is a Man's Issue' (2004: 1). Although Gilman's detailed study

goes on to illustrate the historical and cultural complexity of the 'fat man' with due diligence, his initial rhetorical pitching of women against men remains indicative of a trend that unhelpfully reinforces the prevailing gender dichotomy when it comes to the topics of fatness, body image, and food consumption. Susan Bordo, by contrast, shows a way to open up this discourse. With its focus on feminist cultural critique and political and transcultural aspects of eating disorders, her study stresses that men 'are developing the eating and body image disorders that we once thought only girls had' (2003: xxii). Bordo emphasises that 'body insecurity can be exported, imported and marketed across the globe'(2003: xxiv); this applies not only between cultures but also across genders. Fat and the related field of disordered eating and eating disorders[4] is an issue that concerns society as whole; and it is feminist cultural critique and women's writing in particular that create a discursive space for its discussion.

The following article emphasizes the role of women's writing, narrative fiction and literary analysis in the discussion of disordered eating. It focuses on gender roles, food consumption and the interconnection between male and female eating disorders in Karen Duve's 1999 *Regenroman* [*Rain*], which provides a rare example in the field of women's writing of a novel that depicts a man with a developing eating disorder. In exploring Duve's engagement with the topic I aim to show that, precisely because it is such a highly gendered issue, eating disorders and wider aspects of disordered food consumption in contemporary society require an approach that engages with the fundamental link between perceptions of both male and female eating behaviour as part of a much broader construction of 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. Duve's fictional exploration of the topic, I will argue, offers a space to explore these questions. My discussion of *Regenroman* is preceded by an overview of Duve's œuvre to show how this author links food consumption, eating disorders and cultural critique in her other texts.

It is important to emphasize that this article does not focus on non-fictional narratives of male eating disorders authored by those directly affected, such as male sufferers, their carers, family or friends. Elsewhere, I passionately advocate the importance of such male- and transgender-authored narratives.[5] Here, however, I explore the contribution of feminist cultural critique in the negotiation of social gender roles. I will outline how Duve portrays a struggle fought out in the field of food consumption and gendered constructions of the body.

Love songs, power and 'decent eating' – Duve's other texts

Disorderly eating and eating disorders feature in both the fictional and non-fictional works of Duve. She shows the close link between food consumption and other urgent contemporary social issues: gender roles and attempts at revision; concepts of masculinity and femininity; power structures in the political and domestic spheres; consumerist culture and the ethical and ecological issues raised by genetically modified food; exploitation of the natural environment; and factory farming of animals. Duve's second novel after *Regenroman, Dies ist kein Liebeslied* (2002) [*This Is Not a Lovesong*], features a young woman, Anne Strelau, who is obese, obsessed with food, and goes through phases of self-harm and thoughts of suicide. The overweight anti-heroine in this dark anti-Bildungsroman has been struggling since childhood with her sense of identity and her body. The decision to go on her first diet is cynically described as 'ein einschneidender, wenn nicht sogar der wichtigste Moment im Leben eines Mädchens' (2002: 43) ['a decisive, if not the most decisive, step in a girl's life' (2005: 41)] echoing Kim Chernin's critical description of diets as 'puberty rites' in contemporary society (1986: 167). In an interview Duve has talked about the agony of writing the character of Anne Strelau and revealed her personal experience with bulimia: 'Allerdings hat Kotzen natürlich etwas Beschämendes, Würdeloses, überhaupt ist es eine erbärmliche Sucht' (2002: 9) ['But to puke has of course something shameful, undignified, it is after all a rather miserable addiction']. In Duve's 2006 *Taxi*, another novel that has some parallels with the author's own life, the long and monotonous stretches of driving through the city highlight the alienation of the individual in its dehumanised urban environment. Urban alienation leads to self-neglect that includes disordered (under) eating by the female protagonist, taxi-driving Alex, who also shows signs of a borderline psychosis (see Bartel 2011: 179-94). Duve's deeply harrowing *Macht* (2016) [*The Prepper Room*] is a dystopian novel set in the not-so-distant year 2031 at a time when the ecosystem is about to collapse and food resources are running dangerously low. In the midst of global crisis a political power struggle between men and women is brutally played out in the domestic sphere. Literally and metaphorically underneath the façade of the caring home of a father and responsible citizen with seemingly 'feminist' values lies the hidden *Prepper Room,* the place of household bondage which Mike Mitchell takes as title for his 2018 translation of *Macht* (literally 'power'). The male narrator Sebastian has been holding his estranged politician wife Christine locked up for two years in the kitchen. This isolated room with its nostalgically homely furnishings is anything but a 'safe room'. Rather it is the scene of a gendered power struggle that culminates in repeated and violent scenes of the raping and torturing of Christine. The horrific physical abuse is preceded or followed by deeply disconcerting acts of

viciously enforced submission through female-coded domestic tasks: Christine has to don an apron and bake Sebastian's favourite German Christmas cookies. Her preparation of hearty traditional German dishes with meat, an ingredient that has become extremely scarce on the 'surface', are also a key feature in this tormenting scenario.[6]

Besides her novels Duve engages with the topic of food in other kinds of text. In *Anständig Essen: Ein Selbstversuch* [*Decent Eating: A Self-Experiment*; 2011], for example, boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are fluid. Here Duve engages critically with the ethical and moral dimension of the eating habits of Western consumer societies, condemns industrial livestock farming and highlights ecological consequences of pollution and over-farming. Duve describes here what appears to be her own experimentation over fixed time periods with different forms of ethically aware food consumption ranging from eating only organic food to adopting vegetarian, vegan and frutarian eating habits. The text uncovers the far-ranging ethical, moral, economic and health implications of our food consumption, for example the lack of fair trade practices between richer and poorer countries, cruelty to animals, and humanitarian and ecological disasters. The protagonist's own struggles to adapt her eating and other consumerist habits introduce elements of the confessional and the educational novel into the mix. This hybrid between novel, essay, and confession about food shares with the novels discussed above the scathing portrayal of contemporary society, its power relations and ideologically sustained inequalities and does so by the apparently autobiographical staging of the female body at the centre of a confrontation with eating habits.

Regenroman

Regenroman, the text at the centre of this article, is the first novel by Duve, born 1961 in Hamburg, whose work 'attract[s] both a popular readership and academic interest' (Graves in Bartel et al 2006: 38). It is set in post-unification Germany. Martina and Leon Ulbricht, the joint protagonists, are a young west-German couple who move from Hamburg to a house in the country in north-east Germany in an economically depressed region of the former GDR.[7] This turns out to be not an idyllic country cottage for newlyweds but a dilapidated, mouldy, waterlogged house on the edge of boggy marshland. Leon is an unsuccessful writer who hopes to follow in the footsteps of Romantic poets in finding solitude and inspiration in nature. His wife Martina, fourteen years younger than Leon, is eager to set up home and to 'fix' her body and her life by starving herself, by purging what food she does consume, by following the advice readily offered in various popular self-help books, and by adopting

Noah, a stray dog. Leon has bought the house with the advances for a yet-to-be written biography commissioned to flatter the overblown ego of Pfitzner, a former boxer, now brothel owner in nearby Hamburg. The deal was arranged through Harry, Leon's best friend. Harry works for Pfitzner in the macho and brutally misogynist red-light milieu; his job is to keep Pfitzner's prostitutes 'in check' and to enforce Pfitzner's control. This is something Harry does with unquestioning and brutal determination: when Leon fails to finish the biography, on the orders of his boss Harry rapes Martina. It rains incessantly in *Regenroman* (literally 'rain-novel') and each of the ten chapters is preceded by a weather forecast that announces, in line with a plot heading for disaster, increasingly urgent climate warnings from occasional showers in the first to violent storms in the last chapter.

The novel includes episodes of food binges by Leon that point forwards to an eating disorder which later in the novel will take on grotesque proportions with the eating of rotten food and the consumption of inedible substances like marshland mud. Leon's bingeing does not stand alone, however, but must be read in conjunction with his wife Martina's bulimia nervosa. Leon's bingeing and Martina's bulimia together play a pivotal role in the gendered framing of the novel, and belong within wider constructions of masculinity and femininity that are explored with reference to food consumption.

Regenroman is clearly a work of fiction, albeit one that has a strong vein of realism running through it, particularly in its portrayal of Martina's eating disorder. But the realism is counterposed by parody and the grotesque and undermined by shifting, conflicting perspectives. Commenting on Fredric Jameson's studies on the ideology of narrative form, Vera Nünning and Ansgar Nünning emphasize that different narrative modes can reinforce or query the construction of gender identities and gender roles. The authors point to a shifting of perspectives as a way to undermine dominant discourse and raise the questions: who speaks or rather who represents whom? (Nünning and Nünning 2004: 11-13). Duve's novel forces the reader to pose these questions by constantly changing literally and metaphorically the 'location from which events in a story are presented to the reader' (van Peer and Chatman 2001: 5) and thus undermining seemingly fixed positions. *Regenroman* even includes the perspective of Noah the dog, who offers comical yet fitting assessments of human power hierarchies: under-dog Leon, dogsbody Harry, and top-dog Pfitzner. The highly detached and factual tone that has become Duve's narrative trademark never reveals much of the innermost thoughts and motivations of the characters but tends rather to deflate emotive scenes. The play with perspectives is interwoven with the voice of a seemingly authoritative omniscient narrator, and leads into the very centre of pressing contemporary topics such as eating

disorders and gendered violence. This highlights the particular potential of literature in addressing these issues (see McIlvanney in Bagley et al 2018: 23-44).

Integral to the critical thrust of Duve's narrative approach in *Regenroman* is graphic exaggeration: socio-cultural gender stereotypes are over-inflated to an extent that becomes subversive. On the one hand, Duve's writing is succinct, factual, and coolly detached especially in its depiction of rape and self-harming through self-induced vomiting. Yet the realism is intermixed with elements of the fantastic and the grotesque and a running vein of sinister dark humour. Such writing at once displays yet undermines prevailing gender and other stereotypes. This strategy is part of the 'provocative quality of Duve's work' (Bartel and Boa 2006: 8) and has also provoked divergent readings of her work as witness numerous reviews and scholarly articles. Scholars emphasize how Duve's short stories, some of which are precursors of *Regenroman,* critically distort binary oppositions of gender ideology (Macnab in Bartel et al 2006: 107-18); highlight in *Regenroman* Duve's 'oblique cultural criticism and […] comic travesty of myth' (Boa in Bartel et al 2006: 57-72) and her subversive play with cultural and literary symbols (Müller-Adams in Bartel et al 2006: 73-88); and read her laconic explorations of multi-media and consumerist society as invitations to emphasize active choice rather than passive subjection (Bartel in Bartel et al 2006: 89-106). In contrast Duve's work has also attracted criticism. Teresa Ludden sees a running danger in Duve's writing of reinforcing rather than subverting stereotypes. Ludden challenges what she sees as Duve's 'voyeuristic fascination with violence and gore and aesthetic exploitation of the suffering body' in *Regenroman* and extends her criticism also to *Dies ist kein Liebeslied* (Ludden in Bagley et al 2018: 116; also Ludden in Bartel et al 2006: 41-56). In Ludden's reading, the author's attempts to criticise society '"collapse back" into repetition of the very problems that are criticized' (Ludden in Bagley et al 2018: 108). Ludden also acknowledges, however, what other authors, including myself, emphasize in different ways: Duve's attempts to move beyond a normative framework of aesthetic, gendered and literary discourses (2018: 116). Monika Shafi too warns that the violence in *Regenroman* – self-harm, rape, and murder by blowtorch – means that like other authors, Duve has 'to face the vicious circle whereby any representation of violence runs the risk of reinforcing rather than critiquing it' (2006: 387). However, Shafi also points out that Duve's grotesque representation of violence lends it subversive power. Following on Wolfgang Kayer's theoretical engagement with the grotesque, Shafi reads Duve in the long tradition of German-language writers who employ violence in their works in order to point to a 'contemporary society out of joint' (2006: 387).[8] The following closer analysis of the shifting of narrative

perspectives in *Regenroman* show Duve's subversive depiction of violence and critical take on normative 'femininity', particularly with regards to protagonist Martina.

Shifting Perspectives

Martina struggles throughout the novel to establish her own identity. Tellingly, the reader is first introduced to her through the eyes of (male) others. Through Leon's eyes Martina is described as 'langbeinige Schönheit mit […] Rennpferd-Eleganz' (1999: 29) ['this long-legged lovely with her racehorse elegance' (2002: 20)]. His view illuminates his own misogynist vision in which her beauty becomes his personal conquest. Priding himself on being able to 'get' any woman, he congratulates himself on acquiring Martina as the prettiest of all the many others he has ever slept with. However, this macho attitude is accompanied by a deep-rooted dislike of all women – including his own wife. Leon emphasizes his disgust for what he perceives as women's soft and changeable bodies that he rejects in their difference from the 'superior', unchanging, hard, male body. That Leon will later acquire, through unbounded eating, the very soft and fleshy 'feminine' body that is the object of his disgust is a sign of Duve's deeply ironical approach to gender stereotypes.

The perspective of the omniscient narrator introduces the reader to a more complex image of Martina. The rating of her physical appearance as highly attractive is situated here in a gendered hierarchy whereby her good looks make her either prey to men or diminish other women: 'wo immer Martina erschien, [strafften sich] die Männer […] wie Vorstehhunde, die Witterung aufnehmen, während die Frauen bei ihrem Anblick zusammensackten wie mißratene Kuchen' (1999: 8) ['wherever she went men perked up like pointers finding a scent, while the sight of her made women slump like sad cakes' (2002: 2)]. However, the reader can find another story in the details of the narrator's description of Martina: 'Sie hatte einen großen Mund – Zähne wie Zuckerwürfel, die Lippen in den Winkeln wund und ein bißchen ausgefranst' (1999: 8) ['She had a large mouth, with teeth like sugar cubes and lips sore at the corners, their skin flaking slightly.' (2002: 2)] The woman's mouth, often object of eroticized depictions of the female body and evoking other body openings to be penetrated – as will be the case in Martina's brutal rape by Harry – is here marked differently. The inflamed corners are early tell-tale signs of Martina's secret bulimia that will be revealed later to the reader. The mouth as the site of cultural inscription of eroticized female beauty bears here the marks of Martina's secret, yet violent, self-induced vomiting. The author continues with the description of Martina's beauty moving from her mouth to her eyes that 'lagen so nackt und verschreckt in ihren Höhlen, als wären diese nicht

ihr angestammter Platz, sondern nur ein vorläufiger Zufluchtsort, und es könnte jederzeit der rechtmäßige Besitzer kommen, Ansprüche geltend machen und sie wie zwei Murmeln in die Tasche stecken' (1999: 8) ['lay in their sockets looking exposed and alarmed as if this were not their accustomed place, only a temporary refuge, and the rightful owner could come along at any time, stake a claim and pocket them like a couple of marbles'. (2002: 2)] The description that resembles grim expressionist images of blinding, emphasizes Martina's lack of ownership of her own body and anticipates her status as victim of brutal bodily violation and object of male power struggles. Harry describes Martina shortly before raping her on his boss's orders in a way that dehumanises her as a woman: she is too thin, too tall, her breasts too small and ultimately 'gar keine richtige Frau für ihn' (1999: 237) ['not really a woman as far as he was concerned' (2002: 195)] because she wears her unvarnished fingernails short and does not adhere to his stereotypical ideal of a voluptuous and heavily made-up woman. After the rape, in a sickening attempt to mock-comfort Martina he assures her: 'Du bist schön' (1999: 240) ['You're beautiful' (2002: 198)], whilst deeply violated Martina 'legte keinen Wert darauf, schön zu sein.' (1999: 240) ['did not care in the least about being beautiful' (2002: 198)]. Elizabeth Boa reads this utterance as marking a 'shift from feminine subordination to an internalised, controlling male gaze' and as an indication that Martina here 'throws off her female status of victim' (in Bartel et al 2006: 68). In a deliberate reversal of many other narratives of female eating disorders that often start with abuse, trauma and rape, Martina's violation seems to instigate change here – albeit a change that comes at a particularly high price and does not point towards a fulfilling alternative life.

Martina's descriptions through the different perspectives in *Regenroman* evoke Judith Butler's concept of the constructedness of gender: 'If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end.' (1990: 33) Butler highlights here both the danger that women are shaped according to predominant views, and also the possibility that this may not be the end of a process but can perhaps also lead to difference and change. However, Martina's body is predominantly the site onto which an expected shape and look are inscribed by (male) others rather than being actively shaped by herself. In the familiar paradox outlined by Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* this female objectification goes hand in hand with the various, time-consuming and strenuous acts a woman has to undertake to make herself feminine and beautiful: Martina's repeated changing into fashionable but highly impractical clothes, her beauty treatments like ridding herself of unwanted body hair, and especially the secret 'Ritual' ['ritual'] (1999: 69)

of bingeing and purging, 'tausendmal geübt' (1999: 69) ['made a thousand times' (2002: 53)], as part of her eating disorder. Echoing non-fictional accounts of female bulimia, Duve's text clearly shows 'tension building up prior to a binge eating episode' (Gordon 2000: 43) particularly with regards to the relationship with her father introduced through flashbacks to Martina's childhood. Martina is consumed by a hunger that grows no less no matter how much she eats, that then triggers vomiting as a drastic effort to compensate for the caloric intake followed by the temporary relief and calm (Gordon 2000: 43-46). *Regenroman* depicts Martina's frantic search to find her next 'fix' of food and then a place and time where and when she can secretly and silently vomit without being seen or heard. Duve's shifting of perspectives breaks down the door to these secret places and reveals mercilessly and in great detail over almost three pages the act that is regarded as so shameful:

> [Martina] klappte Toilettendeckel und Klobrille hoch und beugte den Kopf. *Vater, ich habe gesündigt*. Sie seufzte, steckte den Zeigefinger in den Mund […]. Ihr Körper reagierte auf die Rituale im Gästeklo so prompt wie ein Pawlowscher Hund auf die Futterglocke. […] Dann krümmte sie ihren Finger leicht, damit der Nagel nicht die Mandeln verletzte, und steckte ihn wieder hinein, tiefer diesmal, bis in den Rachen. Es klappte nicht gleich. […] Ungeduldig bewegte sie ihren Finger schneller und grober, stieß ihn immer tiefer in den Hals. […] Mit dem nächsten Rülpser erbrach sie die Banane. Eine halbe Nuß geriet dabei in ihren Nasengang. Es schmerzte […]. Spaghetti gerieten ihr beim Kotzen grundsätzlich in die Nasengänge. Fleisch war am schmerzhaftesten zu erbrechen. Schokoloade am ekelhaftesten. […] Am liebsten hätte sie sich selbst mit ausgekotzt und dann heruntergespült. Als alles heraus war, war sie beinahe glücklich. (1999: 69-71)
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> [(Martina) put up the lavatory lid and seat and bent her head. *Father, I have sinned*. She sighed, stuck her forefinger in her mouth […]. Her body reacted to the ritual in the guest loo as promptly as a Pavlovian dog to the sound of the food bell. […] Then she crooked her finger slightly, so as not to scratch her tonsil with her nail, and put it back in, further this time, right down her throat. It didn't work at once. […] Impatiently, she moved her finger faster, more roughly, further and further down her throat. […] With the next belch she brought up the banana. Half a nut got stuck in her nostril in the process. It hurt […]. Spaghetti always got up her nose when she vomited. Meat was the most painful to bring up. Chocolate was the most disgusting. She would have liked to vomit herself out too and flush herself away. When it was all gone she felt almost happy. (2002: 53-5)]

Duve's description may provoke disgust or even voyeuristic interest in some readers, but it also undoubtedly breaks through dominant personal and cultural practices by making the invisible visible. The reference to religious confession, 'Forgive me Father', emphasizes the underlying perceived affinity to sinful behaviour. While the reader is mercilessly confronted with Martina's 'rituals' and the reality of her eating disorder, her suffering goes completely unnoticed by her husband and family. In a subversion of cultural taboos and conventional aesthetics, Duve's text quite literally throws up the hidden content of Martina's smooth and flat stomach. The detailed description of Martina's purging can be read in parallel to the equally mercilessly detailed description of her rape (see Linklater 2001: 253-71). This act that brutally explores and violates her bodily orifices and openings, including her vagina, anus and mouth, bears parallels to Martina's self-induced vomiting where she pushes her (phallic) finger roughly further and further into the openings of her mouth and throat. As an internalisation of male violation resembling Foucauldian internalised 'auto-discipline' (1994: 198) this highlights that Duve firmly embeds Martina's eating disorder in the sphere of gendered domination.

Regenroman raises general questions concerning how to write about eating disorders, a topic which is often situated within the framework of suffering, pain and physical and emotional violence often rooted in childhood, and also engages with the dominance of media and popular culture. The novel highlights, for example, the 'triggering' power of particular consumer brands such as the Mars bar or the trademark (West-)German ice-cream desert 'Königsrolle' (1999: 224; literally 'king's roll'), childhood treat to a generation born in the 1960s and 70s and translated by Anthea Bell for the British cultural context as the iconic 1970s 'Arctic roll' (2002: 184).[9] Narrative depictions of eating disorders and the anorexic or adipose body can overstep the boundaries between voyeuristic presentation and critical representation as some autobiographical texts on eating disorders demonstrate.[10] However, I argue that the distance introduced through Duve's narrative technique critically discloses the violence inherent in Martina's rape and in her purging behaviour, and thus intervenes in prevailing constructions of power and gender rather than catering to voyeuristic desires.

In line with her subversion of narrative practices that render the invisible provocatively visible and undermine cultural expectations, Duve also overturns gendered perceptions of eating disorders. The reader learns about Leon's developing binge eating through the perspective of Martina who, obsessed by the thought of her next binge, wants to raid her secret hiding places for forbidden food – only to find them empty. In a surprising twist of the narrative that starts by tracing Martina's frantic search, the reader gains

simultaneous insight into her addictive behaviour and follows the trail left by Leon's insatiable appetite:

> Martina hatte Hunger. Den großen Hunger. Den, der mit einem Stück Brot nicht zu stillen war. Sie mußte sich richtig vollstopfen, bis oben hin. […] Sie griff in das oberste Fach. Es war leer. Panik überfiel sie. Sie stellte sich auf einen Küchenhocker und durchsuchte den Schrank. Alles weg. Fünf Tafeln Schokolade, drei große Kekstüten, Lakritzen, Gummibären, die Familienpackung Marsriegel … einfach verschwunden. Sie sprang vom Hocker, machte den Kühlschrank auf, sah ins Gefrierfach. Die Riesen-Königsrolle. Weg! Sie zitterte. Hatte Leon also doch gemerkt, daß sie heimlich kotzte, und alle Süßigkeiten versteckt, um sie zu demütigen? Oder hatte er sie weggeworfen? Sie öffnete die Klappe unter der Spüle und sah in den Abfalleimer. Er quoll über von Schokoladenpapier, Staniolfolien, leergefressenen Kekstüten und einer schmierigen Eisverpackung. Mit spitzen Fingern zog Martina die schwarzrotgoldene Plastikhülle, in der sechs Mars-Riegel gesteckt hatten, heraus und ging damit zu Leons Lager, hielt sie ihm wortlos hin. 'Na und? Ich hatte heute großen Hunger', sagte Leon gereizt. 'Und außerdem habe ich Schmerzen.' (1999: 224)
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> [Martina was hungry […]. Ravenously hungry, the kind of hunger that a slice of bread wouldn't satisfy. She had to stuff herself really full, full to the brim. […] She put her hand on the top shelf. It was empty. Panic-stricken, she climbed on a kitchen stool and searched the cupboard. Everything was gone! Five chocolate bars, three large packets of biscuits, liquorice, jelly babies, the family pack of Mars bars … simply gone! She got down from the kitchen stool, opened the fridge, looked in the freezer compartment. The giant Arctic roll. Gone! She was trembling. Had Leon noticed her throwing up in secret and hidden all the sweet stuff to humiliate her? Or had he thrown it away? She opened the door of the cupboard under the sink and looked in the rubbish bin. It was brimming over with chocolate papers, foil, empty biscuit packets and a smeared ice cream packet. With her fingertips Martina fished out the black, red and gold plastic wrapper that had contained six Mars bars and took it over to Leon's bed, holding it up without a word. 'Well? I was hungry today,' said Leon, irritated. 'And what's more, I'm in pain.' (2002: 184)]

Initially Martina's insatiable hunger, her lack of control, secrecy, shame and fear of discovery are foregrounded in this scene but then, in a darkly comical twist, Leon is put at the centre of the binge-eating episode taking on the role of the incriminated and shamed binger.

Unaccustomed to Martina's 'rituals' of bingeing, Leon reacts with irritation and defends himself. In contrast to Martina who desperately aims to control and contain her bingeing through purging, Leon is losing control in all areas of his life including his ever-expanding body which he stuffs relentlessly. Martina's bulimia draws upon familiar narratives of the female desire to conform to a body ideal of slimness but also has a psychological backdrop in a disturbed and guilt-fuelled father-daughter relationship. Leon's bingeing is portrayed as a response to his inability to achieve his goal of 'masculine' control and strength and is part of a general attempt to subvert gender roles in *Regenroman*. Factors that contribute to Leon's eating spiralling out of control lie in the areas of perceived 'failed masculinity': his incapacitating back injury acquired in a vain attempt to protect his house from the advancing moor; his consequent confinement to the 'feminine' sphere that is the home; an episode of impotence in the marital bed; and finally his failure to protect Martina against the assault by Harry and Pfitzner. Leon's cowardice and his readiness to give in to lack of control, and to his insatiable hunger, render the principle of perceived male mastery as the foundation for gender roles highly questionable, indeed absurd.

The realistic portrayal of Martina's eating disorder – bingeing controlled by purging – turns to the grotesque in the case of Leon's excessive eating. Without any controlling mechanisms his life consequently spirals out of control. His belly takes on enormous proportions, he ends up living alone and in squalor cut off from the rest of the world, stuffing himself with whatever food is left even if it turns into a mouldy mass. He likens himself to a beetle on its back which cannot turn over (1999: 211) in a thinly veiled reference by Duve to the fantastic metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa in Kafka's 'Die Verwandlung' (1912) ['The Metamorphosis']. The novel emphasizes the dynamics of Leon's disintegration from a cultivated 'moderner Mensch mit Abitur' (1999: 274) ['modern man who had passed his school-leaving exams' (2002: 227)]. It highlights the grotesque, particularly the 'distortion of shape and size' which defines the grotesque in the theory of Kayser (1966: 185). Kayser reads the grotesque in literature not as crudely comic but as an expression of a fundamental ambivalence, 'a violent clash of opposites' where physical anomaly signifies a chaotic world completely out of sync (1966: 235). Duve's grotesque depiction of Leon's swelling body and boundless consumption of food not only reverses gender and body stereotypes, but also echoes the completely 'dysregulated appetite' (Gordon 2000: 148) of a society where psychosis meets post-industrial consumerism and oversteps boundaries that were once assumed to be fixed and impermeable. Leon's and Martina's food consumption exemplifies a

transgression of cultural and gendered boundaries that is a general theme in *Regenroman* and will be explored in the following section.

Pushing at boundaries in *Regenroman*

Invasion of spaces, breaking through confines, and pushing at boundaries are formal and thematic leitmotifs in this novel. Such moves, often followed through with grotesquely comic force, are constantly interrupted by brutal acts of violence. The incessant rain pushes at the boundaries culture sets up against nature. Water seeps through the walls of the house and eats away at its foundations. The treacherous nearby moor advances stealthily as an army of slugs eats up the garden and invades the house. Leon embodies the male universal subject in his constant struggle to subjugate nature. The novel depicts the attempted conquest of nature as interventions that range from the comical and utterly futile warfare against the slugs to the seriously damaging agricultural exploitation of natural resources that results in environmental pollution, despoiled landscape and local crop failure. Read against the historical and political backdrop of post-unification Germany, this 1999 novel also engages with other borders. The natural north-eastern landscape, formerly the borderland between East and West Germany, is now the site of an economic and cultural struggle over what to retain and what to abandon of former East-German life and values. This specific form of political and economic colonisation by westerners in the (former) East, is aligned with greater battles for domination of mankind over nature and of man over woman. Margaret Littler reads the water-flooded fields of this East-German moor and surrounding dark bog, in which Leon is trying in vain to demarcate and cultivate his male space, as a 'feminised landscape, albeit one which takes revenge on the profiteering westerners who come to colonise it' (Littler 2007: 189). The house finally withstands all attempts to dry it out and collapses on top of Leon like the ship 'Argo' that finally collapses over Jason the Argonaut as part of another (hi)story of colonising. What kills Leon, however, is not the collapsing house but the nature that he has fought throughout the novel. Leon drowns in moorland mud in an act that combines sexualised fantasies of returning to the womb with depictions of a grotesque and deadly final binge:

> Seine Hände griffen in feuchtwarmen Morast, glucksend schloß sich das Moor über seinem Schädel. Leon versank in einer Welt voller Dunkelheit und schwellender Weichheit. Er schmiegte sein Gesicht in die verrottenden Pflanzenfasern. […] Schlamm drang in seinen Mund und seine Nase, Schlamm füllte seine Gehörgänge und jede Falte seines Körpers. Leon schmatzte und schluckte, füllte seinen Magen mit

> Schlamm und Dunkelheit. Wie gut es war, Moder unter Moder zu sein. Leon sank zurück in den Schoß seiner wahren Mutter. Irgendwann war er geboren worden, und jetzt starb er, und was sich dazwischen ereignet hatte, machte wenig Sinn. Seufzend ergab er sich in die feuchte Umarmung. Sofort brach der Morast mit grellem Scmerz in seine Lunge ein. Leon rang nach Luft und fraß bloß Sumpf. (1999: 297-8)
> [His hands grasped damp, warm mud, and the bog closed, gurgling, over his head. Leon sank into a world of total darkness and swelling softness. He buried his face in the rotting plant fibres. […] Mud made its way into his mouth and nose, mud filled his ears and every fold of his body. Leon smacked his lips and swallowed, filling his stomach with mud and darkness. How good it was to be mould beneath the mould. Leon sank back into the womb of his true mother. At some point he had been born, and now he was dying, and what had happened in between, if you looked at it critically, did not make much sense. Sighing, he gave himself up to that damp embrace. Immediately the mud burst into his lungs with fierce pain. Leon struggled for breath but swallowed nothing but quagmire. (2000: 246)]

Whilst in this case nature has fought back successfully and resisted the advance of so-called cultivation, Duve's critical portrayal of man's destructive interventions in the environment leaves the outcome of the larger battle highly open to question.

The theme of overstepping prevailing boundaries is also echoed in Duve's critique of gender binaries which she sees as located in the ideological equation of nature with the female and culture and technology with the male. Leon, with his billowing dressing gown, dies in an ironic reversal of the Ophelia-motif (that, in turn, invokes the drowned female corpse Leon and Martina find at the beginning of the novel). Food and food consumption play an important role in this destructive battle that pits man violently against (female) nature, a battle in which man constantly oversteps natural, ethical and moral boundaries.

'Anständig essen', to eat decently, to use the title of Duve's 2011 text, is a clear challenge for contemporary western societies that is interlinked with many other pressing issues. In *Regenroman* the topic is highlighted in the vignettes of suffering animals passing by in transporters destined for industrial-scale slaughter. The image of a solitary pig that Leon sees outside the window of his bachelor flat in Hamburg overlooking an abattoir is one poignant example: part of a load of 'seifenrosa Schweine mit absurd langen Körpern und obszönen Hinterteilen, deren Schwänze abgebissen waren' ['soap-pink pigs with absurdly long bodies, obscene hindquarters, and their tails bitten off'], one pig stumbles around aimlessly until 'blutbespritzte Männer es wieder eingefangen und an den Ohren zurückgezerrt

hatten' (1999: 20) ['blood-splattered men caught it and dragged it back by its ears' (2002: 12)]. This image at once signifies the immediate brutality of public detachment from the processes of food production. The image is later echoed in Pfitzner devouring a rare steak with blood dribbling onto his clothes. The link between detached production and disordered consumption is made by many scholars. Hillel Schwartz traces attitudes towards fatness in a cultural history from the nineteenth century to the present, with particular focus on the US. His study links altered notions of self and susceptibility to over and under eating and to industrialised food production and consumption that are utterly alienated from its source (Schwartz 1986: 77-84). Richard Gordon traces eating disorders to 'the problem of self-regulation in societies in which alienated production and consumption run riot' (2000: 188). Both Leon and Martina – with their lack of awareness of the animal suffering that their 'Lachsschinken' (1999: 78) ['pork loin' (2002 61)] has caused – exemplify this socio-cultural development that manifests itself psychologically especially in their detachment from their bodies when in the throes of their eating disorders.

Scholars and critics have commented that the text of *Regenroman* is traversed by yet another form of border crossing: between the comic, the satirical and the horrific, between the real and the fantastic, and that it borrows from the genres of the Gothic and the detective novel (there is a side-story of an unsolved murder of a young woman).[11] The novel is full of intertextual references to the canonical authors of German so-called high culture, amongst them Goethe, Thomas Mann, and Gottfried Benn. However, it also delivers a self-reflective parody of literary scholarship and of the intellectual, in particular the figure of the author. Here, other borders are also crossed: Duve as a female author introduces a male author who expires of disordered eating whilst the female protagonist Martina embodies an authorial move to overcome her affliction. Whilst Leon boasts a macho image of himself, he is also styled ironically as the stereotypical intellectual who is always dressed in 'existentialist' black but writes 'Kurzgeschichten über enttäuschte Männer, die ihm ähnelten und Gedichte, die sich nicht reimten und nicht gut verkauften' (1999: 20) ['short stories about disappointed men very much like himself, and poems which neither rhymed nor sold' (2002: 12)]. Duve alludes to the long tradition of the failed artist in German culture including the hero of Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* [*The Sufferings of Young Werther;* 1774] and Thomas Mann's Gustav Aschenbach in *Der Tod in Venedig* [*Death in Venice*; 1911]. But at the same time Duve goes beyond these texts in the parodic ridiculing of Leon's writing skills, and also his would-be macho image. His genius is crudely described by Pfitzner with reference to food consumption and bodily functions as artistic constipation:

> ‘Ein Schriftsteller ist einer, der nicht scheißen kann, weil er den ganzen Tag vor seiner Schreibmaschine sitzt und sich nicht von der Stelle rührt. Aber statt daß er nun aufsteht und ein paar Runden um den Block läuft, bleibt er sitzen und schreibt darüber, daß er nicht scheißen kann.’ (1999: 134)
> [‘A writer’s a man who can’t shit because he spends the whole day sitting at his keyboard and never moves from the spot. But instead of getting up and running round the block, he just sits there writing about how he can’t shit.’ (2002: 109)]

Whilst emphasizing his intellectual superiority Leon strives nevertheless to be part of the macho world embodied by Pfitzner whose profession as a former boxer evokes a masculine hard and hard-fighting body aesthetic. Leon, however, ends up with a grotesquely swollen shapeless body. When he fails to deliver the ordered biography, Pfitzner compares him to one of ‘his’ prostitutes owned by him and who either deliver ‘the goods’ or endure brutal sanctions. The punishment is, however, not felt by Leon directly but by innocent Martina who is raped by Harry on the orders of his boss. Harry carries out this rape in the marital bedroom as a violent assertion of Pfitzner’s power over Leon who sits cowardly in the next room. The rape turns Martina’s body into the site where male struggle over dominance is brutally carried out, an act that can be linked to historical and contemporary use of rape as a part of private or international warfare.[12] Duve discloses both images of masculinity, the violent macho and the intellectual genius, as ‘stylized repetitions of acts’ (Butler 1990: 141). Both male ‘types’ are dismantled in *Regenroman* and find their death: nature takes revenge on Leon while Martina is being revenged by her female friends, the neighbouring sisters Kay and Isadora Schlei. These women kill both Harry and Pfitzner in an attack with a flamethrower that also marks in its almost comical exaggeration of violence Duve’s parodic take on female agency. In addition, the revolting image of Pfitzner’s burning flesh reads as a disgusting parody of the aim of most diets which is to ‘burn’ fat.[13]

After the rape Martina leaves her husband and the marital home and Leon’s bingeing grows grotesquely out of control. It culminates in the deathly bursting of bodily boundaries when he drowns in the moor. This goes far beyond what Peter Michalzik sees merely as an innovative way to discredit men (1999: 7): Leon’s over-consumption of food and other substances instigates a dissolution of the male gender position of control and power. The transposition of the assumed ‘female-only’ eating disorder results in the subversion of stereotypical masculinity and femininity: Leon’s swelling male body loses its hard ‘manly’ shape and becomes fleshy and excessive and contrasts with Martina’s ‘soft’ female shape that

develops the harsh contours of extreme boniness. Whilst Martina's bulimia is depicted in brutally realistic detail, Leon's eating blows apart the frame of the recognised pathology of the binge eating disorder with which his disordered eating began. As Leon loses all control over his house, his work, and his life, his body is feminised. In its voluptuous fleshiness clothed only in a billowing dressing gown, Leon's body loses the markers of masculinity which are thus revealed as demarking not a fixed but a fluid concept of gender as a shifting performance under shifting surrounding conditions.

Two further characters contribute to this construction of a comically exaggerated binary opposition in the novel where men are (over-)drawn as hard, technical and penetrating and women are to be penetrated, soft, shapeless and natural: Kay and Isadora, the sisters who live in the only nearby house. In Duve's parodist depiction Isadora is not only fat, she is shamelessly sexual, a man eater who first seduces and later rapes Leon when he is incapacitated through an injured back acquired whilst labouring ineffectively and inexpertly against the advancing forces of nature. Isadora's large body suggests a Rabelaisian openness to the pleasures of eating unbounded by civilised restraints, and she veers between provoking lust and disgust as Boa points out: where Leon tries to slaughter slugs in the mass, Isadora slurps down a single slimy slug as one might swallow an oyster (in Bartel et al 2006: 62). Negotiating her own body topography with the same ease as the dangerous paths through the moor, Isadora evokes the long tradition of nymphs or witches in German literature and culture. Leon's body that grows fatter and fatter parodically parallels in its fleshy feminisation Isadora's voluptuous form. Yet while her body is highly sexual, his becomes impotent to the point that he cannot find his penis any more underneath his expanding stomach just as he loses his way in the moor. Whilst Leon's fatness signifies the loss of control, potency and masculinity, Isadora's fat empowers her to the extent of reaching a problematic level of female aggression. It could even be argued that she parodies a fearful male fantasy of female agency. Her raping of Leon, although not depicted with the same violence as Martina's rape, does raises nevertheless important questions of female sexual violence against males since the boundaries of consent by the male are blurred.

The other Schlei sister Kay is depicted as lesbian and de-feminised: angular, tall and lanky. Far more technologically expert than Leon, Kay knows how to dry out rising damp and handle flame throwers. With the portrayal of Kay, Duve may be alluding to what Landreau and Murphy call in their discussion of masculinities in women studies a 'new conversation that dislocates masculinity as the property of men in order to make it available to a variety of embodied practices not all of which are easily comprehensible by a binary

gender system' (2011: 133). However, the comically overdrawn rejection of lesbian Kay's advances by straight Martina and the resulting broken heart undermines deliberately a new (non-heteronormative) happy ending in this darkly-humorous novel. With its parodical approach the novel clearly aims to shake up the normative cultural discourse even though it may not entirely disassemble it and is sometimes, particularly in the depiction of the Schlei sisters, treading the fine line often inherent in parody between undoing and reinforcing stereotypes.

Through parodic exaggeration of deviant eating and grotesque male and female bodies the darkly comic *Regenroman* as a whole succeeds in subversively undermining prevailing binary oppositions of gender ideology. Duve's realistic portrayal of the violence inherent in eating disorders and other acts of (auto-)brutality intervenes with the full force of their shocking images and with the power of an expertly composed literary narrative in constructions of power hierarchies. Duve challenges the reader to negotiate new discursive territory by literally and metaphorically throwing up what is hidden behind conventional aesthetic boundaries of 'femininity' and by busting stylized acts of 'masculinity'. This scathing cultural critique may not lead to a new critical programme but addresses poignantly the struggle over identity and gender roles fought out in the field of food consumption and constructions of the male and female body.

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[1] For the German context see for example Alois Wierlacher (1987) on the topic of food and literature, a work that is still regarded as seminal but lacks engagement with female authors.

[2] In German-language literature one recent example is the anorexia-autobiography by male author Christian Frommert (2013) with an introduction by the well-known former footballer Oliver Bierhoff. Examples of (auto-)fictional texts authored by men are found particularly in the field of New German Pop-literature: for example Christian Kracht's *Faserland* [*Land of Fibres*; 1995) and Benjamin von Stuckrad Barre's *Panikherz* [*Panic-Heart*; 2016]. Both authors draw heavily in their depiction of disordered male eating, consumer culture and 'pop masculinity' on Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991).

[3] References are to men and boys who have sought treatment, compared to women and girls. The number of men and boys with undetected and undiagnosed eating disorders is estimated to be much higher partly due to the perception of the disease as female-only and the consequent shame and reluctance to seek help. See https://www.firststepsed.co.uk/men-and-boys; https://www.malevoiced.com/ .

[4] In the following, I distinguish between the terms 'eating disorder' as a clinically specified disorder with a specific profile (for a definition see e.g. https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/types) and 'disordered eating' to designate more loosely forms of food consumption that deviate from perceived normative eating, e.g. eating rotten food or preparing food in a highly unusual, ritualistic way.

[5] See the work of the AHRC-funded international research network which I lead as Principle Investigator: 'Hungry for Words: An interdisciplinary approach to articulating, communicating and understanding male anorexia nervosa'. See in particular our 2018 poetry competition: https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/hungry-for-words/index.aspx .

[6] With regards to *Macht* (2016) and its repetitive accounts of rape I share some of Teresa Ludden's criticism of Duve's depiction of violence. Whilst these scenes express the merciless and repetitive brutality of this dystopian society, they do raise questions concerning the 'aesthetic exploitation of the suffering body' criticized by Ludden with regards to Duve's 2002 novel *Dies ist kein Liebeslied* (Ludden in Bagley et al 2018: 116).

[7] The protagonists' first and surnames are significant. In ironic reference to German-German history the west-German couple's surname is Ulbricht. Walter Ulbricht was head of the GDR between 1960 and 1971 and instrumental in building the Berlin Wall. Martina is the new first name Leon forces his new wife to take up condemning her original name Roswitha as not fashionable enough.

[8] Shafi quotes here Wolfgang Kayser who reads the grotesque as an expression of estrangement and alienation (1966: 21).

[9] This article is dedicated to the memory of brilliant literary translator and cultural communicator Anthea Bell, 10.5.1936 – 18.10.2018.

[10] An example is one of the first autobiographical texts by a man on his anorexia nervosa: Michael Krasnow's 1996 *My Life as a Male Anorexic* intermixes detailed and deeply harrowing personal accounts with family-photos of himself showing his 'development' from child to skeletal adult.

[11] For examples of scholarly engagement with Duve see e.g. Bartel and Boa (2006); Blumenkamp (2011); Graves (2002); Müller (2004).

[12] For further reading on warfare and sexual violence, see, e.g. Roth (2012); Gartner and McCarthy (2014).

[13] Gordon comments on the 'self-hating' and 'masochistic' quality of the verb *burn* used to indicate reducing fat (2000: 148).