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Isn't it Byronic?
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Isn't it Byronic?
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INTRODUCTION

Politics is pervasive,
Language is constitutive,
Truth is provisional,
Meaning is contingent,
Human nature is a myth.

(Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*)

The more things seem to
change,
the more they stay the same.
Don't you think it's strange?

(Corinne Bailey Rae, "Put Your Records On")

One of postmodernism's strange and provisional truths appears to be the following, more or less overtly agreed on supposition: our time and age, which, for lack of any other applicable designation, we might as well call "postmodernism", is far from a literary, cultural or artistic period of its own. What today's key art forms like pastiche, collage, or in the realm of more popular orientated styles, vintage and retro eventually amount to is a wholesale, unapologetic recycling of well-known and -established aesthetics, fashions, styles and their according techniques. Equally clearly, this reworking, to give it its proper, neutral name, has come to be understood as one of the foremost defining characteristics of today's postmodern architecture, literature and other traditional as well as popular art forms. Who, then, should in effect think it is strange that what is regarded as one of today's dominant aesthetic styles and the only correct designation for everything desirable and literally brand-new, is merely a plain, yet elaborate and hugely successful reshaping of supposedly long-gone aesthetics? And who should think it is less than self-evident we are talking cool here?

"C-O-O-L. What's that spell?", pop singer Prince was asking in the 80s, and his persona conveniently provided an instant answer: "C-O-O-L" spells for sex, drugs and money and for "something that [Prince] didn't learn in school".[1] It is spelt by hipsters, punks, Goths, ghetto gangstas, jocks, rock stars and it-girls, hippies and yuppies alike. It gathers its letters in the non-plus-ultra accessories, the fast cars, the high-tech gadgets of today's globalised world, the mandatory dark sunglasses at night. Originating in US-American youth and sub cultures, it has literally conquered the whole world, including its cyberspace equivalent. At its centre is a blatant,

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[1] These lines are taken from Prince's song "Cool", unreleased album. The lyrics can found at <http://www.lyricstime.com/prince-cool-lyrics.html>. Accessed 4 Nov. 2009.

irresolvable paradox, a contradictory aura of simultaneous mass appeal and individualistic detachment. Its etymological roots in ice and coldness are not coincidental. Cool is a style, a pose, a less-but-also-more-than emotion and a mask, without ever making perfectly clear what it intends to cover up. However much its ingredients might be enumerated, it defies definition in the best postmodern manner: the "worst sin is […] to attempt to define and analyze Cool" (Pountain and Robins 24), as those who must know put it. Rather than explore in greater detail the (non)qualities of this phenomenon and thus ranking in the socially shunned row of the utterly uncool, I want to elucidate the kind of aesthetic category cool appears to owe its current popularity, its theoretical conceptualisations and, in fact, its very existence to: the Romantic sublime.

The sublime, to resort to its well-known theorist Edmund Burke, was understood by the European Romantics as the one quality in objects of both art and nature which "anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force" (53). Its introduction as a major aesthetic category in the course of the eighteenth century set Romanticism apart from the earlier Neo-classical period and the latter's predilection for beauty, a concept despised as tame and immobilised by the Romantic artist. To be *en vogue* for an eighteenth-century man (much rather than woman) of the world, to have one's finger on the zeitgeist, to be, in short, cool, meant to display, produce and respond positively to the sublime in works of music, painting and literature. Appropriately, my thesis will reveal that there are a significant number of enticing and conspicuous parallels in the way cool is employed and theorised and the way the sublime was conceived of by critics like Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, and produced in Romantic poetry, such as Lord Byron's. In fact, it is via the latter's notorious character figure of the Byronic hero, featuring most prominently in his closet dramas such as *Manfred* (1817) and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1818), that the sentiment of sublimity was conveyed to the reading audience. Via the Byronic hero, the Romantic reader experienced the intrinsic sublime quality of simultaneous attraction and repulsion, of pleasure and pain, or, as Burke has it, the famous "delightful horror" (67). As my argument explicates, it seems to be far from coincidental that the originally European Byronic characters thrive in American popular texts of the twentieth and twenty-first century: with their air of proud nonchalance, their defiance of society's conventions and the invariably black attire in which they appear, they perpetuate and display postmodernism's cool to the utmost degree.

Hence, I will explain the wide-spread use of the Byronic hero in US-American

popular culture, i.e. well beyond the heyday as well as the context of British Romanticism, via the intrinsic coolness this figure displays. The more than two-hundred-year-old Byronic character serves as a prime example of how sublime aesthetics, originating in European Romantic poetry, are reworked in a twenty-first-century context and are concurrently employed as well as understood as cool in contemporary American texts. It is due to the (ruptured, yet undeniably noticeable) use of the sublime in the guise of cool that the Byronic hero is so pervasive in American popular art forms. What my thesis aims to achieve via the analysis of recent Byronic manifestations in the media of film and television is a thorough scan of an apparently (post)modern phenomenon and a possible account of its historical origins. Thus, I first of all want to lay bare what I perceive as enticing and non-coincidental parallels and similarities between the European sublime and the (initially) American notion of cool. Yet, to do postmodernism the justice it deserves, these parallels are covered under bewildering and elaborated layers of reworking, which makes the succession from a Romantic to a postmodern dominant aesthetic one of ruptures and reconstitutions. In accordance with the general tenets of postmodern theory, I will resort to one of its most elucidative methodologies and apply the insights gained in Queer Theory to the specific concerns of my thesis. What will thus be examined are parallels and overlaps between sublimity and coolness as indicative of a distinctly queer continuum, i.e. an essentially paradoxical continuum with decisive ruptures and discontinuities.

In that sense, Queer Theory will be applied beyond the realms of gender and sexuality to examine and account for mismatches between periods and temporalities.[2] The use of queer theoretical concepts for exploring issues devoid of sexual content is not an original experiment, but inherent to the discipline as such, which "cannot be assimilated to a single discourse, let alone a propositional program" ("Queer", 343), as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner claim. Queer Theory challenges and complicates binary oppositions and long established categories in manifold ways.[3] One of its main aims, therefore, is the subversion of normative, traditional assumptions and discourses, of social, cultural and/or political conventions, or, as Jean-François Lyotard has it, "meta-narratives" (*Postmodern,* xxiv). In that sense, to be queer means to be "at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (62), as David Halperin suggests. Queer Theory, in consequence, advocates an alternative vision to normative assertions.

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[2] This sentence plays upon Annemarie Jagose's famous phrase that "queer focuses on the mismatches between sex, gender and desire" (3), which constitutes a most basic supposition of the aims and premises of Queer Theory.

[3] Queer is, in the best sense, "a zone of possibilities" (Edelman 114) with the potential to be employed in numerous and unconventional ways.

Denaturalisation and contestation of familiar discourses are central to its scope. With regards to this thesis, queer theoretical concepts and strategies will be employed for analysing the ways and degrees in which the sublime is ruptured and, consequently, newly and queerly reconstituted as cool. I will thus attempt to offer an alternative, a queer version of aesthetic historical development running counter to dominant explanations and, consequently, strive for "unsettlement rather than systematization" (Berlant and Warner, "Queer", 348). By exploring the reasons for the pervasiveness of the Byronic hero in contemporary texts and, concurrently, the implications of his current popularity, this thesis might yield a critical awareness of the terms and conditions of aesthetic development.

The Byronic characters accordingly scrutinised in this thesis are all united by their relatively recent appearance in popular US-based visual media, i.e. film and television. Apart from these formal parallels, they are further connected by their position of the marginal, the liminal and the other. This status places them in particularly close vicinity of the sublime, which is also latently defined by ruptures, inconsistencies and incoherencies. As will be pointed out with reference to both Burke's and Kant's writings, the sublime is implicitly established as an overwhelming, crushing force which brings about chaos, anarchy and destruction. It is defined by an excess of boundaries, binaries and norms. As Donald Pease points out with regards to the workings of "Sublime Politics" (1984), the sublime can hence be understood less as "a rhetorical or even an aesthetic category than a power to make trouble for categorizing procedures" (259). The Byronic heroines and heroes of this thesis display this potential via their invariably maintained cool posture, which, according to Dick Pountain and David Robins, should be understood as a "*permanent* state of *private* rebellion" (19, original emphasis). Consequently, I will explore in how far and in which specific ways all of these contemporary Byronic characters display cool and thereby, in effect, create moments of both traditional and postmodern sublimity.

My first analysis focuses on the Byronic heroine Kathryn Merteuil from the 1999 movie *Cruel Intentions*. With regards to Kathryn's eventual depiction as a villain rather than a heroine, I will explore the highly phallocentric undercurrent which informs traditional Romantic theories of the sublime and the beautiful. Accordingly, Barbara Freeman's feminist critique of *The Feminine Sublime* (1995) will serve as a point of departure for exploring and eventually transcending patriarchal discourses. Utterly oblivious to both legal and social laws, Kathryn is plainly depicted as someone who is, like Byron's original heroes, "[m]ad – bad – and dangerous to

know" (Lamb, quoted in Rogers 298). She is proud, hedonistic and ironic and stands aloof from the concerns of common mortals, which does not merely establish her as a contemporary Byronic heroine, but, even more so, as a fundamentally cool character. While Kathryn, just like Byron's Manfred, never fails to present her proud defiance and cynical nihilism, she, however, lacks the quintessential Byronic remorse over her past, dark actions. She refuses to repent and atone, but continues her cruel agency, which Freeman treats as a central precondition for feminine sublimity. Accordingly, Kathryn becomes defined by excess, which further solidifies her cool posture, because "almost any excess is seen as Cool" (Pountain and Robins 129). Via her coolness in terms of looks, attitude and intention, Kathryn succeeds to subvert a moment of supposedly hot passion into one of cruel destruction. As the movie's German title, *Eiskalte Engel*, already suggests, her cool stance contributes vitally to her role as a cold angel, bringing both delight and destruction. Due its display of this odd mixture of pleasure and pain, one of the film's most famous scenes will accordingly be understood as producing nothing else than the sublime. As the plot implies, the hence provoked "delightful horror" (Burke 67) is decoded as cool, which ties in with the award it has gained from the coolest of all television programmes, MTV.

The second Byronic character analysed in greater detail will be the vampire Edward Cullen from the novel adaptation *Twilight* (2008). Edward literally depicts coolness via his ice-cold skin and his status as an undead. Attired with the insignia of modern-day cool, clad in grey-and-blue-toned designer clothes, equipped with high-tech gadgets and fast cars, he seems to have little in common with Bram Stoker's evil *Dracula* (1897), who appears in outdated leather coats and chokers. Indeed, Edward lives as an outsider from both the human and the vampire community, since he has to evade bright sunlight, but abstains from human blood. While Manfred and other Byronic heroes long for immortality and aspire to transcend their bodily limitations, Edward curses his nature and envies his human lover Bella. In accordance with the long tradition of Byronic vampires, partly originating in Byron's horror tale *The Vampyre* (1819), Edward is thus a categorical rebel who lives by his own ethical code and, paradoxically, displays a moral conscience. His defiance of both human and vampire laws accounts for the contemporary vampire's perception as a "new James Dean" (Plec, quoted in La Ferla 4). It is this iconic coolness inherent in the figure of Edward that allows to unearth *Twilight*'s latent potential for the sublime, which, according to Adam Phillips, "contain[s], so to speak, the unpredictable; the possibility of losing one's way, which is tantamount, Burke

implies, to losing one's coherence" (xxii). In this respect, the most viable example of sublimity is the conversion, the vampire's modified bite transforming the victim into one of his kind rather than causing her death. Similar to the vampire, one of today's central metaphors for deviance, queerness and otherness, the act of blood-sucking and converting offers sufficient ground for contesting *Twilight*'s conservative undercurrent. For the female protagonist Bella, it is Edward who embodies the promise of this highly desirable, yet simultaneously dreaded act. In accordance with Lyotard's predication that the true postmodern sublime is one which remains ultimately "unpresentable" ("Postmodernism", 78), the conversion does not occur in the text, yet exerts a major force from the highly subversive subtext. The nonetheless included glimpses of the final conversion, which the whole narrative is implicitly centred around and fuelled by, are, appropriately, presented in terms of cool aesthetics. Consistent with Edward's cool posture and looks, *Twilight*'s sublime moment is imagined as detached, nihilistic and disengaged. It relies heavily on cool's etymological roots in literal coldness and, in accordance with the vampire's icy skin, implies "daß [sic] eine 'coole' Lebenspraxis herausgefordert wird durch die Kälte im symbolischen wie im realen Sinn" (11), as Ulf Poschardt argues.

Finally, it is Brian Kinney from the Showtime series *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), according to his creator Russell T. Davies an unconditional "A-Gay" (12), who best portrays the rebellious nature of the classic Byronic hero. In alliance with Manfred and the pirate hero-villain Conrad from *The Corsair* (1814), Brian maintains a standard posture of rebellion and outsiderdom, which, however, is invariably informed by a cool, nihilistic and utterly cynical undertone. Even more prominently than Kathryn or Edward, Brian's character fluctuates between oppositional qualities, which mirrors his hybrid, queer sexuality. Following Joseph Roach's concept of *It* (2007), Brian could be understood as exerting a form of "negative attraction" (208), extracting an ambiguous response from his intra- as well as extradiegetic audience. Rather than supporting the queer community's political endeavours to further his causes, he employs cool as a form of "*private* rebellion" (Pountain and Robins 19, original emphasis). This is best played out via his job as a PR agent, which can be understood as a prime strategy of "cool-hunting" (ch.1), as Malcolm Gladwell dubs the prevalent activity of today's fashion victims, it-girls and advertising companies. By conspicuously (homo)sexualising each and every campaign he is employed to work on, Brian, however, also succeeds in selling queerness as cool. This is invariably connected to his own gendered hybridity, which effectively exceeds binaric definitions. This "desire for excess" (16), which Freeman treats as a central

precondition for the overwhelming experience of the sublime, allows him to surpass material and figurative boundaries. Brian's provocation of the sublime is thus intrinsically linked to his incessant desire, which, by way of his very character conceptualisation, has to remain forever unattainable. It is founded on the paradox of never being satiable in the first place. The prime locus where this desire is both promoted and acted out is the club Babylon, whose biblical origins already establish it as a space of excess, boundlessness and transgression. As Fiona Buckland's analysis of queer world-making at the dance club suggests, the Babylon's use of "juxtaposition, counterpoints, polyrhythms" (Buckland 14) translate onto a formal level the contradictions of Brian's hybrid persona. It is the ultimate unattainability of what Freeman refers to as "the desire for the sublime" (31) which lays bare the underlying paradox and brings about "not an unmixed delight, but [one that is] blended with no small uneasiness" (Burke 43). Similar to the vampire's conversion, this moment of sublimity is literally projected in terms of cool aesthetics, exploiting the affinity of modern-day cool to youth culture, new media and high technology.

In summary, the analysis of these Byronic characters will assist in shedding light on one of today's most influential and culture-shaping phenomena, whose historical roots, as this thesis contests, well surpass the birth of post-war youth culture. The apparent translation from a decidedly European, elitist context into US-American popular art forms, evident in the all-pervasive use of Lord Byron's inventive creation in film and television, contributes to the status of cool as a prime postmodern aesthetic born out of pastiche and cultural reworking. As a first step, this can account for the wide-spread use and popularity of the Byronic hero, who after all displays distinctively Romantic aesthetics, in a twenty-first-century context. Secondly, the following pages will reveal that it is precisely these aesthetics which have inspired, shaped and contributed to the character's perceived coolness today. The sublime and cool, in other words, appear to be related in complex and manifold ways. These relations have the potential to throw new light on respective cultural periods and contexts. Starting with an exploration of the Byronic hero's origins and the specific kind of sublimity this figure is productive of in literary texts, the present thesis will trace the sublime both in traditional and postmodern conceptualisations. Theoretical texts on modern-day notions of cool and the above outlined analysis of cool Byronic characters will serve as a means to track the parallels, (dis)similarities, ruptures and processes of reworking and recycling involved in the conceptualisations of both the Romantic and the postmodern aesthetic. This, in turn, might not only elucidate issues of literary and cultural periodisation, but hopefully

also illuminates the processes and strategies involved in the fuzzy concept we started with, the provisional and strange truths of postmodernism.

1. THE RULE OF THE COOL

The Byronic Hero in Contemporary Popular Culture

> LOUIS. Don't you see? I'm not the spirit of any
> age. I'm at odds with everything and always have
> been! I have never belonged anywhere
> with anyone at any time!
>
> ARMAND. This is the very spirit of your age. Don't
> you see that? Everyone else feels as you feel.
> Your fall from grace and faith has been
> the fall of the century.
>
> (Anne Rice, *Interview with the Vampire*)

Picture James Dean, in this case a rebel *with* a cause, in black leather behind the wheel of one of his much beloved and eventually fatal fast cars; picture Angel, clinging to his eternal love Buffy while at the same time being painfully aware of his unattainable desires; picture Xena, obdurately proud and cynical while defending all threats to her freedom; picture Kurt Cobain, musically brooding over the purpose of life in a delirious fog of sex, drugs and punk rock; finally, picture Louis, the interviewed vampire, defying and rebelling against each and every rule imposed by the vampire community and ultimately relying on his own moral code. The final collage one obtains from these miscellaneous scenes could probably not be more diversified, enticing and, admittedly, dazzling.

Yet, one senses that there is a common, uniting thread in deep red leading from James Dean, the movie star who died far too young, all the way down to Louis, the more than two hundred-year-old vampire, who will never die at all. It is their closeness to death, darkness and gloom, their attitude of ironic detachment, their narcissistic self-occupation, their defiance of society's rules and conventions, and, one might have guessed it, their coolness which all serve as raw materials of this thread. And there is one name we might assign to it, which comprises all these qualities and much more: James, Louis and all the others are not, or, to do them justice, not only, "spirits of our age", but they have all been referred to, analysed and celebrated as contemporary Byronic heroines and heroes. Indeed, Atara Stein, one of the leading scholars researching into the manifold and enticing intersections between Romanticism and present-day popular texts, argues that the figure of the Byronic hero "is so pervasive in contemporary popular texts that once one begins to establish […] the parameters of his type, the examples seem endless" (*Byronic*, 1).

Before we will plunge into the ostensibly infinite pool of Byronic characters in film and television, let us thus start by establishing exactly these parameters that characterise this type.

The Byronic Hero

The Byronic hero, inheriting his name from George Gordon Lord Byron, the most notorious and radical of the younger British Romantic poets, was famously described by Byron's contemporary, the journalist and critic T.B. Macaulay, as "a man proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection" (quoted in Rogers 297). This type of character, in short best described as a dark and gloomy hero, features prominently in several of Lord Byron's works, such as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-1818), *Cain* (1821) as well as in his four Turkish tales, *The Giaour* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814), *Lara* (1814) and *The Two Foscari* (1821). However, it is certainly Manfred of the eponymous poetic closet drama (1817) who is nowadays regarded as the prototype of a Byronic hero. Famously, Byron's Manfred declares in the legendary mountain top scene, surrounded by fog, thunder and darkness and on the verge of suicide:

> […] From my youth upwards
> My spirit walk'd not with the souls of men,
> Nor look'd upon the earth with human eyes;
> The thirst of their ambition was not mine,
> The aim of their existence was not mine;
> My joys, my griefs, my passions, and my powers,
> Made me a stranger; though I wore the form,
> I had no sympathy with breathing flesh.
> (*Manfred* 2.2.50-57)

This scene sets the tone struck by all Byronic heroes: Manfred and his predecessors as well as, perhaps even more prominently, his followers, are indeed proud, but also lonely, since they "spurn[…] the comforts of society" (Thorslev 61) or even appear "to be fated to live their lives outside the society of companionable men, ostracized and isolated because they have been cursed by God with a private vision which must be eternally misunderstood by the world around them" (Thorslev 104). Accordingly, their suffering appears to be of a different, a higher order, as seems to be their general nature. Above all, the Byronic hero defies human society and conventions, both juridical and social, and acts on his own conscience, thereby creating his personal laws of conduct. He might thus prove to be a deeply moral, yet highly individualistic figure that rebels against traditions and antique rules. In that respect, he does not shudder to transgress forbidden boundaries to enter

unexplored areas of both the world and the mind. As Thorslev puts it,

> with Byronic Heroes 'The mind is its own place'; each hero is, in a sense, *jenseits von Gut und Böse*; he creates his own human values, and the 'sins' of which he repents are transgressions of his own peculiar moral codes. For the commandments of religion or for common social morality he has nothing but defiance and contempt. (152, italics in the original)

Thus, the obligatory dark secret that every hero carries with him only induces guilt when it stems form a violation of his very own laws and thus suffices to disturb a conscience not relying on social or religious rules. Most famously, it is Manfred whose pangs of remorse do not stem from the incestuous and thus socially harming and sinful affair with Astarte, an act which the Byronic hero does not deem wrong as such, but are provoked by the indirect result of the affair, the beloved's death:

> […] it were
> The deadliest sin to love as we have loved.
> Say that thou loath'st me not –that I do bear
> This punishment for both – that thou wilt be
> One of the blessed – and that I shall die;
> For hitherto all hateful things conspire
> To bind me in existence – in a life
> Which makes me shrink from immortality-
> A future like a past. I cannot rest.
> (*Manfred* 2.4.123-131)

The rebellion he thus advocates is "a rebellion not only on a political, but also on the philosophical and religious level – and sometimes, in nihilistic extremes, against life itself" (Thorslev 197). One the other hand, the Byronic hero in his deportment also displays the typical aristocratic qualities of irony and detachment, combined with a certain degree of narcissism and, at times, a hedonistic, extreme indulgence in worldly pleasure, quickly followed by a subsequent denial. Bertrand Russell termed this the "peculiar blend of snobbery and rebellion" (776), which was to a great extent also portrayed by the hero's creator.

Allegedly, each of Byron's protagonists as evoked by the initial enumeration of titles illustrates a different angle of the hero. The above survey of Byronic traits has shown that there is a great diversity to be perceived within the whole range of dramas featuring what critics agree on to constitute a Byronic hero. Thus, while Conrad and the Giaour certainly best illustrate the aristocratic decadence of the (stereo)typical Gothic villain[4], it is Harold who comes closest to the eighteenth-century Hero of Sensibility. Finally, Manfred, who bears most resemblance to the figures of Prometheus, Milton's Satan or Faust, rises as a human being above his allowance to, eventually, assume the position of God: "Half dust, half deity,"

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[4] With reference to *The Giaour*, Praz also argues that "Byron might be said to have derived all these characteristics, by an almost slavish imitation, from Mrs. Radcliffe" (86), the author of various Gothic novels, including her best-known *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1797). Ann Radcliffe is thus one of the creators of the archetypical Gothic villain.

(*Manfred* 1.2.40) he famously declares, standing at the top of the mountain ridge. The above listed famous ancestors of the Byronic hero, who would also include types like the Child of Nature and the Noble Outlaw, constitute the main point of origin of the hero, which have been famously elicited in Peter Thorslev's *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (1962). His analysis reveals that the Byronic hero "shows the elements of every major type of Romantic hero" (4)[5], which references the fact that different protagonists display the basic Byronic qualities in varying intensities and degrees.

Despite this obvious diversity and the significant disparities and variations of the hero as he appears in Byron's oeuvre, this thesis will focus on the Byronic hero as the fixed character type or even stock character he has become since his original creation. Indeed, already Friedrich Nietzsche, who, in today's jargon, would place Byron's dramas among the coolest of all ages and felt deeply related to Manfred because "ich fand alle diese Abgründe in mir" ("Ecce Homo", 268), already proclaimed in one of his early speeches he held in front of the Germania assembly that Byron, despite his admiration for him, is "kein Meister der Charakteristik […]. Es giebt [sic] im Allgemeinen für ihn nur einen einzigen Charakter, den er völlig und erschöpfend zu zeichnen versteht: und das ist sein eigner" ("Byron", 43). In fact, Byron's own personality has always been regarded as having contributed vitally to the conception of his fictional characters, and, even more important for the purposes of this thesis, to the character type of the Byronic hero. None of the Byronic heroes, for instance, is painted as a sexually promiscuous or deviant dandy (apart, of course, from his *Don Juan* (1819-1824), who is, however, far from a gloomy and heroic figure[6]), while an essential component of the Byronic hero is his great sexual attraction, which often proves to be fatal to his lovers. Without transgressing too much into the territory of the biographer, this and similar Byronic traits have evidently been influenced and caused by Byron's scandalous life, "a life lived always at extremes and in excess" (McGann, *Lord Byron*, xxii), featuring, among other scenarios, an alleged incest with his half-sister, dozens of hetero- as well as homosexual affairs, illegitimate children, voluntary participation in Greek and Italian wars of independence, a general public support of radical politics, several years in

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[5] Thorslev's study constitutes the to this date only full-scale analysis of the Byronic hero. Its main focus, however, is on the various sources Byron is supposed to have drawn on, while only a minor part of the study is dedicated to the actual characteristics displayed by Harold, Manfred and their successors.

[6] Don Juan is obviously a hero created by Byron, but certainly not a Byronic one. He is no dark and heroic figure, but, as Thorslev claims, "more closely related to Tom Jones or to Candide" (13) than to Manfred or Childe Harold. Above all, it is the sense of humour and the continuous ironic deflating of the protagonist by the overpowering narrator (a prime example, thus, of Romantic irony), which make it inconceivable to rank him among the Byronic heroes.

self-chosen exile and great financial debt.[7] It is thus not by any chance that Lady Caroline Lamb, one of his mistresses, expressively referred to him as "[m]ad – bad – and dangerous to know" (quoted in Rogers 298), a well-known catch phrase which is nowadays often employed to describe Byron's protagonists and their successors rather than Byron himself.

The Byronic Hero and the Sublime

Lamb's fierce characterisation of her lover as "mad – bad – and dangerous to know" reveals that the Byronic hero is far from a straight-forward, purely positive figure like the traditional hero of ancient epics. Rather, scholars have repeatedly stressed the problematic response evoked by Lord Byron's infamous character on parts of the audience. The readers' reactions to his character, his emblematic traits and actions, are indeed difficult and diverse and far from purely positive, which, paradoxically, appears to have contributed to his appeal. The Byronic hero as conceived by Lord Byron largely remains

> an unattainable ideal, a hero who inspires awe but cannot be emulated. At the same time, he lacks social skills and an ability to relate to other people; he is a loner and an outcast, and he can be arrogant, contemptuous of human beings, bad-tempered, overbearing, cold, ruthless, and emotionless. (Stein, "Immortals", par. 3)

Equally, the description by Cedric Hentschel, who was the first to publish a book-length study of *The Byronic Teuton* (1940), sounds anything but inviting:

> the Byronic hero is a tripartite individual: he is the type of satanic, sadistic dandy. Insofar as he is satanic, he is a descendent of Prometheus-Lucifer; insofar as he is a sadist, he stands in the shadow of 'the divine Marquis'; as a dandy, he manifests a fastidious exhibitionism. (8-9)

One wonders how such a character can still be perceived as an exemplary hero, rather than a downright villain. Clearly, the Byronic hero combines several contradictory, extreme qualities. In analogy, the reactions he provokes on part of his readers oscillate between equal extremes. As Stein notes with regards to Emily Brontë's Heathcliff, the Byronic hero "reveals a manifest ambivalence", as he is "simultaneously attractive and horrifying" (*Byronic*, 4), which results in the audience's responses bordering between admiration and fear, attraction and repulsion, love and hate. This ambiguous appeal references what has come to be understood as the dominant sensibility of Romanticism, the Byronic hero's point of origin: the sublime. Generally, the sublime denotes "the 'rush' of intense aesthetic pleasure paradoxically stemming from the displeasure of fear, horror or pain" (White

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[7] For a more detailed account of Byron's life with a special focus on his infamous love affairs and his political commitment see Gross, Jonathan David. *Byron: The Erotic Liberal*, for a more general and concise version, McGann, Jerome J. "Introduction". *Lord Byron. The Major Works.*

ch.1). It constitutes the main aesthetic category associated with the Romantic age and influenced both visual and verbal arts, from popular paintings of awe-inspiring cliffs and snow-topped mountains to the thrilling settings of Gothic novels among ancient ruins and mystic moors. At the same time, the Romantic period marks the beginning of the first theoretical writings on arts and aesthetics, in which the sublime, obviously, plays a major role.

Most famously, the aesthetic of the sublime has been described in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), the first major, European work of aesthetic theory and the central one in the Anglophone world. Burke defines the sublime as a "delightful horror" (67), a feeling which capitalises, above all, on terror, and is produced by such diverse, but always essentially (at least partly) negative notions like obscurity, darkness, uncertainty, vastness, infinity, solitude, silence and bodily pain.[8] Central to the sublime is thus, first of all, its contradictory nature, the fact that it produces ambiguous, competing reactions. Equally, there is a contradiction or juxtaposition of opposing notions that underlies the production of the sublime. Burke thus talks of "two ideas as opposite as can be imagined reconciled in the extremes of both; and both in spite of their opposite nature brought to concur in producing the sublime" (74). Accordingly, the feeling produced by a sublime landscape, a painting or a work of literature does not produce pleasure, positive and unmingled, but rather what Burke terms "delight", which he defines as "the sensation which accompanies the removal of pain or danger" (34). This terminology associates the notion of delight with unpleasant emotions, which are vital in the production of the sublime.

Secondly, the sublime is intrinsically linked to the mind's basic incapability to comprehend entirely the vastness, the infinity, the overwhelming aspects of the awe-inspiring scenery. While Burke refers to the sublime as "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (36), Kant refines Burke's initial commentary and stresses the limits of representation and mental cognition inherent in the idea of the sublime.[9] Indeed, he contests Burke's definition by claiming that

> das eigentliche Erhabene kann in keiner sinnlichen Form enthalten sein, sondern trifft nur Ideen der Vernunft, welche, obgleich keine ihnen

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[8] Burke describes in detail each of these notions and provides reasons why they are much rather productive of the sublime than their opposites, such as light or clarity. What unifies all these notions is, first of all, a certain aspect of power. Burke maintains that he knows "of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power" (59). Secondly, all these concepts, like obscurity, darkness and infinity, represent a general hindrance of knowledge, a point commented on further below.

[9] Kant's argument, furthermore, centres on the distinction into a dynamical and a mathematical sublime and stresses their moral, transcendental functions. He thus claims that "das intellektuelle, an sich selbst zweckmäßig (das Moralisch-)Gute, ästhetisch beurteilt, nicht sowohl schön, als vielmehr erhaben vorgestellt werden müsse" (*Kritik,* 198). Clearly, Kant's ethics lie beyond the scope of this thesis. For a more in-depth discussion, consult, for instance, Luke White. "Sublime Resources – A brief history of the notion of the sublime".

> angemessene Darstellung möglich ist, eben durch diese Unangemessenheit, welche sich sinnlich darstellen lässt, rege gemacht und ins Gemüt gerufen wird. (Kant, *Kritik,* 166)

Thus, it is not the aspect of the wild, roaring ocean which is sublime (in Kant's diction, it cannot be anything than "gräßlich", i.e. dreadful), but it is the ideas within our mind that produce a feeling, a state of emotionality which may be termed sublime. Therefore, it is not the "Gegenstand, als vielmehr die Gemütsstimmung in Schätzung desselben" (*Kritik,* 178), the overwhelming of our cognitive faculties by enormous forces and scenes that we experience as the sublime. It is for this reason that the sublime, especially when it appears in nature as, for instance, in the shape of the much cherished Alps, is envisaged and actually experienced as a form of paralysis, a stunning effect on the spectator's senses and cognitive faculties.[10] With regards to this underlying cognitive failure, which forms the basis of Kant's, and, to a lesser extent, Burke's definition of the sublime, Adam Philips describes the sublime as "the impossibility of knowledge" (xxii). Knowing is analogically defined as the setting of limits, which the sublime successfully defies at all times. Indeed, all the above elicited notions Burke deems necessary for the production of the sublime in nature, such as obscurity, infinity and darkness, are united by their common quality of uncertainty and a general prohibition of gaining information and disclosing knowledge.

Apart from the sublime's foundation on contradictory qualities and its production by essentially inconceivable forces, there are implicit political as well as gendered aspects inherent in the way the sublime is treated by both Burke and Kant as well as by several predecessors and followers. Both these aspects are related to the fact that the sublime is defined in stark opposition to the beautiful, the neoclassical equivalent to the distinctively Romantic sublime. Particularly Burke establishes the latter category with its connotations of tenderness, softness, kindness, weakness, positive pleasure and love bordering on contempt[11] as the exact opposite of the sublime, as distinct as black from white. He concludes that "the sublime and the beautiful are built on principles very different" (145) and therefore constitute and perpetuate an "eternal distinction" (114). This dichotomy, first of all,

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[10] In Burke's definition, this is primarily due to the fear which such sublime scenes inspire in their spectators: "No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear" (53). Phillips thus argues that the sublime "makes reasoning impossible and is the antithesis of philosophical enquiry because it is always that which is in excess of any kind of limit or boundary" (xxii). The notion of excess inherent in the sublime is another central characteristic emphasised in its theoretical studies, as the sublime "in all things abhors mediocrity" (Burke 74) and is accordingly linked to extremes and intense passion.

[11] In the section entitled "How far the idea of Beauty may be applied to the qualities of the Mind", Burke argues that "persons who creep into the hearts of most people, who are chosen as the companion of their softer hours, and their reliefs from care and anxiety [and thus considered beautiful, one might add], are never persons of shining qualities, nor strong virtues" (101).

brings with it decisive political undertones. Already Burke's contemporaries read the sublime in close association with the French Revolution and the radical forces which the Romanticists, among them also the self-appointed freedom fighter and political liberal Byron, favoured. While the beautiful is "subservient and obnoxious" (Phillips xxii), the sublime is an experience of domination, which "rupture[s] the continuity of experience and tradition, a disordering spirit like 'the spirit of liberty'" (Phillips xv). In other words, the binary distinction Burke proposes between the sublime and the beautiful can be translated into the radical and the traditional, the rebellious and the tame.

Similar to its politic undertones, there is a second major dichotomy that Burke's enquiry perpetuates: that of the male versus the female. Clearly, it is masculinity which is associated with the powerful, overwhelming and crushing forces of the sublime, while the terms chosen for the beautiful are supposed to perpetuate female stereotypes of physical and mental weakness, delicacy and timidity. This implicit sexist attitude becomes obvious in the gendering of the examples both Burke and Kant use, like the opposition of a powerful ocean to a smooth, yet tame garden. Concretely, Burke argues that "both sexes are undoubtedly capable of beauty, and the female of the greatest" (89) and explains that "if beauty in our own species was annexed to use, men would be much more lovely than women" (96). Hence, only those aspects of nature are regarded as productive of the sublime which appear as a kind of "Macht, die über uns keine Gewalt hat" (Kant, *Kritik*, 184), a word choice which illustrates the highly gendered nature of Kant's discourse. Even more prominently, he establishes that "night is sublime, day is beautiful; the sea is sublime, the land is beautiful; man is sublime, woman is beautiful […] the sublime moves, the beautiful charms" (Kant, *Observations*, 46-47). Thus, both Burke's and Kant's "aesthetic classifications participated in, and helped to support, a powerful hegemonic sexual politics" (108), as Anne Mellor argues with regards to *Romanticism and Gender (*1993). Necessarily, this has been contested in the course of the twentieth century by various feminist scholars, above all by Barbara Freeman in her engaging *The Feminine Sublime* (1995), whose critique of the phallocentric nature of the Romantic sublime focuses on potential instabilities such as its connotations of excess and the transgression of boundaries.[12]

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[12] Freeman's argument and the general relationship of the sublime to gender, (Romantic) sexual politics and feminist critique will be further elaborated in the second chapter of this thesis as it forms the basis for the analysis and evaluation of what will be treated as a rare instance of a Byronic heroine, the character of Kathryn Merteuil in *Cruel Intentions* (1999).

The Spirit of an Age?

The qualities thus far elicited as sublime, including the combination of and the analogous response to contradictory notions, an air of mystery which impedes the gaining of complete knowledge, the emphasis on domination, rebellion and masculinity, are clearly all evoked by the Byronic hero. Appropriately, Byron places his heroes in landscapes distinctively productive of the sublime, as the following stage directions from *Manfred* make apparent:

> *The Mountain of the Jungfrau. – Time, Morning. – MANFRED alone upon the Cliffs.* (*Manfred* 1.2)

The scene that the spectator is invited to envisage here strongly resembles Caspar David Friedrich's paradigmatic *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818). His depiction of a lonely figure upon a high cliff, starring into the foggy, ragged infinitude of snow-covered mountain tops in front of an overcast, gloomy sky is nowadays cited invariably as a prime example of sublimity in the realm of visual arts.

More important, however, than Manfred's affinity to high cliffs and thunderstorms, in other words to a scene of nature which perfectly illustrates Burke's and Kant's ideas of the sublime, is the Byronic hero's own production of the very same reactions caused by the scenery surrounding him. The figure of the Byronic hero, put plainly, works in a similar way as the scenery he finds himself in: he produces exactly these contradictory reactions appreciated by the Romantic audience as sublime. This explains Stein's initial comment on the audience's impossibility for complete identification, but at the same time elucidates why this, paradoxically, constitutes a major part of his appeal. Note, for instance, this passage which is set in the exact scene described by the above quoted stage directions:

> MAN. The spirits I have raised abandon me –
> The spells which I have studied baffle me –
> […]
> There is a power upon me which withholds,
> And makes it my fatality to live;
> If it be life to wear within myself
> This barrenness of spirit, and to be
> My own soul's sepulchre, for I have ceased
> To justify my needs unto myself –
> The last infirmity of evil […].
> (*Manfred* 1.2.1-28)

Scenes like this reveal the Byronic hero's origins in the Gothic villain as well as the fatal lover. In *Romantic Agony* (1933), Mario Praz argues that a major part of the Byronic hero's attraction is constituted by a new preference of "[t]he mysterious bond between pleasure and suffering" (xvi). Thorslev critiques Praz's proposition,

which in his view reduces Romanticism to "a perverse sensibility, in which pleasure and pain, love and hate, tenderness and sadism, are inextricably blended" (7).[13] As the above review has shown, it is, despite Thorslev's refutation, clearly this sensibility, evidently a sublime one, which is transported to the audience and results in ambiguous reactions to the hero, who cannot be completely emulated. In *Lara*, the narrator evokes exactly this notion of extremes on which the Byronic hero relies: "In him inexplicably mix'd appear'd / Much to be loved and hated, sought and feared" (*Lara* 17.1-2). As Praz's hypothesis makes obvious, the Romantic audience sought exactly this kind of odd mixture in works of art: a blend of simultaneous attraction and repulsion and, consequently, a lack of complete, positive pleasure in Burke's diction, or, in modern narratological terms, "emulation" of the character. In other words, it is not although, but exactly *because* he cannot be emulated or purely admired that audiences responded to him in the way they did. Their reaction references the underlying sensibility of the contradictory, more often terrifying than enjoyable sublime on which they orientated themselves.

Thus, the incentive behind the initial comparison of the character type to a scene of nature or a popular period painting becomes obvious: the fact that the Byronic hero produces and displays the dominant aesthetic of his time explains his appeal to Romantic tastes. Accordingly, *Manfred*, but also several others of Lord Byron's exemplary poetic dramas, have been described as "typical of the Romantic Period; […] an expression of the mood of Romanticism; an epitome of the time" (Chew 74, quoted in Thorslev 167). Equally, the different types of heroes, such as the Noble Outlaw and the Gothic villain, which Thorslev explored as the main predecessors and inspirational sources of the Byronic hero, "epitomize many of the most important aspects of Romanticism" (4).[14] It is, as I have tried to demonstrate, the audience's sublime reactions bordering between terror and delight that establish Manfred, Harold and all the other heroes as epitomes of the Romantic mood and explain their widespread appeal in the early nineteenth century.

Yet, as the initial enumeration of famous contemporary descendants has striven to show, the Byronic hero is obviously not restricted to this narrowly defined time frame, nor, as the epigraph of this chapter suggests, to one age. His clear conceptualisation as a concretely delineated character type, his defining qualities of pride, darkness and gloom, have served as major referencing points for subsequent

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[13] It is due to this sensibility, Praz maintains, that Byronic heroes always seem to have chosen the following quote from *Manfred* as a motto describing their roles as fatal lovers: "I loved her, and destroy'd her" (*Manfred* 2.2.117). Equally, the heroes eventually destroy themselves in the same way (cf. Praz 94).

[14] On the same plane, Praz claims that many qualities of the Byronic hero, such as "ennui, love of solitude, a secret which gnaws the heart, voluntary exile […] had become the common inheritance of growing Romanticism" (88).

depictions of the hero well after the heyday of Romanticism. Most famously, the Byronic hero has been employed by Charlotte Brontë as the aristocratic rake Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and by her sister Emily as the unruly Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (1847). These characters have, at the same time, further contributed to establishing the distinctive and typical Byronic traits.[15] It is even more important for the purpose of this thesis, however, that the Byronic hero is also pervasive in contemporary texts. Thus, we have finally returned to our starting point and, time wise, to the twenty-first century. As evoked in the preliminary evocation of real-life and movie characters, the Byronic hero has found his way into the new media and is nowadays almost a constant in contemporary film and television.

Atara Stein, who has established this pervasiveness as seemingly "endless", offers the most extensive study of the *Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television* (2004). Her analysis audaciously ranges from the rock star ghost Eric Raven in *The Crow* (1994), the Terminator from the eponymous movie series (1984-1991), and the hero-villain Q in *Star Trek* (1987-2001) to the Byronic heroines Sarah Connor, the female protagonist of the *Terminator* series, and Ellen Ripley in *Alien* (1979-1992) to end with Angel from the television series *Buffy* (1997-2003). The study reveals that numerous contemporary heroes are modelled on Byron's protagonists in intrinsic and manifold ways. In fact, Stein even argues that the "western hero is one version of the Byronic hero who embodies the qualities of invulnerability and defiance […]. Autonomy and force of will thus define the western hero *and* his Byronic predecessor" (37-38, *Byronic*, original emphasis). Thereby, Stein proves the current use of Byronic traits within a wide field of genres and types. Apart from fictional characters, Stein also detects echoes of the Byronic hero – in an indecisive mingling with Byron's public persona – in contemporary rock performers ranging from Jim Morrison to Kurt Cobain. Benita Eisler pursues the same line of argument when she describes contemporary incarnations of the poet, like Elvis, James Dean and Mick Jagger, as modelled on Byron, the "hero and martyr of revolutionary struggle, aristocratic aesthete and dandy, transgressive rebel of polymorphous sepuality fueled [sic] by forbidden substances" (752). Evidently, this quote paints a larger-than-life picture of the poet, which is much rather fulfilled by the various, each of them slightly different heroes he created. Interestingly, the figure of the Byronic

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[15] Apart from these two, probably best-known successors in the nineteenth century, the Byronic hero can also be found in non-Anglophone literature of the time, for which Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1825-1832) might be cited as a prime example. Besides, he primarily appears in various vampire stories of the time, explicating "the vampire loves of the Byronic Fatal Man" (Praz 99, see chapter three of this thesis). Further examples include James Joyce's Stephen Daedalus from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Ma*n (1914-1915) and Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831), which have both been described, at one point or the other, as modern embodiments of the hero originally created in Byron's oeuvre.

hero today also appears most markedly in vampire stories, just like his nineteenth-century precursors. A case in point is Coppola's movie adaptation *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), whose protagonist is no longer the murdering monster of the original novel, but has transformed into "the dominating, larger-than-life figure of the Byronic tradition" (Fry 274). Even more famously, Anne Rice's rebellious vampires Louis and Lestat from *The Vampire Chronicles* (1976-1985) and the subsequent movie adaptation *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) follow in this row.[16]

What continuously leaves most scholars studying these remarkable modern adaptations and incarnations stunned is the reason for the Byronic hero's current appeal. Obviously, the Byronic hero's perpetuation of the dominant aesthetic of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and his according popularity among Romantic audiences does not necessarily explain, but actually rather complicates the reasons for his widespread use today. Stein realises that "he is alien to his audience; they find no shared basis for sympathy" (*Byronic*, 2) and, at another point, that the Byronic hero is basically "an unsympathetic character" (*Byronic*, 127). In fact, each of the characters she analyses is at one point or the other dismissed as a highly dissatisfactory figure and impossible to relate to. Contemporary heroes, Stein maintains, would certainly not succeed on screen or in the respective novel series, if they did not lose some of these negative traits. Ironically, however, these traits make them Byronic in the first place. Rather than focussing on the specific shift of aesthetics or, as this chapter's epigraph suitably suggests, the incorporation of the spirits of an age, she maintains that "the appeal to the audience is the same in Byron's times and ours" (Stein, "Immortals", par.12). It supposedly stems from the fact that Byronic heroes "validate the audience's own doubts and fears and sorrows" and "give us a vicarious experience of utter autonomy and power, but at the same time they suggest that in our powerlessness we may be better off and almost surely happier than they are" (Stein, "Immortals", par.12). What Stein refers to as the gradual "humanization" of the heroes under scrutiny, i.e. their eventual repudiation of most of the assumedly too negative Byronic traits such as pride and arrogance, thus makes the viewers realise that they "cannot be *like him*", but at the same time "they are flattered that he wishes to be *like them*" (*Byronic*, 3, original emphasis). Evidently, Stein tries to explain the Byronic hero's appeal *despite* his assumedly repelling characteristics by claiming that contemporary embodiments of this type are gradually humanised, i.e. tamed down within the respective film or television series. Paradoxically thus, they supposedly lose many of their Byronic traits in order to become more sympathetic, humane and, consequently, attractive to contemporary

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[16] For an in-depth analysis of these Byronic characters, their similarities and differences, cf. chapter three of Stein's study.

audiences. While this might well be true for the particular characters of her analysis, it is necessarily a highly generalising and hardly satisfactory explanation when applied to all contemporary versions of Bryon's original hero.[17] In a similarly generalising way, Jennifer Williams argues that "the descendents of Byron's Manfred remain so popular and prevalent […] because of two factors: 1. voyeuristic interest in the criminal [and] 2. the conviction of individual powerlessness in the face of institutional power" (par.1). Again, such an explanation is certainly valid in its own right, but it obviously fails to take into account the large time gap the Byronic hero has had to surmount between the late eighteenth and the early twenty-first century. Furthermore, arguments like a "voyeuristic interest" can clearly be applied to a range of different heroes, heroines and villains in contemporary film and television, but do not explain the specificities of this Romantic hero. The reasons for his current popularity seem to be much more intricate.

Rather than paradoxically explain the Byronic hero's appeal to a twenty-first century audience by his gradual denial and consequent loss of Byronic qualities, which I deem barely convincing, this thesis will provide an explanation based on the figure's production of the sublime aesthetic. With the focus on a particular aesthetic category and its relation to larger issues of cultural continuation and translation, I consequently aim to (re)direct the focus to notions of aesthetic judgement and style and, additionally, to connect the contemporary use of a Romantic character type to larger issues, precisely the relation of the Romantic to the postmodern age. My focus on the pervasiveness of the Byronic hero in the postmodern age and his appeal to a particular *postmodern* audience is in accordance with Carrol L. Fry's argument that this figure reflects many of the values of postmodernism which "influence our popular culture: alienation, moral relativism, distrust of authority figures, and solipsism" (227), so that he actually stands as "a contemporary model for postmodern creatures of the night" (277). Similarly, I claim, as a first step in my argumentation, that the reason for the Byronic hero's pervasiveness in contemporary popular arts and, thus, his continuing appeal to a postmodern audience must lie in the specific aesthetic he displays. The attraction and shaping force of these aesthetics, evidently, has survived the journey from Romantic literature to postmodern popular arts astonishingly unharmed, if not unmodified. Plainly put, the sublime unmistakably thrives, in one way or the other, in our

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[17] At another point, Stein equally unconvincingly argues that the extraordinary appeal of this character type to his female audience stems from the "bad-boy syndrome" which women are seldom able to resist. As an example, she notes that "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* makes a point of self-consciously emphasizing the bad-boy syndrome, exploring the heroine's erotic attraction to vampires, despite her calling to destroy them. In this respect, Buffy, despite her superhuman powers, creates an identification with the audience, many of whom find the vampire characters Angel and Spike irresistibly attractive" (Stein, "Immortals", par. 4).

postmodern age. Hence, before I consider the special vantage point adopted by this thesis with regards to the question of an aesthetic appealing to the contemporary Byronic hero's audience, a concise survey of studies and theories of the sublime in contemporary postmodern culture will prove necessary.

A Postmodern Sublime

As Neil White explains in his brief history of the sublime, the end of the twentieth century has witnessed a "revival of interest in the notion of the sublime in philosophy and cultural criticism" (ch. 11). The two most influential critics offering accounts of sublime aesthetics are Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson. Both significantly appropriate the traditional understanding of sublimity for their own purposes, the former with regards to the specific qualities of modernist and postmodernist avant-garde art and the latter by equating the sublime in current post-industrial society with cultural schizophrenia. In the following section, I will attempt to outline briefly each of their complex arguments and subsequently consider Patricia Waugh's critique of both theorists, which provides highly valuable reconsiderations. By doing so, I intend to prepare, if not yet shape the ground for my own outlook on sublime aesthetics in contemporary arts and culture. The transition will be manifested in the last part of this section, which explicates yet another main use of the sublime, in particular in the field of technology and hyper arts, which has been referred to by Alan Liu as "viral aesthetics". While Liu treats the destructive potential, the "destructivity" evoked by this new, yet historically firmly grounded aesthetic as one of several potential acts of destruction latent in cool, my thesis will define the sublime not as one out of several, but indeed the central ancestry of the concept of cool. In fact, conceptualisations of cool reveal a ruptured and modified, yet perceptible use of the sublime in contemporary popular arts, primarily apparent in and at the same time explicative of modern embodiments of the original Byronic hero.

The theorist who has written most extensively about the potentials of a postmodern sublime is Jean-François Lyotard. Next to his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1994), a reaction to Kant's *Analytic*, his most noteworthy ideas emerge in the short, yet influential essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism", which appeared as an appendix to his well-known 1984 publication *The Postmodern Condition*. In this essay, Lyotard establishes the sublime as the central, or indeed "the only authentic mode of expression" (Waugh 27). It takes place "when the imagination fails to represent an object" (Lyotard,

"Postmodernism", 78). Evidently, this is, above all, reminiscent of Kant's claim that the real sublime can never be adequately presented nor found within nature, but is rather occasioned by our mind's reaction to nature.[18] Lyotard, however, distinguishes between two different modes of the sublime: the first is the sublime of melancholia, the nostalgic sublime, apparent in modernist art which still "offers to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure" ("Postmodernism", 81). These art forms, however, "do not constitute the real sublime, which is an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain" (81). In Lyotard's opinion, it is the "task" of postmodern avant-garde art to incorporate exactly this true sublime by putting forward "the unpresentable in presentation itself" (81), or, in a perhaps more lucid expression, to "present the fact that the unpresentable exists" (78). Above all, this comprises a denial of solace and nostalgia and at the same time a search for new presentations which will make their audience aware of the ultimately unpresentable. In that sense, that postmodern artist has to assume the role of a philosopher and produce art not governed by pre-established rules. The result, thus, will no longer be an object or a text, but will in character resemble that of an event.

The focus of Lyotard's publications concerned with the *The Postmodern Condition* on a category of Romantic aesthetics leads Patricia Waugh to the conclusion that the postmodern might in fact be conceived of as a mode of the sublime: "[Lyotard's] invocation of the sublime as definitive of an authentic Postmodernism seems to reinvent the postmodern as a new Romanticism" (Waugh 28). Thus, "Lyotard's authentic Postmodernism is an ultra-Modernism and a Romanticism" (Waugh 32). Arguably, the relation Lyotard seemingly strives to create between traditional Romanticism and the modern and postmodern avant-garde is more complex than that. In "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" (1991), which in contrast to his other works centres more on Burke's definitions and his emphasis on excess and intensity, Lyotard locates the main difference between these two modes of representation each period stands for in the fact that contemporary avant-garde looks for "sublimity in the here-and-now" ("Avant-Garde", 92).[19] Thus, he claims that the sublime within postmodern art is "still the sublime in the sense that Burke and Kant described and yet it isn't their sublime anymore" (Lyotard, "Avant-Garde", 93).

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[18] For a more in-depth analysis of Kant's concept of the sublime and the accompanying impossibility of knowledge and cognition consult section one of this chapter.

[19] This quote, like the whole essay in general, references Barrett Newman's "The Sublime is Now" (1948) as well as his unfinished "Prologue for a New Aesthetic" (1949). The new aesthetic Newman proposes in these essays is put into practice in his huge colour-field paintings, such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51). These paintings do not represent anything outside themselves, as for instance a landscape or a person, but only present themselves to the viewer. This, in Lyotard's interpretation, "is what dismantles consciousness, what deposes consciousness, it is what consciousness cannot formulate" ("Avant-Garde", 90), because it is utterly alien to us and, consequently, presents us with what White has termed the "'hit' of the sublime" (ch.15).

Nonetheless, what he defines as a sublime event and, accordingly, sublime avant-garde art pays tribute to Burke's initial comments: the sublime involves a certain degree of anxiety and remains, ultimately, unknowable and obscure, since it is constituted by notions like darkness and vastness.[20]

In conclusion, Lyotard's concept of the sublime might thus clearly be understood as a Romantic concept due to its extensive borrowings from Romantic theory. The most vital point of his analysis, however, concerns his understanding of the sublime as the defining aesthetic, the dominant mode of perception, reception and production of postmodern art. The latter is supposed to centre equally on the notion of unknowablility and the intrinsic and mesmerising relation of pleasure to terror. Both aspects are conceived of as defining forces of a postmodern aesthetic, yet, as the above quotes have shown, with crucial differences to the original Romantic concepts. What these differences consist of and how exactly the Romantic notion of the sublime is put into practice in concrete works of art, is, however, not considered in Lyotard's essays. Secondly, and equally problematic, is the restriction of the sublime moment to avant-garde, i.e. "high" art. Lyotard argues vehemently against popular varieties[21] and thus, paradoxically, bases his whole account of the postmodern condition on a distinction whose refutation, blurring and eventual overcoming is regarded as a defining characteristic of postmodernism.[22] Since the use of the sublime in contemporary popular arts is central to this thesis, it will evidently aim to offer a different perspective on its postmodern variety, which, just like postmodern art in general, will not be restricted to avant-garde forms. Before we turn to the argument of this thesis, let us, however, first consider the second major theorist who has commented on the sublime as a structuring force in the postmodern age.

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[20] According to Lyotard, the sublime moment in fact is so obscure that we do not ask ourselves "What is happening?", "What is it?", "What does it mean?", but more fundamentally, "[I]s it happening, is this it, is it possible?" ("Avant-Garde", 108), which accentuates the unknowable nature of the sublime as well as its dependence on terror and existential fears. For a more detailed account of Burke's terminology, cf. section one of this chapter.

[21] Works of art which embrace their position within postmodern consumer culture are heavily criticised by Lyotard since they contradict the Romantic notion of art as an autonomous sphere. In such cases, art becomes kitsch and "panders to the confusion which reigns in the 'taste' of the patrons. Artists, gallery owners, critics, and public wallow together in the 'anything goes,' and the epoch is one of slackening. But this realism of the 'anything goes' is in fact that of money; in the absence of aesthetic criteria, it remains possible and useful to assess the value of works of art according to the profits they yield" (Lyotard, "Postmodernism", 76).The idea of "slackening" evoked in this quote is a central one in Lyotard's work, referring to the fact that artists nowadays "are being urged to put an end to experimentation" ("Postmodernism", 71) and yield to the demands of the masses and the market.

[22] In his highly recommendable introduction to literary and cultural theory, *Beginning Theory* (2002), Peter Barry emphasises the fact that "postmodernism rejects the distinction between 'high' and 'popular' art which was important in modernism, and believes in excess, gaudiness, and in 'bad taste' mixtures of qualities" (84) as one of the defining characteristics of the arts today. Interestingly, this phrasing not only evokes the mass appeal of postmodern art, but also its celebration of excess and, secondly, mixture, collage and juxtaposition. These two notions are, as I have striven to show, central to both Romantic and postmodern conceptualisations of the sublime.

In the first chapter of his seminal *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson, like Lyotard, harks back to Kant, especially to his concept of the mathematical sublime, which is occasioned by the essential impossibility to grasp a vast, seemingly infinite scene or object and the resulting overpowering of our senses. Overall, the essay is concerned with elucidating the effects of globalisation, capitalism and technological advancement (in short, what has been termed "post-industrialism"[23]) on contemporary culture and society as well as individual subjectivities. Jameson suggests referring to our period as the "Third Machine Age" (36), which makes "demands on our capacity for aesthetic representation" (37) substantially different from earlier phases of industrialism. What is sublime, in Jameson's view, is the fact that this new peak of a technological, globalised world we find ourselves living in today eventually resembles the overwhelming sight of the roaring ocean or a thunderstorm above a snow-topped mountain range depicted in Romantic paintings. It is, in Kant's terms, "unangemessen unserm Darstellungsvermögen" (*Kritik*, 166), i.e. simply not graspable or comprehensible, so that it stuns our senses and exceeds our cognitive and imaginative faculties. At the same time, this is clearly the underlying reason for the great fascination enacted by new technological and social possibilities in our own age, because it offers a way to comprehend the eventually incomprehensible, complex global network of capital and labour. This actually means that, contrary to popular belief,

> the technology of contemporary society is […] mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentred global network of the third stage of capital itself. (Jameson 37-38)

The postmodern sublime, thus, is essentially understood as the effect of stunning and overwhelming caused by the global system we participate in today; it refers to "the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects" (Jameson 44). Therefore, Jameson proposes to look upon this postmodern sublime as something like a "'hysterical' sublime" (34) which comes close to Lacan's concept of schizophrenia.[24] Due to new, confusing phenomena like pastiche, collage, channel-zapping and communication from one end of the globe to the other, signs and signifiers lose their relation to each other

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[23] The term "post-industrial" is heavily contested and refuted by Jameson, since such and similar terms like post-structuralism are "too rigidly specified and marked by their area of provenance […], therefore, they could not occupy the mediatory position with the various specialised dimensions of postcontemporary life that was required" (Jameson xiii-xiv).
[24] Lacan defines schizophrenia in linguistic terms as a collapse of syntax or syntagmatic relationships (cf. White ch. 13, Jameson 6).

and we are thrown into a realm of random, unconnected signs, an experience which is intense and ecstatic while simultaneously terrifying. Consequently, Jameson establishes this "whole new type of emotional ground tone" (6), the new "intensities" (6) as a constitutive feature of the postmodern condition, illustrated adequately by the phenomenon of "high-tech paranoia" (38) which appears in the flourishing genre of conspiracy literature. The extraordinary, consciously provocative word choice of Jameson's essay clearly reveals the conceptualisation of such a postmodern sublime as, eventually, the most prominent effect of a pessimistic and problematic state which society should strive to surmount. As a substitute for the unsatisfactory sublime, Jameson thus suggests to seek a new "aesthetic of cognitive mapping" (54), which would allow individuals to locate themselves again in contemporary culture and determine their positioning in the global system.

Jameson evidently stresses the centrality of the sublime in postmodern society and thus establishes it as a still major shaping force in terms of representation, perception and production. Nonetheless, his analysis seems to focus on the sublime as a psychological phenomenon characteristic of a whole society rather than a sensibility of potentially new postmodern art forms. It is, however, with regards to arts, just as the video installation by Nam June Paik composed of various, scattered screens positioned in the midst of lush vegetation exemplifies (cf. Jameson 31), that the sublime becomes obvious: the sublime effect emerges when one progresses from a traditional to a postmodernist viewer and does not concentrate on merely one, but, in fact, on all screens at the same time. Such art challenges us to "rise somehow to a level at which vivid perception of radical difference is in and of itself a new mode of grasping what used to be called relationship" (Jameson 31). Jameson terms this specific example a piece of collage. His concept of pastiche[25] as a paradigmatic art form of the postmodern might equally be understood as practising the sublime aesthetic. These art forms, collage, pastiche and others, which essentially rely on the juxtaposition of diverse images and objects, clearly reference the basic contradictory nature of the sublime. It appears to mingle randomly terror with delight and, eventually, remains ungraspable, just like the global system these new art forms are produced in and supposed to reference, parody or, simply, represent. Thus, while Jameson, similar

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[25] Pastiche is defined by Jameson as "the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style" (17). It is similar to parody, yet "without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that […] some healthy linguistic normality still exists" (17). A prime example for such pastiche would be the recently thriving genre of the nostalgia film which displays the so-called "historicism", i.e. "the random cannibalization of all styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusions" (Jameson 20) which thus replaces real history. This again references the idea of random juxtaposition crucial in the production of the sublime.

to Kant, situates the sublime within the spectator's mind, he concedes to postmodern art the locus of its production.

Despite his in-depth discussion of a Romantic aesthetic in the postmodern age, Jameson strongly supports the view that the latter indeed "constitutes a cultural and experiential break" (xiii), or, at another point, a "*coupure*, generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s" (1). This is strongly contested by Patricia Waugh. Her central claim concerns the idea that postmodernism might essentially be regarded as a "late-flowering Romanticism" (3), or, conversely, Romanticism as the "'beginning' for Postmodernism" (4). In *Practising Postmodernism, Reading Modernism* (1992), Waugh then discusses the sublime as a major indication of the proposed continuation between Romanticism, Modernism and postmodernism. Overall, Waugh takes Lyotard's concept of a postmodern elitist sublime as a starting point and judges it as emblematic of "an essentially Romantic preoccupation with paradoxes" (34). This preoccupation, or, in other words, the aesthetic specificities which characterise Romantic literature and the visual arts, including, primarily, the sublime, are no longer restricted to the realm of artistic creation, but "have spilled out of the self-consciously defined sphere of art and into the spheres of what Kant referred to as the cognitive or scientific on the one hand and the practical or moral on the other" (Waugh 3). Waugh is thus evidently less concerned with tracing particular aesthetics in a new environment, but strives to define the general emphasis on aesthetic judgement and values as a defining principle. Supposedly, this principle has dominated Western thought and modes of representation since Romanticism and has only superficially changed within such concretely and, as for instance by Jameson, definitely conceived of periods as Modernism and postmodernism. The sublime is thus not supposed to circumscribe or totalise such vast concepts as postmodernism, whose general aestheticism Waugh does not want to narrow down to a specific dominant category. While she discusses Jameson's[26] and especially Lyotard's approaches in great detail and values the latter for its elucidation of how the "postmodern condition" indeed relies on aestheticism beyond the realm of art, she remains critical of the special place given to the sublime as a defining characteristic.

Finally, Alan Liu's *Laws of Cool* (2004) will serve as the starting and referencing point for the specific outlook of this thesis on a postmodern sublime. In his riveting study, Liu speaks of a "new *sublime* of 'destruction'" or a "destructive creation" (*Laws*, 325, original emphasis) which implements itself under the name of

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[26] Waugh discusses Jameson with regards to his groundbreaking 1984 article "Postmodernism or the Consumer Logic of Late Capitalism", of which the first chapter in the (almost) eponymous book, analysed in detail further above, is an extended version.

"*viral aesthetics*" (*Laws*, 325, italics in the original). Essentially, this new aesthetics evokes previously discussed notions of juxtaposition and paradox inherent in the Romantic concept of the sublime, since it may be understood as "the ultimate form of […] mutation and mixing" (*Laws*, 325). Liu detects these viral aesthetics in contemporary technological works of art, such as digital drawings fusing pictures, photography, written language and computer codes, online art books as well as browser art. These produce a "terroristic sublime" (*Laws*, 341) by at once mimicking and critiquing knowledge work and today's culture, in which information has become the most highly valued commodity. In other words, viral is any

> destructivity that attacks knowledge work through technologies and techniques internal to such work. The genius of contemporary viral aesthetics is to inject destructivity within informationalism. (Liu, *Laws*, 331)

Hence, viral aesthetics describes a new sublime of knowledge culture because it works in a fundamentally "terroristic" manner (*Laws*, 341) and provides an alternative creativity that is "ultimately less *fin-de-siècle* than Romantic" (*Laws*, 340, italics in the original). The notion of contradiction is central to it, both in terms of its production as well as the reaction it evokes, which is apparent in the allegations of "terrorism" that have been made to viral artists.[27] Above all, however, the new viral aesthetic is founded, similar to Lyotard's postmodern sublime, on ultimate unpresentablity and unknowablility. In Liu's terminology, it is an attempt "to install within the life of knowledge work an 'ethos of the unknown'" (*Laws*, 371), which basically denotes a resistance to dominant cultural forms based exclusively on information processing.[28] This is not only reminiscent of Burke's idea of the "impossibility of knowledge" (Phillips xxii), but also evokes the connotations of rebellion implicit in presumably purely aesthetic treaties on the Romantic sublime.[29] In summary, Liu focuses on exactly those characteristics of the sublime which have also proven to be most significant in Lyotard's and Jameson's analysis of a potential postmodern version: a prohibition of complete knowledge and, subsequently, its air

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[27] The charge of terrorism, which, as Liu stresses, was made well before September 11, 2001, has actually been directed to the Critical Arts Ensemble (CAE), whose works of art often take the form of computer viruses and thus pose a serious threat to the integrity of the audience's hardware. The "electronic disturbance" is a major part of such exhibits, whose consequent destruction of data, however, is not condoned by everyone. Terror, as Burke makes clear, is of course the ruling principle of any sublime moment (cf. section one of this chapter).

[28] Liu clarifies that "ethos" in the context of this book can refer both to an ethic as well as an aesthetic category and should generally be more openly and flexibly conceived of as "zeitgeist". He derives the term partly from Raymond Williams' "structure of feeling" as well as from Pierre Bourdieu's "habitus". Most importantly, "the ethos of the unknown" is to be understood as a fundamentally dynamic concept and a process rather than a state of identity (Liu, *Laws*, 72, footnote). This also entails that, again, it is a "paradoxical ethos […] that from the viewpoint of the new corporation both does its job and seems to gesture toward some contrarian reserve of knowledge" (*Laws*, 72), which is, however, not the same as repressing knowledge in general.

[29] For a more detailed discussion of these qualities see section one of this chapter.

of mystery; the reliance on power[30], the "concomitant of terror" (Burke 61), which forms the basis for a resistance towards dominant forces; and, above all, its production by a juxtaposition of contesting and opposing images or ideas and, closely connected to this, its provocation of intense, yet ambiguous reactions bordering between positive and negative extremes.

Most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, however, the above elaborations make obvious that Liu, as well as Lyotard and Jameson, and, to a lesser degree, Waugh, all view the sublime as a major structural force in the postmodern era, an "aesthetic responsive to the postindustrial ideology" (Liu, *Laws*, 370). Liu's ideas then provide the starting point for my own concept of a postmodern sublime, which apparently does not only (re)appear in a different time and place than originally, but also under a new designation. While Liu sees viral aesthetics as one of several possible strategies for a new cool, which is the name he attributes to both the aesthetic of contemporary knowledge work and the ethos which carries the potential for the eventual "destructivity" of such a culture, this thesis will suggest to compare and contrast these two categories on an equal level. In other words, cool will be treated as the newer, hipper, in short, the postmodern version of or rather successor to the sublime. This argument in parts supports Waugh's and other critics' theory of an evolution of aesthetics since Romanticism rather than a radical break as advocated by Jameson. Predominantly, however, it is concerned with the question of the specific reworkings and shifts in emphasis that the sublime has had to undergo in order to be employed and perceived of as cool by a postmodern audience. This becomes apparent in the cool figure of the Byronic hero, who produces such sublime feelings. Instances of this figure in contemporary popular texts will thus allow us to explore theses reworkings and shifts in greater depth. Before we can, however, focus on the intrinsic and surprisingly deeply grounded connections and parallels between two aesthetic categories, we first of all have to attempt an answer to what seems to be the question of questions in today's popular culture: "So, what's cool?"

Theories of Cool

In the free market and popular culture of today's globalised West, it appears as if there were one word which does the trick for all: cool. Cool is the attitude, the style, the design, the trademark, the exclamation of the time, and, most importantly, the reigning referencing point of contemporary aesthetics, what Alan Liu has

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[30] This being a power which bears essential connotations of male dominance and gender binaries, see section one of this chapter.

evocatively dubbed the "cultural dominant of our time" (76). This thesis will treat cool, first and foremost, as the dominant aesthetic category of postmodern culture, in which distinctions into avant-garde and popular art are fleeting. In that sense, it will be argued that the Romantic category of the sublime is reborn, rewritten and rethought in contemporary (popular) culture in the notion of cool. As the following comments will reveal, the ways of arguing, defining, thinking and feeling about cool are highly reminiscent of the way that Burke and Kant conceptualised the sublime. It is in the Byronic hero, whose perpetuation and current popularity in American culture can be explained via exactly these parallels between sublime and cool, that the interconnections as well as the processes of translation and exchange of these two aesthetic categories become most palpable. For this purpose, it is first of all crucial to provide, in analogy to the prior section on the sublime, a brief survey of past and current research on cool aesthetics in cultural and media studies as well as in the field of sociology and history.

What has to be clarified at the outset is that while cool undoubtedly rules much of academic study today, it does so in various different shades and colourings. Cool is simultaneously treated in different publications as an attitude or a pose (Pountains and Robins), "the nascent, everyday aesthetics of knowledge work", "a culture of destruction", "the unknowing or unproductive knowledge" (Liu), a concept "distinctly American", an "emotional mantle", a symbol of "our culture's increased striving for restraint" (Stearns), a disguise, a camouflage and an instance of charade for self-defence (Harris), the ruling principle of modern "metroethnicity", an example of "cultural crossing" and a "demand for self-sufficiency" (Maher), a rhetoric and an (electronic) writing style (Rice), one the most popular contemporary compliments (Poschardt) as well as, plainly but tellingly, "It" (Roach). The list makes obvious that cool is a difficult, diversified idea referring to several, structurally interrelated phenomena. Broadly speaking, cool is treated in three ways: as a style or attitude, an emotional response or indication for contemporary society's state of sensibility, and, finally, as an aesthetic category tightly connected to post-industrial consumer and knowledge culture. While I will obviously focus on the latter definition, it is necessary to elucidate all three uses accordingly, especially because they are clearly interconnected and correlated in several ways. Furthermore, most of the works I will briefly consider in this section reference each other, in some cases extensively, without, however, commenting on the structural differences of their conceptualisations of cool. My thesis will make use of all of the presented theories in the best postmodern eclectic manner while at the same time adhering to the concept

of cool as, principally, a current aesthetic category. Nevertheless, I want to raise awareness and reveal potential and actual instances of intermingling of, in fact, quite diversified and dissimilar notions.

Apart from the theories I aim to explore in more depth, cool has also been treated by less recent studies, almost without exception in a more empirical way. Apart from linguistic accounts focusing on the use and implications of cool as one of several expressions of approval primarily used among teenage speakers with an underlying preference for a certain behavioural style[31], these principally include works in the field of African American Studies. They centre on the emergence of a cool attitude out of African culture and its later use among African American males, especially within the US-American music industry. Here, two of the most influential publications are Robert Farris Thompson's *African Art in Motion* (1979) and *Flash of the Spirit* (1984), in which he introduces the concept of *itutu*, which denotes gentleness of character, grace and a refusal of angry or spiteful emotions. *Itutu* presents itself as a mask worn by warriors in the presence of danger or attack and is accordingly translated as cool. In *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (1992), Richard Majors and Janet Mancini argue that this attitude survived through slave communities as a means of self-protection against humiliation and persecution and can be detected, among others, in the specific attitude carried by Jazz and R'n'B musicians of the US-American music scene today. More recently and with a lesser focus on historical evolution, Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool* (1997) and Herbert Gold's *Bohemia: Digging the Roots of Cool* (1996) place the discussion of cool in the field of capitalism and consumerism as well as US-American and European bohemia and art scenes respectively.[32]

The first surveys I want to explore in greater depth define cool as an attitude or pose. In that respect, the most insightful accounts have been offered by Pountain and Robins in their book *Cool Rules* (2000) and by Joseph Roach in *It* (2007). The subtitle of the former, *Anatomy of an Attitude*, already reveals its underlying stance towards the phenomenon of cool. While it initially poses the question "[W]hat kind of an entity is Cool? Is it a philosophy, a sensibility, a behaviour pattern, an attitude, a zeitgeist, a worldview?" (17-18), the study quickly settles on the definition of cool as "an oppositional attitude", a "*permanent* state of *private* rebellion" (19, original

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[31] Cf. especially Danesi, Marcel. *Cool: The Signs and Meanings of Adolescence.* Toronto: 1994, who defines cool as an age-specific "general behavioural trait of teenagerhood" (Danesi 42).
[32] Frank for instance concludes that cool, perceived of as a fundamentally rebellious, countercultural stance, eventually serves the interest of big corporate organisations and acts as a major tool in advertising (Cf. Pountain and Robins 11). This basic contradiction of cool, its oscillation between "rebellion and digital production, commercialism and individuality" (Rice, "Cool", par. 1) and its eclectic, yet seemingly random intermingling of contradictory, oppositional qualities constitute a major concern of the explorations referenced in the following.

emphasis). The development of cool is traced from an originally countercultural, openly rebellious posture to one appropriated and often aggressively employed by consumer and media culture today. While Pountain and Robins claim that the flavour of rebellion, however, can still be tasted in the ice cream hailed as cool, they refrain from proposing fully fledged combat plans for a cool and potentially revolutionary sensibility as do certain other theorists discussed further below. Predominately, cool is devoid of a clear and decisive (counter-cultural, subcultural or mainstream) political stance and might best be grasped as a "personality type" (Pountain and Robins 26). It is employed and displayed by contemporary movie stars as well as eighteenth-century dandies. Pountain and Robins acknowledge the concept's roots in African tribal culture and the characteristic warrior pose. The transportation of this pose via African slaves explains cool's position as a specifically US-American phenomenon, as exemplified by its prevalence in various cool youth cultures, most of which have originated in the United States. However, one can also detect explicit traces of this seemingly recent attitude in Europe, specifically in Italian Renaissance culture, which displayed a similar emphasis on emotional continence. The philosophy of the *sprezzatura*, "an attitude of aristocratic disdain" (Pountain and Robins 53), is understood as a less hip, though nonetheless crucial predecessor of (post)modern cool. Purportedly, this philosophy persisted in the British beaus, rakes, fops and dandies of the Caroline Age in varying degrees.

The fact that cool can be traced back to specifically European aristocratic practices and, implicitly, the Restoration drama on and off stage links *Cool Rules* to another study of attitudes which, however, neither references cool in its title nor its content while it is actually, as I will argue, concerned with nothing else. In *It* (2007), Joseph Roach offers an absorbing account of that "certain quality, easy to perceive but hard-to-define, possessed by abnormally interesting people" (*It*, 1). For several reasons, I will treat Roach's study as a major account of cool, not the least for the fact that *It* also evokes the notion of sprezzatura as the a major source of the supposedly modern effect created by the contemporary it-girl. Accordingly, Roach stresses the "contradictory forces of It" in accordance with the "ambiguous sensibility" (*It*, 43) that Pountain and Robins detect behind cool. The rakes, rogues and, to a lesser degree, fops of the English Restoration stage are all cited as major manufacturers and perpetuators of It, as they all display that "particular combination of three core personality traits, namely narcissism, ironic detachment and hedonism" (Pountain and Robins 26), the essence of cool as well as the reason for the "mysterious force of mass attraction" (Roach, *It*, 16) propagated by It. Thus, Roach

equally treats this instance of "secular magic" (*It*, 3) as a major attitude, displayed, however, by a considerably small percentage of the population. This is apparently at odds with Pountain's and Robin's conceptualisation of cool as a mass phenomenon and dominant attitude of consumer society, a discrepancy which I will explore further below. Roach's account is clearly linked to his heritage as a performance studies scholar and thus analyses individual performers of It, above all celebrities, actors, aristocrats and contemporary pop stars, rather than the appearance of this specific attitude as a wide-spread, clearly (post)modern posture. What is especially compelling about his account, however, is his riveting linking and criss-crossing of centuries and periodical ruptures in tracing a coherent, yet clearly changing phenomenon. This approach will be adopted by the present thesis, as Roach thereby achieves a detailed analysis of the scrutinised concept and its historical context.

Another, equally illuminating publication dealing with "Coolness" as an attitude is Daniel Harris' eponymous article (1999). The nominalization of cool already accentuates its treatment as a pose and, in Harris' terms, "an aesthetic of the streets, a style of deportment" (39). Coolness is thus the opposite of a genuine portrayal of emotions, which evokes Pountain's and Robins' definition of cool as a mask covering extreme sensations. Serving self-defence and, eventually, survival in "an increasingly uncontrollable urban environment" (39), coolness might thus principally be conceived of as a disguise, a "flamboyant charade of toughness and authority" (Harris 40), in short, a "camouflage for the ghetto" (Harris 40). What Harris' account brings to the forefront is cool's closeness to danger and death, to meanness, hypermasculinity and threat. Harris's study is far from a diachronic one, but rather observes the scrutinised phenomenon from the vantage point of the late 1990s, with a focus on its use in US-American teen culture. While he also identifies coolness with conspicuous consumption and technological gadgets, he emphasises the idea of rebellion and unconventionality that every cool guy and item must exhibit, from the ghetto gangster to the cyberspace rebel, from the cell phone to the boom box. Central to coolness, furthermore, is a typical postmodern nihilism. This results in apocalyptic and affected gloom and a derision of "conventional notions of physical beauty" (Harris 46). The potential of destruction inherent in cool, which is central to Liu's study introduced further above, is reduced, however, to a mere farce. In the end, it is the big corporate companies which chiefly profit from cool advertising,

while the rebellion that they assumedly promote "carefully preserves the world it so blusteringly sets out to destroy" (Harris 47).[33]

The use of cool as an innovative, personal, yet eventually apolitical attitude in a specific environment and for varied purposes also constitutes the focus of John C. Maher's "Metroethnicity, Language and the Principle of Cool" (2005). As a sociologist investigating into ethnic minorities and their struggle, Maher understands cool as "the main operating principle of cultural hybridity" (89), resulting in a new metroethnicity, i.e. a kind of "hybridized 'street' ethnicity" (83). This is employed both by ethnic minorities and individuals with mainstream ethnic backgrounds as a new, multicultural lifestyle expressed in art, eating and fashion. This new metroethnicity "deploys cool with a vengeance" (89), since it uses the new attitude without the traditional connotations of heated political struggle, but centres on personal rebellion and a commitment to ethnicity in useful ways, as for instance in the realms of visual art or music. Since cool "puts 'ethnicity' in quotation marks" and "sees the world as an aesthetic phenomenon" (91), it becomes indicative of the particular conditions of our contemporary postmodern society. Cool thus reveals how the struggle between ethnic minorities and majorities, exemplarily explored by Maher in Japan, "has 'postmodernized'" (89), so that it primarily focuses on ethnicity as a design, a style or a fashion which, in the best of all cases, is considered cool. What is crucial in the way Maher regards cool is its production via a general mixing of different styles and ethnicities, resulting in "the paradox of Cool [which] is precisely its power" (97). This is, as I will reveal, central to several other studies in this survey.

The second major way of treating cool relates to its conceptualisation as an individual as well as social and cultural sensibility which is, in contrast to hot or warm emotions, rather defined by a general restraint and literal cooling of the passions. The most influential study in this row is Peter N. Stearns' *American Cool* (1994) which, as its subtitle explicates, aims at *Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style*. Since this publication is part of a larger project exploring the history of emotions and (American) emotional culture by unravelling underlying trends in what is more generally regarded as the "mentality" of (a particular) society, *American Cool* focuses on cool as an indication for a transgression. In fact, cool is conceived of as a radical break with the preceding Victorian sensibility, in which passions, positive as well as negative, were much higher valued. Since the 1920s, Stearns argues, US-American society has witnessed a slow development towards a more obvious and openly demanded restraint of too blatantly or overtly expressed

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[33] Obviously, Harris offers a substantially judgmental rather than neutral account of cool practices and eventually prefers to view coolness symptomatic of, while at the same time responsible for "the psychological instability of adolescence" (49) in most Western countries today. Evidently, the value of cool for maturation and peer group building is beyond the scope of the present thesis.

emotions. Nowadays, such emotions are considered embarrassing and/or immature rather than stimulating and inspiring. For Stearns, cool thus designates, above all, a favouring of "dispassion" (1) and is treated less as an actively employed attitude but as a symptom of the present society's negation and inhibition of emotionality. Besides these insights in modern emotional culture, the title of *American Cool* already indicates one of the most central and far reaching implications of Stearns' study: cool is attributed the status of a distinctively and, as his argument might suggest, exclusively American phenomenon, whose consequences, however, can apparently also be felt in other parts of the industrialised West.

A similar stance is made by Ulf Poschardt (1999), the only German-based theorist having published about cool, who links the term to its initial etymological roots of cold and coldness. For Poschardt, cool living practices and attitudes indicate the social temperature of our civilisation today, which he illustrates with various popular works of art ranging from films based on coolness to cool comic heroes combating icemen and mutated polar bears. Similar to Stearns, Poschardt traces the beginning of this new culture of coldness, which describes "das zwischenmenschliche Klima in modernen Massengesellschaften" (9) to the beginning of the twentieth century, while examples of it can already be found in the early decades of modern times. Cool, in Poschardt's phraseology, is "der Versuch, den Kältepassagen der Existenz affirmative Strategien entgegenzusetzen" (10). With regards to its focus on the considerable emotional and social restraint in contemporary society, Poschardt's study is close to Stearns' account of *American Cool*. On the other hand, however, Poschardt's conceptualisation of cool is also in accordance with what I have constructed as the third main usage of cool, namely as a specific aesthetic to which, eventually, concrete practices and "acts of destruction" might be linked.

This finally brings us back to the already referred to *Laws of Cool* (2004) by Alan Liu, which comes closest to my own conceptualisation of cool, namely as a major, if not the dominant aesthetic of contemporary (American) post-industrial society. As already outlined in the previous section, Liu defines viral destructivity, a major element of a more general cool art, as a crucial force in the culture of knowledge work and the cubicle, of which cool is simultaneously the dominant design and aesthetic as well as a potential destructive enemy achieving the "ethos of the unknown" (*Laws*, 9). This ethos is supposed to provide a more humane vision by reorganising "the residual avant-garde, subcultural, and countercultural elements in cubicle culture" (Liu, *Laws*, 9) in order to eventually "impede or parody the self-

evident force of information" (Liu, *Laws*, 9). Cool is thus, paradoxically, conceived of as a cultural dominant of this knowledge culture as well as its (potentially) most dangerous enemy due to its absorption and refusal of all information. This paradox evoked by Liu accentuates a major quality of cool emphasised by most studies so far, namely the, implicit or explicit, ambiguous and contradictory quality of this attitude, sensibility or aesthetic.

Jeff Rice's articles "What Is Cool? Notes on Intellectualism, Popular Culture, and Writing" (2002) and "Writing about Cool: Teaching Hypertext as Juxtaposition" (2003) take the same line. His account of cool as an "electronic discourse" ("Cool", par. 3) harks back to Marshall McLuhan's distinction into hot and cool media (the latter requiring higher audience participation)[34] and Jean Baudrillard's modification of this distinction in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976). It is the "extermination […] of the real of production and the real of signification" (7) that Baudrillard has termed cool.[35] Similar to Liu, Rice basically understands cool as devoid of all content and information, with the deviation, however, that he is eventually more concerned with ways of cool writing and rhetoric, which are produced by mixing and linking various discourses, practices and theories. This, in Rice's view, is symptomatic of "a world where everything is interconnected" ("Cool", par. 4). What is cool, essentially, is the juxtaposition of various, apparently unrelated electronic, formal or content items for "creating associations and emotional responses out of the combination of unlike words and images" (Rice, "Writing", ch. 1). A prime example of this new cool rhetoric as proposed by Rice is the "eclectic mix of cool on the Web", i.e. the "juxtaposition of youth culture, capitalism, fashion, and the Internet" ("Writing", ch. 1). Rice's argument, however, might also be extended to the analysis of cool as an attitude and sociological phenomenon, as Greil Marcus's analysis of *Dead Elvis* (1991)[36] makes clear: juxtaposition in this case is the "cultural joining of Elvis as an

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[34] McLuhan establishes a general dichotomy of hot versus cold media in *Understanding Media* (1964), in which he mentions the radio and the movie as prime examples of hot media, while television, the telephone as well as mere speech represent the opposite, in which "so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener [or viewer]. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation" (36).

[35] In Baudrillard's diction, cool is a form of expression, a discourse which exemplifies the way in which "signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real" (7), thus they no longer depend on referents and have become indeterminate. This also elucidates how cool relies on often contradictory, oscillating qualities without fixed meanings or intentions.

[36] In *Dead Elvis*, Marcus reveals the circulation of Elvis, the ultimate celebrity, as, eventually, an example of discourse used by society at large whenever a representation of Elvis is intended. This discourse is created by a collage of such diverse appearances of Elvis as a commodity, a joke, a web site, a comic book cover, etc. Each of these appearances "is a presentation, an acting out, a fantasy, a performance […] of what the deepest and most extreme possibilities and dangers of our national identity are" (Marcus 31). Elvis, another epitome of cool, is thus a sign with shifting meanings by way of "unlikely arrangements" (Rice, "Writing", ch. 4).

Energizer commercial with Elvis the alarm clock with Elvis the singer" (Rice, "Writing", ch. 4).

Again, this particular example draws attention to the origins of cool in US popular culture and its continuing perception as a specifically US-American practice and style. The implicit equation of cool with post-industrial consumer culture ties in with studies mentioned previously, above all Liu's and Roach's, and will constitute the major emphasis of this thesis. By positing the claim that it is not only possible but, implicitly, indeed desirable and necessary to teach "cool writing", Rice's article, contents-wise more situated in the field of IT practice and computer sciences, reveals the central value of cool as an aesthetic for which designers, artists and cool creators strive in their products. At the same time, it exposes the often-cited breakdown of traditional lines between avant-garde and popular culture, which cool, after all, epitomises and, as Pountain and Robins show in their analysis of Andy Warhol's consumer fetish paintings[37], enhances. Furthermore, Rice's study stresses how cool is fundamentally achieved by a juxtaposition of frequently contradictory images and ideas, a combination of various, diversified qualities with, possibly, opposing intentions and effects, which is also evoked by a number of other studies.

In summary, the review of recent theoretical works on cool reveals several central points, which will be crucial in the further discussion of cool. First of all, cool is produced by a juxtaposition of various, contradictory qualities, which, accordingly, might often result in ambiguous reactions and effects. Secondly, from its emergence in the jazz culture of the 1950s onwards, cool bears a distinctively US-American orientation and heritage, which has survived until today in various US-centred youth cultures, such as in the hippie movement or in the figure of the 'gangsta' rapper.[38] Most importantly, uses of cool and its treatment from the vantage point of the late 1990s institute this aesthetic as the central one in postmodern art and culture, as indeed the dominant postmodern aesthetic. As Liu puts it, cool is not only the "cultural dominant of our time" (*Laws*, 8), but indeed

> the techno-informatic vanishing point of contemporary aesthetics, psychology, morality, politics, spirituality, and everything. No more beauty, sublimity, tragedy, grace, or evil: only cool or not cool. (*Laws*, 3)

Instances of cool as the major aesthetic of our time, however, were already noted in the early sixties, witnessing the beginning of postmodernism, as the following passage from Susan Sontag's 1965 article, tellingly called "One culture and the new sensibility", suggests:

> [T]he model arts of our time are actually those with much less content, and much a cooler mode of moral judgment – like music, film, dance,

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[37] Cf. Pountain and Robins, 123-128.
[38] Cf. Pountain and Robins, 109-111.

architecture, painting, sculpture. The practice of these arts – all of which draw profusely, naturally, and without embarrassment, upon science and technology – are the locus of the new sensibility. ("Culture", 299)

"Cool" here undoubtedly does not bear the specific value and meaning of the modes commented on by theorists at the end of the 1990s, but rather references the lack of "hot" engagement and ethical judgement passed by works of art of previous times. Nonetheless, I propose to treat this as an instance of early comments on the specific cool aesthetic of postmodern art, especially due to Sontag's emphasis on the particular combination, or, as one could also term it, juxtaposition of the new technological and the traditional artistic styles, methods and modes of representation.[39] This new aesthetic and focus of art that Sontag here evokes is given a definite name in the spatially and temporarily immediately preceding, most renowned article of Sontag's engrossing *Against Interpretation,* namely her "Notes on Camp" (1964). It is camp, sharing so much more with cool than its initial, which Sontag has famously described as an "unmistakably modern" sensibility of "artifice and exaggeration" ("Camp", 275). With reference to Rice's "cool rhetoric", the juxtaposition with cool is thus not so random after all: camp, just like its today more popular twin, presents itself via underinvolvement, detachment and hedonism as well as a serious lack of all seriousness. In its purest sense, it is "[d]andyism in the age of mass culture" (289). What Sontag describes as the dominant aesthetic mode of affluent, or, equivalently, post-industrial society, is, simply, cool. Not only does she trace the roots of the sensibility to similar eighteenth-century roots like Roach or Pountain and Robins do, she also underlines its endeavours for extravagance. Paradoxically, camp simultaneously appreciates vulgarity and serves the masses with what Rice would call a cool juxtaposition of "the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve" (Sontag, "Camp", 283). Furthermore, she notes that "[c]amp sees everything in quotation marks" (Sontag, "Camp", 280), which references Maher's assumption of what cool does to "ethnicity" (91, cf. above) and accordingly establishes camp as a major postmodern strategy. While equating camp with cool is unquestionably a too far fetched comparison, camp can be said to be, without doubt, cool. In other words, it constitutes a part of or a variant within dominant coolness. As a case in point, Pountain and Robins touch upon this relation but fail to deepen the connection when they comment on gay cool as a defence strategy to persecution similar to the tactic of *itutu* in African (American) society. Just like cool, gay culture employs camp strategies, which originate in general US-

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[39] Sontag maintains that today's art is characterised by "its insistence on coolness, its refusal of what it considers to be sentimentality, its spirit of exactness, its sense of 'research' and 'problems'" ("Culture", 297). It is thus "closer to the spirit of science than of art in the old-fashioned sense" (Sontag, "Culture", 297). This, in Sontag' view, also entails the break-down of the boundaries between "high" and "low" culture, as indeed all works of art are mass-producible today.

American culture[40], and reveal an implicit "love of irony, exaggeration and 'bad taste'" (Pountain and Robins 143).

Underlying camp, just as cool, is thus, as the above survey has hopefully helped to elucidate, a central contradictory attitude which, consequently, produces reactions uncomfortably centring between terror and delight. Not by chance, it is in Gothic novels that "the origins of Camp taste are to be found" (Sontag, "Camp", 280). The connection to the previous section on the aesthetic of the sublime thus becomes more than apparent. Similar, yet again contrastive to Jameson, who in his comment on the postmodern sublime "propose[d] a somewhat different cross-light on [camp], drawing on the equally fashionable current theme of the 'sublime'" (34), I will thus suggest yet another explanation for the interconnection of these phenomena. As the following section, concluding my preliminary theoretical remarks, will clarify, cool is typified by definitions and ways of argumentation strongly similar to the way Burke and Kant conceived of the sublime. Not only are avant-garde works of art, producing Lyotard's high staked notion of (post)modernist sublimity, a form of cool. Even more significantly for the purposes of the present thesis, the Byronic hero is perceived as a cool character, which, as I have argued, is largely due to his production of the sublime. The following section will explore in greater depth the apparent, eye-striking similarities between the sublime and notions of cool. As a starting point, let us thus reconsider the opening research question and the proposed reason for the pervasiveness of the cool Byronic hero.

The Cool Byronic Hero

In order to facilitate the return to my initial question concerning the reason for the Byronic hero's pervasiveness in an age whose cultural dominants are assumedly at odds with Romantic aesthetics and, consequently, with their embodiment in an essentially Romantic character figure, I would like to approach my argument by accentuating a passing, yet highly elucidating comment Atara Stein makes in her analysis of Dream a.k.a. Morpheus, the protagonist from Neil Gaiman's graphic novel series *Sandman* (1990-1996). After describing in detail Dream's biker punk outfit, complete with leather jacket and boots, all dominated, as it appears to be the case with almost every contemporary Byronic hero[41], by the

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[40] Pountain and Robins write of a "darkening of gay sensibilities, from the coke-and-poppers orgies of '70s San Francisco and New York disco and bath-house scenes, to the current vogue for sado-masochism and fetishism" (144).

[41] This claim is both supported by the Byronic heroes of my analysis (cf. chapter two, three and four) and by Stein, whose extensive study has, among others, also come to the conclusion that "the contemporary Byronic hero is almost always dressed in black" ("Immortals", par. 9). Obviously, the colour black accentuates the hero's dark and brooding nature. At the same time, however, black is clearly the colour with the coolest effect, as for instance Maher reveals when he describes the cool

colour black, she evocatively concludes that Dream is, in appearance, "the embodiment of cool" (*Byronic*, 108). As my analysis will show, it is not due to their repudiation of Byronism, as Stein claims, that these heroes appeal to their audience. To the contrary, it is because their Byronic traits, in looks and even more so in attitude and personality, are perceived to be the one thing everyone seems to strive for: cool.

Apparently, the real and fictional personas conjured up at the very beginning of this thesis are above all united, as it has already been alluded to, by their coolness: James Dean as well as the rock star-vampire Louis and the bad boy Angel are all fundamentally cool. Indeed, as I will claim, the attitude of cool is an indispensable quality of the Byronic hero, endorsed by his ironic detachment, laidback attitude and controlled expression. Put more evocatively, the Byronic hero displays those "three personality traits" which Pountain and Robins describe as the essence of cool: "narcissism, ironic detachment and hedonism" (26). As the analysis of the Byronic characters in the second part of this thesis will reveal, contemporary Byronic heroes present, first and foremost, coolness. Hence, their appeal is clearly due to the portrayal of a dominant, and thus appealing and workable attitudinal code, which contemporary audiences are well versed in and conceptive to, rather than due to their Romantic origins and traits, which, in all probability, only very few spectators are consciously aware of after all.[42] The production, perpetuation and depiction of coolness is thus central to the current appeal of the Byronic hero, as it directly addresses what Liu has most suitably termed "the cultural dominant of our time" (*Laws*, 76) as well as the "nascent, everyday aesthetic" (*Laws*, 8) of today's knowledge culture.

This reference to aesthetics, however, already brings us back to where we left off in the previous section, namely with a reference to the notion of the sublime and its interconnections to the concept of cool. Obviously, the question that arises at this point has to address the inherent contradiction of the claim that both the sublime and cool are, paradoxically, supposed to be produced and depicted by the Byronic hero: how can a fixed character type be regarded as conveying both Romantic and postmodern aesthetics? The answer is necessarily connected to and thus has to be searched within what has served as the starting point for the current discussion, namely the pervasiveness of the Byronic hero in a period well beyond his Romantic

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ethnic look (99). Similarly, Pountain and Robins note that "dark glasses […] are apparently timeless in their appeal" (7) to those who strive to be cool.

[42] Equally, creators of contemporary Byronic heroes, i.e. script writers and directors, do not necessarily have to be familiar with Byron's oeuvre: "[a]n actual awareness of Byron's texts is not required for the creation of a contemporary Byronic hero […].The Byronic hero has so pervaded our collective unconsciousness and captures our imagination that his Byronic traits are easily accessible to a contemporary filmmaker, television writer, or novelist" (Stein, *Byronic*, 9).

origins: it is for the same reasons for which he has, as pointed out by various studies presented in the previous sections, appealed to Romantic and contemporary postmodern readers/viewers that he must in fact display aesthetics feasible for both kinds of audiences. This would mean that the Byronic hero, apparently, has always depicted the dominant aesthetics of the current age. This assumption, however, does not entail that he represents different modes simultaneously, but, to the contrary, that cool might be read and understood as the postmodern, contemporary version of the sublime, thus exemplifying an equation or translation rather than a co-existent alternative. Accordingly, this postulation necessitates that what has been decoded as specific of the sublime, like its underlying contradictory nature, its dependence on terror, pain and negative pleasure, its implicit association with political radicalism and masculinity, is nowadays primarily read as cool. Indeed, all these characteristics are valid for and inherent in the concept of cool, so that the conceptualisations of the sublime and of modern-day notions of cool witness some striking and highly insightful parallels and overlaps.

Above all, both the concept of cool and that of the sublime are united by their production via a general, unresolved tension due to contradictory qualities put into juxtaposition and combination. As previous sections have revealed, this results in the famous "delightful horror" (Burke 67) evoked by a sublime scene, and, as I have striven to show, a sublime character such as the Byronic one. This underlying contradiction has also often been elicited in theoretical engagements with cool. Above all, Rice evokes Burke's original phrasing when he describes cool aesthetics in writing as stemming from a "juxtaposition […] for creating associations and emotional responses out of the combination of unlike words and images" which then "prompt new observations" ("Writing", ch. 1). Similarly, Liu considers "mutation and mixing" (*Laws*, 325) central processes in the production of viral aesthetics, the most blatant example of a general cool aesthetic. Thus, there is undoubtedly an "ambiguous sensibility […] that lies beneath Cool" (Pountain and Robins 43), or a "paradox" and "hybridity" (Maher 97), which "comes out in the play of suddenly reversible polarities" (Roach, *It*, 9). Above all, this dependence on an insolvable contradiction is epitomised in the ultimate statement of camp, which has beforehand been described as the potential predecessor of cool: "it's good because it's awful" (Sontag, "Camp", 292). Hence, cool is

> the apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities simultaneously: strength *and* vulnerability, innocence *and* experience, and singularity *and* typicality among them. The possessor of [cool] keeps a precarious balance between such mutually exclusive alternatives, suspended

at the tipping point like a tightrope dancer on one foot; and the emphatic tension of waiting for the apparently inevitable fall makes for breathless spectatorship: hence [the] location of a psychological contradiction with reversible polarities like egoless self-confidence or unbiddable magnetism at the source of the mysterious fascination of [cool]. (Roach, *It*, 8, original emphasis)

Roach's original comparison of a cool character to the tightrobe dancer's bold venture and the consequent emphasis on the precarious, thus thrilling nature of cool accentuate its dependence on danger, which apparently needs to be inherent in any character eager to demonstrate cool. Evidently, the here evoked focus of the cool attitude on danger and paradox is highly reminiscent of the way Burke and Kant dealt with and designated the sublime, the state of mind when "all motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (Burke 53). Apart from the reference to danger, the words Roach chooses to describe the It-effect sound revealingly familiar: "mysterious", "unbiddable" and "the possession of mutually exclusive alternatives" might have been just the terms employed by Burke to explain how the sublime must be conceived of, eventually as "an odd mixture, revealing, as it can, the overlap between pain and pleasure" (Phillips xxi). Upon exploring the appeal of hero-villains in contemporary movies, Roach thus appropriately notes that "[t]he contradiction that makes [them] the most interesting, simultaneously alluring and alien, is their danger, balanced precariously at the tipping point of love and death" (*It*, 214). This elicits the appeal of the Byronic hero[43] and at the same time intimately mirrors Burke's explanations of how the sublime is put into practice. Hence, the major, unifying points here are, first of all, the contradictory nature, which is produced by both the sublime and by notions of cool and exemplified in prime terms by the Byronic hero, thus aligning the postmodern aesthetics to what will be treated as its Romantic predecessor. Secondly, it is the closeness to danger, terror and death that functions as a major structuring force in the effect the aesthetics have on the respective audience. Just as "terror is in all cases whatsoever […] the ruling principle of the sublime" (Burke 54), cool, appropriately explicated in a much cooler phraseology, "loves the night, and flirts with living on the edge" (Pountain and Robins 12) and "grows out of a sense of threat" (Harris par. 1). One version of it "always produces a thrill of fear" (Roach, *It*, 208), just as the Byronic hero is supposed to do.

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[43] Tellingly, Roach explores Johnny Depp's interpretation of Captain Jack Sparrow from the 2000 movie *Pirates of the Caribbean* as a major representative of the typical pirate hero-villain, who clearly has It. This type of sea-faring, hijacking hero goes back, as Roach correctly notes, to a representation of piracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, including, as a prime example, Byron's corsair Conrad from the eponymous epic poem (1814). Conrad, just like contemporary pirates, conjures up a "scenario of negative attraction, the lethal charm of the dangerous exerted on the curious and fearful" (Roach, *It*, 208). See also chapter four of this thesis.

Apart from the focus on the essentially contradictory nature of these aesthetic categories and the incorporation of the aspect of danger and terror as a central component in their production and effect, the sublime and the concept of cool are also aligned with regards to their position to knowledge and its transference. It has already been noted that the sublime is understood as ultimately resisting knowledge and the conveyance of information. This is connected to its dependence on a feeling of infinity, limitlessness and obscurity, i.e. a hindrance for the transferral of any information, which makes the sublime into "the category for a power or 'greatness' that is beyond categorization" (Phillips xxii). The idea of a "greatness" so gigantic that it becomes, ultimately, unconceivable and exceeds all boundaries, both physical and mental, is also central to the conceptualisation of cool. What characterises cool, both as an attitude as well as a quality perceived in objects, is a "competitive urge to gigantism, to make everything bigger, faster, longer, shinier, louder" (Pountain and Robins 128). This results in what has already been referred to as the "ethos of the unknown" (*Laws*, 9), a term coined by Liu to designate the effect of cool when employed as an aesthetic category within our contemporary culture of knowledge. The effect resembles that of an "empty signifier" (Rice, "Cool", par. 3), since it reveals, as Maher claims, a general tendency to

> take[…] the signifier more seriously than the sign. The form of the statement is more 'significant' than where it comes from. […] It takes for a starting point not content (what you say and mean) but material shape (how you say and mean) as rather important. (96-97)

Equally, Sontag notes that camp/cool emphasises "texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content" (Sontag, "Camp", 278). With reference to this refutation of all content and information, cool has been dubbed "our interface with infinity" (Liu, *Laws*, 183), which, in another kind of terminology, "has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime" (Burke 67).

The above reference to an "ethos of the unknown", which Liu proposes to employ by way of resistance to dominant trends, makes obvious another major parallel between cool and sublime, namely their inherent flavour of rebellion and the implicit closeness to radical and innovative forces rather than conservatism and tradition. Cool is thus described as a "*permanent* state of *private* rebellion" (Pountain and Robins, 19, original emphasis). "[T]he anti-establishment attitude associated with cool" (Rice, "Cool", par. 2) can still be detected today, despite the clearly not recent appropriation into mainstream mass culture and the subsequent employment

in the vocabulary of advertising and corporate culture.[44] Correspondingly, the sublime has also been equated with revolutionary and radical forces opposing the established order.[45] Similarly to political undertones, there is also a common, implicit association with the male. Harris defines cool as "a hypermasculine folk religion" (par.1), while Pountain and Robins suggest that "although Cool is a strategy that women understand and can wield as well as men, fewer of them actually choose to do so" (138). While the latter statement clearly reveals a latent sexism and will be strongly contested by instances of female coolness in the analytical part of this thesis, it yet draws attention to the underlying tendency to associate cool with masculinity, similar to conceptions of the sublime. Hence, it is above all heroes, rather than heroines, who portray Byronic and, accordingly, cool character traits.

The above survey of parallels makes obvious how closely the sublime, an aesthetic of Romanticism and supposedly expressive of Romantic sensibilities, is apparently related to cool, the representative of a whole new range of "information age aesthetics" (Liu, *Laws*, 370). As a major difference, however, one might detect their discrepant positions towards passion and feeling. While the sublime, typical of its Romantic origins, requires and produces extreme reactions, the concept of cool, despite its production via polarities and extreme states, is in common perception often regarded as the zero point of emotionality, as being devoid of all feeling.[46] However, there is again an intrinsic relationship to be perceived between these two conceptualisations. As Pountain and Robins argue, cool can be seen as "a mask covering an extreme form of romanticism which […] involves an emphasis on feeling and content rather than order and form, on the sublime, supernatural and exotic, and the free expression of the passions and individuality" (119-120). More overtly than any of the elaborate comparisons made above, this quote reveals how these two aesthetics might be aligned.

Accordingly, the above account might be understood as, in parts, supporting Patricia Waugh's already mentioned proposition, which suggests contesting the "radical break theory" (4). Indeed, the manifold parallels and relations found

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[44] Marcel Danesi's *Cool: The Signs and Meanings of Adolescence* (1994) explores how cool is nowadays already adopted at primary school and solidified as an attitudinal stance in adolescence. Equally, Pountain and Robins note that cool now predominately rules in the field of mass media and the advertising industry by providing "the way into the hearts and wallets of young consumers" (12). Maher points out the paradox that "[w]hilst fully absorbing and enjoying material consumer culture, Cool views itself as a [sic] historical and anti-establishment (a "cool millionaire" is an oxymoron)" (96). Nonetheless, "[c]ool still plays on the periphery, the outside" (Maher 95-96). The most extensive study on the intrinsic relationship of cool to mass and counter cultures is Liu's (2004), whose argument is delineated in greater detail in section two and three of this chapter.

[45] For an overview of the political as well as gendered connotations of the sublime cf. section one of this chapter.

[46] This is, above all, suggested by Stearns, who describes cool as indicative of a culture of "emotional self-restraints" (10) since it functions as "an emotional mantle, sheltering the whole personality from embarrassing excess" (1).

between the sublime and contemporary notions of cool might challenge prevailing periodisations which construct Romanticism, Modernism and postmodernism as unambiguously and clearly delineated periods. With regards to aesthetic tendencies, it furthermore appears apposite to link postmodernism to Romanticism rather than the supposedly forerunning modernist period. Consistent with Waugh's argument, Liu hence observes that "it is especially pertinent to initiate an interview between the postmodern and the Romantic" ("Remembering", 274). The following analyses of popular texts shall thus put one of the prime instigators of this connection, the Byronic hero and his modern incarnations, to the test.

2. "THAT WAS COOL": THE *CRUEL INTENTIONS* OF A FEMININE SUBLIME

> "Well, I can tell you one thing. 'Cool's' got
> nothing to do with women.
> Nobody ever calls a woman cool."
>
> "That's 'cause guys like
> you'n'me, Camille, we like 'em *hot.*"
>
> (Tom Wolfe, *I am Charlotte Simmons*)

> Going straight forward to its end, unappalled by peril,
> unchecked by remorse, despising all common maxims and all
> common means, that hideous phantom overpowered those who
> could not believe it was possible she could exist at all.
>
> (Edmund Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*)

> Oh, she's an eight ball
> She's rolling faster than a whitewall
> Got an avalanche packed in a snowball
> She's losing all the leeches like a stonewall
> She's loaded up.
> [...]
> You want her talking up to you
> Where you float like a royal balloon, oh
> Your ego swollen to the size of the moon, well
> I think you found somebody to cut you down to size.
>
> (Mary Playground, "A Cloak of Elvenkind",
> *OST Cruel Intentions*)

> Yes! The sublime was called Charlotte Simmons.
>
> (Tom Wolfe, *I am Charlotte Simmons*)

"You amaze me!" (*Cruel Intentions*), Sebastian Valmont exclaims in awe when his stepsister Kathryn Merteuil ruthlessly plans on destroying the hitherto unblemished reputations of naïve Cecile as well as that of prim Annette, daughter of their high school's new headmaster. *Cruel Intentions* (1999) might effectively translate the original (adult) story *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1782) into a teenage movie set at a New Yorker prep school[47], but it does nothing to tone down the plot. Like their literary predecessors, the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont, Kathryn and Sebastian "race through life as if it were a game" (*Cruel Intentions*) and leave behind a trail of destruction. Abandoned by their globe-jetting

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[47] Since I am interested in the particular employment and function of the sublime in contemporary popular texts, the focus of this chapter will be on the film *Cruel Intentions* and not its novelistic base nor the various adaptations preceding this one. The intention is not to treat the present remake as one out of several adaptations in a long row, but as a work of art in its own right. Equally, the original text by Choderlos De Laclos will merely be referred to when necessary for the argument. For a closer analysis of *Les liaisons dangereuses* and its cinematographic history, consult Humbert, Brigitte E. *De la lettre à l'écran: Les Liaisons dangereuses.*

parents in their mansion on the Upper East Side, the bored step siblings engage in cruel games during their summer vacation. In order to revenge herself on her ex-boyfriend Court, Kathryn, careful to maintain the façade of the morally upright school representative, intends to turn his new lover, the innocent and girlish Cecile, into "the premier Blow Job Queen of the Tri-State area" (*Cruel Intentions*). Sebastian, New York's most notorious heartbreaker, comes in handy for this mission. In turn, he wants to corrupt Annette, who declared in a youth magazine that she "plan[s] to wait" (*Cruel Intentions*) until she is truly in love. To spice things up, Kathryn and Sebastian agree on a wager: if Kathryn is right in doubting her step brother's seduction skills, she will win his vintage Jaguar. If not, she will be his for a night, an offer which he only accepts after her accord that he "can put it anywhere" (*Cruel Intentions*). Consistent with the Hollywood romance formula, the unavoidable happens: the hunter falls in love with his prey and undergoes a radical change of heart and morals. While his serious relationship with Annette ironically involves that Sebastian wins the bet, he refuses to consume his victory. Furiously, Kathryn makes her new devotee, Cecile's music teacher and former love affair, attack Sebastian on the street, which results in the latter's fatal car accident. During a mourning memorial at their high school, Annette distributes copies of Sebastian's secret journal, thus redeeming his reputation and irrevocably ruining Kathryn's.

> Expressed more poetically, *Cruel Intentions* portrays vividly how

> [t]he romantic movement's cult of the child has ended in creating a foul-mouthed enfant terrible who has turned the playground into a cemetery, a necropolis where prematurely aged Byronic figures stagger from the merry-go-round to the seesaw to the jungle gym striking anguished poses of misery and ennui, convinced that their grim-visaged solemnity lends them an air of sophistication and maturity. (Harris 44-45)

Allegedly, what cultural theorist Daniel Harris[48] refers to in this quote is not so much the 1999s movie but rather what he at another point terms the contemporary "philosophy of affected gloom" (43), the conflation of "loveliness and elegance with dullness and mediocrity" (46), the currently en vogue "over-accessorized copiousness" (41). In short, he refers to nothing less than cool and what it has done to hitherto unspoiled teenagehood. The following analysis, however, will demonstrate that Harris' claim can well be applied to the popular text under scrutiny. *Cruel Intentions* and the embodiment of its central tenets in the character of Kathryn is quintessentially cool, as its apparent stylisation[49] on and the various awards by

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[48] For a more detailed account of Harris' ideas on "Coolness" (1999) cf. chapter one of this paper.
[49] Music plays a central role in the movie, as the extensive and highly successful Original Soundtrack including several well-known artists suggests. Furthermore, one can detect various scenes shot in the traditional style of a typical music video, involving fast jump cuts and a generally fast pace of editing. Interestingly, the employed music supports the general notion of the sublime as put forward in the film,

the coolest of all television programmes, MTV, testify. Yet, or rather in consequence, the whole movie appears to be implicitly striving for nothing else than a wholesome amount of "delightful horror" (Burke 67). As director Roger Kumble states in an interview: "I just hope it's just gonna be like ninety minutes of just: 'Oh my God, I can't believe I'm watching this!'" (n.p.), which, indeed, merely paraphrases what one of his actors felt upon first being confronted with the script: "I read it, and I was immediately both frightened and challenged, and intensely interested all at once" (Phillippe n.p). What Phillippe apparently experienced during his study was nothing less than the "'hit' of the sublime" (White ch.15), which is exactly what the audience, as I will strive to contest, is primarily confronted with via the figure of Kathryn, a prototypical Byronic character, if not, however, a categorical heroine.

As the following analysis will reveal, neither she nor her counterpart Sebastian, who equally starts out as a highly appealing contemporary version of Manfred, are allowed to maintain or display in a favourable light their sublimity and coolness, which are evoked by their Byronic traits. Accordingly, Kathryn perpetuates a version of the sublime which Barbara Freeman has termed *The Feminine Sublime* (1995) and which contests originally phallocentric conceptualisations.[50] As the "site both of women's affective experiences and their encounters with the gendered mechanisms of power" (Freeman 2), the feminine version of the sublime feeds on the notions of excess, boundlessness and ultimate unavailability inherent in Burke's and Kant's definitions of sublimity and undermines them effectively. It is via these notions, which are, as my analysis will reveal, connected to contemporary coolness, that Kathryn becomes responsible for the most prominent and sublime moments of the film, which shall be analysed in greater detail. Hence, this chapter will explore how the present form of sublimity becomes equated with and coded as cool throughout the film, which, as the dominant postmodern aesthetics, actually explains its widespread appeal. At the same time, it can account for the negatively critiqued, inadequate ending of the film, which deviates significantly from this aesthetic. In accordance with the representation of Kathryn in the opening sequences, let us start out by delineating how she and, less significantly, her stepbrother Sebastian display what it takes for a Byronic hero/ine to prosper in the late 1990s.

"Jesus Christ! Is she for real?": The Byronics of Kathryn Merteuil

It appears almost too broad a hint when Kathryn Merteuil, the (acoustic) namesake of Emily Brontë's Catherine Earnshaw, played by the very same actress

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which especially its theme song, "Bittersweet Symphony" by the US-pop band *The Verve*, illustrates. In the following, I will comment more extensively on this point.

[50] For the strong patriarchal colouring of traditional conceptualisations of the sublime and its equation with male stereotypes of strength and power see chapter one of this thesis.

as Buffy, the hunter and lover of the vampire Angel, tries to make her stepbrother and secret double Sebastian yield to her plan of destroying her ex-boyfriend's reputation by morally perverting the girl she has been dumped for: "Be her Captain Picard, Valmont. Boldly go… where no man has gone before" (*Cruel Intentions)*. In other words: the web of Byronic hero/ines surrounding the character of Kathryn could not be tighter. While Catherine, her namesake and, as my following analysis will show, moral ancestor, presents the Victorian typecast of the "nontraditional, nonconforming female" (Stein, *Byronic*, 170) and has thus been described as a possible counterpart to the traditionally male Byronic hero, it is Angel, acting as the soul mate, lover, alter-ego and worst enemy of Buffy, Sarah Michelle Gellar's most prominent role, who best portrays how the essential Byronic traits of remorse, melancholy and anguish are reworked in a twenty-first-century context. Principally, however, Kathryn's above quoted challenge, which likens her stepbrother to the explorer and conqueror of hitherto unexplored parts of the (female) space and at first glance establishes a highly pallocentric discourse, equates her with the one person Picard takes orders from: Q, the archetypal, superhuman and perpetually triumphant enemy of the Star Trek Crew, who at the same time presents the "quintessential isolated Byronic outsider" (Stein, *Byronic*, 145).

In such prominent company, it seems that Kathryn and, to a lesser degree, her stepbrother Sebastian cannot have any other choice than to adopt those Byronic traits as well. Most obviously, first of all, both act on their own moral code. The defiance of every legal, social and moral law is best exemplified in visual terms when Sebastian sits behind the wheel of his beloved vintage Jaguar and traverses in the middle of a crammed road, thereby causing tyres to squeak and horns to blow. The police man, who dares to inform him that parking is not allowed on this lane, only receives an apathetic gesture from behind: Sebastian and Kathryn, be it with regards to parking, seduction or their joint cruel intentions, could not care less. The typical aristocratic blasé attitude of the bored, yet highly talented Byronic hero (and, indeed, Lord Byron's infamous stylisation of his own public persona) is translated into a bunch of sophisticated prep-school kids of Manhattan's Upper East Side, who are, as an alleged rationale for the unfolding action, simply "sick of sleeping with these insipid Manhattan debutantes" (*Cruel Intentions*). While this is first and foremost intended to sketch, as the overall morale implies, the teenagers' empty and morally perverted lives, it also calls to mind Manfred's loathing for his fellow beings and his striving for more, for something beyond his currently limited (human) life. He thus recites:

> […] From my youth upwards
> My spirit walk'd not with the souls of men,
> Nor look'd upon the earth with human eyes;
> The thirst of their ambition was not mine,
> The aim of their existence was not mine;
> My joys, my griefs, my passions, and my powers,
> Made me a stranger; though I wore the form,
> I had no sympathy with breathing flesh.
> (*Manfred* 2.2.50-57)

Kathryn and, at least initially, Sebastian are similarly depicted as utterly discontent with their current options and, consequently, disgusted with the company they have to put up with. In view of that, Gellar states in an interview that Kathryn "is given all these material things, yet she constantly wants more" (n.p.). While the actress here in fact refers to Kathryn's avid greed with regards to sexual and material satisfaction, a point I will return to further below, such a description of her mindset in fact recalls the Byronic hero's origin in the traditional Faustian overreacher. The typical Faust character represents the "thirst for absolute knowledge and […] lust for experience" as well as, in the traditional medieval conceptualisations of the Faust legend, a certain "cupidity" and "yearning for wealth and luxury" (Thorselv 87). All these traits reappear in Byron's hero, as, for instance, when Manfred summons the seven spirits to transcend his restricted human existence (cf. *Manfred* 1.1). At the same time, the Faustian striving beyond human limits is rewritten by Byron and combined with a boredom and apathy underlying the wish for more: "Accursed! What have I to do with my days? / They are too long already" (*Manfred* 1.1.169-170).

Regarding these specific parallels to Byron's original hero, it is also noteworthy that Kathryn is frequently depicted from above, for instance when she observes (or actually spies on?) Sebastian from the balcony of their mansion. This scene is cast like an almost clichéd Romantic posture[51] and recalls the Byronic hero's affinity to height, as the mountain tops and high cliffs favoured by Childe Harold during his melancholy journey testify. Additionally, most of Kathryn's interactions with Sebastian, as well as the lessons she gives to Cecile, are set inside their parents' mansion in rooms lushly decorated with dark and heavy curtains, at least half drawn. Again, it is a stereotypically Romantic setting and, even more significantly, recreates two of the main principles of the sublime: darkness and obscurity, since according to Burke, "darkness is more productive of sublime ideas

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[51] Cf. Stein, who describes Morpheus a.k.a. Dream, previously referred to as the embodiment of cool (Stein, *Byronic*, 108, cf. chapter one of this thesis), as "leaning on a balcony in a quintessentially Romantic pose, barefoot, rain streaming round him, and his dark cloak flapping in the wind" (*Byronic*, 120). This suggests that Kathryn's posture, while predominantly conceived to inspire an atmosphere of threat and envisage her embodiment of the impeding threat she represents to the young couple's happiness, might equally be interpreted as an indication for her more obscured feelings of melancholy and unrequited love, which in fact inspire her hate and desire for revenge. Thus, in another diction, the cool posture maintained in this scene is yet a barely efficient "mask covering an extreme form of romanticism" (Pountain and Robins 119) and hardly succeeds in hiding extreme passions.

than light" (54) and together with obscurity is "universally terrible in all times, and in all countries" (131), because it hides and conceals present circumstances. The Byronic hero displays an almost natural closeness to these notions due to his depiction in dark and gloomy settings, which come to stand in for his dreary, brooding mood and produce exactly this effect of the sublime. Accordingly, Kathryn's almost invariable depiction in a dark environment and her overshadowed face when she tells Sebastian that the eventual triumph is hers because "You don't know anything. You don't even know me" (*Cruel Intentions*) recalls a central characteristic of the sublime, namely its unknowable nature. She thus serves as a prime instance for how the Byronic hero/ine indeed evokes exactly these sublime sensibilities on part of the audience. Similar to the way that Byronic heroes like Childe Harold and Manfred were almost consistently depicted in a dark and obscure setting, which, by analogy, stood in for their unknowable nature, so Kathryn and her intentions, though certainly cruel, also ultimately remain vague and unclear. Deception and deceit are central to her character and precisely represent how "all [that] is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible [is] sublime to the last degree" (Burke 55).

The striking parallels of Kathryn with Lord Byron's original heroes show that, despite her eventual decoding as a downright villain and the evil pole in the whole film, she is to a large extent modelled on what various scholars have referred to as contemporary Byronic heroines. In many instances, Kathryn obviously portrays those features which have been defined as typical of such heroines, including Xena and Sarah Connor from *Terminator*, and which are, notably, by far more prominently bordering on the negative than the qualities portrayed by their male counterparts. The Byronic hero "defines himself by separation, eliminating his loved one when he feels his self-sufficiency to be threatened" (Stein, *Byronic*, 190), which actually results in the fact that heroines modelled on precisely such Byronic characteristics, which are latently coded as masculine, automatically "rebel against traditional roles not only through their violent tempers and their 'unfeminine' desire to triumph over others but also through their isolation and alienation from their society" (Stein, *Byronic*, 184). Indeed, Kathryn portrays all these qualities, which apparently can be read as virtues as well as vices, depending on the emphasis, the point of view attached to them and, as Stein's analysis suggests, the protagonist's gender. Like other Byronic heroines in this row, Kathryn indeed "selects and discards men according to their usefulness in achieving her own ends" (Stein, *Byronic*, 190) and "must destroy her soul mate, her violent double" (Stein, *Byronic*, 208), a part which is evidently played by Sebastian: his status as a stepsibling already hints at his

being the mirror image, in this case the more positive one[52], of his sister.

"You and I are two of a kind" (*Cruel Intentions*), Kathryn says in one of the initial scenes, and Sebastian later resignedly repeats the phrase. Apparently, Sebastian depicts all the qualities of his stepsister, yet his Byronic traits are more restricted to the positive range of the spectrum. Thus, the brooding, contemplative and melancholy nature of Manfred is accentuated by the film's emphasis on Sebastian's diary, which references the original epistolary and, consequently, confiding style of the novel *Cruel Intentions* is based on[53], but also serves to lay bare his supposedly true emotions. Accordingly, it functions as a major means of forging an alliance with the audience. Furthermore, it is via Sebastian that the Byronic hero's capability of "deep and strong affection" (Macaulay, quoted in Rogers 297) becomes apparent, as he indeed strongly attaches himself to Annette, the beautiful[54], and, in consequence, eschews the sublimity he hitherto provoked.[55] Hence, the attraction which a Byronic hero exerts, especially in his contemporary versions, is most decidedly worked out in the figure of Sebastian, a "guy who out of boredom decides to challenge himself" (Phillippe n.p.) and who is, as Phillippe characterises him, "just so smart, so funny, so sharp, so angry..." (n.p.), that no one can resist his appeal. Much more than Kathryn, whose modelling on the part of evil does not allow her to appear in too favourable a light, Sebastian, at least in his deceptive engagements with his fellow beings, does appear beguilingly charming and engaging. Hence, he depicts that "irresistible and dangerous sex appeal of the Byronic hero-villain" (Stein, *Byronic*, 25). For completion's sake, however, Philippe would have also to admit that this overt attraction characterises the initial Sebastian,

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[52] In the film to which Stein's analysis applies, *Terminator*, the reverse is the case: Sarah Connor is the heroine of the film, while her soul mate, the Terminator, represents evil and has to be destroyed. The act of destruction at the same time serves to "eradicate[...] her own violent side, her Byronic stance, so that she [...] can rejoin society" (Stein, *Byronic*, 208).

[53] Laclos's novel takes the form of letters, which the characters address to each other and which give Merteuil and Valmont the opportunity to relate their deeds to the respective confidant/e. The epistolary style is a central and important characteristic of *Les liaisons dangereuses*, since "the letter-form supports the content" (Humbert, "*Cruel*", 279) and allows for several narrative ambiguities and ironic discrepancies between the different perspectives.

[54] This distinction follows Burke's dichotomy of the sublime as the diametrical opposite of the beautiful (cf. Burke 113-114, and chapter one of this thesis). In accordance with Burke's definitions, Kathryn could be understood as representative of the sublime, while Annette stands for the beautiful. I will comment on this point more extensively further below.

[55] Thus, Sebastian is portrayed as envying the beautiful and striving to emulate it eventually: "I can't win with you" (*Cruel Intentions*), he complains about towards Annette after their charitable visit to a care home for the elderly, which he must confess her did not enjoy at all, despite his intentions to do otherwise. At the same time, Humbert ("*Cruel*", 284) implies that Sebastian passes on his Byronic traits to Annette, who "is also an ambiguous character" (Le Gagne 145), especially towards the end. Annette approximates several accessories used to identify Sebastian as a rake and ruthless predator, and, in fact, a Byronic hero, including, above all, his dark glasses, his fast car (i.e. one reason for the bet over her virginity), his diary, and his cynical attitude towards Kathryn. On the one hand, this can be understood as Annette having outlived the beautiful and not only "usurping the gaze previously controlled by Kathryn" (Le Gagne 147), but also her status of the sublime. On the other hand, it reveals a repudiation of any form of excess underlying the whole film, a point I will elaborate on in the following section.

but not the one who, for his great love, transforms into a "knight-in-shining-armour" (Humbert, "*Cruel*", 282) and indeed assumes the role of the beautiful rather than the sublime when he blames Annette: "You spend all your time preaching about waiting for love. Well here it is. Right in front of you, but you're going to turn your back on it" (*Cruel Intentions*) and thus equates himself with beauty, "that quality or qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it" (Burke 83).

The comparison to Sebastian and his essentially more positive character reveals that Kathryn lacks several vital traits which would make her into a heroine. What is primarily amiss in Kathryn's conception as a Byronic heroine and what eventually causes her portrayal as a villain rather than how Gellar views her character, a "very tragic heroine" (n.p.), is the utter lack of a momentum of remorse: Kathryn does not repent nor suffer from feelings of guilt over the stereotypical (in)famous dark secret, which would result in a dumbness of all senses and a general apathy. Thorslev refers to this as the "problem of commitment, this intense and long-drawn self-analysis, the agonized passiveness" (144), which constitutes a vital characteristic of any Byronic character. Allegedly, Kathryn is at one point allowed to put forward precisely such a self-analysis and explain her motives:

> Eat me, Sebastian! It's alright for guys like you and Court to fuck everyone. But when I do it, I get dumped for innocent like twits like Cecile. God forbid I exude confidence and enjoy sex. Do you think I relish the fact that I have to act like Mary Sunshine 24/7 so I can be considered a lady? I'm the Marcia fucking Brady of the Upper East Side and sometimes, I wanna kill myself. (*Cruel Intentions*)

The final "and sometimes, I wanna kill myself" contains an elucidative reference to Kathryn's recurrent contemplations of suicide, which again evokes a similar scene in Manfred, who is only saved from jumping off a cliff by the chamois hunter (*Manfred* 1.2). Furthermore, although her genuine feminist motives might be questioned here, there is a strong sense of justice in her speech, as the monologue in the end only serves one, highly Byronic purpose: the defence of her own moral code. Nonetheless, there is a vital difference in the kind of "psychoanalysis" (*Cruel Intentions)* Kathryn presents to her stepbrother and the traditional Byronic hero's long-drawn soliloquies: Kathryn's monologue fails to make her sympathetic to her audience because she is not portrayed as compassionate for others as she neither reflects about the world at large nor about other people. In contrast, the classic Byronic hero, despite his characteristic narcissism, "meditat[es] on ruins, death, or the vanity of life" (Thorslev 138-139) and therefore depicts that he is "capable of deep and strong affection" (Macauley, quoted in Rogers 297). Although the film overall suggests that Kathryn lacks this quality, there is one brief instance in which

Kathryn's motives are indeed explained through the occurrence of unattainable love: "You're in love with her, you don't love me anymore" (*Cruel Intentions)*, she blames Sebastian, and it is only after this scene that the real war between the stepsiblings starts. Unfortunate love is a central tenet in the conceptualisation of the Byronic hero. Furthermore, the case of the Valmont-Merteuils, due to its pseudo-incestuous undertones, is highly reminiscent of Manfred, whose dark secret supposedly involves an affair with a close relative of his.[56] However, while Manfred, who in a similar way indirectly destroys his object of love, is shaken by feelings of guilt (which give his attempt of suicide a different tone than Kathryn's), Kathryn again lacks any signs of remorse.

In summary, the above quoted scene apparently constitutes a kind of turning point, in which Kathryn is given a chance to explicate her motives, which, however, only put her firmly in place as the evil one because she does not demonstrate feelings of guilt in the Byronic fashion. After her self-announced "psychoanalysis" (*Cruel Intentions*), it becomes inconceivable to treat her character as anything than the downright villain. Sebastian shows scruples about destroying an innocent girl like Cecile: "Before we go through with this, I want you to be aware of the damage we are about to cause." Kathryn, in a millisecond, snaps back: "I'm aware." While Sebastian proceeds to delineate his doubts ("We've done some pretty fucked up things, but this is…"), she simply replies: "Court Reynolds is going down. And if you won't help me, somebody else will" (*Cruel Intentions)*. Evocatively, it is due to her obstinacy and great willpower that Sebastian at this moment acknowledges how she exceeds his abilities by far: "You amaze me", he says, and clearly, this statement expresses both admiration and contempt, as it is in the fact the general reaction one could expect to utter when encountering a sublime moment. Kathryn, in short, is amazing, which attests to her production of sublime feelings[57], yet at the same time, one senses that in Sebastian's "compliment", the negative aspects outweigh by far. Interestingly, neither the novel version, which, according to the film's opening credits, "suggested" (*Cruel Intentions)* this remake, nor most of the eventually deleted scenes establish Kathryn as such a downright villain as does the eventual

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[56] Moreover, Lord Byron himself is supposed to have contemplated, if not actually engaged in an affair with his half-sister Augusta Leigh. Gross notes that Byron plunged into a relationship with the wife of a friend merely to "distract himself from pursuing a still more dangerous, because incestuous, affair with his half-sister" (42).

[57] Besides, this compliment is especially relevant because it is uttered by the only character who could compete with Kathryn's sublimity. In confessing his amazement over her actions, Sebastian concedes the superior sublime status to Kathryn. Apart from the superficial intention of this remark, namely to show that Sebastian, in contrast to Kathryn, does have a conscience and moral scruples, he appears to resign and accept his defeat via complimenting her superior and more radical sublime. Indeed, this scene marks the beginning of Sebastian's transformation from a Byronic character into a tame Prince Charming and, accordingly, the end of his sublime moments. Kathryn, on the other hand, from then on radicalises all the negative aspects inherent in her sublimity.

screen version, whose ending, apparently, was not approved of.[58] Thus, one can observe that "Merteuil's guilt, which was already highlighted in the Frears' version by Valmont's redemption [in contrast to the original novel], becomes blatant here" (Humbert, "*Cruel*", 282). This is not supposed to criticise the lack of fidelity to the novel, but merely accentuate how Kathryn, due to the Byronic traits she was already given in the *Liaisons Dangereuses*[59], must be punished for what is apparently understood as a too unashamed transgression of boundaries.[60]

Thus, it is apparently her agency and the accompanying lack of remorse for which Kathryn is punished, as these traits figure most prominently in her character conceptualisation: it is always she who sets plans in motion and seduces or manipulates others, rather than being manipulated by them. Sebastian never succeeds in imposing his own agency upon her or repressing her into a more passive role, so that, evocatively, "[e]ach time Sebastian and Kathryn have an intimate moment it is she who is on top: a position that allows her to control his excitement"" (Le Gagne 143), but also, by analogy, himself. Indeed, the whole action repeatedly "demonstrates Kathryn's perceived superiority over her stepbrother" (Le Gagne 143): while Kathryn, until the very end, always succeeds in her cruel intentions, Sebastian has to witness an end to his own agency. Evidently, he strives in vain to seduce her. Hence, while her environment in the end invariably yields to passivity, eventually even including Annette, Kathryn always remains in control and succeeds in exerting her own will and power. Appropriately, it is this agency which figures as the most prominent characteristic of a distinctively feminine version of the sublime according to Freeman, while it is seldom accepted when too openly promoted by the heroine: "the only acceptable form of feminine agency is that the female protagonist employ it to sacrifice herself" (Freeman 78), a solution which

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[58] Cf. the last section of this chapter for an interpretation of the negative reviews concerning the film's ending.

[59] While Merteuil's guilt amounts to a similar extent in the novel as it does in *Cruel Intentions,* she is not equally severely punished for it in the former, in which she manages to escape abroad with sufficient financial means to support herself. Although beforehand, she also has to undergo public exposure and disgrace, this has in fact often been interpreted as "a way to satisfy the censor, while allowing Laclos to induce doubts about the moralistic intentions in his readers' minds" (Humbert, "*Cruel*", 285).

[60] Furthermore, it is interesting that most of the scenes which were eventually not included in the final movie paint a considerably more positive and redeeming picture of Kathryn, which would allow her to come closer to that of a heroine. As a case in point, her final allegation against Sebastian, namely that he has hit her (a message which deeply upsets Ronald, whose uncontrolled anger eventually leads to Sebastian's death) is, if the deleted scene were maintained, actually true, as her stepbrother really raises the hand against her when she does not yield to his wish to "get on the bed and prepare for the fuck of your lifetime" (*Cruel Intentions*). If she refuses, he will consider it a "declaration of war", as Sebastian, rather than Kathryn herself, suggests. "War, it is" (*Cruel Intentions*), Kathryn replies, instead of ceding to his wishes and thus staying true to the Byronic pride she incorporates. In introducing the scene, Kumble talks of it as being "the climax of the film" (n.p.). The reasons in cutting it, then, are obviously connected to the audience's sympathy, which in Kumble's view should clearly lie with Sebastian rather than Kathryn: "I felt I'm gonna lose the audience [for Sebastian], I'm gonna lose his sympathy" (n.p.), which, in his view, requires the repudiation of too repulsive Byronic traits.

Kathryn evidently refuses. Accordingly, her agency is not acceptable but portrayed as villainous and evil scheming.

"In All Things Abhors Mediocrity": Exceeding the Limits of the Beautiful

The central flaw in Kathryn's potential depiction as a true heroine is her agency, which involves immoral behaviour and a lack of resentment over it. This makes obvious a main motive in her characterisation, which connects her tightly to the notion of the sublime. Kathryn's exuberant agency is linked to excess, in terms appropriate to the film's focus on excessive sexual relations, as illustrated by her complaint that "to fuck everyone" (*Cruel Intentions)* is considered improper for her as a woman. However, in contrast to Kathryn's angry monologue driven by her jealousy of her male opponents' alleged freedom, one might in fact discern that "[i]n *Cruel Intentions*, there are numerous scenes in which the image of excessive *femininity* can be identified" (Le Gagne 141, my emphasis). Excess, in other words, is generally denied to females, and at the same time constitutes Kathryn's major weapon for carrying out her plans and eventually even destroying her male counterpart. Sublimity, as already outlined in the previous chapter, bears a strong relation to excess, as a quality which cannot be contained in boundaries and literally exceeds categorisation.

What Kathryn's above quoted monologue thus presents is a "female subject's encounter with and response to an alterity that exceeds, limits and defines her" (Freeman 2). In Freeman's argument, this is the typical feminine sublime, "a domain of experience that resists categorization, in which the subject enters into relation with an otherness – social, aesthetic, political, ethical, erotic – that is excessive and unrepresentable" (Freeman 2). Central to Freeman's unearthing of a feminine version of sublimity are excess and the transgression of boundaries, notions which advance the detection of a particularly female experience of ecstasy and awe without the "attempt to master its objects of rapture" (Freeman 3). Due to its dependence on excess, the sublime was paradoxically identified as marginal and secondary in nature, just like woman to man. Kathryn, in other words, does not merely display the idea of (sexual, moral and material) excess in terms of agency, which is subsequently interpreted and acted on as negative and punishable: she also presents the consequent restriction imposed by patriarchal society and her location on the margins, which is just where Kant placed his discussion of the sublime.[61]

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[61] The *Analytic of the Sublime* might actually be regarded as an (inferior, secondary) appendix to the main body of the work, *The Analytic of the Beautiful*, to which the sublime serves as a kind of frame, or, in another terminology, an alterity against which the beautiful can be de-fined and delineated. In that

Excess, in the original sense of the word as exceeding de-finite boundaries and, implicitly, knowledge (which is by analogy constructed as the setting of limits, cf. Phillips xxii) is a central tenet in both Kant's and Burke's conceptualisation of the sublime: the sublime "in all things abhors mediocrity" (Burke 74) and is to be found in that object "mit welchem in Vergleichung alles andere klein ist" (Kant, *Kritik,* 171): "Erhaben ist, was auch nur denken zu können ein Vermögen des Gemüts beweiset, das jeden Maßstab der Sinne übertrifft" (Kant, *Kritik,* 172). Apparently, however, Kathryn's addiction to excess is negatively connoted because she in fact has to defend her immoderate lifestyle, which is, just like the sublime, coded as specifically masculine, since "it's alright for guys like you and Court" (*Cruel Intentions)* to indulge in excesses of various kinds. It is indeed the strong dependence of the sublime moment on excess in terms of sound, light, quantity or colour that has led to a repudiation of the sublime, particularly in connection with the French Revolution, in which it was "understood exclusively as a hostile, persecutory force" (Freeman 25), and an ensuing re-evaluation of the tame and moderate beautiful.[62] Kathryn, however, portrays the "confirmation of excess in a mode that does not lead solely to its recuperation" (Freeman 16) and extinction, which can be read as a sign of her "desire for excess itself: not just the description of, but the wish for, sublimity" (Freeman 16). Appropriately, thus, the sublime, due to its similarly marginal position has been taken as an incentive for "[c]onceiving of excess only as a frightening (and feminine) other" (Freeman 25). When Kathryn explains herself and offers to Sebastian what she dubs a "psychoanalysis" (*Cruel Intentions)*, she embraces her abandonment to excess and her own moral (as well as, most at the time, legal) transgressions, which solidifies her sublime status. This status, as she shows in the allegations made towards "guys like you" (*Cruel Intentions*) and the generally accusative nature of the monologue is, evidently, a secondary and marginal one. Kathryn, however, is more induced to consider this position her own than that of the beautiful, which is embodied by her mere faking of "Mary Sunshine" and "Marcia fucking Brady of the Upper East Side" (*Cruel Intentions).*[63]

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sense, however, "Kant's sublime […], relegated to the margins, contests the authority and universality of the beautiful" (Freeman 108), just like Kathryn's depiction of excess defies boundaries and is thus illustrative of the limitlessness and boundlessness inherent in the notion of the sublime.

[62] In fact, Burke's attitude towards the sublime is quite contradictory. While he appears to advocate this "strongest feeling which the mind is capable of feeling" (Burke 36) in his *Enquiry*, he adopts a considerably different attitude towards it in his political writings. Here, he equates the French Revolution with the sublime and condemns it for creating chaos and destruction rather than elevating emotions. I will elaborate on this point further below.

[63] Her simultaneous embodiment of both a "lady" (*Cruel Intentions*) and an evil schemer yet reveals another layer of the contradictory nature of the sublime. Just like cool, it works by juxtaposition and an "eclectic mix" (Rice, "Writing", 224) and reveals an underlying, unresolved paradox, an "ambivalent, recusant oppositionality" (Liu, *Laws*, 293).

Important to note in that respect is also the fact that Kathryn's position in the film is secondary not only to Sebastian, but also to the female protagonist, Annette. Not only is Annette the clear heroine in the tradition of the nineteenth-century morally upright and virtuous young lady who inspires others to do good, she is also plainly cast as the beautiful, both inside and out: "she seems to epitomize the stereotypical notion of the 'good girl'" (Le Gagne 145), so that Kathryn, in contrast, constitutes the necessary sublime other, who does not, as her actions enclose, possess a beautiful character.[64] When Annette sheds tears over a tragic novel, Kathryn's cynical (and, one might add, cool and cold) remark amounts to the following: "Little baby's upset by the big, bad book" (*Cruel Intentions)*, a comment which successfully ridicules Annette's behaviour and exposes its inappropriateness to a twenty-first-century audience. Annette's portrayal of her sentimentalised reading thus allows for a comparison with exactly these heroines of sentimental novels. Stereotypically, Annette appears to be modelled on what has often been referred to, much contested and first coined by Barbara Welter as a "true woman", a construct which supposedly epitomised the dominant female ideal in nineteenth-century literature and culture and was, primarily, defined by "four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter 152). Above all, this is evoked by Annette's dedicative attitude towards her fellow beings and her rather odd avowal of virginity, which "seems to be playing straight into the outdated patriarchal notions of femininity that condemn female sensuality and sexual curiosity" (Le Gagne 145).

The conclusion that the comparison of Annette with a true woman would necessarily lead to is that Kathryn has to be understood as the emancipated, yet, or rather therefore, punishable modern heroine, so that, eventually, the film latently supports a highly conservative message. Interestingly, however, it has to be justly noted that the translation and application of Welter's concept to the 1990s results in the overall plot advocating what might best be termed a fair balance, and, consequently, argues both against excessive indulgence in vices as well as virtues, or, to put it another way, extremes of true women on the one hand and Byronic heroines on the other. Thus, it seems that in the end, "Annette [has] been perverted into playing the same games as Sebastian and Kathryn" (Humbert, "*Cruel*", 284), as she now cunningly deceives Kathryn when she meets her in the ladies' restroom

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[64] Annette's position as the beautiful stems from her conflation with love (as attested by Sebastian's attachment to her). For the film, it is thus vital to "distinguish love, […] that satisfaction which arises to the mind upon contemplating any thing beautiful, of whatsoever nature it may be, from desire or lust" (Burke 83), a distinction which is primarily reflected via the character of Sebastian. The fact that Annette represents love and thus, by extension, the beautiful, is, for instance, illustrated by her spontaneous and happy consent to spend the day in a care home for the elderly or by her compassionate attitude towards Sebastian's aunt Helen. Moreover, Annette is portrayed as not only promoting, but, as Sebastian's miraculous transformation suggests, also inducing virtue via love, which the film depicts "as the only path to moral redemption" (Humbert, "*Cruel*", 283).

immediately before her funeral speech and cynically declares: "I'm here if you need a friend" (*Cruel Intentions).*

While advocating an allegedly more authentic balance might initially be deemed a sensible representation of women's reality, it, however, also entails that excess, in other words, is eventually chastised and successfully renounced in both directions. Annette loses her virginity and becomes more ruthless, while Kathryn, apparently lacking any possibility of redemption, can only be punished for her excess, which is maintained until the very end. The sublime, in other words, is successfully rebuked in Kathryn and not even allowed to emerge without being immediately repressed in Annette. In that regard, "excess is thematized as a 'blocking agent'" (Freeman 25), which would eventually lead to a loss of the self as well as of confining boundaries and, indeed, binaries, represented by those instituted via Kathryn and Annette. The establishment of binaries with regards to Annette's portrayal as a sentimental heroine and Kathryn's depiction as an supposedly modern-day, emancipated woman due to her display of stereotypically masculine traits evokes a concept tightly connected to Welter's "Cult of True Womanhood": the myth of the separate spheres, which deposits a decisive division of nineteenth-century society into a public, i.e. male sphere and a private, i.e. female sphere.[65] Concretely, "[w]omen were said to live in a distinct 'world' engaged in nurturant activity, focused on children, husbands, and family dependents" (Kerber 10). Kathryn's and Annette's excess in oppositional directions, would, however, copiously spill over the boundaries of these spheres and make such a construction obsolete. In other words, if Annette were to relish further her extreme emotionality, it would lead to an excess of binaries and, eventually, equate rather than contrast her with Kathryn, whose excess merely takes a different path. Annette's and Kathryn's different, yet comparable excess symbolises an "impending confusion" (Freeman 49), which could eventually "destroy traditional distinctions and hierarchies" (49) and "lay[…] waste to binary […] distinctions" (45). This recalls the overwhelming and uncontrollable forces variously attested to the sublime, which inevitably contains the "possibility of losing one's way, which is tantamount, Burke implies, to losing one's coherence" (Phillips xxii). Appropriately, the last shot on Kathryn, who waits for her final verdict, publicly exposed on the scaffold-like elevated doorway, focuses on her

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[65] The separate spheres is a concept applied to nineteenth-century US-American literature, including the so-called sentimental literature and its heroines, who Annette seems to be modelled on in the reading scene. According to Cathy N. Davidson, the binary that was introduced by this concept is a "retrospective construction that has had the effect of recreating a binaric gender division" (80) and in fact conceals "how other categories complicate the […] paradigm" (80). A main source for the myth of the separate spheres is Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (first published in 1840), which states that "[i]n no country has such constant care been taken as in America to trace two clearly distinct lines of actions for the two sexes" (quoted in Davidson 445).

silver cross, which the headmaster untwists to reveal a considerable quantity of cocaine, yet another, negatively connotated means for the former Byronic heroine to celebrate excess and the loss of control.

The evocation of the splendidly ornamented silver cross displaying brilliant diamonds and pearls, an evidently expensive piece of jewellery, which contains an even more expensive means to escape the world(liness)[66] it represents, makes obvious that Kathryn not only indulges excessively in physicality and sex, but moreover highly cherishes materiality. As already noted in an abridged version further above, Gellar commented on her character in the following way: "She is given all these material things, yet she constantly wants more. Not because she wants them, but because other people have them" (n.p.). At the end of the 1990s, Kathryn indeed embodies the height of postindustrial consumer culture. As noted in the previous chapter, the sublime has been identified as its major aesthetic, testifying to "the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (38), as Fredric Jameson maintains. Equally, Lyotard notes that "[t]here is something of the sublime in capitalist economy" ("Avant-Garde", 105), which, just like Kathryn herself, is primarily related to excess, boundlessness and eventual unpresentability:

> [Capitalism] is, in a sense, an economy regulated by an Idea – infinite wealth or power. It does not manage to present an example from reality to verify this Idea. In making science subordinate to itself through technologies, especially those of language, it only succeeds, on the contrary, in making reality increasingly ungraspable, subject to doubt, unsteady. (Lyotard, "Avant-Garde", 105)

Put more plainly: "the marketplace terrifies" (Freeman 59). Kathryn, in her utter embrace of the market and all it has to offer, embodies the terrifying excess of capitalist society. Indeed, she herself becomes part of the infinite transfer of money and goods: she places herself in the wager as an equivalent to Sebastian's vehicle. In doing so, she not only confirms Lyotard's argument that "the human subject [is] being dissolved into the calculation of profitability, the satisfaction of needs, self-affirmation through success" (Lyotard, "Avant-Garde", 105). Kathryn's character also verifies that this is a sublime, i.e. a pleasurable as well as painful experience, as can be seen by the consequences of the (highly materialistically charged) bet. Furthermore, the bet depicts how Kathryn's two main goals of excess, material objects, i.e. money, and sex, become conflated, and eventually both lead to her downfall. Implicitly, thus, Kathryn is punished for her "desire for the sublime" (Freeman 31), which she unearths both in physical and material (near)-satisfaction,

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[66] This being, of course, a nicely contrived paradox, because the cross, first and foremost, is supposed to symbolise Christianity and, by extension, religious values in general. Kathryn hypocritically refers to these several times: "I know this sounds corny, but whenever I feel temptations of peer pressure, I turn to God and he helps me through the problem. Call me an anachronism, but it works" (*Cruel Intentions*), she explains to Cecile and Mrs. Caldwell while fingering her sophisticated cocaine hideaway.

as the sublime is a want that can never be allowed to be fully satisfied, a fact which will be explored more closely in the following.

On the one hand, it is capitalist society itself, personified through the most excessive of all characters, Kathryn, which is triumphed over in the end: Annette, who is never portrayed as caring for either material objects or sex, wins over her evil twin. Yet again, as has already been argued with regards to sexuality, there is a "presence of ambiguity" (Humbert, "*Cruel*", 284) surrounding Sebastian's lover: the very last shot shows Annette behind the wheel of Sebastian's car, wearing his sunglasses and smugly grinning as she passes into the open highway. While this indicates that she might have "taken over both for Sebastian and Kathryn and forgotten her 'allegiance to the side of good'" (Humbert, "*Cruel*", 284), on a more abstract level it also depicts Annette's eventual surrender to capitalist forces, and, if one follows Lyotard, to the sublimity inherent in it. This is also alluded to by the song accompanying the scene and evidently sounding from the Jaguar's radio: the final relapse into capitalism, it seems, is indeed a "Bittersweet Symphony". The initial lines "trying to make ends meet / you're a slave to the money / then you die" evoke the pain of a sublimity founded on materiality, while it at the same time dispenses an odd kind of delight which overwhelms the senses: "I need to hear some sounds that recognize the pain in me, yeah / I let the melody shine, let it cleanse my mind / I feel free now" ("Bittersweet Symphony"). The situation is one of a willing, yet not thoroughly satisfactory indulgence into pain, a delight which arrives from it and an accordant excess of mental capabilities. Annette is, in short, suffering the notorious "'hit' of the sublime" (White ch.15), caused by nothing less than her ultimate triumph over the until then most excessive character.

Cool Intentions

Appropriately, it is in relation to excess and boundlessness that the sublime makes most obvious its stringent connection to today's coolness, as indeed "almost any excess is seen as Cool", which actually marks "a deliberate inversion of the bourgeois virtue of moderation" (Pountain and Robins 129), or, in other words, the beautiful.[67] Kathryn's excessive lifestyle is thus also a cool lifestyle: even more so than Sebastian, she "loves the night and flirts with living on the edge" (Pountain and Robins 13). Her desired price in the bet is "that hot little car" (*Cruel Intentions*), Sebastian's 56 Jaguar Roadster, which recalls James Dean in *Rebel Without A*

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[67] Indeed, cool very frequently becomes apparent in objects and styles which could not be classified as traditionally beautiful, but excessive: it can "be seen at work in clothes fashions (for example, the '20s zoot suit, the ragga's baggies) and in haircuts (the long hair of the hippy, the exploding '70s Afro, the punk's Mohican)" (Pountain and Robins 129).

Cause (1955). Here, it is "the surly punk […] who, during a game of chicken, casually combs his air, gazing admiringly at his image in the rear-view mirror while he slams his gas pedal to the floor and speeds towards the edge of the cliff" (Harris 39) and thus impressively demonstrates the character's as well as the actor's lethal love for fast cars, which has eventually turned the latter into "Cool's first martyr and saint" (Pountain and Robins 64). In accordance with the mythical persona of James Dean, Kathryn noticeably depicts what has been referred to as the three core characteristics of cool in terms of personality and attitude (Pountain and Robins 26): "Narcissism", which is apparent in Kathryn's self-centeredness and recalls the fact that "the sublime induces a commitment to individuality and self-preservation" (Freeman 63) as opposed to the stereotypically self-sacrificing beautiful; "ironic detachment", which becomes apparent in Kathryn's general attitude towards her fellow beings; and "hedonism", which brings us back to Kathryn's flamboyant and excessive lifestyle.

The flamboyance of cool hedonism becomes particularly apparent in Kathryn's frequent engagement in camp talk, which has already been referred to as a major aesthetic forerunner of postmodern cool. Camp, involving "flamboyant mannerisms susceptible of a double interpretation; gestures full of duplicity, with a witty meaning for cognoscenti" (Sontag, "Camp", 281), in fact "discloses innocence, but also, when it can, corrupts it" (Sontag, "Camp", 283), just like "[c]oolness also represents the wholesale denial of innocence" (Harris 44). In accordance with this premise, camp "converts the serious into the frivolous" (Sontag, "Camp", 276), which is exactly what Kathryn does during one of her highly erotically charged tête-à-têtes with her stepbrother: "I hate it when things don't go my way", she exclaims, "it makes me so horny" (*Cruel Intentions*). This recalls "[t]he ultimate Camp statement: it's good because it's awful" (Sontag, "Camp", 292), an unsolvable paradox, which in equal measures underlies the conceptualisations of sublimity and coolness. Furthermore, due to its explicitness of female sexual desire and the assignment of the role of the active pursuer to Kathryn, the remark also shows how "androgyny is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility". Tellingly thus, "the most refined form of sexual attractiveness consists in going against the grain of one's sex: […] what is most beautiful in feminine 'women' is something masculine" (Sontag, "Camp", 279). Via her camp talk, Kathryn, in other words, serves as an interface of the sublime and of modern-day notions of cool, since she reflects how excess, a major quality for the production of the former, is, in the new, postmodern environment decoded as the latter, because it accounts to a great extent for her

coolness.

This coolness is also conjured up by the German title of the film, *Eiskalte Engel*: Kathryn is cool, both in the sense of cold and sublime. Her figure, read as a (post)modern Byronic hero(ine), thus demonstrates how "die 'Kälte' zur Leitlinie einer ästhetischen Haltung [avanciert]" (Poschardt 10). Kathryn's treatment of herself and others in that respect makes palpable

> daß eine 'coole' Lebenspraxis herausgefordert wird durch die Kälte im symbolischen wie im realen Sinn. 'Coolness' ermöglicht den Menschen mit der Kälte zu leben, statt in ihr zu erfrieren. Die Ästhetik des 'Cool' macht die Kälte der Entfremdung stilisierbar und gibt Methoden in die Hand, die Pracht der Welt, die zum 'Eispalast' (Jean Paul) geworden ist, zu genießen. […] Als individuelle Praxis dient die Haltung des 'Cool' wie eine Rüstung der Abwendung von Unheil auf psychischer und körperlicher Ebene. […] 'Cool' sein heißt, nicht verführt werden können, wenn man es nicht will. Es heißt, nicht verletzt werden können, wenn man es nicht will. (Poschardt 11)

For Kathryn to function as the title's "cold angel", she needs to adopt cool, as Poschardt suggests, both in terms of living practices and aesthetics, which allows her to not only tolerate, but, as her emphasis on excess has shown, embrace her own and others' coldness. This coldness is no longer connotated as negative, but, as its coupling with the quintessentially positive term "angel" suggests, purveys an intrinsic blend of positive and negative feelings. Kathryn, as a cold angel, brings both pleasure and terror. She indeed produces the ominous "delightful horror" (Burke 67) via her translation of a merely alienating and denying coldness into a more affirmative, yet invariably ambiguous coolness. The kind of psychoanalysis Kathryn thus offers to her appointed "Dr. Freud" (*Cruel Intentions*) reveals that she utilises cool less as an "aesthetic self-defense" (Harris 40), but rather subscribes to the "basic credo of cool [which] is nihilism" (Harris 43). This can be understood as a kind of "carpe-diem tendency to equate meaning with the instantaneous gratification of desire" (Harris 43), which Kathryn's obsession with achieving her cruel ends, the revenge on her ex-boyfriend, as well as her abundant sexual appetite illustrate. Her actions, driven by an inherently cool craving, result in the sublime: for her victims as well as for those she desires (which are, in the end, often conflated into one and the same), she presents pleasure and threat, incites admiration and fear, causes destruction, but also, as has to be acknowledged in Cecile's, Ronald's and Annette's case, initial personal satisfaction by exceeding their previous mental perspectives. As Kant puts it: "[W]ir nennen diese Gegenstände gerne erhaben, [die] die Seelenstärke über ihr gewöhnliches Maß erhöhen, und ein Vermögen zu widerstehen von ganz anderer Art in uns entdecken lassen, welches uns Mut macht, uns mit der scheinbaren Allgewalt der Natur messen zu können" (*Kritik,* 185).

Kathryn's status as a cool angel for herself and for others is also illustrated via the impregnable atmosphere of danger, which invariably surrounds her. Her love of fast cars and the danger she represents to other people's moral integrity and, in the case of Sebastian, their lives reflect her conflation with horror and destruction. Kathryn's character is thus accordant with the prototypical Byronic heroine, who "must adopt a callous indifference to the needs and feelings of others in order to pursue her own goals" (Stein, *Byronic*, 205). Again, it is when excess is not controlled but allowed to spill over that chaos and destruction necessarily ensue, which leads Burke to the observation that terror serves as the "ruling principle" (54) of any sublime moment. Interestingly, it is all those insignia decoded as cool, above all Sebastian's and Kathryn's preference for black clothes and dark glasses, which simultaneously evoke the atmosphere of an impeding danger inherent in the sublime. Tellingly, the movie starts with a wide-angle shot of Manhattan's graveyard, to then zoom in on Sebastian's (dark, hunter green) car and first of all give us a glimpse of his sunglasses via the rear-view mirror. Furthermore, the atmosphere of danger generally present throughout the whole film is enhanced by the musical scenery established when Kathryn plots one of her evil schemes with Sebastian. The music from the off is tantalising, arousing and thus representative of the erotic undercurrent of their meetings, while it concurrently creates an uncanny suspense. It is, in other words, uniquely sublime in its blending of the promise of future pleasure (the consumption of their until then merely verbalised eroticism) and the threat of future destruction. This destruction eventually harks back to the stepsiblings themselves: the threat they pose to others in the end turns into a mutual warfare: "War, it is", Kathryn declares when Sebastian comes to her bedroom to claim his prize, which she successfully refuses.[68] Similar to the workings of a new, cool destructivity, "the most sublime of the contenders for a new governing aesthetic" (Liu, *Laws*, 370), Kathryn, coolly and coldly, is intent on "committing acts of destruction" (Liu, *Laws*, 8). Ultimately, Kathryn proves to be so cool that she "is profoundly hedonistic but […] to […] a self-destructive degree" (Pountain and Robins 23). Her eventual self-destruction, not necessarily lethal, but highly damaging to her reputation, is manifested in her obsessive use of cocaine, the central object in her last scene. It not only visualises her closeness to sublime excess, but also reflects her participation in the "darker side of Cool" (Pountain and Robins 16), which is ultimately presented as similarly excessive.

Cool excess is also obvious in what has already been discussed with regards to the feminine sublime, which Kathryn ostensibly portrays, namely the blatant and

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[68] This refers to one of the eventually deleted scenes in the film. Its central message of mutual destruction, however, nonetheless influences the whole plot.

open expression of her sexuality. It is Kathryn's sexual appetite that leads to excess, and, in consequence, chaos and (self-)destruction, i.e. the purported dark sides of cool. Kathryn is excessive, in other words, because she is never satisfied, neither materially, nor, even more palpably, physically. Accordingly, Gellar explains the overall aim of the movie: "It's about wanting and desire" (n.p.). Indeed, it is an eternal want that her character represents, something that Toni Morrison, in a discussion of her novel *Beloved* (1987), another major example of a feminine sublime[69], has referred to as "the ability to make you want it, and remember the want. […] They will never satisfy – never fully" (Morrison 411). What Morrison refers to with the pronoun "they" is both her own books, which are supposed to defy closure, and pieces of jazz music, which portray a similar aim. Indeed, it was the jazz musician and sax player Miles Davis who proclaimed the *Birth of Cool*[70], so that consequently "jazz musicians were among the leading innovators and incubators of Cool attitude" (Pountain and Robins 46). What Morrison's remark thus elucidates is the intrinsic connection between the typical kind of insatiable, yet, paradoxically, highly satisfactory want inherent in the sublime[71] and the same kind of attitude discernible in the typical attitude of cool. Both are united in the character of Kathryn and her avid want for more.

This, in turn, brings us back to the Byronic hero and his predecessor Faust, whose "passionate self-assertion […] is also essentially the doctrine with which *Childe Harold* closes, and it is the final position of Manfred and Cain" (Thorslev 91). All of them depict an unappeasable thirst for more: more knowledge, more experience and more transcendence. In contrast to Faust, and in allegiance with Kathryn and the sublime's characteristic refusal of a full satisfaction, Manfred knows that the achievement of his goals would not contribute to making him more content in any respect:

> Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most
> Must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth;
> The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.
> (*Manfred* 1.1.10-12)

It is, however, not only that Kathryn's Byronic striving for more must necessarily be left unfulfilled, but also she herself has to remain unknowable in nature and character, a quality which accentuates yet another main aspect of her coolness. Kathryn, one could contest, spreads an "ethos of the unknown" (Liu, *Laws*, 9) when

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[69] Cf. Freeman's discussion of *Beloved*, 119-148.
[70] This is the title of Davis' 1949 album, whose musical direction became known as the 'cool school' (cf. Pountain and Robins 48).
[71] This also references the concept of Romantic irony, which "works against its own striving or intentions for completeness, aware that such a striving can only fail, but that the failure itself is a moment of partial illumination" (Colebrook 68).

she makes clear to Sebastian: "You don't know anything. You don't even know me" (*Cruel Intentions*). "Unknowability", as Liu maintains, "is part of cool as an object of study; it is a theme internal to cool" (*Laws*, 456). Indeed, Kathryn is cool because one can never ascertain her goals and plans: what she carries is a "pose that conceals ferociously competitive instincts" (Pountain and Robins 29). A vital precondition for the achievement of her intentions, cruel as they may be, is that they have to remain in the dark, just like she herself is frequently depicted in a badly lit environment. By analogy, a complete representation of her, both physically and with regards to her mind, recurrently remains blocked, because "the sublime attests to this: there is something that cannot be presented" (Freeman 139).

One can, in fact, observe an essential unavailability not only of the wants that a sublime induces, but of the sublime itself. Kathryn is certain to "remember the want", but at the same time, she constitutes a want, a lack, a hole herself. In proposing the wager to Sebastian, she throws herself into it, knowing that Sebastian's desire for her body can well live up to her want for the Jaguar: "I'll give you something you've been obsessing about ever since our parents got married" (*Cruel Intentions*). When Sebastian, whose facial expression well confirms this obsession of his, nonetheless tries to appear detached and patronisingly asks her: "What makes you think I go for that bet? That's a 56 Jaguar Roadster!", she self-assuredly replies: "Because I'm the only person you can't have and it kills you" (*Cruel Intentions*). What Kathryn here pays tribute to is the essential unavailability of the sublime, again appropriately linked to its destructive potential ("and it kills you"). As Freeman notes with regards to the goddess Isis, she and her actions "are sublime because they manifest a certain reserve and distance […] [She] is impenetrable, and therein lies her power. She is herself the enigma she exhibits and she ensures the place of the unknowable" (Freeman 118). Correlatively, it might be argued that Sebastian "loves [Kathryn] for her unavailability. […] No one can lift her veil and that is what makes her sublime" (116). In other words, Kathryn embodies cool: only the gifted ones have it, but "almost everyone wants to get it anywhere he or she can find it" (Roach, *It*, 4). The notorious cool posture is indeed a central object of today's Faustian striving for something one cannot have, and part of its complex appeal is that it has to remain unattainable for the great masses – or at least radiate the glow of this paradoxically much sought-after unavailability. Kathryn's cognisant and coolly calculated play with her own availability reflects all that: hers is a self-manufactured, supposedly "discreet veil of solitude" (Roach, *It*, 2), which she employs, apparently at will, to inspire that "'rush' of intense aesthetic

pleasure" (White ch.1), the sublime.

"That Was Cool" – Prime Time for the Sublime

As a case in point illustrating this obvious presentation of sublimity via styles, attitudes and practices of the new, postmodern coolness, I will now analyse in greater depth two scenes, the most central and sublime moments of the film, in which Kathryn features all the important accessories of a cool character. The scenes under scrutiny reflect excellently how Kathryn's sublimity is actually encoded and, accordingly, read as cool by contemporary viewers. Hence, these examples lead their audience to observe that and how *Cruel Intentions*, whose status as a cool movie is confirmed by its appeal to the MTV generation due to its winning the Movie Awards' "Best Kiss", equates a latent sublimity with an overtly expressed coolness and reflects how these two notions are intertwined in various intricate ways.

The first scene featuring a sublime momentum involves the typical aspect of revelation inherent in the traditional conceptualisation of the Romantic aesthetic, which entails an overwhelming of the senses and cognitive faculties and enables "das Gemüt die Sinnlichkeit zu verlassen" (Kant, *Kritik,* 166). This is exactly the kind of feeling Ronald, Cecile's music teacher and secret love affair, as well as, suggested by the camera assuming his point of view, the audience, is enticed to feel when the doors of the elevator he finds himself in open and reveal Sebastian and Kathryn, both dressed in black and with dark glasses. The sudden opening of the doors lets in a stream of dazzling white light, which, in contrast to the moderately lit environment, can actually produce the same terrible, and thus sublime effect as darkness: Burke contests that "such a light as that of the sun, immediately exerted on the eye, as it overpowers the sense, is a very great idea" (73) and that, just as the elevator scene depicts, "[a] quick transition from light to darkness, or from darkness to light, has yet a greater effect" (73). Thus, what the couple here become associated with is excess, in this case a literal excess of light, but also, as the audience knows, in terms of their character. The action that immediately follows this scene depicts an excess of their cruel intentions, as they force the ignorant Ronald to, unconsciously, participate in Cecile's destruction. The excess, thus, is one of terror, which is already evoked at the moment when the elevator doors open and the revelation of what has been obscured behind them heavily startles Ronald, and, one must assume, many viewers likewise. The scene in the elevator stays without conversation, as neither Sebastian nor Kathryn utter a word. Merely, Kathryn waves Cecile's letter and hands it over to Ronald. The utterly threatening silence of the

scene, enhanced by the typical tantalising music, heightens the effect of sublimity. It produces exactly the kind of uncertainty and impeding danger which is vital in its production. Furthermore, not uttering a single word is a crucial part of Kathryn's and Sebastian's cool carriage, as cool is associated with a denial or holding back of emotions and an "aversion to emotional intensity" (Stearns 11).[72]

Moreover, it is vital to note that despite the threat that Kathryn and Sebastian appear to embody in this scene, they also emerge as utterly irresistible and, due to the use of appropriate accessories, cool. They might, first of all, induce a startled kind of fear and repulsion: Ronald's first impulse, clearly, is to step back as if trying to escape. Simultaneously, they enact an apparently enticing and overpowering attraction, both in terms of looks and with regards to the bait with which they attempt to lure Ronald: the letter dangling in Kathryn's hand represents Ronald's only possibility to stay in contact with Cecile and avow his low to her. What the couple in black thus present is both a promise and a threat: they will bring pleasure, but, as is already latent in their appearance and comport, pain. Again, this is especially true with regards to Kathryn, with who Ronald will shortly start an affair. The scene in the elevator thus reveals how a sublime effect, most effectively conveyed to and experienced by Ronald as well as the audience, is in fact produced via a cool attitude and might accordingly be regarded as a cool moment on its own.

While this example highlights the revelatory and sudden nature of the sublime, it is, however, another scene which best portrays my argument of a translation into and creation of the sublime via a cool attitude. Not incidentally, this is also probably the most prominent and most frequently intertexualised scene of the whole movie: the kiss between Kathryn and Cecile during their picnic in Central Park. To start with the most apparent (and, possibly, the most sublime?) feature of it, the kiss is evidently a same-sex kiss. Equally apparently, and as a second twist to ordinary movie kissing scenes, it is a kiss allegedly devoid of love or desire. To the contrary, Kathryn via that kiss tries to pervert and subvert the inexperienced Cecile into "the premier Blow Job Queen of the Tri-State area" (*Cruel Intentions*), which requires that she first of all has to be seen save through "first base" (*Cruel Intentions*), i.e. French kissing. The first association that this brings to mind is of course an allegory to the Judas kiss, which acts as a sign of betrayal rather than an expression of love or loyalty, and eventually serves as an instrument of destruction for the one receiving the kiss. Apparently, here a symbol which traditionally

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[72] Stearns maintains that since "people work to adjust their expressions of emotion, even their self-reports, to cultural standards" (229), the second half of the twentieth century has witnessed a general denial of feeling such as anger or pain, but also extreme expressions of positive emotions and enthusiasm. It is this phenomenon that Stearns treats as the dominant process in the development of a cool emotional style.

expresses love is transformed to express its exact opposite, namely a cruel intention on behalf of Kathryn. A comparison to the sublime suggests itself, as it equally turns something painful and terrifying into an odd kind of pleasure and thus subverts traditional symbols of horror, such as lightning or an avalanche, into aesthetically elevating and literally delightful experiences (cf. Burke 33-34). The inherent meaning of, for instance, a snowstorm has thus been altered via the Romantics' sensibility from one of signifying death and destruction into an event which is "productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (Burke 36). The kiss and its subversion of meaning thus exemplify how "the sublime demonstrates the capacity of one extreme to turn into the opposite" (Freeman 44). As this subversion is initiated and indeed only fully conceivable via Kathryn, who gives the kiss its cruel intention of eventually destroying Cecile's morale and reputation, it is her who produces the sublime moment. Her embodiment of the underlying forces of all sublimity, namely terror and an impeding threat upon her victim, is highlighted in this scene.

The twisting of and meddling with the original denotations of a kiss, however, also entail that its meaning ultimately cannot fully be known: "the kiss scene [is] even more mysterious because of its undefined nature: is it simply a didactic moment, an erotic moment, or both?" (Le Gagne 145). Furthermore, the significance of the kiss for the plot remains obscure: it does not depict a necessary development within the relationship between Kathryn and Cecile (whose destruction is achieved much later by other means) nor does it involve any consequences. In fact, it is never commented on in the scenes that follow[73], and seems to be erased from the collective memory of the participants, if certainly not from that of the audience. The kiss, one might argue, generates floating signifiers, which actually leave a black hole in the otherwise tightly woven net of evil schemes and cruel intentions. While every other (sexual) act has a declared effect[74], the kiss stands quite aloof in this row and has no, neither positive nor negative, consequences that are depicted in the movie. Caetlin Benson-Allott contests that this actually constitutes the reason for the great appeal of the kiss to a generation born when "the AIDS epidemic had already become a moral panic" (357) and sex equated with risk. Thus, in contrast to most other movies kisses, which signify love or, at the other end of the spectrum, desire

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[73] As noted by Caetlin Benson-Allott, neither the participants nor the other characters were "interested in whether or not Katherine [sic] and Cecile kissed: no one hypothesized about it in advance, no one talked about it afterwards, and no one saw it happen" (358). This lack of involvement in the film is accordingly understood as one of the main reasons for the great appeal of the kiss, which, due to the utter lack of witnesses and discourse surrounding it, "becomes a kiss one can have just of one's self" (Benson-Allott 357).
[74] Cf., for instance, Sebastian's (initially equally innocent) kisses given to Cecile and Annette or Sebastian's and Kathryn's teasing and highly erotically charged banters over their bet.

and in both cases more often than not lead to sexual intercourse, the present kiss is "not overburdened with meaning" (Benson-Allott 357). In other words, it perpetuates the by now already notorious "ethos of the unknown" (Liu, *Laws*, 9), which is enhanced by the fact that "[t]he moment is rendered even more obscure in that it denies sight, as Kathryn reminds Cecile to keep her eyed closed" (Le Gagne 145). Shutting one's eyes is terrifying for human beings since it implicates a loss of control, just like the surrender to the overwhelming forces of the sublime. With regards to the kiss, closed eyes are, however, declared necessary by Kathryn in order to experience total "delight" (Burke 34). Above all, however, Kathryn's instruction to keep one's eyes closed and therefore be deprived of (in)sight recalls the notions of obscurity and darkness, which are central to the sublime's ultimate resistance to meaning, clarity and certainty. Hence, the kiss demonstrates how the sublime "refuses a dualistic formulation" (Freeman 27) by preventing complete control and knowledge so that it effectively defies categorisation, as the already discussed closeness to excess depicts.

Apart from the lack of a clearly definable meaning, there is one characteristic of the kiss which is even more significant than its lack of mutual desire or its homoeroticism unusual for mainstream Hollywood cinema, a characteristic which "renders [the] kiss unique among other same-sex kisses and even heterosexual cinematic kisses" (Benson-Allott 353): it is the spit-string which forms between their lips when Kathryn draws away from Cecile's mouth. This little string of saliva has received by far the most critical attention and been the target of numerous parodies. Not only "[t]he kiss scene is bathed in ambiguity" (Le Gagne 145), but also the spit-string itself remains highly ambiguous and constitutes the main reason why Benson-Allott in her riveting analysis almost despairs over the number of "contradictory signs" (348) the scene generates. In her highly elucidating examination of the reasons why this scene has won the MTV Movie Awards' "Best Kiss" in 2000, she compares the function of the spit spring to the so-called "money shot", a term used in hardcore pornography. As Linda Williams explicates, the term "money shot" refers to scenes portraying "external penile ejaculation" (94), which involves an interruption of the penetrative act in heterosexual pornography to visually present the ejaculating penis. This money shot is employed as a (indeed the only possible) means of conveying to the audience that the actor (rather than the actress) is in fact receiving pleasure from what he is doing, of which his orgasm is taken as a living proof. Consequently, Benson-Allott's equation of the spit-string with the money shot entails that the visible saliva is taking as a "proof of a desire 'that (allegedly) never existed',

or pleasure (represented by the physical evidence of enthusiasm) that may have never existed" (Benson-Allott 351), because the kiss is, at least as far as Kathryn is concerned, founded on the very opposite of desire.

The interpretation offered by Benson-Allott, which is part of her general explanation for the great appeal of the scene, leads to several important conclusions with regards to the specific concerns of this thesis. First of all, the rather innocent kiss is equated with an orgasm, which is undoubtedly a sublime moment, as already its French nickname, *la petite mort*, suggests: orgasm in the Western conception involves an odd mixture of pleasure and pain, of death and rebirth, of yearning and satisfaction. In a perversion of Burke's famous definition of the sublime, one could term it "the strongest emotion which the [body] is capable of feeling" (36).[75] The function and meaning of spit, however, is even more ambiguous than that of an orgasm, or, its visible counterpart, the ejaculating penis in the money shot. This is because if saliva leaves its proper place, the mouth, it is generally considered repulsive as well as, in certain contexts, embarrassing and is consequently dreaded to appear. In other words, the mere thought of unwanted saliva in inappropriate situations produces fear and anxiety. However, it is precisely its terroristic nature and the connotations with revulsion which make this particular string of saliva so appealing: "we can be fascinated by it because it [sic] other contexts we fear it" (Benson-Allott 354). Underlying the symbolism of the kiss is thus a combination of opposing qualities, which consequently produces a contradictory end product, just like the one which comes into being when "two effects as opposite as can be imagined [are] reconciled in the extremes of both" (Burke 73). In another terminology, it is produced when links are used "to connect ideas and images, […] motivated by juxtaposition" (Rice, "Writing", 226) and thus create the essential "paradox in corpor[al] culture" (Liu, *Laws*, 125)[76]. The intrinsic appeal of this kiss is, apparently, never fully resolved, as the reactions border between disgust or even fear, and arousal, which especially its comparison to the money shot and the unique portrayal of, in contrast, *female* pleasure suggest. Hence, this scene defers complete meaning, which is understood as being responsible for its sublime effect. In other words, it "has contradictory meanings, or means contradiction, [which] points to the irreconcilable coexistence of opposites without the possibility of

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[75] By analogy, Kathryn herself symbolises orgasm. When she reminisces about her ex-boyfriend Court, for whom she gone "to great lengths" (*Cruel Intentions*), the audience see her bending over his crotch and, assumedly, performing fellatio on him. Hence, Kathryn is cast as the ultimate orgasm donor, which, as delineated above, constitutes an example of sublimity. She thus represents the ruling principle behind others' sublime feelings. Allegedly, the same claim can be made with regards to Sebastian, who does the same for Cecile, leaving her in awe of the "explosion" (*Cruel Intentions*) he has induced her to.

[76] Liu in this case, of course, refers to "corporate" culture, whose subversion to "corporal", however, appears more appropriate to the object of study here.

resolution" (27), as Freeman contests when emphasising the denial of any form of dualism or binary inherent in a particularly feminine sublime.

The focus on a sublime beyond phallocentric conceptualisations is appropriate for the kiss scene because, first of all, it involves a transformation of the highly gendered money shot to portray female pleasure, of which the saliva serves as a proof. Furthermore, its distance from patriarchal discourse is secured by the fact that no male gaze is conveyed: there are no witnesses whose position the camera could be said to adopt. Kathryn and Cecile, in cinematographic terms, do not expose themselves to the typical "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 19) by male characters, which serves the objectification and concurrent attribution of the passive role to the women gazed upon.[77] What these properties of the kiss suggest is that the whole scene defies categorisation or rather blurs existing categories. It is not only "an exception from heterosexual and heterosexist norms" (Benson-Allott 356), but also apparently unique in its use of saliva and its attempt to make exclusively female pleasure visible to the audience. What the kiss depicts, therefore, is an excess of boundaries and norms, just like the one noted by Burke when he condemned the French Revolution for its (sublime!) destruction of traditional and, implicitly, patriarchal institutions. In his political writings, the Revolution and, by logical extension, the sublime, are unmistakably gendered as female[78], so that "the confusion of the sexes becomes a metaphor for the revolutionary forces that would destroy traditional distinctions and hierarchies" (Freeman 49). And what could possibly better testify to this "confusion of the sexes" and the sublime's "power to make trouble for categorizing procedures" (Pease 259) than an excessive, female, same-sex, (en)gross(ing) kiss devoid of romantic love?

Conveniently, Cecile offers an answer to this question, which is simultaneously the only appropriate interpretation of the kiss, but also, one might assume, of the sublime moment at large: "That was cool!" (*Cruel Intentions*), she exclaims in awe, while the remains of the spit-string still linger on her lower lip. As the above analysis has revealed, this concluding remark is the only logical designation for the kind of sublimity produced by Kathryn, who, throughout the whole scene, wears the insignia of modern day cool, the dark glasses. Cecile's final

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[77] "To-be-looked-at-ness" (19) is a term defined by Laura Mulvey and refers to the fact that women in film rather receive than actively employ the gaze, which results in a "visual objectification" (Le Gagne 141). The camera, in other words, adopts the point of view of the male character and consequently places the woman in the position of an object passively gazed upon. This coincides with the fact that women seldom advance, but rather "freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey 19). *Cruel Intentions* is understood as undermining this technique via the actively gazing characters of Kathryn and Annette (cf. Le Gagne 141-147).
[78] Cf. this chapter's epigraph from Burke's *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796). With regards to that passage, Freeman notes "a bizarre reversal of sexual roles" (47), which again points to the sublime's excess of hitherto fixed binaries.

statement, which concludes the kiss and in fact leads back to the proper story, brilliantly depicts how a sublime moment is evoked by and indeed understood as cool. Notably, this equation has to be extended to Kathryn, the one who creates the moment and embodies the overwhelming force of cool via the accordant attitude she displays, so that one might in fact want to reach out and present Cecile's final comment as a compliment to her sparring partner.

"Unfit for Earth, Undoomed for Heaven":
Concluding with a Byronic Villainess?

The popularity and frequent citation of the above analysed scenes reveal that the particular aesthetics they perpetuate in the figure of Kathryn highly appeal to their audience. Especially with regards to the kiss and the string of saliva, it appears to be the movie's focus on coolness, excess and the accompanying blurring of boundaries, the intrinsic mixture of attraction and repulsion that make Kathryn an epitome of postmodern aesthetics. Indeed, Kathryn might be said to embody "many of the values of postmodernism […] [which] have influenced our popular culture: alienation, moral relativism, distrust of authority figures, and solipsism" (Fry 277), values which are all presented by "Byron's brooding hero" (Fry 277). In contrast to that, however, the film's ending apparently follows the notorious Hollywood formula originating in the 1930s, which deposits that every good romance requires "two opposing poles definitely representing good and evil, with a readily identifiable hero and villain" and a "Happy Ending, in which evil [is] destroyed and good rewarded" (Roffman and Purdy 4-5). It seems as if, for this reason, Sebastian were turned "into the conventional knight-in-shining-armour, which drags the movie into the clichéd sentimentality often favored by Hollywood" (Humbert, "*Cruel*", 282). Likewise, Kathryn is not redeemed later on by expressing her deep love or sincerity, both explicit positive characteristics of the traditional Byronic character. Rather, she unmistakably ends up as the film's villain, as the final unfavourable representation of excess and transgression might suggest.

The concession to Hollywood prescriptions, however, leaves audiences, as attested by a variety of reviews, highly dissatisfied. Kathryn's failure as a (Byronic) heroine and her according repudiation of cool and sublime characteristics, it appears, ties in with the negative reviews of the film's ending. Sebastian's conversion and posthumous redemption and Kathryn's simultaneous punishment for her evil doings make reviewers detect "a moralistic ending", which reproduces the "conventional Hollywood fashion" so that "Valmont's transformation and Kathryn's

exposure both seem contrived for conventions' sake and this foray into moralistic territory takes a lot out of the movie's initial bite" (Humbert, "*Cruel*", 283-285). Equally, reviewers note a "surprisingly conservative denouement" and a "disappointingly less-than-libertine ending", which constitutes a "moralizing conclusion" (Benson-Allott 246). Thus, the film is "smart and merciless in the tradition of the original story", but then it eventually "crash-lands with an ending of soppy moralizing" (Ebert par.2). It "is hampered by an excessively literal and moralistic tone in the last reel" (Levy par.1) because its "last chapter is too earnest and obvious in its punitive stance toward some of the characters, turning [the] pic into a more conventional youth drama" (Levy par.10). Accordingly, "[t]he best parts of the movie allow us to see how good it might all have been, with a little more care. It steps wrong in three ways. The first is with the ending, which lacks the courage to take the story to its logical conclusion, and instead contrives a series of moralistic payoffs that are false and boring" (Ebert par.6). In short, "the final tragedy doesn't resonate as it should" (Lim par.4). This, as well as the fact that "[t]he movie's at its best in the scenes between Gellar and Phillippe, who develop a convincing emotional charge" (Ebert par. 5) attests to the major appeal of the sublime, which is clearly not featured in the film's ending nor in the more conventional scenes between Annette and Sebastian, which rather recall Burke's notion of the beautiful.

In conclusion, the range of negative reviews concerning the movie's eventual regress to the supposedly safe and proven Hollywood formula suggests that this may have well worked in the 1930s, but that postmodern audiences apparently seek different aesthetics. The Byronic hero/ine, as it has been contested, can be regarded as a central "contemporary model for postmodern creatures of the night" (Fry 277). The exploitation of this figure indicates a preference for specific aesthetics, involving, as regards Hollywood movies, the portrayal of a general "shift away from the firm distinctions between good and evil throughout our culture" (Fry 276). For our purposes, this entails that only those scenes which in fact portray a sublime aesthetic are cool enough to be appreciated and eventually awarded accordingly, which the MTV Movie Awards exemplarily testify. *Cruel Intentions*, thus, not only seemingly perpetuates the dichotomy of the sublime versus the beautiful, but also reveals the general predilection for the former. Yet, it is the figure of Kathryn who introduces an observably queer twist in this phallocentrically connoted dichotomy. First of all, her depiction as a villain, due to the apparently unacceptable masculine Byronic traits, necessarily reveals a "distinctly misogynist undercurrent"

(Stein, *Byronic*, 172).[79] However, it is through excess, contradictions and transgressive tendencies inherent in the discourse of the sublime that essential instabilities and ambiguities, both in its traditional conceptualisations and the superficially rather straight-forward morale and plot line of the scrutinised text, are revealed. All these characteristics link the Romantic aesthetic to its postmodern successor, as substantiated in the movie's cool Byronic heroine, who only via eventual, odd amplifications of her sublime potential ends up as the (still not so downright) villain. While the ending, as the above quoted reviews propose, thus deserves a dismissive "How beautiful!", those scenes driven by Kathryn's production of the sublime might rather be granted Cecile's assessment: "That was cool".

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[79] This, in Stein's opinion, is what many films featuring a Byronic heroine ultimately amount to. Stein arrives at this conclusion after her extensive analysis of what she understands as contemporary Byronic heroines, Sarah Connor from the two *Terminator* films (1984, 1991) and Ellen Ripley from the *Alien* series (1979-1997). Both, in Stein's opinion, promote "the heroines' adoption of stereotypically exaggerated masculine qualities", which eventually "leaves both Sarah and Ripley disempowered" (Stein, *Byronic*, 171). Hence, what these Byronic heroines actually fulfil is the stereotypical Victorian angel-monster dichotomy, i.e. they visually demonstrate "the monstrousness of women who violate their 'proper' gender role" (Stein, *Byronic*, 171).

3.   IN COOL BLOOD: WHY *TWILIGHT*'S SUBLIME SUCKS

> Philosophizing was always a kind of vampirism.
>
> (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*)

> Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour.
>
> (Karl Marx, *Capital*)

> The vampire is the new James Dean.
>
> (Julie Plec, executive producer *The Vampire Diaries*)

Twilight (2008) is not a novel or a movie – it is a cult, and it is way cool, as its screaming teenaged fans all around the globe testify. *Twilight* actors, all of them utter newcomers, host MTV awards[80], adorn the title pages of tabloids and fashion magazines[81] and act as testimonials for a range of vampire goodies, from T-Shirts to Barbie dolls. Generally, the vampire seems to have left its coffin, which hitherto only the most nerdy and freakish of the mortals worshipped, and has successfully found its way into fashion, art and lifestyle. From *True Blood* (2008-) to *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-), from current lace and leather-trends to a new Gothic look, the vampire and its alluring predator charm have never been more stylishly depicted than today. Undeniably, it is a long way from Bram Stoker's evil *Dracula* (1897) to today's Edward, the protagonist of the *Twilight* series. While Dracula is cast as the quintessential subhuman villain, representing wickedness and deviance in whatever form, Edward is a downright romantic hero, even if he and his beloved Bella have to undergo the inevitable trials and tribulations until their eventual happy ending.[82]

Moving from sunny Arizona to rainy Forks, Washington, to live with her single father, the seventeen-year-old Bella meets the mysterious, yet irresistibly handsome Edward Cullen at the local high school. While he initially appears to avoid her and especially her scent, they soon become friends and eventually lovers. After the superhumanly strong Edward has saved clumsy Bella's life several times, he is finally forced to reveal his dark secret, which makes him even more attractive in both Bella's and the audience's eyes. From now on, Bella's only desire is to be converted into a vampire, a wish which Edward invariably denies her. While he and his

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[80] In 2009, Taylor Lautner, playing the werewolf Jacob Black, presented the award for Best Female Video. The show's host, British comedian Russell Brand, referred several times to Robert Pattinson's alluring vampire charms. Furthermore, Pattinson, Lautner and Kristen Stewart, playing the leading role of Bella, presented an exclusive preview glimpse of the movie's sequel *New Moon* (2009).

[81] Robert Pattinson, playing the irresistible vampire Edward, has just been voted "Sexiest Man In The World" by the British *Glamour* magazine.

[82] Since I am interested in notions of cool and a potential postmodern sublime as found in contemporary films, the following plot summary and my subsequent analysis refer to the movie *Twilight* and do not reflect upon the preceding novel. Stephenie Meyer's novel tetralogy will merely be introduced when deemed necessary for the argument.

siblings, a group of vampires living together as a family, have decided to spare humans and live only on animal blood, three nomadic vampires sign responsible for a series of cruel murders in the area around Forks. When accidentally meeting with the Cullens, the villainous vampires try to kill Bella, who happens to be with them. Although Edward and his family manage to fight them off this time, James, the leader of the group and a notorious tracker, swears to get hold of Bella to revenge this defeat. Together with some of the Cullens accompanying her, Bella hurriedly flees to her mother in Arizona, where she is supposed to be safe from James. The plan, however, backfires, and Bella ends up trapped with James in her former ballet studio. At the last moment, Edward manages to save his lover and interrupt the ongoing conversion James has initiated on her via his bite. James is killed and Bella survives the final shoot-out with minor injuries, vowing that she will continue to implore Edward to make her one of his order.

While Stephenie Meyer, the author of the preceding novel series (2005-2008), evocatively declares that "the story is about love, […] and how drastically it invades every part of the mind" (n.p.), a closer look will reveal that it is actually all about sex, and the sublime. Like the latter, *Twilight* thus "contain[s], so to speak, the unpredictable; the possibility of losing one's way, which is tantamount, Burke implies, to losing one's coherence" (Phillips xxii). In the rather conservatively informed fictional world of *Twilight*, the loss of coherence and control is connoted negatively. Physical intimacy between Bella and her vampire lover, allegedly due to it being literally "unsafe" and potentially fatal, has to be avoided at all means. Only after Bella's (in the film never occurring) conversion, the metaphorical wedding, is the bodily union of the lovers conceivable. Edward's status as a vampire incapable of physical closeness hence promotes highly rigid (sexual) politics. At the same time, the figure of the vampire lays bare various degrees of instabilities and inconsistencies, similar to Barbara Freeman's critique of the phallocentric nature of the sublime. Above all, this is perceptible in the fact that the act of bloodsucking can be understood as denoting sexual intercourse. As I will argue, it is the much sought-after conversion which acts as the major moment of sublimity within the movie. Appropriate to Lyotard's predication that the true postmodern sublime is one which remains ultimately "unpresentable" ("Postmodernism", 78), the conversion does not occur in the text, yet exerts a major force from the highly subversive subtext. By blurring established boundaries and remaining unpresented, the act of conversion and its connotations of both sexual and general deviance effectively create and promote the sublime in its postmodern form.

Not surprisingly, thus, it is tightly connected to the perpetuation of contemporary notions of cool by Edward, who represents the so far unattainable act and Bella's only possibility of obtaining it. Accordingly, the almost-conversion provoked by the villainous James in the movie's final shoot-out scene illustrates how the sublime is not only induced by the cool Byronic vampire Edward, but also imagined in terms of cool aesthetics. This deviates considerably from traditional depictions of passion, love and the sublime, because *Twilight* portrays none of them in terms of heat and affectedness. In accordance with today's obligatory cool posture, the sublime moment is rather presented as detached, nihilistic and, simply but appropriately, cool. Before exploring the influence the conspicuous absence of the sublime conversion exerts on the text and how it is provoked as well as represented by notions of cool, I will first of all delineate how Edward is, in every sense of the word, positively Byronic.

"I Am Not Of Thine Order!":

<div align="center">Why Byronic Heroes Suck and Why Edward Doesn't</div>

Of the three contemporary Byronic heroes scrutinised in this thesis, Edward initially appears to constitute the most obvious and decided example. Indeed, he is consciously modelled on Byron's heroes, which Meyer openly acknowledges in various interviews. When commenting on Edward's status as a "very modern sort of tortured soul" (n.p.), Meyer, who majored in English literature, admits that "you just need to go back to Byron and it's all there" (n.p.). While "[a]n actual awareness of Byron's texts is not required for the creation of a contemporary Byronic hero" (Stein, *Byronic*, 9), it apparently cannot hurt: in the figure of Edward, one can detect many of the characteristics generated by an indecisive and creative intermingling of Byron's protagonists, his own public persona and significant literary successors, who continued to shape the classic Byronic hero into a clear type.[83]

Before analysing Edward's Byronic traits, it has to be noted that these certainly do not come by surprise, but are already suggested by his status as a vampire. Vampires, whether portrayed as blood-sucking monsters or, more frequently nowadays, compassion-seeking damned souls, have a long tradition of

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[83] These predecessors include, above all, the Brontë sisters' respective Byronic heroes, Rochester and Heathcliff. Especially the latter presents an important model for Edward, since the third part of the novel series, *Eclipse* (2007), extensively resorts to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* as a major intertext. In contrast to the second novel, which intertextualises Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Bella's and Edward's relationship here is modelled on the famous literary couple Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff. Furthermore, there are several implicit references to *Jane Eyre*, as for instance when Bella hears her lover's voice, which parallels the well-known telepathy-scene between Jane and Rochester. Besides, Bella is consistently described as a rather mediocre-looking, clumsy school girl, which, apart from forging an alliance with the identification-seeking young adult readers, references Jane's looks, described as rather average at several instances.

displaying Byronesque characteristics. With regards to the roots of the traditional vampire legend, Milly Williamson argues that "from its entry into the novel, the popularised image of the vampire in Europe and the anglo-American world had become fused to Byronic images of glamorous outsiderdom, morose fatalism, sexual deviancy and social and artistic rebellion" (294). This apparent fusion is not immaterially connected to the fact that the very first vampire story in English literary history was originally attributed to Lord Byron. According to popular belief, he wrote the Gothic horror tale *The Vampyre* (1819) in the same night and during the same legendary ghost-story competition at the Villa Diodati in Switzerland which gave birth to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).[84] While the story was in actual fact contrived by John Polidori, it was its (deliberate) confusion with the much more popular figure of Byron and the concurrent "Byromania" at the time which furthered and promoted the vampire's appeal.[85]

In the twentieth century, Mario Praz's notorious *Romantic Agony* (1933) was substantially involved in conflating Byron and the vampire in the public mind. "For, once fashion is launched, the majority imitate its external aspects without understanding the spirit which originated it. The same can be said of Vampirism, and for this fashion also Byron was largely responsible" (95), Praz writes. He furthermore lets his readers know that, at least, "Byron composed part of a 'tale of terror'", so that "Dr. Polidori [merely, one might say] elaborated the sketch" (95). In consequence, "the vampire […] took on a Byronic colour" (97) and, in turn, readers might discern "the vampire loves of the Byronic Fatal Man" (99). Hence, it is not only time-wise that Elke Bartel, with reference to Margaret L. Carter and her eminent *The Vampire in Literature* (1988), claims that "the vampire is very much a product of the romantic movement" (22) and, one might add, of the cult of Byron's persona. It is due to the long-established Byronic tradition of the vampire figure, which constructs the latter as "a glamorous outcast, sexual deviant, rebel, rogue and tortured soul" (Williamson 289), that contemporary versions continue to be perceived as idiosyncratically Romantic creations. As Bartel argues with regards to vampires in today's popular texts, their popularity seems to stem from the "intriguing mix between Gothic villain and Byronic hero [which] […] creates an alluring individual, indeed, a rebel, who does not care for established authority and, rather, wants to shape the world according to what he or she considers the right way" (22).[86]

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[84] For a more detailed account of the famous ghost-story contest see for instance Siv Jansson's introduction to Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein Or The Modern Prometheus.* 1818. London: Wordsworth Classics, 1999.

[85] Wilson, 1999 offers an insightful and entertaining account of Byromania and popular mythmaking.

[86] For completion's sake, it has to be noted that Peter Thorslev in his landmark study *The Byronic Hero. Types and Prototypes* (1962) strongly refutes any connection between the figure of the vampire and that of the Byronic hero. Apparently overlooking the vast array of literary vampires with distinctive

Indeed, the proudly displayed resistance to the dominant order and the resulting double outsiderdom is central to the character of Edward. By creating vampires, who by their own definition live as "vegetarians" (*Twilight*), because they survive on animals instead of humans, the audience is presented a tribe of vampires much easier to identify with than the traditionally bloodsucking, wicked monsters. Yet, Edward and his siblings still disperse the air of rebellion typically embodied by the vampire figure. Due to their endorsement of an uncommonly and paradoxically humane philosophy, they eschew the mainstream vampire community and the cruel practices to which the latter resort to satisfy their needs. While this results in outsiderdom, it also illustrates how Edward "overcomes [his] craving for blood, repudiating […] the limitations projected onto [him] by the representations of others" ("Variations", 148), as Hollinger claims with regards to *I, Vampire* (1984). Evidently, this symbolises the moral and social freedom of the Byronic character. At the same time, the Cullens will never, despite whatever humanitarian thinking they might underwrite, become fully integrated in human society. As Andrew Schopp outlines, it is "[b]y its very nature [that] the vampire is an outsider, an 'other'" (232).[87] Edward thus perfectly embodies "the association between rebellion and a doomed but glamorous outsiderdom which marked the Romantic idea of vampirism" (Williamson 293) and to which Byron's reputation deeply contributed.

The intrinsic and long-established connection between vampires and Byronic heroes is further informed by the formers' mythical status as immortal creatures. The vampire as "a hopelessly paradoxical figure", which is "both dead and immortal, torturing and tortured" (Richards 128) is, by logical extension, both sub- and superhuman. Thus, it lends itself perfectly for coupling the traditional Byronic traits with superhuman powers, which appeal to, yet for the accordant sublime effect equally appal its audience. On account of his prodigious strength, Edward is, for instance, able to impress his lover by taking her on a tour through tree tops, which

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Byronic traits, he maintains that "Byron's fragment, elaborated by Dr. Polidori and published as *The Vampire*, is a small fraction indeed of the complete tale – in his portion of the story Byron had not even introduced the vampire – and, in any case, the whole matter has nothing to do with the Byronic Hero. For the most part the Byronic Hero was a typical romantic lover, and nowhere in all of the poems is he referred to either literally or figuratively as vampire-lover" (Thorslev 9). While it may well be argued that Byron himself did not engage in creating vampires, immediately following narratives as well as contemporary, more sympathetic versions owe a great deal to Byron's heroes. As the above survey has shown, the Byronic hero and the vampire share many vital characteristics, their outsiderdom and disregard of moral norms only constituting two out of many.

[87] Hence, vampires have often been treated as representative of minorities. As Shannon Winnubst explicates, "[j]ews, like whores and blacks and queers, are vampiric – in the fantasy life of Western European and North American psyche" (7). Interestingly, however, Edward and his family are part of the dominant order, as they are presented as white, heterosexual, upper middle class Americans. Their outsiderdom is, similarly to that of the aristocratic Byronic hero, mostly figured in internal terms: it is their moral beliefs which set them apart from other vampires. Equally, Manfred's outsiderdom is based on his feeling apart (and indeed above) common mortals: "Preach it to mortals of a dust like thine, – / I am not of thine order" (*Manfred* 2.1.37-38) he tells the chamois hunter, who implores him to be patient.

references Manfred's affinity to height.[88] Supernatural powers appear to be a frequent motif in the creation of both original and contemporary Byronic heroines and heroes, as Stein argues: "In both nineteenth-century and late-twentieth-century texts, the Byronic hero is given superhuman abilities that range from Manfred's ability to summon the spirits to the Terminator's ability to vanquish an entire urban police force (without a casualty)" (*Byronic*, 1). Thus, the superhuman vampire, in Edward's case an immortal being incredibly fast, strong, with heightened senses and the power to read people's thoughts, "provides his audience a satisfying vicarious experience of power *ana* empowerment, autonomy, mastery, and defiance of oppressive authority" (Stein, *Byronic*, 1-2).

Despite these superhuman powers, the Byronic hero as well as, in most cases, the vampire represents the quintessential "tortured soul" (Meyer n.p.). It is of more than anecdotal significance that Robert Pattinson, the actor playing Edward, claims to have been signed for the role because his auditioning performance "was a lot more pained" (n.p.). This describes Pattinson's way of translating how Edward is "extremely tortured by various different things" (n.p.). The archetypical secret guilt which a Byronic figure necessarily feels becomes blatant when attributed to the vampire, whose murderous past is part of the general myth every vampire narrative builds on. Additionally, the vampire's characteristic immortality assists in endowing him with a literally inhumanely vast, shameful past and an equally vast guilty conscience. "You have an infinite memory because you're a vampire as well, so he's always gonna be rapt with guilt" (n.p.), Pattinson unintentionally promotes the suitability of fusing a Byronic character with the traditional vampire legend. In Edward's case, however, it is indeed a dirty past rather than a shameful present. He might be everlastingly consumed by endless feelings of guilt, yet he is currently not committing new crimes.

This suggests a general emphasis on the positive variety of Byronic traits, which is further supported by Edward's undying love for Bella. His absolute devotion to her well-being references how the Byronic hero, despite a tendency to outbursts of extreme anger and his prototypical defiant brow, is always "capable of deep and strong affection" (Macaulay, quoted in Rogers 297). As Pattinson notes, being Edward involves that "you feel everything with such intensity" (n.p.). Similarly, it is only his treasured Astarte who can induce proud Manfred to laud a fellow being as universally superior to himself:

> She had the same lone thoughts and wanderings,
> The quest of hidden knowledge, and a mind

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[88] Similarly, the Cullens' mansion is situated on top of the local hill and, according to the director Catherine Hardwicke, intended to resemble a tree house.

> To comprehend the universe: nor these
> Alone, but with them gentler powers than mine,
> Pity, and smiles, and tears – which I had not;
> And tenderness – but that I had for her;
> Humility – and that I never had.
> Her faults were mine – her virtues were her own –
> I loved her, and destroy'd her!
> (*Manfred* 2.2.109-117)

The praise of and loving devotion to his recently deceased lover provides evidence for his great emotionality and sensitive nature, which he retains in spite of the cynical manner with which he meets both the obliging chamois hunter and Arimanes, the ruler of the seven spirits. Edward portrays a similar capability to sensibility, as for instance the piano scene reflects. Seated at an impressive black piano, Edward plays one of his favourite classic tunes, thus wooing his lover next to him. The scene, filmed in slow camera movement with the piano as the centre of the camera circle, emphasises Edward's melancholy and brooding nature, as do his love of literature, classical music and the uncountable journals he has been keeping since his conversion. Similar to the case of Sebastian from *Cruel Intentions*, the diary is used to symbolise the Byronic hero's introversion and introspection, traits which he owes to the foregoing Romantic Man of Feeling.[89]

With regards to the more negative Byronic traits, Edward appears to display only one of them, whose destructive potential, however, becomes apparently intensified. While Manfred's love for Astarte eventually proved to be indirectly fatal ("I loved her, and destroy'd her!"), the vampire's threat to the human Bella exceeds the mere figurative threat to her moral and/or mental integrity, even if it is not put into practice. Paradoxically, it is only through his apparent lust after her blood that he becomes more and more romantically attached to her. "I've never wanted a human's blood so much in my life" (*Twilight*), Edward makes a perverted avowal of love when revealing his dark secret to Bella. Hence, Edward is cast as the classic tormented lover, who literally cannot live with nor without his beloved and is therefore doomed to a life in constant agony. *Twilight* translates Manfred's and similar Romantic lovers' all-consuming desire, more often than not leading to the beloved's death, into its logical literal equivalent.[90] The same effect is conjured up when Edward characterises his relationship to the mortal Bella: "And so the lion fell in love with the lamb" (*Twilight*). Additionally, this remark reflects that Edward does

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[89] For a closer account of the Byronic hero's literary predecessors see Thorslev, 1962, and chapter one of this thesis.
[90] Simultaneously, this reveals the conscious employment of Romantic tropes and motifs, in this case Romantic irony: Edward cannot, in fact, desire to possess Bella completely, because this would equal death. Rather, he wants wanting, yet never fully attaining her. This figures as a major element in the Romantic concept of love: love is understood as a sensibility in which "pleasure and pain, love and hate, tenderness and sadism, are inextricably blended" (Thorslev 7). Evidently, this love provides the necessary paradox for a sublime moment, which the Byronic hero is meant to incite.

not merely constitute the only character in this study consciously modelled on Byron's protagonists, but is also characterised by latent references to the latter's texts. His identification with a lion seems to be inspired by Manfred's proclamation on the mountain top: "The lion is alone, and so am I" (*Manfred* 3.1.123).

A similar intertextual reference can be detected in Edward's display of the Byronic hero's visual insignia. Special attention is invariably drawn to his eyes, which, in agreement with his hunger, change colour from black to golden. Consciously or not, the colour play of his eyes accentuates the Byronic hero's origins in the Gothic villain and accordingly establishes him as "an intimidating man with a glittering eye" (Fry 273). Hence, Conrad in Byron's poetic drama *The Corsair* is described as bearing a "more glittering eye, and black brow's sabler gloom" (*The Corsair* 2.4.149) as well as a "dark eye-brow [which] shades a glance of fire" (*The Corsair* 1.9.4). In much the same manner, Edward's eyes are consistently highlighted throughout the movie. The first meeting between Bella and Edward takes place during a biology lesson, when both have to examine samples through a microscope, which allows close shots of Edward's eyes. During a later meeting, in which Edward apologises for his initially rude behaviour towards Bella, it is her question about his eyes and their changing colour which makes him turn around abruptly and leave. Appropriately, all film posters, an important part of the huge fan cult surrounding and promoting *Twilight*, display Edward with golden eyes and a hypnotic, irresistible gaze upon the potential onlooker. As Martine Beugnet elucidates with regards to cinematic representation, the focus on eyes has always been linked to vampirism, which the traditionalistic "expressionist eye-shadows and lopsided eyebrows of the original vampire" (79) confirm. Edward's Byronic stare is indeed tightly connected to his vampirism. A warm, golden colour indicates that his appetite is sufficiently satisfied and that he can easily control himself in the presence of human beings. Black eyes, on the other hand, indicate hunger and, by extension, danger.

Hence, the colour of his eyes might be read as indicative not only of his hunger, but also of his state of soul and his psyche. The dual option – black or golden – perfectly references the typical dual nature of the Byronic hero, who is simultaneously a cynical and villainous sociopath as well as a deeply devoted "man of courtesy and sensibility" (Thorslev 8). Central to the figure of the Byronic hero is thus a highly ambiguous, simultaneously attractive and repulsive nature. As the above survey has shown, Edward clearly depicts the golden, i.e. attractive qualities: he "spurns the comforts of society" (Thorslev 61), bears "defiance on his brow and

misery in his hear" (Macaulay, quoted in Rogers 297) and makes the audience appreciate "his cloak of mystery and his air of the sublime" (Thorslev 69). While his eyes do at times take on a darker shade, the dangerous potential they signify is, however, seldom actualised. Paralleling Kathryn Merteuil's fate, a Byronic *heroine* cast as the film's categorical villain, Edward represents a hero lacking several quintessential, negative Byronic characteristics. Indeed, he seems firmly positioned on the unambiguously positive end of the heroic spectrum, so that his potentially darker, vampiric aspects are successfully repudiated.

Allegedly, "the first sympathetic vampires" have always been those mingled with and indebted to "the brooding Byronic heroes of British Romanticism" (262), as Candace Benefiel argues. Hence, while the Byronic character is itself "a hero who inspires awe but cannot be emulated" because its audience "find no shared basis for sympathetic identification" (Stein, *Byronic,* 2-3), he certainly redeems and re-humanises the vampire legend to function as a sufficiently heroic figure. In Edward's case, however, the frequently employed technique of what Stein terms rehumanisation[91] seems to have resulted in the total repudiation of any undesirable Byronic traits. The danger supposedly embodied by a blood-thirsty vampire is not even partially actualised. In actual fact, Edward more often saves than threatens Bella's life.[92] His modelling on the archetypal knight-in-shining-armour reveals that the dark side of a traditional Byronic hero is, in fact, never fully played out. Rather, Edward is cast like the traditional hero, who might be "creative and crazy and fun and drives fast cars, but will go down to the wire to save his one love" (Hardwicke n.p.). This stands in stark contrast to Manfred, who "loved her, and destroy'd her" (*Manfred* 2.2.117). Lacking Manfred's cynicism, ironic detachment, and other, more distinctly negative traits, Edward stands as a noticeably more tamed and hence less categorical Byronic character than his famous ancestors.

This lack becomes particularly noticeable with regards to the vampire's actual and symbolic physique. Edward unmistakably exerts a major physical attraction on his prey as well as on his lover, who, conveniently, are impossible to

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[91] Stein notes that "[a]lmost inevitably, the creators of the contemporary Byronic hero do not allow him to remain in his superhuman condition; they rehumanize him, in effect, or have him voice appropriation and admiration of ordinary human values, and they provide him with a moral center, an empathy with human concerns, which earns him the audience's affection in addition to their respect" (*Byronic*, 2).

[92] Allegedly, one could also argue that this pays tribute to the typical sublime paradox frequently embodied by the Byronic character. Similar to the way the Byronic hero looks upon his environment, and, as suggested by various scholars, should be read, Edward is, ironically, both Bella's most dangerous counterpart and her rescuing soul mate. Accordingly, Stein argues that Byron's plays "operate on at least two levels: readers can take them at face value, immersing themselves in the *apparently* self-revelatory and 'spontaneous overflow of feelings,' or they can be in on the joke and see the ways in which Byron incorporates a highly ironic distance from his heroes" (*Byronic,* 11-12, original emphasis). Similarly, Jerome McGann claims that with regards to the self-tormented, exaggeratedly suffering hero Manfred, Byron deliberately employs "comic debunking" (*Wordsworth*, 29) so that "the dramatic presentation makes self-consciousness rather than sincerity the determining stylistic move" (*Wordsworth*, 24).

entangle. While a handsome appearance is not necessarily a defining characteristic of the vampire figure, traditionally more repulsive than physically alluring, it is certainly so of the Byronic hero, if yet with reservations. Both his personality and his appearance might be highly attractive, but at the same time repulsive and abhorrent. In Stein's words, Byronic heroes are only "'sexy' in their dangerousness" (*Byronic*, 25). Accordingly, they are seldom described as conventionally beautiful, but rather as impressive-looking. The lure they exert, similar to that of the vampire, exceeds categorisation and might be detected in what Meyer refers to as the fusion of "both sides": "A lot of guys are pretty, but they are not dangerous and other guys are dangerous, but they are not pretty enough. […] He's got both sides" (n.p.). This remark demonstrates how the tradition of the Byronic hero is strongly influenced by Romantic aesthetics and the ideal of the sublime. Mere beauty, as both the development of the Byronic figure as well as Meyer's expressive quote reflect, does not suffice to move and overwhelm the audience. This, however, constitutes the main effect sublime art is supposed to have on its audience. Accordingly, Emily Brontë "makes [Heathcliff] simultaneously attractive and horrifying" (Stein, *Byronic*, 4), while today's Byronic action heroes are "of superior and apparently impressive physique, as the women's appreciative glances attest" (Stein, *Byronic*, 68). By combining perfect beauty with the enticing charm of the dangerous predator, Edward bears the potential to achieve the same effect. As his danger and the more negative Byronic traits are never played out, however, he appropriately remains "the most beautiful man in the whole world" (Hardwicke n.p.), a condition which he owes to the beautifying process automatically initiated during the conversion.[93]

Reading the Movie, Part I: The Beauty and the Text

Edward's status as "the most beautiful man" literalises how his character, as *Twilight*'s overt text implies, is ultimately expressive of the beautiful rather than the sublime. These two notions are, as Burke explicates, "ideas of a very different nature" (113), because in contrast to the terror and awe inspired by the sublime, the beautiful causes "a relaxation in the body [and] produces the passion of love in the mind" (136). By failing to constitute a character that is not just immensely attractive but at the same time highly repelling, Edward only partly achieves the typical sublime reaction provoked by the classic Byronic hero. Since he is eventually forced to repudiate potentially negative Byronic traits, the sublime cannot be directly provoked by an ambiguous character. As the following analysis will show, this

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[93] In the fictional world of *Twilight*, becoming immortal entails that the new vampires grow to be more beautiful than they used to be as humans. This allows them to lure their future victims more easily. Ironically, vampires are thus by definition more attractive than common mortals.

results in a "beautiful" rather than sublime overt text of the teen movie, which latently centres on an utter prohibition to any loss of control, above all in sexual terms. Evidently, the loss of control figures most prominently in any conceptualisation of the sublime, which contains "the possibility of losing one's way, which is tantamount, Burke implies, to losing one's coherence" (Phillips xxii). Similarly, its postmodern variety presents itself as a "threatening and potentially uncontainable version of the sublime" (Freeman 15), which results in a complete "self-loss" (Freeman 38). Accordingly, *Twilight*'s beautiful text and Edward's not entirely Byronic, beautiful character are intrinsically connected to the fact he "can never lose control" (*Twilight*) with his lover.

Indeed, the central, yet implicit concern the whole story evolves around is that Edward, still fighting his inner urge to bite humans, has to evade situations capable of inducing the dreaded self-loss. First and foremost, this means that he can never be intimate with Bella because in the sexual act Bella could easily be killed. This establishes a seemingly natural prohibition to any physical intimacy exceeding that of a quick kiss on the cheek. Both sexuality and the vampire's metaphorical kiss are inspired by as well as involve a significant amount of losing control and are hence represented as naturally dangerous. The lack of bodily closeness turns the teen movie, modelled on classic love stories like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Wuthering Heights,* into a chaste sandpit romance. Via the natural prohibition spelled by the vampire, the narrative utterly disavows sexual intercourse and hence promotes not only true love, loyalty and chastity, but, in fact, proscribes pre-marital sex.[94] Bella's and Edward's sex is only literally "safe" if Bella is converted into a vampire. The conversion, just like a wedding, is cast as a once-in-a-life-time event. It requires absolute trust and deep love, since it binds her to her creator until the rest of her life. Similar to the traditional discourse surrounding marriage, Bella's old life with her family and especially her single father will end with the conversion. She will literally become a new person, leaving her family and her past life behind to stay with Edward. Only then can the latter safely lose control with her, because she has become part of the vampire family. In the deliberate, superficial reading encouraged by *Twilight's* text, the act of conversion comes to signify marriage and the only safe and legitimate union of the lovers.[95] Such a reading links *Twilight* to

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[94] For completion's sake, it should also be noted that the apparent disavowal of sexual activity in *Twilight* might not be expressive of the movie's conservative undercurrent at all. The notable absence of physical intimacy might comment "upon our own culture's insistence on (obsession with) the sexual act and genital sexuality" (240), as Schopp argues with regards to Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) and several related narratives.

[95] Readers familiar with the plot of the novel tetralogy know that eventually, Meyer appears to flaunt the very principles she has created for both the fictional vampire world and the protagonists' relationship in order to remain faithful to the text's conservative tone. In the fourth novel, *Breaking Dawn* (2008), Bella is still not converted into a vampire, but married to Edward. Thus, the couple can have sex, although

many other narratives in which the figure of the vampire provides a means to discuss "the fear about […] blood-transmitted diseases – syphilis in the Victorian era, AIDS in our own time" and implicitly promotes "the importance of chastity" (Bartel 20).[96]

Consequently, the openly endorsed ban to any loss of control effectively robs the plot of any potential for the sublime, which relies substantially on the possibility of excess. It hence makes sense that the scenes which are apparently consciously contrived for a visually sublime effect fail to convey the genuine sublime to the audience.[97] *Twilight*'s camera work is dominated by dark and gloomy colours, especially blue and grey. The setting, north-western U.S.A, provides the appropriate backdrop for staging a highly effective, traditionally Romantic scenery. In all outdoor shots, the audience is confronted with a dark, overcast sky, impressive mountain ranges, shots from above and thunderstorms or lightening. Apparently, such scenes perpetuate a traditional version of the sublime in, however, merely visual terms, which ties in with the overall conservative tone of the text disowning any loss of control. While such outdoor scenes do contain all the prime ingredients of a traditionally sublime moment, they do not, as I argue, achieve to convey Burke's famously declared "delightful horror" (67) to a contemporary audience. The typical effect of the sublime, the overwhelming feeling of simultaneous pleasure and fear, is, in its postmodern variety and for the accordant spectatorship, created via different means than traditionally employed.

Thus, *Twilight*'s panorama shots of mountains in front of an overcast sky might be impressive, yet do not, as Lyotard has it, "put[…] forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" ("Postmodernism", 81). They are not mentally thrilling nor terrifying enough to create, for a postmodern audience, "the real sublime sentiment, which is in an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain; the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility

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this was formerly utterly prohibited because it might end in Bella's death. Nonetheless, even the marital sexual activity proves to be fatal (without a prior conversion), because Bella threatens to die while giving birth to their daughter. Only Edward's bite, eventually offering the much desired conversion, keeps his wife alive, or rather, undead. The intricate connection of death, birth and immortal rebirth in what I understand as a sublime moment would be worth analysing in depth, but clearly exceeds the scope of this thesis.

[96] The vampire has frequently been treated as representative of diseases. In accordance with contemporary HIV discourses, sex between people of different blood, the one pure and the other apparently undead, always involves a risk. In the relationship between Bella and Edward, "the too literal question of whether they have sex with a condom simply cannot arise because in the most fundamental sense her entire relationship with him is 'unsafe'" (126), as Richards claims with regards to *Buffy*. The figure of the vampire can be treated as an embodiment of the simultaneously desirable, yet invariably dangerous nature of every sexual encounter, an issue which in today's AIDS-conscious society proves to be highly topical (cf. Richards 121-128, Schopp 237, and Bartel 15-24).

[97] Scenes of traditional sublimity due to the use of visual obscurity include the baseball scene (see further below) and scenes in which Edward climbs gigantic trees with Bella on his back. As already mentioned further above, the tree top scenes also illustrate the Byronic hero's affinity to height.

should not be equal to the concept" (Lyotard, "Postmodernism", 81). The central reason why *Twilight* falls short to perpetuate this genuine postmodern sublime and remains literally beautiful appears to lie in Edward's unambiguous, only partly Byronic character. This results in an overtly beautiful plot disavowing any loss of control, a necessary prerequisite for the sublime. As demonstrated above, this entails that the latter is forced to remain conspicuously absent from the text. The following analysis, however, will illustrate how it can be unearthed in the movie's subversive subtext.

Reading The Movie, Part II: The Sublime Subtext

As Edward's central dilemma reflects, *Twilight*'s disavowal of any loss of control is represented as the natural requirement for avoiding any loss of blood. Indeed, it is the noticeable absence of blood which makes both Edward and the movie, as Burke would have it, relaxing to the body and loveable to the mind. Since Edward always manages to contain himself, blood is oddly missing in the narrative, both in terms of blood being shed, drunk and (literally as well as metaphorically) mingled. An act of feeding or conversion, which would signify his utter loss of control, is never put into actual practice. Nonetheless, the apparently absent conversion of Bella, of which Edward is potentially capable, pervades the highly subversive subtext, if yet in a different reading than the overt text would suggest. Instead of treating the conversion as Bella's and Edward's metaphorical wedding, which would finally enable physical intimacy, the act of biting itself can equally be understood as denoting sexual intercourse. In this kind of reading, the vampire's ultimate bite not only figures as a strong latent desire influencing the whole plot, but provides the movie's paradoxically absent, supreme sublime moment.

Treating a mortal's conversion into a vampire as expressive of the sexual act, which would considerably undermine the movie's text, is supported by the long-established literary use of the vampire as a metaphor. The archetype of the vampire is expressive of a great variety of contemporary and universal topics because, as Schopp argues, it "provides a space for articulating and reconstructing cultural desires" (231). Hence, the vampire acts as "a mirror that reflects shifting cultural desires and fears" (Schopp 232). Similarly, Benefiel notes that the vampire provides a "stage upon whom the fears and secret desires of society could be acted" (262). While the traditional vampire legend stood for the "anxiety of reverse colonisation" (Arata 622) because it "epitomises the inhuman ability to materialise and disseminate itself seamlessly through time and space" (Beugnet 77), the vampire

after Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* (1976-1985) "was used to provide a vehicle for social commentary, and vampirism itself became a convincing metaphor for […] varied topics" (Benefiel 262). Whatever state of society, identity or social group the vampire is employed to represent, its essential position "at the border with the abject, between the visible and the invisible, the real and virtual [allows] the vampire [to] retain[…] the capacity to fascinate and repulse" (Beugnet 78). The vampire as a figure or trope can be employed for a great variety of topics and hence proves to be a highly flexible metaphor: "As palimpsests of society's dreads and obsessions, monsters, especially vampires, can mean anything" (4, quoted in Wilson Overstreet 9), as Laura Diehl evocatively argues. The vampire has come to constitute a viable means for social as well as political commentary by offering a neutral space for embodying topical issues. Every generation fills this space with its own fears, desires and obsessions. Not by chance, Nina Auerbach has called her insightful analysis of metaphorical vampirism *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995): "[V]ampires […] can be everything we are, while at the same time, they are fearful reminders of the infinite things we are not" (6).

As already suggested above, one of the foremost metaphors the vampire has been subjugated to is connected to the reading of the conversion as a sexual act. Deborah Wilson Overstreet explicates the manifold parallels between the act of biting and sexual intercourse in the following way: "Not only is there something fairly sexual about the whole physical arrangement, biting the neck not being that different from kissing the neck, feeding usually takes place at night, and often in the victim's bedroom" (8). These parallels are intensified by the fact that both the bite and the sexual act "are traditionally performed by a male character on a female victim who is passive and seems to welcome his touch. As a result of the pain of the bite and the loss of blood, she even experiences a pseudo-orgasm" (745), as Terry Spaise explains. Furthermore, the act of feeding and/or conversion via the sucking of blood from the victim's neck constitutes a subversion of the reproductive act. In contrast to other non-heteronormative and non-standard sexual acts, the act of sucking does not signify sex without reproduction, but reproduction without sex. Additionally, "the parent of the vampire is the vampire who made it" (Benefiel 262), i.e. the vampire acts as both parent and pleasure-, yet also pain-inducing lover. Thus, it not only embodies homosexual, but also incestuous desires.

The fact that the vampire is understood to represent both our fears and desires and in particular illustrates the "delightful horror" (Burke 123) of orgasm reflects how especially the conversion can be read as productive of the sublime.

Hence, it is not only the Byronic hero, but also the vampire, equally a product of the Romantic age, who potentially inspires sublimity and provokes both terror and attraction. Chris Richards, following the psychoanalytical argument offered by Franco Moretti, argues that "the vampire is invented to serve an emotional purpose: to appear as an external menace where the source of anxiety and dread is inside us" (122). Especially the conversion is hence imagined as "insistently desirable and self-endangering" (Richards 126), because it represents both death and eternal life. Thus, it constitutes a highly sublime act: variously, it is depicted as both desired and dreaded, experienced as both immense pleasure and pain[98], and as an overwhelming of the senses and mental faculties. "[I]n the sublime, borders disappear and the subject is overwhelmed by a magnitude she can neither control nor represent" (113), Freeman accordingly argues. Due to Edward's (and, by lack of choice, Bella's) obligatory evasion of such a moment of self-loss, the conversion, i.e. *Twilight*'s potentially most sublime moment, remains notably absent from the whole narrative. Ironically, however, this potential as well as its connotations of sexual ecstasy emerge conspicuously in the symbol by which the whole *Twilight* series has come to be recognised, a red apple.

In one key scene, demonstrating Edward's superhuman and slightly uncanny powers, he unnaturally quickly catches a deep red apple which slips out of Bella's hand at the school cafeteria's salad bar. According to Hardwicke, this scene was contrived for the sole purpose of displaying the series' symbol to its fans.[99] Obviously, the fruit connects the human/vampire couple to the very first human couple in Genesis, as the first novel's epigraph acknowledges.[100] Primarily, grabbing the apple hence signifies seizing (forbidden) knowledge, which results in an expulsion from the present paradise. Since Bella is the one who loses and Edward the one who catches the apple, knowledge apparently rests with Edward. This might be regarded as symbolic of the general state of knowledge distribution between the couple. Apart from being able to read humans' minds, which allows him absolute

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[98] It seems that due to the painful pleasure that the act of feeding is supposed to convey to the victim, human/vampire relationships have traditionally been depicted in sado-masochistic terms. One of the most famous contemporary couples, the slayer Buffy and the vampire Spike, frequently engage in sexual innuendo with a stark BDSM subtext. Vivien Burr claims that human/vampire relationships tend to be governed by verbal and actual ambiguity. Spike "both loves and hates her, both desires and wants to kill her" so that "[a]mbiguity here is not either/or but both/and. Sexual desire and violence are not really alternatives" (354-357). The prime moment in which these extreme opposites can be unleashed is the sexual act or, in analogy, Spike's attempt to literally consume Buffy. Appropriately, Edward equals Bella to a lamb completely at his mercy. Loving her means that he is a "sick, masochistic lion" (*Twilight*).

[99] "If you know the book cover, you got it for like one eighth of a second in there" (n.p.), Hardwicke says when commenting on the scene.

[100] Meyer variously suggests that the apple representing the forbidden fruit is Edward, and Bella has to decide between good and evil, i.e. between taking or leaving the fruit. My own reading partly coincides with this view, but is furthermore connected to the apple traditionally representing (prohibited) knowledge as well as sexuality, both notions noticeably disregarded by the movie's text.

knowledge of and power over his potential prey, Edward has not yet revealed his secret to Bella.

Interestingly, the vampire generally does not merely represent ultimate knowledge, but simultaneously embodies the prohibition of conveying knowledge to others. "Dracula's lack of origin", as Schopp explicates, "figures him as unknown and unknowable" (232), a claim which might well be extended to his twenty-first-century successor. This references how the sublime is, in Burke's conceptualisation, implicitly conceived of as "the impossibility of knowledge" (Phillips xxii) as well as how contemporary cool works by exuding an "ethos of the unknown" (Liu, *Laws*, 9). In view of that, little is revealed about Edward's past, while he himself never discloses any plans for his nor Bella's future. The latter, epitomised in the narrative's central question of whether or not she will become Edward's eternal companion, rests in the vampire's hand. In contrast to other boys who surround and try to charm Bella, Edward stands oddly aloof: he remains a mystery to both her and the audience. Appropriately, when Bella claims: "I know you", Edward tells her: "You don't know anything" (*Twilight*). This establishes him as capable of putting in awe those trying to penetrate his secret self. Having been rescued by Edward in an exceptionally fast manner, the inexplicably unharmed Bella asks her saving knight after the car accident how he was able to react so quickly. "I know what I saw", she claims, which Edward coolly ignores. He unsettles Bella's world view completely: she knows that his powers are superhuman, yet he makes her doubt her common sense by refusing to account for any of his actions. Several times, Bella asks: "So how about some answers?" (*Twilight*), which Edward is unwilling and unable to supply. The obscure meaning and uneven rhythm of his colour-changing eyes, representative of his hunger, appears to be indicative of this unwillingness: just like Bella cannot read his eyes, the metaphorical windows to his soul, Edward in general stays unknowable and ungraspable in every aspect.[101]

Apart from representing forbidden and/or unattainable knowledge in general, the apple in its biblical context is also connected to issues of sexuality. Hence, the decision to employ the apple as *Twilight*'s brand logo unearths how its subtext exerts a seminal force upon the whole narrative. Interestingly, its biblical context inextricably links the sexuality represented by the apple to biting and feeding. It is

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[101] Not only Edward, but all the other vampires as well seem to spread the ethos of the unknown. Hence, the nomadic, villainous vampires James, Victoria and Laurent are invariably faced with the same reaction of their soon-to-be victims. "It's always the same idiotic questions: Who are you? What do you want? Why are you doing this?" (*Twilight*), James explains. As Schopp explicates, the fact that "the vampire's origin is left completely unexplained […] figures him as […] inherently different and threatening in his otherness" (232-233). The idea of threat and danger exerted by an impossibility of and prohibition to knowledge is central to Burke's conceptualisation of the sublime, which presents itself in a "terrible uncertainty" (Burke 58). I will elaborate on this point further below.

via consuming the apple that Eve and Adam gain knowledge and the according punishment. The apple thus principally reflects how sexuality enacted via the bite results in the sublime moment of revelation, which, however, is not sanctioned but causes a metaphorical death. Thus, biting and consuming the desired object also involves an excess of boundaries, both literally in terms of the actual expulsion, and, metaphorically, as a moral transgression violating divine law. Edward's categorical evasion of self-control already reflects that excess of various kinds of boundaries and the subsequent loss of control over a formerly contained area are central to the vampire's bite. Both notions figure prominently throughout *Twilight*. While the previous section has shown that "the subject's encounter with excess, one of the sublime's most characteristic and enduring features" (Freeman 15) is overtly disavowed throughout the movie, Bella's and Edward's longing for eternal union implies that they ardently desire this sublime self-loss via the act of conversion. Indeed, the conversion, the metaphorical sexual act, represents complete ecstasy. Not only will it involve physical and psychological pain for Bella (representing, in another metaphor, the loss of her "soul"), it could ultimately result in her death unless Edward is, again, able to control his craving and stop sucking at the right moment. Accordingly, Edward tells his human lover: "Your scent, it's like a drug to me. Like my own personal brand of heroine" (*Twilight*). Drugs embody the utmost loss of control and the dangerousness of excess which, similarly to excess in sexual terms, should be avoided at all costs and yet proves to be irresistible. In this case, however, the consumption of the drug would not lead to the death of the consumer, but to that of the drug itself, while simultaneously granting eternal, excessive life.

Indeed, not only becoming, but also being a vampire, in accordance with its metaphorical reading as representative of the sublime, latently involves excess in a variety of forms. Not only are all undead excessively beautiful in order to attract their potential prey, they are also endowed with superhuman qualities and immensely heightened senses. This enables them to indulge in the excessive slaughtering of the invariably inferior humans. There is no mediocrity in the realm of the immortals, and this claim can also be applied to their relationships. "It would be better if we weren't friends" (*Twilight*), Edward tells Bella, and according to the logic of excess, they should indeed either be total lovers or haters. By definition, *Twilight*'s vampires can only love excessively: Edward does not merely desire to possess Bella as his girlfriend, but literally wants to consume this love, even though he has learned to control this craving. Hence, their relationship is fed by a strange undercurrent of simultaneous excessive love and hate, attraction and repulsion, comfort and fear,

danger and rescue. Torn between these extremes, Bella apparently suffers the "'hit' of the sublime" (White ch.15), as actress Kristen Stewart explicates: "She's oddly drawn to this look of hatred. It's like: 'What's wrong with me? It's sado-masochistic. Why am I subjecting myself to this seemingly unpleasant experience?' But for some reason, it's like a need" (n.p.). Hence, Bella asks Edward after his coming-out to her as a vampire: "Why did you hate me so much when we met?", to which he replies: "I did because I want you so badly" (*Twilight*). This principally marks their love as determined by extremes.

It is, however, the kill and the subsequent feeding, induced by the overpoweringly great appetite for (human) blood, which represents the prime moment of excess. When attacking, the Cullens as well as the villainous nomadic vampires are depicted in typical animal poses. They resemble predators like lions or tigers, with their fingers spread to imitate claws and their fangs bared to produce hissing sounds. In the moment of killing and feeding, the animalistic, non-rational instincts overweigh, resulting in a loss of rational control, as Edward explains: "When we taste human blood, a sort of frenzy begins, and we can't stop" (*Twilight*). Via its closeness to excess, the vampire analogically comes to represent a "frightening […] other" as well as "a hostile, persecutory force" (Freeman 25), which inhabits the "domain of the unrepresentable and excessive" (Freeman 33) typical of the sublime. Bella's desire for the conversion as well as for Edward (the one, in actual fact, becoming inextricably entangled with the other in both her and the audience's imagination) is thus a "desire for the sublime" (Freeman 31).

Furthermore, excess as embodied in the figure of the vampire can also be understood as the literal ex-ceeding of boundaries, which the material as well as mental transgression represented by the biblical apple already suggests. As Phillips argues, the sublime "is always that which is in excess of any kind of limit or boundary" (xxii). Similarly, the vampire crosses and re-crosses all kinds of borders:

> It is the monster that used to be human; it is the undead that used to be alive; it is the monster that *looks like us*. For this reason, the figure of the vampire always has the potential to jeopardize conventional distinctions between human and monster, between life and death, between ourselves and the other. (Hollinger, "Fantasies", 201, italics in the original)

Thus, Edward "occupies a series of paradoxical and liminal spaces that make him impossible to categorize" (313), as Dee Amy-Chinn claims with regards to the vampire Spike from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). Similarly, Benefiel argues that the vampire essentially presents a "liminal, transgressive figure" (262), because it belongs, by its very nature, to an "elusive realm, at the fragile border

between sleeping and waking" (Beugnet 79). Not fully human yet bearing the human form, the vampire "does not have the necessary precondition for the possibility of becoming a subject. But, consequently, nor can he be fully objected, nor can he be caught, labelled, categorized, and expelled" (Winnubst 8). This impossibility becomes blatant in the character of Edward: as a supposedly soulless immortal with a moral conscience, he effectively blurs the boundaries between human and vampire.[102] Simultaneously dead and immortal, frightening and sympathetic, pleasure-giving and painful, loving and hating, he possesses, according to Donald Pease, "a power to make trouble for categorizing procedures" (259), just like the sublime does. Equally, he "demonstrates the power of being both/and, rather than simply either/or" (Amy-Chinn 326). Edward invariably embodies oppositional extremes and thus reflects how "[t]he sublime demonstrates the capacity of one extreme to turn into the opposite. Its ruling principle resides in an incessant and infinite reversibility, a movement that destabilizes boundaries and undercuts the terms of any opposition" (Freeman 44).

This becomes particularly obvious in the conversion's long-established reading as a highly subversive, liminal act. Both the vampire and its bite destabilise conventional notions of physical intimacy, reproduction and sex.[103] While this involves the embodiment of homosexual, incestuous and thus queer desires, the bite also presents an intimate encounter between two different species: the mortal and the undead. Thus, a vampire's affection for a human being reflects how the act of bloodsucking "both promises and threatens racial and sexual mixing" (Haraway 214).[104] In *Twilight*, this indeed proves to be a liminal experience, because Edward initially "both loves and hates her, both desires and wants to kill her" (354), as Burr claims with regards to love-relationships in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The bite then constitutes a "powerful nexus of Eros and Thanatos" (Winnubst 11), and, by extension, blurs the borders between these diametrically opposed drives. It is this excess of borders inherent in the bite that Haraway terms the "paradigmatic act of

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[102] Furthermore, Edward also blurs the boundaries between genders. He performs both hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine behaviour. The latter is, among others, also connected to the vampire's general status as a mother giving birth to new immortals. Furthermore, the destiny of the vampire strongly "resonates with that of women. He suffers in a way that reflects back to 'the second sex' [or species, in that case] their historical condition, being despised on the basis of his physiology" (Amy-Chinn 325). The "implicit identification of woman and vampire" (Hollinger, "Variations", 152) is perceptible both in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and succeeding vampire narratives, while the vampire is at the same depicted as a "traditionally potent figure" (Hollinger, "Variations", 155).
[103] In accordance with the sexual transgression metaphorically represented by vampires, they are frequently depicted with a "gender and sexuality [which] are fluid: neither is secure and both are based around excess" (316), as Amy-Chinn argues with regards to Spike from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer.*
[104] Blood as such brings with it highly ambiguous and paradoxical connotations. While it is nowadays oftentimes associated with the transmission of fatal diseases, it still bears connotations of human bonding ("blood ties") and family ("being of the same blood"). Richards argues that blood is both "threatening and facilitating intimacy" (135). The fact that the vampire feeds on this highly contested, ambiguous body fluid further accentuates its status as a liminal creature.

infecting whatever poses as pure" (214). Indeed, Edward and his siblings drink blood, but they can similarly infuse their venom into the victim, depending on whether they need food or want to create a companion. In analogy to the potential injection of poison via the fangs of the vampire, Winnubst argues that

> [t]he vampire pollutes all systems of kinship, pollutes all systems of blood, pollutes all systems of race and sex and desire that must be straight. He infects the body and thereby *alters the spirit* – no body can transcend the metamorphosis of his bite […]. The vampire crosses even these boundaries. (8, italics in the original)

Dwelling in the Twilight: The Postmodern Vampire

The transgressive, subversive and deconstructive potential inherent in the vampire suggests that this more than two-hundred-year-old figure can well be employed as a prime representative of the dominant values of contemporary postmodern society. Accordingly, Beugnet proposes to treat the contemporary heir of Dracula "as an allegory of the threat of exploitation on a global scale" (78). The vampire today "thrives on the limitations of the human condition in today's 'society of spectacle', a society in which people are caught within a web of manufactured desires and endlessly recycled, lifeless images" (Beugnet 79). Hence, it can be understood as representative of the global, post-industrial society.[105] Equally, Veronica Hollinger argues that "the potential inherent in the archetype of the vampire, one of our most long-lived cultural icons, to function effectively as metaphor for certain aspects of postmodernity is particularly striking" because it proves to be "an inherently deconstructive figure" ("Fantasies", 201). Since the contemporary vampire is frequently endowed with Byronic traits, Hollinger's claim ties in with Carrol Fry's argument that the Byronic hero represents "many of the values of postmodernism" (277), such as the blurring of boundaries and a downright scepticism towards ultimate truths. With regards to human-loving vampires in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* Bartel similarly argues that it is "in the difficulty of deciding what is right and what is wrong, that [the vampire's] and our own postmodern dilemma is fully displayed, for the distinction between those terms does not appear as simple as it seemed to be in former times" (23). The vampire, particularly in its contemporary versions, is thus a prime means for exerting postmodern practices, as it provides multiple possibilities for "contesting dominant cultural narratives" (Schopp 231).[106]

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[105] Beugnet's analysis shows that the figure of the vampire is nowadays often employed to represent "global media vampirism" (84), "a web of Internet sexploitation" (84) or, in more general terms, contemporary society at large, so that "the system itself is the ultimate Grand Vampire" (84).

[106] This explains why "[t]he vampire […] is one satanic figure which is currently enjoying a resurgence of literary and critical popularity" (Hollinger, "Variations", 146), as "it has possibly never had as pervasive an appeal in American popular culture as it has had in the past decade" (Schopp 232). Not by chance, apparently, much the same could be said about the figure of the Byronic hero.

Following this line of argument, it appears self-evident that Edward, as a contemporary vampire representative of postmodern values, is depicted as cool all the way through. Accordingly, Edward's perpetuation of it appears principally suggested by the contemporary vampire's frequent depiction as a quintessential "postmodern subject with identities that are multiple, contradictory, shifting, oscillating, inconsistent and fluid" (Amy-Chinn 315). As Williamson argues with regards to Spike, a vampire from the *Buffy* series, Edward shares "key characteristics […] with each incarnation of the sympathetic vampire, although he updates them with late 20th and early 21st-century 'cool'" (295-296). Similarly, Julie Plec, the writer and executive producer of *The Vampire Diaries*, notes that "the vampire is the new James Dean" (quoted in La Ferla 4). Plec thus acknowledges that the vampire thrives in today's popular culture because he epitomises postmodern notions of cool. Equally, *The New York Times* explains the "latest vampire mania" (La Ferla 4) as stemming "from the ethereal cool and youthful sexiness with which the demons are portrayed" (La Ferla 4). It seems to be due to his embodiment of cool that "the vampire in particular suddenly emerges as the saviour of the world" (Bartel 22). As *Twilight* literally reflects, the contemporary vampire no longer sucks, but coolly rules.[107]

Accordingly, Edward's Byronic "cold charms" (La Ferla 4) indeed rely heavily on his employment of cool as "a mask, covering an extreme form of romanticism" (Pountain and Robins 119). Acting and masking is central to his being a vampire, because he has chosen, in contrast to the majority of literary and cinematographic vampires, to take part as much as possible in human society. Evidently, this requires a high amount of deception, role-playing and identity change. These techniques not only reference how cool is used as a posture artificially maintained to cover up more ambiguous emotions. What is more, they also reflect the postmodern concept of the self, which understands identity as performative and constructed, rather than naturally given and stable. The notion of an unstable, ever-changing identity is central to the notion of cool, which is not by chance "the ideal sensibility for anyone who must live by constant self-reinvention" (Pountain and Robins 132). Literally, the Cullens constantly have to re-invent their identities. Since they do not visibly become older, they never stay in one area for more than a few years in order to avoid arousing suspicions. In their mansion, a huge canvas decorated with uncountable mortarboards from all their high school graduations serves as an ironic

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[107] As Pountain and Robins argue, "it is no coincidence that those cartoon anti-heroes Beavis and Butthead classify everything they encounter as either 'Cool' or 'It sucks'" (144). The vampire literalises as well as simultaneously neutralises this opposition. Clearly, Pountain's and Robins' comparison again links the sucking vampire to sexuality. The underlying misogynist and homophobic semantics imply that all those performing fellatio are not cool, but suck. See also chapter four of this thesis.

reminder of their immortality and perpetual re-self-invention. It constitutes an appropriate illustration of the vampire's and especially the Cullens' status as prime postmodern creatures.

Furthermore, role-playing and identity change are appropriately linked to the vampire's literally cool skin, which references its status as 'the cold one'. In bright sunlight, the skin begins to glitter and sparkle "like diamonds" (*Twilight*). In order to hide this characteristic, which would, more than any other, disclose their 'true' selves, the Cullens have invented an elaborate scheme for avoiding human society during the rare sunny days in Forks. Accordingly, it is their literal coolness which induces them to ever more sophisticated role-playing in the best postmodern manner. At the same time, the vampires also construct their own myth. When Bella bewilderedly asks about the traditional vampire legends, such as sleeping in coffins, dissolving in bright sunlight or being repelled by garlic, Edward amusedly reveals that this is part of their disguise. The vampires themselves spread these myths, or, as Lyotard would term it, "meta-narratives" (*Postmodern,* xxiv), in order to both scare as well as distract humans from their actual existence. Thus, *Twilight*'s vampire Edward, more than any other monster, embodies the postmodern credo of identity construction. He unmistakeably portrays how the postmodern being, whether alive or undead, can only subsist by playing roles and changing identities in its every-day life. The cool look is the only style appropriate to this maxim.

When Beugnet hence suggests that the contemporary cool vampire displays, "as an aesthetic phenomenon, the alliance of the destructive and the creative" (86), one feels reminded of Liu's "new *sublime* of 'destruction'" (*Laws*, 325, italics in the original). This is in fact a destructive creation, evocatively termed "destructivity" (*Laws*, 331). Destructivity is one of the central *Laws of Cool* and serves as a major way for cool to "at once mime[…] and critique[…] knowledge work" (327). Similar to the vampire, who employs a subversive reproductive strategy by destroying the human and correspondingly creating the immortal via the infusion of its poison, cool works in a paradoxical, both destructive and creative manner. Just like the vampire prospers and disseminates by infusing its venom into the human body, works of art representative of Liu's destructivity simulate the method of PC viruses and (at least pretend to) infect the audience's processors. Thus, the vampire exerts the new sublime by metaphorically engaging in what Liu has termed "viral aesthetics" (*Laws*, 327), exemplified by computer programmes which simulate the working of viruses. Vampirism, similar to what Liu promotes as new, postmodern cool, infiltrates contemporary culture with "disturbance, chaos, play, transformation" (*Laws*, 370)

and spreads virus-like by recruiting ever more numbers of infected ones. Hence, it is paradoxically expressive of the dominant order, i.e. capitalist, global consumer culture, and simultaneously works as a major subversive force, which the postmodern craze for deconstruction symbolises. In that respect, Edward might be treated as indicative of how "[c]ool has mutated from […] a form of rebellion against the conformity of industrial capitalism […] [to] a mechanism for coping with the competitive pressure of post-industrial consumer capitalism" (Pountain and Robins 28).

Above all, Edward's outward display of cool is perceptible in his clothing, which constitutes a noticeable contrast to former conventions for depicting a vampire. Edward's clothes principally reflect the figure's changed status as a postmodern metaphor. Meyer explains the principle behind her vampires' fashion style in the following way: "There were people who said: 'Well, they need leather and black and chokers and they're vampires.' And Catherine [Hardwicke, the director] said: 'No, we want ice'. It was perfect." (Meyer n.p.). Equally, the film's costume designer, Wendy Chuck, intended to dress the characters as "rock stars" ("Twilight", n.p.) rather than half-rotten immortals. Generally, contemporary Byronic heroes and vampires are often depicted as rock stars, which highlights their status as prime representatives of postmodern coolness.[108] *Twilight*'s vampires, however, elevate the cool rock star aesthetic to a new level, because the leitmotif for their attire is to resemble an "Arctic wolf" ("Twilight", n.p.) in terms of colour and fabric. Accordingly, their clothing is dominated by cold colours like grey, white, silver, black and steel blue. Hence, Edward's look is illustrative of his cool, detached posture and evokes his status as one of the "cold ones" (*Twilight*).[109] To a large extent, his coolness is created by way of his clothing and analogically extended to the general attitude with which he meets both other vampires and mortals. In accordance with Ulf Poschardt, one could thus argue that the *Twilight* vampires' icy look makes obvious "daß [sic] eine 'coole' Lebenspraxis herausgefordert wird durch die Kälte im symbolischen wie im realen Sinn" (11).[110]

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[108] Cf. Stein and her analysis of *Angel* (1999-2004), *The Vampire Lestat* (1985) and *The Crow* (1994). Stein argues that the protagonist of the latter "has the aristocratic charisma of the nineteenth-century Byronic hero with an overlay of 1990s Goth-rock chic" so that he comes to represent the "embodiment of cool" (Stein, *Byronic*, 108). This contestation can equally be applied to *Twilight*'s Edward.

[109] While the term "cold one" is never actively attributed to the vampires in the film, it is the term Bella comes across when, appropriately, googling the vampire legend. The web, and especially Internet search engines, spread and suck out information in a similar way to the vampire and hence provide the accordant viral aesthetics proposed by Liu. Coldness and all its connotations stand in stark contrast to the heat represented by the Quileute, the Native American tribe to which Edward's rival Jacob Black belongs. The Quileute's temper(ature) is invariably feverish. While neither they nor the Cullens are cast as utterly bad (the villains being the blood-sucking, nomadic vampires), the audience's sympathy is directed to rest with the cool vampires rather than the heated Quileute.

[110] The whole movie is shot with a special filter, so that everything appears rather gloomy and bleak. This highlights the coldness spread by the Cullens. In more general terms, the film's camera work ties

Importantly in this context, it has to be noted that the vampires' clothing is devoid of its first and foremost function, namely to protect the body from cold and to keep the wearer warm. As the audience is constantly confronted with Edward's cold skin and his ability to remain untouched by extreme temperature swings, they are concurrently reminded of the merely ornamental function of his clothes. Hence, his outfit loses most of its practicability, so that the only remaining function, that of making Edward appear handsome and cool, becomes highlighted. When attributed to the vampire, clothes lose all connotations of warmth, for which they are valued and used by humans, and become efficient means for further "cooling" the already dead, cold wearer. Consequently, special attention is drawn to the vampires' style, as it has no practical purpose and is nothing but an extravagant and excessive ornament. Contrary to any need, Edward appears to attach major importance to the way he dresses.[111] Cool is a central part of his identity, because he apparently craves for cool in a similarly obsessive way as vampires tend to crave for human blood and the sublime moment of feeding. Fashion and style, in other words, are not necessary for warming the cold ones, but prove to be indispensable for them to remain the cool ones. Additionally, the fact that the vampires' clothes are completely cleared of any purpose except to make the wearers appear, simply and solely, cool, references how cool is conceived of as a style rather than content. Liu elucidates that what is cool tends "to be flaunted in ways which exceed the strict bounds of rational content" (*Laws*, 195) so that "its content is useless" (*Laws*, 195). Free of any intrinsic function, cool hence succeeds in "committing acts of destruction against […] the content, form, or control of information" (8). This results, paradoxically, in the creation of what Liu terms the "Apatheia of Information" (*Laws*, 234) or the already mentioned "ethos of the unknown" (*Laws*, 9) central to today's laws of cool.

With regards to Edward's cool clothes, it also has to be noted that they, together with his hairdo and general carriage, consistently emphasise his status as a teenager. In popular imagination, cool belongs to the young, rich and beautiful, and Edward epitomises all of them. Due to his immortality, he will always remain a teenager and thus one of the prime perpetuators and creators of cool. Daniel Harris argues that cool as worshipped by teen users "fetishizes all of the appurtenances of high technology, the twenty-first-century gizmos that its would-be raga-muffins are

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in with the influence vampire figures tend to have on the shooting style. Beugnet for instance argues that in contemporary cinematic vampire narratives, "the *mise-en-scène* and the camera work concur to destabilise the perception of familiar environments, as if the bodies of the films themselves were progressively contaminated with the presence of radical Otherness" (81, italics in the original). On another level, the filter is employed to create the desired effect of a typically Gothic, bleak and slightly uncanny atmosphere, to which the surroundings (moors, giant trees, fog) vitally contribute.

[111] Otherwise, he would still dress the way he used to when he died and became a vampire, which was in 1918.

constantly pulling out of their backpacks: cell phones, Motorola pagers, and Pioneer Compact Disc Players" (42).[112] Suitably, the coolest sentences Edward utters include references to these and similar technological gadgets. For instance, when Bella asks him how he was able to react superhumanly fast during her car accident, he tries to keep his secret by lying to her: "It was an adrenalin rush. It's very common, you can google it" (*Twilight*). Apart from the forefront irony of this statement, an almost one-hundred-year old vampire talking techno-slang and advising a teenager to use an Internet search engine, Edward's casual remark highlights how cool vitally relies on high technology.

Accordingly, each member of the Cullen family seems to be not only perfectly equipped for the hunt after human prey, but even more so for the cool hunt, i.e. "[t]he act of discovering what's cool" (Gladwell ch.1). Their apparent predilection for fast cars, designer furniture and technological gadgets exposes them as prime participants in "the chase of the elusive prey" (Gladwell ch.1). Again, this appears to be intrinsically linked to their immortality. Being a vampire highlights the figuratively immortal youthfulness cool feeds on. At the same time, the Cullens' old age seems to endow them with the wisdom of experience necessary for cool's obligatory detached posture, which cannot be disturbed by the trivial calamities of every-day life. These three components, the vampire's evocative status as the "cold ones", their cool, adolescent way of dressing and the accordant posture they tend to adopt with regards to the mortals' outbursts of passion, are all combined to produce the prevalent and immensely popular image of the cool vampire. This figure thus becomes representative of postmodern aesthetics. In accordance with the arguments outlined above, the notions of cool perpetuated by Edward merely seem to enforce certain characteristics already inherent in his status as a (metaphorical) vampire, such as the undermining of dominant discourses and the blurring of apparently fixed boundaries.

Additionally, Edward's representation of today's aesthetics is further enhanced by Bella's obsessive longing for him. She wants to possess him (physically), and, as the alleged only possibility to do so, obtain the status of a 'cold one' herself. Her craze for vampirism can easily be translated into a craze for cool, which "almost everyone wants to get […] anywhere he or she can find it" (Roach, *It*, 4). Accordingly, Bella would not mind receiving the literally cold kiss by someone else than her lover. Judging by her clothes, she seems to approach this goal, which

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[112] The items Harris enumerates reveal the datedness of his 1999 article, as today's "raga-muffins" would rather be pulling i-pods and blackberries out of their laptop bags. This also makes blatantly obvious how quickly cool changes. As Pountain and Robins argue, young people have always been "absorbing, redefining and appearing to reject their parents' notion of Cool" (7). The hunt for cool appears to be a high-speed race.

mirrors the development of the whole movie as a long-drawn out approach to the eventual almost-conversion at the end. Initially, Bella's style resembles that of a typical teenaged school-girl. However, her preferred colours change perceptibly the more she becomes acquainted with the Cullens and, by analogy, the stronger her wish for being one of the cold/cool ones becomes. In the course of the film, Bella's clothes adopt the colour scheme displayed by the vampires, so that she eventually primarily dresses in blue.[113] This can be read as Bella becoming part of the in-group, of the gang which the gorgeous, successful and rich Cullens, especially in the high school environment, represent. They are the cool kids, unapproachable and untouchable for the literally common mortals, as Bella's friend Jessica knows. "Apparently, no one here is good enough for him […] Anyway, don't waste your time" (*Twilight*), she says when Bella admiringly stares at Edward and his well-groomed, chic siblings. Like those in possession of cool, the vampires choose not to mingle with their fellow pupils in order not to endanger their common secret as well as the still irresistible humans. Implicitly, their aloofness from the general high school community can be read as cool, which is not by chance defined as the "particular combination of three core personality traits, namely narcissism, ironic detachment and hedonism" (Pountain and Robins 26). Cool is indeed the reaction Bella is confronted with upon first meeting Edward during the biology lesson. He refuses to talk to her, avoids her imploring eyes and moves his chair as far away from hers as possible. The reason for this cool attitude, with which Bella is initially confronted, however, lies in Edward's vampirism. Again, this unavoidably endows him with a fundamentally cool posture.

Coming closer to her declared goal, namely joining the cold ones, is also illustrated when Bella for the first time pays a visit to the Cullens' mansion and literally approaches the home and heart of cool. Upon first entering Edward's room, she exclaims in awe: "You realize how cool this is?" (*Twilight*).[114] The "cool" room in fact demonstrates that the vampire's desire is doomed to remain cold: Edward's otherwise perfectly equipped bedroom lacks, ironically, a bed. Allegedly, this is because vampires do not sleep, but also, by extension, because they do not sleep with mortals. Their way of reproduction, as already described further above, is noticeably asexual. Accordingly, the love between Bella and Edward, despite the latent striving for the eventual sublime union, has to remain devoid of physical warmth and fervour. Cuddling with her cold-skinned lover, the utmost form of

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[113] Wendy Chuck, the film's costume designer, acknowledges that this was a consciously employed technique when dressing Bella ("Twilight").

[114] This comment did not make it to the final version, because the scene was considerably shortened. With Bella's exclamation referring to Edward's bedroom missing the essential bed, this might again be read as indicative of the movie's conservative tone.

intimacy possible without ending up dead, freezes rather than warms Bella. As a convenient side effect, it thus immediately cools off any rising infatuation. Coming closer to Edward literally means coming closer to and simultaneously becoming cool. This is also illustrated when he and Bella present themselves as a couple for the first time. They drive up their high school's alley in Edward's stylish sports car, whose toned windows reveal a dressed-to-kill vampire with dark sunglasses, despite the noticeable absence of sunshine. After coming to a halt with screeching tires, he nonchalantly opens the door for his lover. When she worriedly remarks that all the other pupils are staring at them, he casually retorts: "Not that guy. He just looked" (*Twilight*). What Edward perfectly illustrates in this scene is that coolness "must appear to be exercised effortlessly or not at all" (Roach, *It*, 5). Indeed, Edward only provides the *appearance* of nonchalance: his wearing of sunglasses alone firmly establishes him as one worrying about and consciously contriving cool. Since he can never appear in public when sunrays would necessitate dark glasses, his display of the latter must accordingly be interpreted as part of a deliberately generated cool carriage. Thus, the whole situation, representing their first appearance as a couple, brings to the forefront why Bella desires Edward: it is because of his coolness and her wish to partake in this "new virtue" (Pountain and Robins 24).

This desire displayed by Bella is equally expressed by the audience she is intended to represent. *Twilight* has rapidly accumulated a huge fan base which, above all, centres on the look of the Cullens.[115] The primarily teenaged fans seemingly attempt to attain the vampires' coolness by imitating their outfits and hairdo. The movie deliberately caters for its audience, as the choice of cool music and the inclusion of the accordant video clips in the DVD fan edition suggest.[116] Additionally, there are several key scenes, especially the one in which the Cullens play vampire baseball, "the American pastime" (*Twilight*), which are shot in the typical style of a music video. Visually, the baseball scene is dominated by the approaching thunderstorm, accordant lightening and an overcast sky. This traditional scenery is counteracted by its background music, a song by the US pop band *Muse*. This adds speed to the powerful performance of the players, dressed in

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[115] With regards to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and internet fandom, Josh Stenger writes that its "online reception occasioned a unique and enlightening collision of fandom, consumption and internet culture" (27). Fan communities based on the Internet "extend[…] a program well beyond its initial network run" (26). The argument might well be applied to the *Twilight* novel series, whose success and eventual exploitation as a movie is largely connected to the cult created by active fan (slashers). During the Summit Pictures Comic Convention in Los Angeles, where director and actors granted a first preview of some scenes, the fans openly expressed their excitement with *Twilight* in the appropriate exclamative: "I loved it, it was so cool!", a fan says ("The Comic-Con Phenomenon").

[116] The soundtrack includes, among others, songs by Linkin Park, Paramore and Robert Pattinson himself. The music videos of all these songs are included in the DVD fan edition.

tight, brand-marked sports gear. Even more importantly, it turns the scene into a quintessentially cool one. Major care seems to be taken to construct *Twilight* as a cult movie among its teenage audience. As a certainly welcome side effect, this transforms the accompanying, average merchandise into the "big-ticket items" (Harris 42) every cool hunter pines for. As Pountain and Robins explicate, "[c]ool is not something that inheres in these artefacts themselves, but rather in people's attitude to them" (18). In the case of *Twilight*, it appears to be the coolness of the vampire which makes ordinary T-Shirts and Barbie dolls cool and thus marketable.

The marketing of the *Twilight* characters as carriers of cool highlights the traditional identification of vampirism with capitalism, which, eventually, brings us back to the vampire's closeness to excess. As already suggested by Karl Marx[117], one can link the figure of the vampire to "greed and, increasingly, as we move in time, to international politics and the advent of global capitalism" (Beugnet 83). The identification of the vampire with capitalism or, in more general terms, money is one which suggests itself strongly in *Twilight*. The Cullens are extremely rich, evidenced by their expensive sports cars, their mansion and their extravagant designer clothing. Furthermore, they represent a precious, craved for commodity themselves: their glittering skin constructs them as precious gems, "like diamonds" (*Twilight*). Thus, Edward embodies capitalist values: apart from his generally good looks, it is his glittering, diamond-like skin which lures his victims, similar to the way people are lured by the magnetic force of money. The one that exerts this lure, be it the vampire or money, ultimately creates destruction, suffering and death, at least in Marx's vision. Similarly to money, Edward is both immensely attractive and eventually fatal. He is treated and "thinks of himself as a monster, but actually he's very beautiful" (n.p.), as Pattinson rightly notes. Money, just like the vampire, is dangerous and yet irresistible, both terrifying and alluring, both pleasurable and painful. These notions perfectly represent all the necessary predicaments for a sublime moment. Accordingly, Lyotard argues that "[t]here is something of the sublime in capitalist economy" ("Avant-Garde", 105).[118] Both money, as embodied by the contemporary vampire, and the sublime constitute much sought-after commodities. This can also be applied to the notion of cool: Bella's character illustrates that everyone craves for it, but few do in fact obtain it. Equally, however, all of these notions are united by the cold charm they exude. None of them promises unadulterated pleasure, but involves

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[117] In *Capital*, Marx famously wrote that "[c]apital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour" (quoted in Gelder 17). The identification of the vampire figure with money is connected to the fact that both of them travel invisibly and are able to multiply endlessly at will (Beugnet 83). Furthermore, most vampires, such as Count Dracula, are depicted as wealthy. This trope can still be found today, as the case of the Cullens illustrates.

[118] For a closer account of Lyotard's identification of capitalist economy with the sublime see chapter two of this thesis, which analyses Kathryn Merteuil's closeness to material excess.

concrete or abstract danger. As Freeman explicates: "[T]he marketplace terrifies" (59) and so do the sublime and the vampire. [119]

Above all, Lyotard's unusual identification of the sublime with capitalism is feasible in relation to excess and the complete loss of control. What unites capitalist consumer society with both the sublime and the contemporary cool vampire is the striving for material, moral and mental excess. Thomas Garza hence claims that "[w]ith a recession and war, the conflict has indeed seemed to turn inward, as we question our fiscal, political and moral status. 'Have we been too excessive? Do we need to be more restrained?'" (quoted in La Ferla 4). Equally, however, the closeness of the vampire to capitalist excess and its accordant depiction as a comfortable consumerist might rather suggest the opposite. The vampire can also embody a current desire for excess and an overcoming of former restraints. With regards to *Twilight*, the preceding analysis has shown that this appears to be much more to the point than Garza's claim. Bella's ultimate desire for "it", coming to represent "what I want" (*Twilight*), is a wish to overcome the physical, material and mental restraints imposed on her by her mortality. With Bella as the one making the audience think "'That's me!'" (Hardwicke n.p.), the contemporary vampire might best be understood as embodying society's wish for excess. In terms of aesthetics, this is "a desire for the sublime" (Freeman 31). Following its decoding in the text, namely as the ever-absent conversion, it is a wish whose fulfilment, symbolising ultimate loss of control, is both ardently desired and abhorred. The protagonists both long for and desperately try to avoid it. This wish is highly reminiscent of the current craze for cool. Accordingly, the following analysis of the arguably most sublime moment in *Twilight* will reveal that the conversion is both induced by notions of cool as well as imagined in terms of cool aesthetics.

Presenting The Unpresentable: A Glimpse of the Sublime

Due to its constitutive absence from the narrative, the conversion as the supreme sublime moment is one of those "Ideas [sic] of which no presentation is possible" (Lyotard, "Postmodernism", 78). These ideas "impart no knowledge about reality (experience); they also prevent the free union of the faculties which gives rise to the sentiment of the beautiful; and they prevent the formation and stabilization of taste. They can be said to be unpresentable" (Lyotard, "Postmodernism", 78). The

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[119] Suitably, the very last scene, in which Bella vows to pursue her wish, takes place at "Monte Carlo", the motto of the prom. Hence, one might discern casino tables, roulettes and banknotes as decorations. These surroundings accordingly translate Bella's wish for "it" into a more materialistic context, which accentuates the sublime's closeness to the marketplace as proposed by Lyotard. At the same time, the prom theme highlights the presence of the vampire as "the metaphor of a global system where only the powerful can thrive and circulate freely" (Beugnet 83).

vampire's bite is hence not a concrete, graspable event, but, in accordance with the overwhelming force of the sublime, remains un(re)presentable and ungraspable. As Freeman argues, "[t]he sublime attests to this: there is something that cannot be presented" (139). Nevertheless, one also has to recognise that "[i]f the sublime appears to mark a trauma that exceeds language [and re/presentation in general], it simultaneously implies and disables symbolization, and its effect is that we can never relinquish the attempt to find words for some of the unspeakable things that remain unspoken" (Freeman 116). The act of conversion, symbolising transgressions of various kinds, might well be an unspeakable and un(re)presentable one. Yet, its portrayal is nonetheless attempted. This is apparent in the movie's last scene, which offers the audience a glimpse of the unspeakable, while the actual presentation still remains unattainable.

The final scene takes place in the ballet studio where the Cullens rescue Bella from being consumed by James, the nomadic villain-vampire. Although they manage to overwhelm him, Bella is already bitten by the vampire and the venom injected by his fangs begins to disseminate in her body. Edward is faced with the choice to either let the poison and hence the initiated conversion advance, or to suck out the intoxicated blood. The latter option would, however, involve the risk of losing complete control, so that he could accidentally kill his beloved. While Edward contemplates the options, Bella, as I will contest, experiences the onslaught of the sublime, pictured as a complete self-loss. Spread out on the cold floor, her body is given to violent convulsions while she moans and cries in pain. Tellingly, her moaning is difficult to categorise, because the film implies that Bella, despite the pain she is enduring in this scene, is well aware that this could make her one of Edward's kind. Hence, the scene portrays an odd intermingling of pleasure and pain, which Bella experiences simultaneously. Apparently, she undergoes an utter loss of both physical and mental control. Furthermore, the fact that Bella is lying on her back, with her trembling extremities widely spread out and accompanied by deep moans, allows the already mentioned comparison of the conversion to a sexual act. Not only has she been bitten by a male, highly sexualised vampire[120], who intends to revenge himself on his rival. What is more, this scene is enabled by a foregoing flight from her father's house as well as a staged quarrel and break-up with Edward. This makes her figuratively free for a new partner. The fatal bite is preceded by a physical, uneven struggle between her and James, who appears to be rather

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[120] Throughout the movie as well as in this scene, James is wearing tight jeans and an unbuttoned leather jacket, revealing his muscular chest. His status as a "tracker" (*Twilight*), a vampire obsessed with the hunt after humans, might equally be read as expressive of his attitude towards women, his figurative prey.

amused by her acting coy and exclaims: "Too bad he didn't have the strength to turn you" (*Twilight*).[121]

During her initiated almost-conversion, we get to see flashbacks to various scenes from the movie, representing Bella's consciousness. All the scenes are re-presented in a cool, pale blue colouring symbolising relived memories in the mind. They are familiar to the audience and hence seem to constitute mere repetitions from the foregoing movie. The last and longest flashback Bella experiences in both a dreamlike and nightmarish fashion during her struggle with eternal life and death is the famous meadow scene. In this scene, Edward reveals his Byronic dark secret – his vampirism and the fact that he has already killed people – to his lover. This involves explaining to her why he cannot face the sunlight and revealing his before mentioned glittering skin, literally expressive of his cool character. As already pointed out above, his skin is simultaneously cool due to his status as one of the "cold ones" and, indeed, sublime. In a tone of deep desperation countering Bella's fascination with and attraction to the sparkling diamonds, Edward directly acknowledges this: "This is the skin of a killer. I'm a killer. […] I'm the world's most dangerous predator. Everything about me invites you in" (*Twilight*). Similar to the sublime, the vampire's skin is highly attractive and awe-inspiring yet equally dangerous, because it assists in ensnaring and overwhelming his prey.[122]

This is combined with a literal coolness, which, as one could argue, considerably enhances the air of mystery or the "ethos of the unknown" (Liu, *Laws*, 9) which surrounds the skin. Edward's surface is cool because it contributes, more than any other body part, to his mysterious, unfamiliar and ultimately inexplicable nature. This literalises Liu's claim that "[r]elevance, clarity, and utility are not the virtues of cool qua cool except insofar as these traits of efficient information are parodied, misapplied, radicalized, and otherwise used against the grain" (*Laws*, 186). Or, as Burke would have it, "[t]o make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary" (54). The sublime, as has been shown above, is caused by and in turn denotes an "impossibility of knowledge" (Phillips xxii). While this is well applied to Edward's skin, the scene in which it is revealed is, however, far from

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[121] Again, this ties in with the fact that vampire relationships are frequently depicted as sado-masochistic and, even in moments of lovemaking, dangerous. Cf. Burr, 2003; Williamson, 2005; Spaise, 2005.

[122] Interestingly, the discourse surrounding the moment when Edward shows his glittering skin to Bella is one latently employing the language of the sublime. As Meyer variously stated in interviews, the whole novel series started with her dream of a beautiful vampire and a girl in the middle of a meadow. The story of the inspiring dream, referencing the Romantic cult of poetic genius inspired by sudden, dream-like visions of insight, deliberately places the novel in the literal twilight between divine inspiration and profit-driven calculation. Furthermore, the story's origins in an impressive, unforgettable dream reference the suddenness of the sublime, a flash of revelation which one cannot escape or grasp rationally: "It came very suddenly and unexpectedly" (n.p.), Meyer describes the overpowering moment.

a sublime moment. Apart from the metaphorical obscurity of Edward's nature, there is a decisive absence of any kind of terror or threat.[123] After Edward's brief revelation of the sparkling skin, the lovers lay down in the middle of the quiet and sunny meadow in a wood completely devoid of danger. The potential for sublimity opened up by the coolness and deviance of the skin is not played out. Upon first seeing Edward in bright sunlight, surrounded by herbs and flowers, Bella thus appropriately exclaims: "You're beautiful!" (*Twilight*). Sublime, or, in the accordant contemporary exclamation, awesome and hence awe-inspiring, is, however, an utterly different experience.

Interestingly, the meadow scene and its connotations are transformed in Bella's flashback. While all the other scenes relived in her feverish dreams remain unaltered, the very last flashback depicts the meadow scene slightly, yet importantly changed. This time, the meadow is completely covered in snow, partly concealing the lovers. Snow flakes are falling from the cloudy, grey sky, and the whole scene is re-presented in a cold, bluish white. Generally, snow bears connotations of coldness, bleakness and forgetfulness, which testifies to its potential to hide, obscure and visually change the environment. This creates an uncanny, thrilling atmosphere missing in the original scene. In the flashback, the cool lack of information embodied by the skin is extended to the whole scene by the obscuring snow. Thus, it is via coolness and its etymological roots in coldness that a merely beautiful moment is translated and, as one might have it, elevated to a sublime one.

Coldness, as Ulf Poschardt explicates, is "ebenso klar definiert wie negativ besetzt" (1). It is via films featuring an icy setting that "der Einbruch von Schnee und Eis zum Sinnbild für die Kälte der Gesellschaft [wird]. Die Kälte in der Natur [lässt] anschaulich werden, was zuvor kaum greifbar in den Beziehungen der Menschen als Vernichtungsarbeit aufschien" (1). Similarly to the way in which the translation of pure coldness into the more positive coolness elevates the mere destruction into a creative one, so the beautiful meadow and the attraction existing between Bella and Edward are enhanced via the terrifying snow storm in the revision of the original scene. Importantly in this context, snow produces exactly the kind of obscurity lacking in the original meadow scene. Snow spreads a literal white blanket over the landscape and makes certain details invisible, thus rendering the surroundings "dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree" (Burke 55).

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[123] Additionally, the meadow scene would conventionally end in a love scene between Edward and Bella. In accordance with *Twilight*'s promotion as a teenage movie, however, the lovers merely lay down next to one another without touching. Again, this reveals the conservative undercurrent informing the movie, and simultaneously highlights the conspicuous absence of physical intimacy due to its dangerousness. In contrast, the revised meadow scene results from the metaphorical orgasm Bella experiences due to the bite. This contrast evidences how the original scene remains tame, beautiful and contained, while its flashback version is sublime and lays bare the film's powerful subtext.

While the original meadow scene is one of containment and disclosure (Edward presents his "true self"), the flashback version experienced during Bella's almost-conversion references the characteristic air of ultimate unknowability leading to a sublime moment. The thick, noise-absorbing and gaze-diverting snow, eventually burying the lovers underneath, transports all "kinds of absence, what Burke calls privation, [which] are Sublime – vacuity, darkness, solitude, silence" (Phillips xxii).

Interestingly, the passionate conversion as well as the meeting of the lovers and their ardent avowals of love are traditionally imagined as hot or warm emotional moments. They tend to be represented by fire, sunlight and golden colours.[124] Here, however, the conversion becomes associated with snow rather than fire. Assumedly, the latter could be much rather expected to represent Bella's feverish convulsions, since pain, similarly to love, is imagined as burning like fire: "Als 'hitzig' und 'feurig' empfunden, erscheint das körperliche wie geistige Verschmelzen zweier Menschen als das Andere zur gesellschaftlichen Funktionalität, zu Kälte, Seelenlosigkeit und Anonymität" (Poschardt 179). In the flashback scene, however, the moment of love, in the intermingling of both the romantic meadow scene and the pseudo-conversion symbolising the lover's eternal union, is enhanced by the snow. Paradoxically, it is because of its connection to cool/coldness that their passion figures as truly sublime. This suggests that the revised meadow scene, induced and representative of the sublime feelings Bella is experiencing during her almost-conversion, is indeed informed by contemporary notions of cool. Generally, it demonstrates how the sublime in its postmodern varitey is intrinsically linked to cool aesthetics, both literally and via its accordant attitude. The coolness embodied by the snow bears exactly those characteristics vitally important for the production of the sublime. It is paradoxically both thrilling and terrifying, both comforting and suffocating. It denotes danger, but also romance, whiteness as purity and whiteness as unknowability. Cool snow could hence be regarded as a "device for creating associations and emotional responses out of the combination of unlike words and images" ("Writing", 223), which is how Rice defines the workings of cool. These responses, I argue, are best understood as the "delightful horror" (Burke 67) produced by the sublime.

As the most obvious sublime moment in the movie, the conversion is what the characters latently strive for. When Edward seems to offer the much sought-after bite during their dance at the final prom, but in the end modifies it into a kiss on Bella's neck, Bella promises both her and the disappointed, yet simultaneously relieved audience to continue struggling for it: "I won't give in. I know what I want"

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[124] Cf. Kövecses, 1986, who delineates the most frequent and pervasive metaphors in which love is popularly imagined.

(*Twilight*). This is exactly the kind of language employed by those hunting after cool. The *Laws of Cool* "now make it mandatory to be cool or at least – trained by cool consumer cultures that really are a lifelong, parallel education system […] – to *aspire* to be cool" (Liu 293, *Laws*, original emphasis). Bella wants Edward, who both embodies and promises her sublime conversion, in which all her fears and desires culminate. The obsessive hunt after it references the implicitly unattainable nature of the sublime. The bite is immensely desirable, yet at the same time manifests "a certain reserve and distance" (Freeman 118). This unavailability makes it representative of the sublime, which once again displays its power to "exceed all presentation" (Lyotard, "Postmodernism", 81).

Conclusion, Or: Ruling The Twilight

The vampire's ultimate bite, alluded to by the almost-conversion Bella has to undergo, depicts how the Romantic sublime in *Twilight* is provoked as well as conceived of via notions of contemporary cool. Apparently, the Byronic hero in combination with the figure of the vampire portrays an unsurpassed flexibility as a metaphor. Its contemporary versions well embody postindustrial society and its accordant values. Overtly, the text repudiates both Edward's potentially repellent Byronic traits as well as its implicit potential for an utter loss of control, the prerequisite for a genuine sublime. An alternative reading, however, unearths how the Byronic vampire as embodied by Edward principally lends itself to a combination with twenty-first-century cool. Both share connotations of material and mental transgression, closeness to excess and the display of a "sum of ambiguities and contradictions" (Beugnet 86). Hence, the potential of embodying "many of the values of postmodernism" (Fry 277) inherent in the Byronic hero and that of being "a metaphor for the emergence of a global system" (Beugnet 83) perceptible in the vampire can only be successfully played out in the actual narrative via the display of cool, the dominant postmodern aesthetic. Consequently, the attribution of coolness to the vampire Edward as well as the movie's stylisation according to generally-condoned laws of cool can account for the tremendous contemporary appeal of the traditional figure.

Overall, the chapter has thus demonstrated that within the constraints of a (popular) text, the figure of the vampire works in a similar way like the sublime and cool's viral aesthetics. It undermines the overt narrative from within and disseminates its subversion similar to the way the poison spreads in the victim's infected body. Destroying the original fabric in order to create a new, better and

immortal being, the vampire assists to uncover the genuine sublime in *Twilight*'s highly deviant subtext. In accordance with the "ethos of the unknown" (Liu, *Laws*, 9) spread by contemporary cool, the postmodern sublime remains unknown and "unpresentable" (Lyotard, "Postmodernism", 78) to the last. What one might deduce from the glimpses offered of the eventual act, however, suggests that the sublime is not only provoked by the cool character of Edward, but is primarily imagined in terms of cool aesthetics, despite its traditional coding as passionate and feverous. It is the literally cool figure of the Byronic vampire, who via his "cold charms" (La Ferla 4) succeeds in creating, by an act of destruction, the true postmodern sublime. Nina Auerbach, one of the leading theorists of metaphorical vampirism, evocatively argues that "every age embraces the vampire it needs" (145). As *Twilight*'s cult status and Edward's unparalleled popularity suggest, the age of postmodernism direly needs a cool one.

4.   COOL *AS FOLK*:
CLUB BABYLON AND THE FABULOUSNESS OF THE SUBLIME

The ideas of the sublime and
the beautiful stand on foundations so
different that it is hard, I had almost said
impossible, to think of reconciling them
in the same subject.

(Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*)

I just saw the face of God.
His name is Brian Kinney.

(*Queer as Folk*[125], "Episode 101")

So it's cool they're gay and all, but…

(A viewer about *Queer as Folk*)[126]

"She thinks you're a lesbian!" ("Episode 106"), Justin warns his best friend Daphne when she is asked out for a soda by a visitor at the arts gallery of the local community centre. Daphne, one of the few heterosexual characters of the Showtime series *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), not only wholeheartedly ignores his objection, but counters it competently: "Well, can't I be with the cool people too?!" ("Episode 106"), she retorts, before leaving for drinks with a member of the apparent in-crowd. Not only does this brief scene involve a remarkable reversal of conventional notions of normality and deviance, but it also reflects, as I will argue, one of the central assets of the series: coolness, which *Queer as Folk* depicts as utterly inextricable from queerness. Rather than the marginal figure Daphne, however, it is the ambiguous, fluctuating character of Brian Kinney, Pittsburgh's prime heart breaker, which functions as the foremost arbitrator of cool.

Originating in the eponymous British Channel Four series set in Manchester's Canal Street, the US-American *Queer as Folk* traces the life of a group of gay friends in Pittsburgh. The plot evolves around Brian, Michel, Justin, Ted and Emmett and their search for sex, love and friendship, which takes us through Pittsburgh's dance clubs, darkrooms and baths. The series starts with Brian, a twenty-nine-year-old advertising executive, chatting up the seventeen-year-old Justin on his first night out on Liberty Avenue. In the very same night, Brian and Lindsay's baby, conceived via artificial fertilisation, is born. Lindsay's girlfriend's

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[125] The title *Queer As Folk* derives from the old Yorkshire proverb "There is nought as queer as folk", meaning that people in general can be quite strange sometimes. Cf. Peeren 59-60.
[126] This quote is taken from the discussion board on <http://www.hulu.com/queer-as-folk>, accessed 3 Nov. 2009. Appropriately, the posting continues by criticising heavily the sexual excess, almost paedophilia and unquestioned embrace of the gay scene's youth cult depicted in *Queer as Folk.*

comment that they "each had an infant tonight" ("Episode 101") proves to be wistfully true, as Justin will soon become a constant in Brian's life. *Queer as Folk*, through its five seasons, tackles such diverse issues as HIV-positive partnership, child raising, nuclear versus alternative families, homophobia and gay bashing, generational conflicts and queer politics. The plot developing around Brian, however, chiefly focuses on his unapologetic promiscuity, his cynical, detached attitude, with which he counters the more assimilated characters of the series, as well as his growing emotional attachment to Justin. Judging by the immense popularity of his character among both gay and straight audiences[127], the appeal of the series might well be sought and found in Brian's coolness.

Apart from arguing that Brian, both as a professional PR agent and a private person, sells queer as cool, I further propose that this conflation of coolness and queerness results in a particularly effective version of postmodern sublimity. As a categorical Byronic hero, Brian exudes the typical ambiguous appeal, which, in equal measures, attracts and repels his audience as well as the characters he interacts with. Furthermore, however, these contradictions also manifest themselves in terms of his gender and sexuality, which he performs in novel and hybrid ways. The paradox that underlies his figure becomes blatant with regards to the issue of desire and its eventual unappeasability. Brian displays excessive desire as well as "desire for excess" (Freeman 16) in a variety of areas. As this is invariably informed by infinity and inherent paradox (Brian desires desire), it serves as a prime precondition for the production of the sublime. Above all, it is in the gay club Babylon where Brian can promote as well as project desire, which, due to its ungraspable and hence overwhelming nature, provokes a sentiment of "delightful horror" (Burke 67). In accordance with the fact that the promotion of desire is only conceivable via Brian's consistently cool attitude and looks, the resulting effect is presented in terms of high-tech cool. My analysis will thus connect the "juxtapositions, counterpoints, polyrhythms" (Buckland 14) customarily at work on the queer dance floor with the fundamentally cool Byronic figure of Brian, who finds his natural territory in the Babylon. Before I will analyse the sublime as created by Kinney, however, let us search for the Byron in Brian.

The Byron in Brian

"King of the World!" (*Queer as Folk UK*), Stuart, Brian's British equivalent, shouts from the top of the hospital tower were his son Alfred has just been born. His

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[127] Brian Kinney has recently been voted the most popular of the "25 Top Gay TV Characters". Cf. <http://www.afterelton.com/people/2007/11/top25gayTVcharacters?page=0%2C0>. Accessed 2 Nov. 2009.

American successor does not fall short to appropriate a similarly emotive quote for voicing his superiority over common mortals: "Come on, Mikey, let's fly" ("Episode 101"), he whispers, and then yells down into the seemingly tiny streets of Pittsburgh below him: "I'll show you the world!" ("Episode 101"). As Michael's resigned comment ("Why am I always Lois Lane?") suggests, Brian employs the rhetoric well as the pose of Superman. It might well be this scene which leads Sally Munt to the conclusion that Brian represents a sort of "super-spunky vaguely Nietzschean hero" (531), an Übermensch in a glossy guise[128], or, as Russell T. Davies, the series' creator and script writer, terms it, "an A-Gay" (12). Yet, Brian is far from easily emulated and sympathised with. In contrast to the apparent predecessor Superman, his incessant (sense of) superiority is not counteracted with good deeds and morally upright behaviour. Brian might well happen to, time and again, save virtues-in-distress from their disagreeable condition, as he did with his teenage lover Justin, but in totally different ways than the superheroes he likes to cite. His moral code is easily defined and appears rather restricted ("I don't believe in love. I believe in fucking"), his cynicism is blatant and never fails to stun the opponent (as for instance his description of the gay and lesbian community centre as a "safe haven for fags who can't get laid") and he depicts an unbearably heightened sense of individuality ("Just because I fuck guys does not mean I'm part of some community, and it doesn't mean I have anything in common with someone else who does").[129]

Rather than evoking the unfailing good and brave Superman, he might have declared himself as the carefully styled, cool version of Manfred, who incessantly asserts his vain superiority, preferably on top of the Alps: "For if beings, of whom I was one, – / Hating to be so, – cross'd me in my path / I felt degraded back to them, / And was all clay again […]" (*Manfred* 2.2.76-79). His self-assured soliloquy on the mountain top is emblematic of his firmly grounded sense of superiority over the less gifted, and, in Brian's case, less sexually attractive. Indeed, the Byronic hero appears to be "completely contemptuous of humankind, deeming them inferior and puny in all respects" (*Byronic*, 139), as Atara Stein argues. Brian's apparent affinity to heights is symbolic of this categorical proud arrogance and not only foregrounded in the above quoted scene on top of the hospital tower. Much more so, it is Brian's loft, which over the course of the series becomes inextricably entangled with and contributes vitally to his character[130], that serves as a modern mirror image of

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[128] Indeed, it has often been proposed that Nietzsche's concept of the Übermensch served as a model for the later comic hero Superman.

[129] The first of these quotes is taken from "Episode 102", the other two from "Episode 106".

[130] In season five, Brian plans to sell his loft and move to a mansion outside of Pittsburgh in order to establish a cosy home with his soon-to-be husband Justin. The empty loft, uncannily alien and almost eerie, symbolises that the decision to marry and become domestic not only runs completely counter to

Manfred's castle "amongst the Higher Alps" (*Manfred* 1.1). Connected to this is the fact that, again similar to Manfred, Brian prefers night over day and darkness over light. As most of his activity, apart from his job, takes place at night, or in the enhanced version, his dance club's back rooms, he appears to be subjected to the same spell that causes Manfred's unrest:

> Though thy slumber may be deep /
> Yet thy spirits shall not sleep
> […]
> And to thee shall Night deny
> All the quiet of her sky;
> […]
> Nor to slumber, nor to die,
> Shall be in thy destiny;
> (*Manfred* 1.1.203-255)

What Byron's original heroes seek in the solitude of the dark night and the sublimity of the rocky and awe-inspiring Alps, Brian finds in the moral as well as literal isolation of Liberty Avenue's dark rooms and the literal vastness of his loft high above the roofs of Pittsburgh. Drop-dead handsome and almost invariably dressed in black like most contemporary Byronic characters, he exerts "the irresistible and dangerous sex appeal of the Byronic hero-villain" (Stein, *Byronic*, 25). Via his looks and attitude, he perfectly portrays the almost stereotypically ironic, cynical, sexy and gloomy rebel, who appropriates the dark night as his natural environment. With regards to the British forerunner, David Alderson hence refers to Brian as "a figure who verges on, but never quite embodies, the *in*human" (79, original emphasis). Through his "refusal to be a 'good' citizen" (Alderson 86) as well as his "egotistical and scandalous sexual assertiveness" (Alderson 86), Brian indeed comes close to being understood as a villain rather than an epic hero.

In accordance with Alderson's evocation of the inhuman, Brian could thus be read as a monster, like the traditional vampire. Apart from his predominantly nocturnal activities, there seems to be another parallel to the figure of the vampire, namely Brian's obsession with aging, death and physical deterioration. In contrast to *Twilight*'s vampire Edward, he is not endowed with superhuman powers and, by consequence, immortality, yet he strongly desires to be so. The issues of death and ageing resonate deeply with him: his newborn son is referred to as a "little time clock" ("Episode 101"), reminding him that he is getting "older by the minute, by the second" ("Episode 101"). Furthermore, he identifies himself with Peter Pan, while his friend Lindsay is understood as playing the part of Wendy. At the end of the series, Brian appears to have gained at least metaphorical immortality, as Michael equates

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Brian's former character conceptualisation, but also foreshadows that his plan will eventually fail to work out.

his persona with eternal youthfulness.[131] Beyond their affinity to night as well as their embodiment of metaphorical and/or literal immortality, Brian and the figure of the vampire are most overtly united by the deviant act they are both frequently depicted to engage in. Similar to the vampire's, Brian's deviance from (hetero)norms and his status as the other in several respects appear to be inextricable from his performance of acts of sucking.[132] Just as the figure of the vampire, particularly the Byronic one, is employed as a "metaphor for social anarchy and sexual freedom, the ultimate powerful Other" (Smith 53), Brian equally appears to be a "sexually free, societally free, powerful being[…] who live[s] life to the fullest" (Smith 53).

The manifold parallels between Edward, the vampire with a moral conscience, and Brian, a gay man with a provocative way of asserting his sexuality[133], serve to emphasise the Byronic character's double outsiderdom. While his homosexuality is certainly not an issue of exclusion within the gay world of *Queer as Folk,* Brian downrightly refuses to participate in what other characters promote as community and a morally responsible life-style. He might thus well be described as "the quintessential Byronic outsider, unable to fit into either of the two societies with whom he interacts" (Stein, *Byronic*, 145). His behaviour references the categorical social aloofness of the traditional Byronic hero, who intimates: "I said, with men, and with the thoughts of men, / I held but slight communion; but instead / My joy was in the Wilderness […]" (*Manfred* 2.2.60-62). Brian is not only portrayed as completely unapologetic about his sexual activities, but, potentially much more problematic for his audience, as amoral, irresponsible, and aware of his aloofness from what the series depicts as the queer masses. "My only responsibility", he asserts, "is to myself. I don't owe anybody a thing" ("Episode 102"). Apart from his social detachment, he depicts the stereotypical qualities of the "the vicious, traumatized, brutal sex-maniac" (154), as Ralph Poole contests. This part of his personality allies him with the traditional depiction of the "bad gay boy" who behaves "according to a script derived from horror, vampire, and monster genres" (Poole 154). In other words, Brian's oftentimes incomprehensible, uncannily reckless

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[131] See this chapter's section "Feeling One's Wings" for a closer analysis of this particular scene and the issue of youthfulness.

[132] Tellingly, the Byronic vampire Armand's exclamation in *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) that "We must be powerful, beautiful, and without regret" might well serve as Brian's motto. In a similar manner, he tells Justin to "[h]ave more money, more power, more sex" ("Episode 402"), which comes close to the vampire's amoral ideology. The queer potential of vampire figures, especially in their (post)modern versions, has variously been commented on. Stein for instance notes that "[i]n an age of AIDS and homophobia […], the vampires represent both the forbidden glamour of homoeroticism and the absolute taboo of sharing blood" (*Byronic*, 99). For a closer analysis, see chapter three of this thesis.

[133] In that respect, *Queer as Folk* as oftentimes been described as setting new standards, for better or for worse, in the depiction of gay (rather than, however, lesbian) characters in mainstream television (cf. Beirne, 2006). The figure of the hitherto prevalent "cute, funny and asexual altruist" (Poole 154) appears to be replaced by a character who is defined by his sexual desire, irrespective of whom this desire is directed to.

behaviour, which does not differentiate between his friends and enemies, never fails to produce a shiver. He is, most overtly, one that is "[m]ad – bad – and dangerous to know" (Lamb, quoted in Rogers 298).

Interestingly, the traditional closeness of the Byronic hero to sin, criminality and danger is exemplified by the frequent depiction of Brian in what seems to be his natural environment, a club tellingly called Babylon, whose proprietor he eventually becomes. Babylon, which connotes sin, sex, hedonism, narcissism, guilt and immorality, not only epitomises Brian's deviant, menacing, highly ambiguous, yet unavoidably appealing personality, which is oftentimes enhanced by illegal and potentially dangerous substances, including ecstasy and poppers. Even more significantly, the club also constitutes the location where Brian acquires additional fodder for his stereotypical dark, Byronic secret. What happens in Babylon and its back rooms stays in Babylon, not least because the literal darkness makes it impossible for both the participants and the audience to entangle what exactly occurred to whom. Interestingly, Manfred's insurmountable feelings of guilt also stem from, assumedly, a non-heteronormative sexual act.[134] Despite his remorse concerning its outcome, namely his lover's death, he, however, refuses to regret the action, supposedly incest, as such. Similarly, Lindsay reminds Brian: "Don't apologize. It doesn't become you" ("Episode 105"). Indeed, Brian never feels guilty for seeking personal fulfilment and, in the course of it, ignoring others' demands. "Brian doesn't do boyfriends" ("Episode 102"), his best friend Michael intimates in one of the initial episodes and thus exemplarily defines his ethical code as completely detached from social as well as, oftentimes, juridical expectations. His status as not merely a moral, but, at times, a legal rebel lends itself to conceive of Brian as a "cowboy viligante" (Munt 539), or, as Andrew Holleran prefers to define him, "an 18th-century rake, a cad, a villain reminiscent of the narrator in *The Swimming Pool Library*: a cold, efficient sex shark" (par. 8). Such an enumeration presents Brian as a particularly dark version of the Byronic hero. More than resembling the brooding, introverted Manfred, Brian might hence be much rather associated with Conrad from *The Corsair* (1814), who exudes an "erotic aura associated with outlaw glamour" (Roach, *It*, 219) and thus constitutes a particularly appealing representative of the pirate hero-villain.[135] His "irresistible allure" (*It*, 208),

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[134] Interestingly, Manfred's word choice when reflecting upon his beloved Astarte evokes the particulars of queer rhetoric: "[We] loved each other as we should not love" (*Manfred* 2.1.27). One feels reminded of the famous description of homosexual, yet forbidden desire as "the love that dare not speak its name", a saying generally attributed to Oscar Wilde.

[135] The comparison of Brian to the pirate hero-villain of the eighteenth and nineteenth century might be additionally supported by the fact that these narratives have traditionally been subjected to queer readings. Similar to the prison, the ship and its usually all-male, often hyper masculine crew necessarily give rise to queer interpretations. Roach expresses this tendency of not merely queering, but generally sexualising the world of piracy in an evocative way: "Because pirates seemed to live as

as Roach argues, is notably based on a "negative attraction" (*It*, 208), a claim which might well be extended to his modern descendant.

Apart from Brian's overt sexual obsession and his outsiderdom, this contradictory kind of attraction also seems to radiate and emerge from his position as a PR agent and his accordant fiscal possibilities. In other words, Brian's abilities depend on his capital, which comes to function as a symbol of the paradoxical, ambiguous appeal exerted by his character. Indeed, it is through his financial power that he manages to enact more overtly his defiance of norms, which in his world are inextricably linked to conservative, both hetero- as well as homonormative discourse. As a reckless businessman who values his own financial interests over the concerns of the supposed community and refuses to sacrifice any of his sexual freedom in order to appear less despicable and stereotypical to straight people, he counters the position of most other characters in *Queer as Folk*.[136] Michael and Lindsay, for instance, clearly "voice pro-assimilationist views" (Beirne 43), which, in Steven Seidman's view, reveal a tendency towards promoting "responsibility" (133) for the community as well as supporting "marriage-like relationships" (133). At the same time, Brian's job paradoxically also allows him to tackle and eventually defeat the very enemies against which the gay and lesbian community centre fights. His opposition happens in a decidedly different, yet eventually much more successful way than traditional, implicitly conservative political actions.[137] Rather than by waving rainbow flags or counter-acting whatever stereotype there might be via supposedly responsible, i.e. sexless behaviour, Brian through his job "directly engages in queer sex as well as the aesthetic and style of the gay stereotype" (Beirne 49) and succeeds via "selling gayness" (Beirne 49) through his highly successful marketing campaigns.[138] Whether by overt, professional action or implicit refusal to bend to the demands of assimilationist politics, Brian even remains defiant in the face of incomparably more powerful forces. Similar to Brian's campaign

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they pleased in a confined wooden world of libidinous masculinity, historians of sodomy have looked to them in hopeful inference, the slender documentary evidence on their onboard sexual practices generously supplemented the spirit of common-sense deduction, tinting the Atlantic triangle pink" (*It*, 210).

[136] Again relying on his own moral code, Brian does not seem to care that his newest client, Stockwell, is a homophobic, right-wing politician. What is more, Brian's campaign might eventually contribute to the latter's victory. Brian only changes his strategy when his very own interests are endangered, as Stockwell's plans for a clean and morally upright Pittsburgh also include the immediate closing of all baths, massage parlours, darkrooms and gay saunas.

[137] For a closer analysis of normalising versus anti-assimilationist discourses within the series see Beirne, 2006, who explores how those trying to "integrate homosexuals into the mainstream (via 'normalizing' and desexualizing their practices)" (43) eventually almost inevitably resort to the very same rhetoric and supposed logic employed by conservative, homophobic politics. Via the figure of Brian, *Queer as Folk* successfully counters these politics: his depiction of what others regard as the stereotype of the sexually predatory gay male "is portrayed as perhaps the most effective political strategy" (Beirne 49).

[138] Brian's use of queerness as a marketing tool is a central point I will return to further below.

against the conservative Stockwell, who plans to make Pittsburgh clean and safe, Manfred meets Arimanes, the ruler of the seven spirits, with proud, unrelenting defiance. To the spirit's order to "[b]ow down and worship, slave! – What, knowst thou not / Thine and our Sovereign? – Tremble, and obey!" (*Manfred* 2.4.31-32), he replies, with a confidence founded on nothing else than his own arrogance: "I know it; / And yet ye see I kneel not" (*Manfred* 2.4.34-35). Brian's campaign and his eventual victory over Stockwell indeed serve to reveal the highly contradictory, and eventually so appealing character conceptualisation of the Byronic hero.

While Brian, however, has committed "thousand crimes" (*The Corsair* 3.24.695), just like Byron's villainous pirate Conrad, these deeds are noticeably "link'd with one virtue" (*The Corsair* 3.24.695). Although "Brian is the character who most exemplifies self-care, even to the point of appearing irresponsible" (Cramer 418) and retains a detached, cynical attitude to social concerns, he is "yet capable of deep and strong affection" (Macaulay, quoted in Rogers 297) towards his friends. Seemingly paradoxically, the hedonistic, negligent Brian, for instance, "takes on the role of a guardian, protecting Nathan/Justin from his intolerant father and stepping in for the latter as a surrogate role model, especially after Justin, in the US version, almost gets beaten to death by his homophobic classmate" (170), as Poole observes. In the same way, Cramer notes that "Brian is shown to be responsible when it comes to his son […], and he is willing to make great sacrifices for his friends" (418). In accordance with the apparently high relevance he attributes to these concerns, his own moral principles, oftentimes deviant from mainstream conventions, also include a categorical distaste for dishonesty and betrayal. Just as he remains impenitent about his behaviour, he never feels the urge to hide it and strongly despises as well as actively fights against those who do. "He tells the truth and he doesn't pretend" ("Episode 105"), Lindsay defends him. Far from being completely amoral, Brian defines, follows, and allegedly imposes his very own social, sexual and legal rules, which "are negotiable and can be bent, but the existence of rules as such is never questioned" (Poole 172) by the logic of the plot. This emphasis on honesty reveals how Brian's principles are not categorically despicable, but that the "Byronic self-definition and assertion of his own moral code renders him heroic" (Stein, *Byronic*, 110) for the audience.

Brian is thus not necessarily easily emulated within either of the prevalent stereotypes of gay characters on television. Even more important with regards to the aims of this thesis, he fails to free himself of ambiguity and contradictions. Rather, one might regard him as epitomising the "paradoxes of the narrative dichotomies

inscribed" (Munt 531) in *Queer as Folk*. While the narrative dramatically foregrounds his constant search for sex, or the fact that he "is driven, in other words, by his cock" (Noble 152), Brian is, as Bobby Noble further maintains, certainly not "constructed as stone – that is, emotionally and sexually impenetrable to [his] sexual partners" (152). As Justin in a later episode gently, but determinedly pushes Brian over to make him assume the role of the bottom, his lover equally breaks through the supposedly hardened emotional mantle. Again, scenes like this one might be classified as serving the purpose of humanisation, which Stein has identified as a central process the contemporary Byronic hero tends to be subjected to. Depicting Brian as "having developed a degree of ethical sensibility" (Stein, *Byronic*, 152) and as, at least, partially sympathetic to common human concerns "earns him the audience's affection, in addition to their respect" (Stein, *Byronic*, 2). Consequently, Brian "may well serve both as a figure of identification and as a fantasized projection of the gay male 'super-stud'" (Poole 164). He thereby projects a "performance […] that may induce excitement, fascination, or disgust" (Poole 164), or, as I would argue, all of them combined. Just like his friend Lindsay admires him for doing "exactly what he wants, no excuses, no apologies" ("Episode 102"), these qualities are concurrently those which "some find most despicable and childlike" (Cramer 418). Mirroring the attraction exerted by the pirate Conrad, Brian's appeal is "balanced precariously at the tipping point of love and death" (Roach, *It*, 214). Observing Brian hence conveys pleasure as well as horror, both of which figure as central traits of the promiscuous, revengeful and unapologetic hero-villain. With regards to the successive logic of this thesis, the amount of ambiguity certainly culminates in Brian: he makes up for both Kathryn's villainy and Edward's virtue, uniting the best of both worlds, as is mirrored by his queerness on another level. It appears to be this contradictory character conceptualisation, fluctuating between equal extremes, which makes Holleran assume that it is "his iconoclasm that propels the show" (par. 8). Manfred's oscillation between brooding, sentimental and affectionate hero and arrogant, irresponsible villain with a shameful past makes the witch by whom he is haunted exclaim "I know thee for a man of many thoughts / And deeds of good and ill, extreme in both" (*Manfred* 2.2.35-36). Likewise, Brian is assigned an ambiguous, fluctuating status within the series' narrative. This allows him to produce nothing less than Burke's notorious "delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime" (67).

Governed by Paradox

The specific pleasure of the sublime, "which cannot exist without a relation […] to pain" (Burke 33), is not only that which arises out of traditional symbols of terror, such as a thunderstorm or an avalanche, but appears to be equally provoked via gender confusion and queer bodies. While Burke stresses the distinction between female beauty and male sublimity, the terms he employs to delineate his arguments implicitly construct the blurring and mixing of supposedly diametrically opposed qualities as the true location of the sublime:

> If beauty in our species was annexed to use, men would be much more lovely than women; and strength and agility would be considered the only beauties. But to call strength by the name of beauty, to have but one denomination for the qualities of a Venus and a Hercules, so totally different in almost all respects, is surely a strange confusion of ideas, or abuse of words. (Burke 96)

While this passage explicitly condemns the ideas of "confusion" and "abuse", Burke's general premises, however, implicitly "privilege risk and chance as central to the experience of the sublime" (49), as Barbara Freeman observes. While in the *Enquiry*, the queer body as a site of the sublime thus still remains latent, it is "in Burke's later writings [that] the confusion of the sexes becomes a metaphor for the revolutionary forces that would destroy traditional distinctions and hierarchies" (Freeman 49). It is only "[t]hrough a bizarre reversal of sexual roles" (Freeman 47), that the sublime is suddenly envisaged as female. Accordingly, it becomes "a metaphor for anarchy and political chaos" (Freeman 47) and is imagined as "a dangerous threat to the social and moral order, linked to the […] unleashing of sexual passion" (Freeman 47). Much the same, evidently, could be said of Brian Kinney, the "heartless bitch" ("Episode 104") everyone is nonetheless eager to surrender to.

Indeed, Brian does not merely exemplify the sexual as well as moral excess as a precondition for the production of a sublime moment. His queerness also makes him a site of gender confusion, chaos and reversal. With regards to his British forerunner Stuart, Margaret E. Johnson hence claims that Brian

> exists in a conflicted space: his persona is simultaneously feminized and masculinized. While this situation may be common in our readings of gay male bodies, [Brian] pushes beyond our expectations and manages to manipulate the feminine and masculine behaviour into a new hybrid sexuality. His performance rejects the familiar feminine-masculine binary, combining elements of oppositional gendered behaviour into something new and dynamic. (293)

Brian hence creates "something new and dynamic", or, as Burke would have it,

chaotic, dangerous and revolutionary. As one of the most evident examples for this new, queer hybridity, Brian consistently takes on the role of both the seducer and the seduced, switching between these supposedly incompatible positions with unparalleled ease. This kind of switching and artistic combination of roles, linked to a categorical countering of conventional expectations, produces moments of wholehearted ambiguity and paradox. Hence, Brian's supposed seduction of the virginal teenager Justin does not simply place the latter in the position of the prey. Upon entering his loft with Justin for the first time, Brian strips completely naked and pours a bottle of water over his head, thus attributing the power of the gaze to the insecure, yet still fully dressed teenager. He offers himself "to-be-looked-at"[139] and, assumedly, objectified. As Justin remains stunned and immobile, yet observably aroused, Brian switches to a more active role, tears away Justin's shirt and initiates their first kiss.

With regards to the incessant switching between stereotypically feminine and masculine behaviourisms and the accordant hybridity this process produces, Johnson hence claims that the resulting kiss, the end-product of Brian's contradictory qualities, is "simultaneously romantic and sexual, feminine and masculine" (298) and conveys an unusual "intensity of passion" (298). It is, in other words, both excessive and contradictory and "undercuts the stability of binaries, including those that divide masculine from feminine" (45), as Freeman argues with regards to the sublime. Due to Brian's "embrace of rich, complex hybrids of masculine and feminine behaviour" (Johnson 301), the kiss produces the effect of the sublime, whose underlying principle is the "union of extreme opposites" (128), as W.J.T. Mitchell fittingly observes. This union is also perceptible in Brian's Byronesque assertion of contradictory qualities, above all his almost simultaneous depiction of self-absorbed, careless individualism and affectionate loyalty to his friends and his son. Not only does this, once again, illustrate the Byronic hero's production of the sublime, it also lays bare how both the notion of sublimity and that of queerness rely on hybridity and paradox. A similar effect is produced by Brian's body. Supposedly a site of hyper-masculinity in accordance with his "A-Gayness" and the almost supernatural attraction he exerts on both males and females, it stands oddly apart, however, from several more chunky, muscular characters of the

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[139] This references Laura Mulvey's concept of the "to-be-looked-at-ness" (19), which female characters tend to be subjected to via the male gaze often adopted by the camera. According to Mulvey, this results in the objectification and passivisation of the woman who is looked at. With regards to Brian's gender hybridity, his willing surrender to the devouring gaze of another male character might be read as the adoption of a stereotypically female position. For a closer description of the concept of the gaze, cf. Mulvey, 1989, and chapter two of this thesis. See also the section entitled "Feeling One's Wings" of this chapter.

show. In fact, Brian is almost skinny and fragile, compared with both the more assimilated, conservative Michael and his later boyfriend, the gym-fanatic Ben.[140]

With regards to the combination of both stereotypically feminine and masculine traits as well as his ambiguous body, Brian's character appears to defy categorisation on a broad scale. Indeed, he surpasses the mere combination of oppositional qualities and produces an effective blend. This blend references the way the sublime is defined as a notion which "goes beyond the 'combination' of opposites in a single object, and involves a transformation of one into the other in the extremes" (Mitchell 128). Employing Burke's terminology, one could hence argue that Brian depicts how "two ideas as opposite as can be imagined [are] reconciled in the extremes of both" (74). Accordingly, Brian's ambiguous body, excessive sexuality and flaunting of norms and boundaries ultimately present him "as a man whose masculine elements […] reflect his vulnerability and whose feminine elements […] reflect his power. His blending [rather than mere combining] of these two binaries turns [Brian] into something new, something bold, something authentic" (Johnson 300). In that respect, he might serve as a representative of the sublime's "power to bring a new form into being" (276), thus making "trouble for categorizing procedures" (259), as Donald Pease argues with regards to what I would term the queer potential of the traditional sublime. Apart from the apparent gender conflation, Brian's status as a Byronic outsider, refusing to be contained within the restraints of any community, further contributes to his status as a hybrid hero surpassing not merely the boundaries of gender.

Most apparently, this is evoked by his consistent disregard for social, legal and moral conventions. Similar to the Byronic heroine Kathryn, Brian's portrayal as a comfortable consumer of various drugs and an almost-criminal effectively ignoring the law if it does not concur with his own interests, establishes him as exceeding both material and metaphorical bounds. Hence, his character heavily relies on the notion of excess, which has already been referred to as a central, implicit principle informing the production of any sublime moment. First and foremost, it is of course sexual excess which Brian indulges in and which, as Johnson's argument reflects, is informed and at the same time assists in his gender hybridity. Quite literally, his sexual conduct involves the incessant transgression of usual conventions as well as

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[140] Brian's rather mediocre physique indeed further highlights his ambiguity and hybridity. Although he appears as the stereotypical "gay male 'super-stud'" (Poole 164), he is neither hunky nor does he seem particularly strong, despite frequently being depicted in the gym or its locker rooms. As Tim Miller points out, "[t]he vulnerability of our bodies (self-judgement, shaming, childhood wounding), which everybody is subject to, for gay men can be especially acute because of the fact that the physical body is such a persistent locus of where gay men's identity is constructed" (289). Brian's body draws particular attention to this fact and, by nonetheless being the most successful and popular character, troubles Miller's observation.

the boundaries of traditional relationships, monogamy or even marriage, all of which Brian abhors. Neither his sexuality nor his lifestyle in general can be contained and restricted, kept in check or de-fined in limits. Equally, he is depicted as excessively rich, intellectually capable and cunning, and unfailingly successful in whatever private or professionally endeavour he embarks on. "Have more money, more power, more sex" ("Episode 402"), he at one point defines the motto of his excessive lifestyle, or, in Michel Foucault's terms, his very own "arts of existence" (*Pleasure*, 10-11). Janet M. Cramer understands these as "certain self-imposed rules of conduct that make one's life unique and 'aesthetic'" (426) and argues that Brian's life is primarily informed by the importance he attaches to the "Care of Self" (417). This includes "honoring one's limits with respect to relationship dynamics, having a sure sense of self-esteem, and practicing safe sex" (Cramer 417). In Brian's case, clearly, "honoring one's limits" is tantamount to ignoring and consequently exceeding the limits imposed by others. Consequently, I would argue that Brian's most central rule of conduct is excess, and the according sensibility, which "will enhance one's life and create an artful, aesthetic existence" (Cramer 426), is that of the sublime. In view of that, Freeman argues that "the sublime induces a commitment to individuality and self-preservation" (63), two central aspects of self care. Both with regards to literal excess and the exceeding of not only gender categories, Brian's life reveals an incessant, unwarranted, and always surrendered to "desire for the sublime" (Freeman 31).

According to these "arts of existence", Brian's lifestyle could be classified as a continual search for satisfaction of both the sublime and more material cravings. As Alderson argues, "fulfilment will always elude him: his restlessness in this respect is a further expression of his sexual insatiability" (77). When Michael comes to pick up Brian and Justin in the morning and discovers them making-out in the bedroom, he bewilderedly exclaims: "Christ, didn't you get enough last night?!" ("Episode 101"). Brian nonchalantly retorts: "There is no such thing as enough" ("Episode 101"). This coolly delivered reply might be read as "suggestive of [the] constraints on his ability to find fulfilment" (Alderson 77). Brian's character and desires thus become emblematic of how the sublime "manifest[s] a certain reserve and distance" (Freeman 118), thereby attesting to its eventual "inaccessibility" (Freeman 118). As the sublime is conceived of as boundless and, as preceding chapters have shown, "unpresentable" (Lyotard, "Postmodernism", 78), it consequently remains impossible for the mind to grasp. It is, in other words, ultimately unattainable and unreachable. The desire for the sublime, hence, fuels on its ultimate unfulfilment, which is forever

postponed. Brian doubly portrays the mental, yet also material unavailability of the sublime. As Pittsburgh's most popular bachelor and notorious playboy, he remains effectively unreachable for anything longer than a few hours of pleasure. When Justin wants to know whether he can see him again some time, he replies: "I see you in your dreams" ("Episode 101"), referencing the elusive quality of the much sought-after sublime. At the same time, his moral code, further above defined as informed by a sublime aesthetic, evolves around the notions of excess and eternal yearning. In so far, his lifestyle is essentially defined by the impossibility of attaining satisfaction or fulfilment, which, as the narrative implies, would result in entirely overthrowing his earlier character conceptualisation.

This reading also suggests that Brian's life is necessarily conceived of as an eternal search, which can, by definition, never be completed. The significance of this perpetual yearning for both the plot and Brian's character is represented in the series' central place of excess, the club Babylon. As its biblical source already suggests, Babylon is the place where Brian can best perform, solidify and most overtly depict the sublime's qualities of boundlessness, excess, contradiction, unattainablility and perpetual desire. Even more importantly, the club's conception as both a place of gay activity and dance floor aesthetics reveals the sublime's reliance on notions of cool. These, in turn, appear to feed heavily on the hybridity, paradox and, not least, style and attitude of Brian's bold queerness.

Welcome to Club Babylon

"Dance clubs – most especially queer dance clubs – were spaces to be fabulous" (36), Fiona Buckland asserts in her riveting analysis of the *Impossible Dance* (2002), and further argues that "improvised social dancing in queer clubs plays a role in queer world-making" (2). Appropriately, Stuart in the British *Queer as Folk* describes the gay scene at Canal Street, which strings together one dance club after the other and culminates in the notorious Babylon, as "the middle of the world. 'Cause on a street like this, every single night, anyone can meet anyone. And every single night, someone meets someone" (*Queer As Folk UK*)[141]. If not necessarily the middle of the world, Babylon is certainly at the heart of the narrative's world and constitutes "the serial's topological center" (Poole 162). This is especially true with regards to the US-American version[142], which starts out with a long-angle shot of the

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[141] This quote is taken from the second episode of the second season.
[142] Johnson, for instance, heavily criticises the US-American *Queer As Folk*'s emphasis on the supposedly trivial act of dancing, coupling and socialising at the local gay club. In contrast to the British series, which "was a revelation for critics sand viewers alike" (293), its US follow-up "sometimes seems like a soap opera padded out with extensive scenes of men at the neighbourhood dance club" (293). This judgement not merely ignores the social as well as aesthetic value of this kind of world-making,

Babylon displaying flashing lights, mirror balls and sweaty, half-naked bodies moving to a pumping beat. As a voice-over, we hear Michael, who leads those not yet familiar with the rules of the dance into the queer world it creates: "The thing you need to know is it's all about sex" ("Episode 101").

While this remark might well be read as referring to the gay world at large ("Men think about sex every twenty-eight seconds. Of course, that's straight men. With gay men, it's every nine"), it is most directly true for the "queer lifeworlds" (Buckland 5)[143] of the dance floor, which the audience is gazing upon in this scene. It is, indeed, all about sex, searching and desire, and this holds true for every night of the week.[144] Most noticeably also in popular discourse, it is the dance floor which translates the desire traditionally enclosed in the bed room into a semi-public, accessible space. Buckland observes that "[o]ne of the most famous descriptions of dancing suggests that it is a vertical expression of a horizontal desire" (112). The empirical study she conducted among a variety of mostly queer dance clubs in New York City leads her to the conclusion that "[o]n the dance floor, participants choreographed themselves as objects and subjects of desire. Desire informed relations between bodies on the dance floor to produce a choreographed effect" (112). Dancing, especially in queer clubs, is thus understood as "bodies negotiating desire" (Buckland 112). The way in which *Queer As Folk* depicts this negotiation of ultimately unattainable, and hence sublime desire, is largely informed by cool aesthetics. It is not only the visual presentation of both the dance floor and the series at large which serve as viable examples of modern-day cool. Much more so, it is the cynical and nonchalant attitude displayed by Brian, who on the platforms, at the poles and in the backrooms of the Babylon finds a prime stage for his self-fashioning as cool.

Babylon as a place created by as well as perpetuating notions of cool is intrinsically connected to the way in which the general visual techniques of the US-American version evoke the aesthetics of a club, beyond the materiality of the

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but recalls former generalising assessments of the soap opera as "soft-core emotional porn for the frustrated housewife" (Haskell 155).

[143] In her use of the term "lifeworlds", Buckland harks back to Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, who define a lifeworld as inherently different from groups or communities because it "includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling than can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright" ("Sex", 558). Accordingly, Buckland defines queer lifeworlds as "sites of interaction and intersection with other groups and concerns, such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender. There are many queer lifeworlds, perhaps as many and as unique as each individual" (5).

[144] Michael's voice-over continues by establishing the Babylon as a prime locus of ultimately insatiable desire: "Who wants to be at home in bed, especially alone, when you can be here, knowing that at any moment you might see him, the most beautiful man who ever lived. That is, until tomorrow night" ("Episode 101"). His British equivalent, Vince, equally evokes the notions of hunting and perpetual, unappeasable desire as central motivations for engaging in club culture in the first place: "'Cause you keep on looking. That's why you keep going out. There's always some new bloke, some better bloke, just waiting around the corner" (*Queer as Folk UK*).

factual dance floor. Poole for instance claims that "the aesthetic styling and filmic technique of the show can be compared to the dance floor in a night club" (162). This appears to be due to the fact that one of the directors of the American version, Russell Mulcahy, used to shoot music videos, whose style and mode of editing to a large degree inform the overall visual presentation of the series. Suzanne Fraser observes that this particular music video style "generates a hyperreal feel based on the extensive use of special effects, fantasy elements, dance soundtrack and glossy aesthetic" (157). This feel of the hyperreal is most blatantly created in very first episode's iconic opening. Rather than depicting the "real" dancefloor, the first ten seconds give us the video wall in club Babylon, which shows almost naked men dancing in front of a psychedelic, neon-coloured and noticeably digitalised background. Only after we have had enough time to devour this view does the camera swerve to focus on the "real" bodies engaged on platforms, poles and the dance floor at large. Right from the beginning, it appears, *Queer As Folk* establishes its dominant aesthetics. It is the hyperreal, the digital and, by implied agreement, the fundamentally cool which create the lifeworld of the Babylon and draw both the extra- and the intradiegetic audience in. In a later scene from the first episode, the neon lights return, this time in a tellingly cold blue shade, illuminating Brian's gigantic twin bed and radiating into his otherwise jet-black loft. Again, one is drawn into the feeling of the hyperreal. These two scenes employing neon lights exemplify how the use of cool techniques is tightly connected to the notion of unattainable desire, both in the case of the sweaty bodies in Babylon as well as Brian's bed, the place where his most immediate appetite is temporarily, yet never fully satisfied.

Generally in *Queer As Folk*, scenes which present, thematise or evolve around desire and its ultimate unfulfilment are likely to be visualised via digital, cool aesthetics. With regards to the Babylon, Fraser hence claims that "[e]ach scene employs a wide range of techniques often found in music video, and creates a uniquely hyperreal, hypersexual lifeworld with its own social and sexual conventions" (157). Tellingly, the projected bodies from the beginning are adapted and reused as opening shots throughout season one two three. This can serve as an example for how the show not only "treats traditional soap opera themes with a queer twist" (Poole 149), but also subverts its formal features. Rather than employing close-ups of the main characters, a basic convention of the soap opera genre, *Queer as Folk* prefers a much cooler, i.e. digitalised and hi-tech version to lead the audience into its world. Accordingly, the opening shots suggest that this is, apart from an inherently queer world, a cool world for the MTV generation, informed

by the formal conventions of fast editing and digital media. As Poole correctly observes, this "results in faster speed, stark contrast, and a condensed narration" (162).

These strategies, then, recall Jeff Rice's claim that "to be cool in the twentieth century, one must be connected to electronic culture" ("Writing", 222). Equally, one might feel reminded of Alan Liu's description of cool as "a form of deco-technology" (*Laws*, 197). The projection of moving bodies in front of neon-coloured backgrounds might be identified as an example of how cool "exceed[s] the strict bounds of rational contents" (Liu, *Laws*, 197) and usefulness. Consequently, the spectator undergoes "an experience of pure style" (Liu, *Laws*, 197). Following both Rice's and Liu's premises, it might be argued that *Queer as Folk* references "[c]ontemporary understandings of cool as a technological phenomenon" and "as a combination of technological savvy and countercultural attitude" (Rice, "Writing", 222). Rice defines "juxtaposition" ("Writing", 223) and "eclectic mix" ("Writing", 224) as central processes involved in the production of cool as a (writing) style on the Web. Cool, he says, should be understood "as a juxtapositional practice" ("Writing", 224).

The visual aesthetics employed in *Queer as Folk* apparently resort to exactly this strategy. With regards to the depiction of the Babylon, the show seems to translate onto its formal level how the dancers' "moves interact with the moves of others. There are similarities and differences, juxtaposition, counterpoints, polyrhythms" (14), as Buckland identifies the processes involved in (queer) improvised dancing. Consistent with the show's overall cool aesthetics of digitalisation and juxtaposition, especially the dance floor scenes thus depict "a hybrid mixture of various television formats: there are elements of comedy, documentary, and video-clips" (Poole 162). As both a space of queer rebellion and commodification, sub and mass cultures, Babylon symbolises cool's oscillation between opposing poles: "[H]ow can the word", Rice puzzles over the manifold connotations of cool, "mean rebellion and digital production, commercialisation and individuality, all at once?" ("Cool", par. 2).

Evidently, Babylon exemplifies how "all at once" cannot merely co-exist peacefully, but indeed blend into each other for the negotiation of desire. This desire, by the very logic of the show, is an inherently queer one, both with regards to its same-sex orientation and to the fact that, paradoxically, it is conceptualised as never satiable in the first place. This, in turn, makes queer(ed) desire particularly potent of producing the sublime via embracing the notions of hybridity and

unattainability. At the same time, Babylon exemplifies how a queer desire is negotiated as well as, indeed, imagined and demonstrated in terms of the intrinsically cool aesthetics of its accordant dance floor. In that way, queer dancing, styling and desire become effectively presented as cool. It is, however, again the figure of Brian who presents us with the most viable proliferation of queerness as coolness. As the character most bluntly indulging in the perpetual search for the unattainable sublime, it is Brian who incorporates this coolness of the Babylon's formal level in his particularly queer performance.

In Neon Across The Sky

Due to his Byronic ambiguity, Brian's character can best be grasped in terms of juxtaposition and paradox. As has already been pointed out with regards to his ambiguous appeal, Brian is conceived of as juggling with and blending apparently contradictory qualities and accordingly performing a highly fluctuating, hybrid identity. While the latter serves the creation of "delightful horror" (67), as Burke would have it, his persona in general is, on the more overt level, decoded and presented as nothing else than cool. Indeed, I would argue that Brian's presentation as a contradictory character accounts both for his own as well as the show's general perception as cool. Following Joseph Roach, whose concept of It conspicuously resembles the more widely used notion of cool[145], one might conceive of Brian as displaying "the power of apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities simultaneously: strength *and* vulnerability, innocence *and* experience, and singularity *and* typicality among them" (*It*, 8, original emphasis). What underlies Brian's appeal is, in other words, "an attraction that […] is fundamentally polymorphous [and] presupposes a certain element of danger" (Roach, "It", 559).

On the more overt level, this is translated into a cool attitude, which Brian never fails to wear on his sleeve. As Dick Pountain and David Robins point out, coolness can be condensed to the display of "three core personality traits" (26): narcissism, hedonism and ironic detachment. Without requiring further elaboration, Brian most evidently depicts all of them to the utmost degree. Indeed, the audience might well envy his "detachment that provide[s] [him] with a state of godlike indifference" (*Byronic*, 87), as Stein argues with regards to Anne Rice's subtextually queer vampires. On a similar plane, Poole argues that "Brian's hedonistic gay life-style sets a standard for all the other characters, whether they strive to emulate or oppose him" (163). In combination with the other fundamentally cool qualities he

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[145] Cf. chapter one of this thesis, which delineates the parallels between Roach's concept of It and popular notions of cool.

performs, he becomes "not an outcast, but the center of the series" (Poole 163). As all of these qualities are connected to what Cramer refers to as "the postmodern ethos" (428), Brian makes obvious how cool works as its major aesthetic. His narcissistic, ironic and hedonistic demeanour reflects that in our postmodern age, "it is left to individuals to interpret their own definitions of moral and ethical sexual conduct" (Cramer 428). A major part of the overall cool attitude Brian is depicted to adopt is his practice of so-called cool sex, which involves casual sexual encounters rather than long-term relationships, emotional detachment and a philosophy of non-possession and independence rather than domination and submission.[146] In accordance with his sexual and other behaviour, Brian is stylised in a way which makes him visually immediately recognisable as the cool guy. Most frequently, he is dressed in black and jeans, combined with a leather jacket and designer boots.[147] The stereotypical sunglasses at night, according to Pountain and Robins "the only core meaning that persisted from generation to generation" (7), is translated in the appropriate Brianesque manner: at several instances, Brian wears his sunglasses in the darkroom (cf., for instance, "Episode 104"), thus not merely attributing to his, even in these situations, typical laid-back attitude, but literally linking coolness to deviance and queerness.

The proliferation of cool as queer is further enhanced by Brian's job and his consequent financial power. His task as a PR expert is to sell products by making them appear cool. Put more bluntly, he sells cool, or, as Malcolm Gladwell has it, illustrates "the rise of coolhunting as a profession" (ch.1). Trousers, soft drinks and laptops are not cool per se, since "[c]ool is not an intrinsic property woven into the blue denim of its jeans" (Pountain and Robins 18), but can only be located in people's attitude towards these items. Thus, Brian's character is interconnected with the workings of coolness in a variety of ways. Not only are his attitude and looks understood as cool, he furthermore engages in both the detection as well as the production of what others, namely his wealthy clients, will perceive as cool. His obsession with coolness both as a private and professional person serves to reveal how "[c]ool is not inherent in objects but in people" (Pountain and Robins 21).

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[146] In their seminal *Hot & Cool Sex: Cultures in Conflict* (1974), Anna and Robert Francouer establish cool sex as the new, egalitarian and liberating counterpart to the traditional hot sex, which involved role-stereotyping and the objectification of women. In contrast, cool sex means "partnership without sex stereotypes and fixed roles" (39). See also Pountain and Robins 134-136.

[147] The presentation of queerness as fundamentally cool is also connected to and entangled with the fact that "the show capitalizes on gay identity as a desirable (no longer shamed) commodity" (533), as Sally Munt argues. Thus, Brian's "opulent apartment, his job as an accountant executive in a chic [...] PR company, his rich, have-it-all lifestyle is a powerful designer fantasy" (Munt 533). The commodification of specifically queer desire and lifestyle portrayed in *Queer as Folk* and via the figure of Brian can thus be tightly linked to the adoption of cool as the dominant sensibility of consumer culture. Evidently, this opens up several new dimensions of both coolness and queerness, which will briefly be explored in the concluding section of this chapter.

However, Brian does not merely sell cool, but sells it as queer. The campaigns he creates always revolve around sex, and are mostly informed by a homoerotic undercurrent. This, on the one hand, is employed as a device for fuelling the plot. For instance, Brian persuades a married, male client that a naked poster boy will sell his rather mediocre jeans, and ends up completing the promised full-time service in the company's toilet. According to Alderson, this might be read as illustrating "the continuity between his job and his sex" (79) as well as mirroring the apparently promoted rather than condemned "commodification of sexuality" (79). At the same time, however, it can be understood as an intrinsically cool practice, since the above mentioned concept of cool sex involves "the overthrowing of the fear-motivated segregation of human sexuality in everyday life" (39), as Anna and Robert Francouer claim in their enthralling study of *Hot & Cool Sex: Cultures in Conflict* (1974).

Brian, however, not only introduces sexuality into every-day discourse, but utilises specifically queer and deviant sexual practices, naked toy boys in jeans being only one out of a wide range. In that way, Brian's (homo)sexualised campaigns challenge "the homophobia of wealthy capitalists via an appeal to their individual fiscal interests" (Beirne 49). Queerness is thus portrayed as immensely appealing to straight and gay-identified consumers alike, since both are induced to perceive the products advertised via queer rhetoric and aesthetics as cool. Indeed, it is the supposedly most problematic aspect of Brian's persona, his excessive and deviant sexual behaviour, which is eventually put to use as the most effective advertisement strategy. As a working example, Brian at one point fails to invent an original campaign for a steak restaurant, and it is only after he overhears a guy in the darkroom ordering his partner to "eat the meat" ("Episode 218") that he has found an appropriate slogan. Literally and figuratively, Brian here subverts the same-sex fellatio's negative connotations of deviancy and social shame ("you suck") into an intrinsically desirable one that will attract consumers and their money ("you're cool").[148] Via his position as a rich, handsome and always triumphant superman as well as through his unbeaten campaigns capitalising on queer sex, Brian embodies how "[g]ayness has been formulaically rebranded as attractive and inspirational, it has acquired cultural and symbolic capital, it has, through commodification, become *respectable*" (Munt 539, original emphasis), it has, in other words, become cool.

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[148] Pountain and Robins establish "it sucks" as the popular antithesis of coolness and point out the latent misogyny and homophobia of this exclamation: "the underlying semantics […] suggest that performing fellatio is so contemptible that it has become the strongest possible term of abuse" (144). See also chapter three of this thesis, which explores this dichotomy with regards to the blood-sucking vampire and his status as the (also queer) other.

In making queer cool, Brain arguably only returns today's most sought-after sensibility to its rightful owners. As has already been pointed out, cool might be conceived of as having developed out of or, at any rate, borrowed from what Susan Sontag has seminally defined as "camp". Pountain and Robins argue that there are indeed "many aspects of Camp that are remarkably similar to our conception of Cool, such as hedonism, love of irony, exaggeration and 'bad taste' and the reluctance to be judgemental" (143). Equally, one might add love of paradox, a fundamental reliance on contradiction and extravagance to the list. What Liu refers to as the basic "uselessness" (*Laws*, 195) of cool, because it tends to be conceived of in terms of style and form rather than contents and rational utilisation, can be found in Sontag's definition of "Camp Art", which "is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface and style at the expense of content" ("Camp", 278).[149] Furthermore, coolness as it is employed in certain gay subcultures, such as the leather, fetish and bondage scene, has been understood as fulfilling functions comparable to that of *itutu*. Robert Farris Thompson suggests that *itutu*, "a strong intellectual attitude" (117), was a central philosophy among African tribes and might be considered as the ancestor of today's post-industrial notions of cool.[150] Similar to the way African warriors employed *itutu* to meet their aggressors with a stance of cool detachment, (male) homosexuals may have employed cool as a weapon. Hence, Pountain and Robins suggest that "centuries of persecution of homosexuals might have created the need for a defensive psychic strategy very similar to Cool" (142-143).

Indeed, a central part of Brian's nonchalant irony appears to be the use of cool as a powerful mask to face one's opponents confidently and successfully, "an emotional mantle, sheltering the whole personality" (1), as Peter N. Stearns calls it. While he refuses to fight homophobia via political or violent activity, Brian effectively counters potential and actual adversaries with a cool stance. His whole demeanour indeed betrays him as one "who gives a flying fuck what straight people think" ("Episode 203"). When a group of school children vandalise his shiny jeep and spray FAGGOT in pink all over one side, he refuses to have it repainted, but pushes the gas pedal to the floor and heads for the city centre. Michael, uncomfortably occupying the passenger seat in the newly queered mobile, asks in semi-panic: "Are you crazy?", to which Brian replies: "No, they are. Well, I say, fuck them! They can write it in neon across the sky! [Shouting into the air] Faggot!" ("Episode 101"). Brian

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[149] Equally, Sontag notes that camp "incarnates a victory of 'style' over 'content', 'aesthetics' over 'morality,' of irony over tragedy" (287). Cf. chapter one of this thesis for a closer examination of the parallels between the notions of cool and camp.
[150] For a closer analysis of Thompson's concept of *itutu* see chapter one of this thesis as well as Pountain and Robins 34-43.

remains cool, even in the face of apparent, if yet minor gay hate crimes. He thus utilises cool not only as a defence strategy, but, by appropriating a word of abuse into a term of empowerment[151], employs it as an example of what Poschardt terms "affirmative Strategien" (10). His cool reaction to the vandalised car, after all one of his most precious commodities and a defining emblem of his persona, depicts the moment, "in dem aus einer Abwehrhaltung eine Angriffshaltung wird. Nur durch diese Schubumkehr entwickeln sich Freiräume, wird die Gängelung überwunden, die noch im bloß Reaktiven durchschlägt, entsteht Freiheit. Dies ist, wozu die wenigen Ikonen des 'Cool' ermutigen" (Poschardt 12). Claiming an emancipated, free space in the city centre and marking the sky, symbolic of limitless freedom, as queer territory, Brian can indeed be emulated as a viable icon of coolness. His latent, detached opposition against conservative, homophobic forces is conceived of as a literally cool rebellion, rather than a hot one. It is via making queer cool and depicting this very subversion in his own persona that he fights against those who oppose his lifestyle.

What Brian thus depicts is "cool as a *permanent* state of *private* rebellion" (Pountain and Robins 19, original emphasis). By not merely refusing, but (for some viewers problematically) ridiculing the efforts of the gay and lesbian community centre and that of conservative politicians, who both criticise his "arts of existence" (Foucault, *Pleasure*, 10-11), Brian perpetuates "not a collective political response but a stance of individual defiance, which does not announce itself in strident slogans but conceals its rebellion behind a mask of ironic impassivity" (Pountain and Robins 19). In Stearns' terminology, he depicts how "[b]eing a cool character means conveying an air of disengagement" (1) both with regards to social and political issues. Despite his unconcealed I-don't-care-attitude, Brian, however, might be read as acting according to very specific, self-defined maxims. He seems to sense that, as Beirne argues, "[a] cynical, individualist and profit-focused society requires cynical, individualist targeted and profit-based political strategies" (49). Hence, when Justin is beaten up by a homophobic class mate and despairs over his own impotency and the lack of effective political measures against such attackers, Brian advises him in the following way: "[T]ake that anger and put it into your work […] because trust me, nothing pisses off a straight guy more than a successful fag"

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[151] Brian's appropriation of the term 'faggot' parallels the resignification the word "queer" has undergone, from a neutral word denoting strangeness into a term of abuse into, eventually, a political statement. Apparently, the series' title, stemming from the old Yorkshire proverb "There is nought as queer as folk", invokes the term's original meaning of strangeness and peculiarity. In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Judith Butler argues that "it is always an imaginative chorus that taunts 'queer'" (226). In fact, the term "derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult" (Butler 226). Via his refusal to repaint his jeep, Brian, as Johnson argues with regards to his British predecessor, "wildly embraces his queerness, turning insult into embrace" (295).

("Episode 402"). This overall attitude is supported by the plot at large, because Brian's cool rebellion is "portrayed as having more wide-reaching cultural effects than the more traditional political methods of lobbying or demonstrations" (Beirne 49).

Apart from its repercussions as a politically effective strategy for the queer community, Brian's selling of cool, however, also relies on selling something which can only be obtained with great difficulty, if it is reachable at all. Although coolness, which "everyone wants to get […] anywhere he or she can find it" (Roach, *It*, 4), is much sought-after in both objects and people, the mere notion of "cool-hunting" (Gladwell ch.1) implies that obtaining it is inherently difficult and eventually often impossible. Coolness is not inherent in objects and, as Pountain and Robins remind us, "what is seen as Cool will change from place to place, from time to time and from generation to generation" (21). Similarly, advertising, as popular discourses have it, involves selling desire and, alternately, feeds on the fact that the desire it creates is never fully satisfied but may be rekindled over and over again. Therefore, what both Brian's job as well as his private persona sell is an intrinsically unattainable desire. Accordingly, Alderson argues that Brian's "job with a PR firm is also connected to both commodification and homoerotic desire: he not only desires and consumes, but also promotes desire and consumption" (79). Alderson here connects Brian's job with his private persona, which could equally be read as functioning chiefly (or, in fact, only) through excessive desire and its ultimate unappeasability. Since these are the central components of any sublime moment, it seems prudent to search for it in a space where Brian most freely and overtly desires as well as promotes desire. So let us get back to the club to return the cool hunter to his natural territory and see him work the world of the queer dance floor.

Falling From Grace

As the one place where the queer subject can, according to Buckland, "embrace the sound and communal energy, and feel again the sensation of those wings we lost when we fell from grace" (2), the dance floor grants Brian ultimate freedom to achieve "the encounter with excess, one of the sublime's most characteristic and enduring features" (Freeman 15). The Babylon can be conceived of as the ideal space for Brian's already mentioned excess of gender boundaries and his "embrace of rich, complex hybrids of masculine and feminine behaviour" (Johnson 301). Equally, it is sexual and visual excess which govern the scene. Interestingly in that respect, Johnson claims that Brian's "actions at Babylon – a safe

haven for a range of gay performances – tell only how he controls his hybrid sexuality within his own familiar community" (294) and that it is in unknown, potentially hostile environments that he can fully explore and perform his queerness. In accordance with the above mentioned range of "juxtapositions, counterpoints, polyrhythms" (Buckland 14) at work in the queer club, however, I would rather argue that Brian's self-fashioning, or, in Buckland's terminology "queer world-making" (14), is inextricably linked to the Babylon. It is on the dance floor of the gay club that the so far explored issues of perpetual desire, unsolvable paradox, digital hyper reality and queer self-stylisation are all brought into close vicinity. And it is, arguably, the figure of cool Brian who not only works these distinct notions into a blended whole, but, much more importantly, employs this end-product as a viable, postmodern instance of Burke's "delightful horror" (67). While this thesis's as well as the show's audience have already had the chance to explore the aesthetics of the Babylon and their implications at an earlier point, it is only in episode three that we get a full glimpse of both the club's interior and its visitors. Indeed, the greater part of this episode's plot happens in or around the club or is, at any rate, fuelled by it. Most importantly, however, this is Justin's very first night at the Babylon, symbolising his initiation into the queer community, which will be directed, just like his sexual awakening, by Brian.

Interestingly indeed, the audience is led to perceive the club with virgin eyes and from a new angle, as almost all scenes are presented from Justin's outsider perspective. Upon entering the club with Justin and Daphne, we not merely become witnesses to their own bewilderment, but are equally overwhelmed by the pumping music, the flashing lights and the video wall projecting distorted images in screaming colours. Partly filmed with a lens that distorts and blurs the edges, the artificial fog and, apart from the light show, dark interior of the club only allow sporadic glimpses of dimly lit, half-naked bodies on platforms, poles and at the bar. The club ostensibly employs almost all of the notions Burke has defined as essential for producing a (traditionally) sublime moment. Indeed, his long list of qualities capable of producing the desired "delightful horror" (Burke 67), including obscurity, darkness, loudness, light and vastness, reads like an account of an ordinary night at the Babylon. For instance, Burke intimates that "[t]he eye is not the only organ of sensation, by which a sublime passion may be produced. Sounds have a great power in these as in most other passions" (75). Furthermore, "darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light" (73), which only "if it moves with great celerity, has the same effect" (73). Equally, "[g]reatness of dimension, [sic] is a powerful cause of the sublime"

(66). According to Burke, hence, the above described entrance scene into the queer world of the Babylon could be valued as presenting a picture in which "all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree" (55). All these privations, considered as indispensable for the sublime, seem to be produced on the dance floor.

Not coincidentally, thus, Justin's first reaction is one of fear and flight: "You wanna go?" ("Episode 101"), he asks Daphne after surveying the scene. In this moment, he is suffering, it appears, from the notorious "'hit' of the sublime" (White ch.15) and is utterly stunned by its force. Daphne, on the other hand, references the delight inherent in the terror of every sublime scene: "What for?", she asks, "We just got here!" ("Episode 101"), a half expected, half dreaded reply which reflects both her and Justin's fascination with the new world they are about to explore. Indeed, the scenery depicted at the Babylon fulfils two of the central requirements to produce not merely fear, but "a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror" (123): the dance floor's "pain and terror are so modified as not be actually noxious" (Burke 123), and its apparent danger "does not press to close" (Burke 42). Hence, the scene of entering the club, surveyed appropriately in a wide-angle shot from above, is a perfect example of "delightful horror" (67) in Burke's traditional sense.

Much more important for the aims of this thesis, however, is the production of the very same effect via the coolness of both the hyper reality invoked by the aestheticised setting and the queer figure of Brian. Brian's entry into the club is one that directly leads him past the bars, dance floors and backrooms to the toilets, to supply him and Michael with a good shot of his "trail mix" ("Episode 103"). Right from the beginning, Brian gives himself to excess, as the purpose of the drug is to intensify an already "too intense" ("Episode 103") experience.[152] As Freeman observes, excess involves "going close to death" (16), and yet necessarily, "the effect of sublime […] entails a certain loss of control" (17). Brian's trail mix seems apt for the cause. Besides the forefront experience of overwhelming induced by the drug, it endows him with the fundamental cool attitude I regard as vital for the production of the sublime in a contemporary context.

A trail mix, however, prepares the stage for the sublime in a much more explicit way. Usually, it chiefly includes ecstasy and viagra, a combination which foreshadows Brian's prospective indulgence in excess in more than one area. Indeed, Brian soon chats up some guy on the dance floor, and yet appears to be far from satisfied with his conquest. While dancing, he greedily observes another

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[152] "Too, uh…intense" ("Episode 103") is the mediocre-looking Ted's final verdict when leaving the club at a moment when Brian's night seems to have only just begun. Indeed, Ted's way home is cross-cut with scenes of Brian dancing, doing drugs and chatting up guys.

dancer, whom he ensnares accordingly. In doing so, he is, first of all, observed by Michael and Emmett, who exchange the following terms of utter disbelief: "He's not. He can't", Emmett stutters in amazement, while Michael resignedly grins and simply replies: "He can" ("Episode 103"). From the staircase leading down onto the main floor, Justin and Daphne have just surveyed the exact scene. "He can do anything he wants" ("Episode 103"), is Justin's admiring verdict, while Daphne merely gaps, with eyes and mouth wide open: "Is he gonna do it with both of them?" ("Episode 103"). For his onlookers, Brian hence provides and creates a scene which produces nothing but utter astonishment, which, according to Burke, "is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree" (53).[153] Indeed, Michael and Emmett as well as Justin and Daphne adopt the typical Romantic pose of those looking for the sublime in nature. From their slightly elevated position on the gallery and the staircase, they can survey the valley from which the fog arises, observe the lightening at face-level and, most importantly, retain a materially detached pose towards the scene, whose terror, accordingly, "does not press too close" (Burke 42). Brian himself evokes the metaphorical terror tinged with delight of this scene, not necessarily for the witnesses, but for those immediately involved. As he has already spotted one of the two guys at another club, he threateningly mutters "He's not getting away this time" ("Episode 103") before following him onto the dance floor. Figuratively, danger hence becomes attributed and outsourced to the dance floor. As Michael's and Justin's reactions confirm, the dance floor is the place where the impeding danger becomes inextricably intertwined with pleasure for both onlookers and participants. It imposes itself as "a literally stunning invasion" (Phillips xxi) of one's cognitive faculties and "makes reasoning impossible […] because it is always that which is in excess of any kind of limit or boundary" (Phillips xxii).

Most apparently in this scene, the sublime here becomes visually intricately entwined with desire, as it is indeed produced by an excess of any (moral as well as material) boundary. The potential threesome depicts that Brian is, above all, excessive in his desire, which for him necessarily has to remain insatiable. Desire in this scene is highly visualised, with long shots of hands groping and tongues licking all across Brian's semi-exposed body. Together with the bird's eye view adopted by

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[153] Apart from astonishment, the comments of Brian's observers also, implicitly, reference the unknowable nature of any sublime event. Similar to the scene at large, which is governed by darkness, fog and general obscurity, Brian's nature is equally constructed as impenetrable. Emmett's and Michael's conversation regarding this scene evolves around Brian's pick-up techniques. "How does he do it? What does he say?", Emmett wonders, to which Michael merely responds: "We'll never know" ("Episode 103"). Interestingly, this references how Burke has latently defined the sublime, namely as "the impossibility of knowledge" (Phillips xxii). At the same time, Brian's mysterious character certainly contributes to or, conversely, is a major part of his coolness. Thus, one could also say that his cool attitude, which he notably adopts throughout the encounters on the dance floor, exudes an "ethos of the unknown" (*Laws*, 9), which Liu defines as a central function of cool aesthetics.

the camera, this, however, places the former active hunter in the place of the prey, who, willingly or not, surrenders to the dominance of others and allows them to take possession of his body. Similar to the above analysed seduction of Justin in his loft, Brian "slides in and out of gendered roles" (Johnson 294) with unparalleled ease. His dancing and seduction performances at the Babylon hence translate onto a personal level the contradictory forces at work in the gay club. As Alderson claims, "*Queer as Folk* presents the scene as an alienated and alienating environment at the same time and for the same reasons that it presents that scene as genuinely exciting" (80). Apparently, the dance floor in *Queer as Folk* provides its users with pleasure and pain simultaneously; it is, as Burke has it, "not an unmixed delight, but blended with no small uneasiness" (43). According to Lyotard, this is "the real sublime sentiment" ("Postmodernism", 81) in a postmodern context. Works of art are therefore supposed to create "an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain" (Lyotard, "Postmodernism", 81). On the visual level of *Queer As Folk*, the idea of the sublime as "such an odd mixture" (xxi), as Phillips reads Burke's premises in the *Enquiry*, becomes translated as cool juxtaposition: the Babylon makes excessive use of fast-changing video wall pictures, flashing lights and the combination of both trashy and extravagant decoration. In accordance with the general aesthetics employed by the gay club, the "delightful horror" (67) of the sublime moment produced by Brian will similarly become translated into and presented as cool hyper-reality.

This representation of the sublime as provoked by the figure of Brian is, again, tightly connected to his performative, fluctuating identity. By switching between the positions of predator and prey, he also, however, forces those responding to this hybrid role-playing to act in an accordant manner. Similar to their first encounter, this mutual switching becomes most apparent via the figure of Justin. Brian's willing adoption of, eventually, an anti-binaric gender equally allows Justin to exchange the rather passive role of the inexperienced seduced for that of an active onlooker and participant. Justin's first night at the Babylon spins this idea further. First of all, it is Justin who can, together with his friend Daphne, comfortably observe Brian, while the latter is chatting up his two guys on the dance floor. In fact, Justin looks down on him from the gallery, which might result in a further objectification of Brian. He is both incapable and, as a further complication of traditional binaries, unwilling to evade the "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 19), to which the gaze of other men subject him. Especially in the brief scene when Brian whispers sweet, or rather, naughty nothings into another dancer's ear, Justin's

perspective is fused with the camera's, so that he comes to impose his own gaze.

On the dance floor, Brian appears to be more at ease in the role of the active seducer, yet time and again he bats his eyes and moves seductively to attract the men's admiring and desiring gazes. Johnson reads these moments as a "change from the more active, masculine role of predator to the more passive, feminine role of sex object as he prepares to offer his body up" (294). While Brian may or may not be aware of Justin's immediate presence, it is nonetheless his behaviour which forces the teenager to become active beyond the empowerment provided by the gaze. Through a boost of glitter and a loud, colourful explosion in the background, turning the scenery into one of traditional sublimity, Justin descends the staircase onto the dance floor, buttoning open and finally flinging away his shirt so that the glitter comes to lie on his bare chest. In close vicinity to the soon-to-be threesome, he then again adopts the role of the passively looked at object, presenting himself to both Brian's and the other men's gaze as he, with closed eyes, seemingly loses himself in the music. Brian's conquests soon divert their attention from their former object of desire and focus on the younger and, by the logic of the gay youth cult, invariably more attractive Justin. It is only then that the latter seems to be desirable for Brian again, who accordingly pushes the other men away to have Justin all for himself. This brief moment opens up two important issues to be explored in greater depth. What makes Justin desirable are, as the underlying semantics of this scene suggest, two qualities: his youth and his (unconscious) ability to concentrate excessive desire, formerly distributed onto two bodies, in one person.

Feeling One's Wings

Let us start by tackling the inherently problematic concept of youthfulness, which, as implied above, appears to govern the processes at work in the queer club more than in any other area of life. Self-fashioning and world-making on the dance floor are intrinsically connected to the issue of perpetual youth, mirroring the issue of perpetual desire. Especially Brian is, as has already been suggested, defined by his craving for eternal youth. He depicts, as Poole observes, "the 'hedonistic', consuming representative of a gay stereotype that can never age" (165). Evidently, it is the story of Peter Pan, the child who will never grow up, which epitomises the myth of perpetual boyhood, and *Queer as Folk* explicitly references this. Brian's fear of ageing becomes fuelled by as well as represented in his infant son, who marks a new period in his life and threatens to turn the carefree party boy into a hopefully

responsible parent.[154] Accordingly, the first conversation with the mother of his newborn child, his friend Lindsay, evolves around the very same topic. When Lindsay refers to themselves as "finally grown-ups" ("Episode 101"), Brian cries out in mockery of Peter Pan: "Don't say that, Wendy. We'll never grow up!" ("Episode 101"). At the end of the show's narrative, Brian appears to have achieved this very goal. During their last dance at the ruin that used to be the glittery, sinful cave of Babylon, Michael tells him: "You will always be young, and you will always be beautiful. You're Brian Kinney, for fuck's sake!" ("Episode 513"). He thereby effectively equates youth with the name of Brian, and indeed constructs the latter as an icon of eternal adolescence, vigour and beauty.

In his analysis of "Boi Spectators and Boy Culture on Showtime's *Queer As Folk*" (2007), Bobby Noble implies that youthfulness and especially the ideal of the perpetual boy are intrinsically connected to coolness. Indeed, the two icons of eternal youth he elicits can equally be understood as cool icons:[155]

> Whereas old-guard actors like John Wayne wore masculinity on the outside as action, toughness, and phallic power, the Brando and Dean types internalize masculinity, converting social nonconformity and rebelliousness into inner torment and emotional excess, and adopting a look synonymous with failed manhood: perpetual boyhood. (156)

As has already been pointed out, Brian can be read as performing a particular form of "*private* rebellion" (Pountain and Robins 19, original emphasis) as well as displaying excess with regards to various issues. In that sense, his obsession with and eventual achievement of (metaphorical) eternal youth can be regarded as contributing vitally to his cool stance. Evidently, coolness can be defined by its seemingly natural attachment to youth and the young. The uncannily frequent early deaths of many popular cultural icons, such as the above evoked James Dean, seem to have contributed substantially to their later decoding as timeless arbitrators of coolness. Indeed, Pountain and Robins claim that "[o]ne component of Cool is certainly a retarded adolescence, inspired in part by a morbid fear of ageing" (21). Accordingly, Debbie, Michael's mother, relates: "I've known Brian since he was fourteen. He hasn't changed much. In fact, I'd say, he and Justin are pretty evenly matched" ("Episode 106"). In seeming agreement with Debbie, Poole hence describes Brian as "a man reluctant to grow up and thus living in an immature and regressively retrospective mode" (165). Brian, in other words, ages neither

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[154] Cf. Umberto Eco, who argues that events like marriage or child birth constitute further steps towards a fictional character's death, as "it would lay down another irreversible premise" (18). With regards to Superman, Eco hence claims that his ostensible lack of sexual interest in both female and male characters "protects him from the events, and therefore from the passing of time, connected with erotic ventures" (18). The birth of Brian's son is a prime example for the intra-diegetic depiction of a character's ageing.

[155] Not by coincidence, both Brando's and Dean's persona have also been treated as contemporary Byronic heroes. Cf., for instance, Stein, "Immortals", par.1.

materially ("You will always be beautiful") nor mentally, and will always remain a "retarded adolescent", or, to give it a less derogatory denotation, a perpetual boy.

A further aspect of perpetual boyhood as explored by Noble is the notion of gender hybridity, which again relates to what Johnson has described as Brian's "rejection of simplistic binaries" (301) and the subsequent construction of a "new hybrid sexuality" (293). Noble treats this as a central feature of the eternal youthfulness embodied by the figure of the boy: "Boyishness then constituted a gender-conflicted performance that signified at once failed masculinity and an excess of masculinity. The 'highly theatricalized' boy body is, thus, a queer body, anti-normative in orientation to the imperatives of masculinity, always already stylized" (156). Brian's obsession with youth, however, does not merely make him "boldly queer" (Johnson 293) with regards to his hybrid gender, but also relates to his queerness, or rather gayness, on a more direct level. As Poole points out, Brian is representative of "the subcultural gay lifestyle that especially relies on the notion of 'eternal' youthfulness" (165). The gay scene, of which the Babylon stands as both its symbol and intradiegetic epicentre, is generally understood as (and heavily criticised for) being dominated by a persistent youth cult, which seems to render nearly invisible all those who cannot live up to the maxims of being young, beautiful and (sexually) vigorous. The queer club hence becomes the central place where Brian's youthfulness is acted out, tested out and sought after night after night. The for some cruel repercussions of the gay youth cult are most feasibly played out on the dance floor, which demands youthfulness in movement, looks and sexual performance. When Brian engages in what Buckland terms the "operation, circulation, and exchange of being fabulous" (37), in short, the fashioning of the self, he invariably also performs himself as young, and, by inextricable connection, desirable.

Evidently, these semantics are also at work when he seduces and allows himself to be seduced, as the case of the potential threesome suggests. This makes obvious that youth is intrinsically connected to desire, in terms of its perpetual presence and its centrality for the character of Brian. Brian both desires youth and the young, which is epitomised in his teenage lover Justin. One reason for Justin's successful ensnaring of Brian is, apart from the materially youthful body he offers to display, his embodiment of the unattainable desire for eternal youthfulness. In a later instance, Brian mutters, "I thought I'd recapture my lost youth" ("Episode 122"), consciously conflating the teenager with the abstract quality of youth. Thus, the figure of Justin might be understood as embodying Brian's "desire for excess" (16),

which, according to Freeman, describes one of the central requirements for the sublime. In this case, it is a desire for transcending the limitations of the (ageing) human body, which Brian's predecessor Manfred scorns accordingly:

> But we, who name ourselves its [the world's] sovereigns, we,
> Half dust, half deity, alike unfit
> To sink or soar, with our mix'd essence make
> A conflict of its element, and breathe
> The breath of degradation and of pride,
> Contending with low wants and lofty will,
> Till our mortality predominates […].
> (*Manfred* 1.2.39-45)

Since Brian's desire for perpetual boyhood, as Noble points out, is tightly connected to his hybrid body, his subscription to the supposedly devastating youth cult also suggests a desire for the excess of bodily and figurative binaries.

This opens up the second issue implicated by the scene, namely Justin's ability to present himself as a viable embodiment of excessive sexual desire. The scene ends with Justin and Brian dancing, hips locked, in the middle of the club, while Brian's previous conquests seem to be completely forgotten. What Justin here performs in order to, quite knowingly, attract Brian's attention is both unattainability and desire. Brian's desire is conceived of as excessive, as it is, in this scene, directed towards two subjects at once. Furthermore, this also constitutes an excess of, because deviance from, generally agreed on moral norms. Freeman proposes that the desire for excess in whatever area should be read as representative of "not just the description of, but the wish for, sublimity" (16). By making it clear to Brian and the audience that these men both desire him, Justin serves as a locus of even greater desire, presenting a distillation of both guys. In short, Brian desires two men who desire Justin. His logical reaction, it appears, is to cut out the middle men. In that sense, Brian can project his desire, in its most excessive and overwhelming form, onto Justin. With regards to "Justin's performance of 'boy subjectivity'" (Noble 156), which fuels Brian's desire for him, Noble argues that his body opens up a "space of excess" (156) for both intra- and extradiegetic audiences. It is in such spaces of excess that a viable postmodern sublime can appear.

As has been pointed out before, Brian's "arts of existence" (Foucault, *Pleasure*, 10-11) involve a continual, yet never to be accomplished search for excess, which, following Freeman's interpretation, reveals a latent "desire for the sublime" (31). It is the ultimate unattainability and concurrent excess of this desire which has the power, as Burke terms it, "to overpower the soul, to suspend its actions, and to fill it with terror" (75) in a moment of sublimity. Via Justin's

(apparently perpetual) youthful body and the infinite desire he allows to be projected on it, Brian employs him as a material "space of excess" (Noble 156), which allows him to realise that both of these excessive desires can neither be contained nor effectively grasped. This mirrors Lyotard's definition of sublime art as one that presents us with and makes us aware of the fact that, ultimately, presentation and mental cognition is necessarily forever deferred. This, as Lyotard has it, produces Burke's "delightful horror" (67) in a postmodern form: "the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept" (Lyotard, "Postmodernism", 81). Neither the sublime nor the desire for it can ever be contained in boundaries. Hence, they are both, by extension, ungraspable and inconsumable. By concentrating all his excessive desires on Justin, Brian allows both himself and the audience to grasp the underlying contradiction and revel in the pleasurable shiver this revelation produces. In that sense, Brian makes obvious that he, ultimately, wants the want. He might strive for fulfilment, while at the same time eschewing it. Thus, his performance on the dance floor further highlights the notions of paradox and contradiction and the centrality of "such an odd mixture" (Phillips xxi) for the production of the sublime sentiment. It is vital that Brian's excessive desire overwhelms the mind both with regards to its infinity and its underlying paradox of never being satisfied despite the perpetual want. It is vital, because "hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness", as Burke argues, "which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds" (58).

In accordance with the cool posture necessary to achieve this very effect of greatness, the revelation of the underlying paradox of unattainable desire is represented via cool aesthetics. The scene of Justin and Brian dancing together, indicative of the sublime on a number of levels, is represented and enhanced via its eventual projection onto the club's video wall. Only during the episode's last seconds, we sense that the whole scene we have just witnessed and which has been observed by various characters has also been reproduced on the video screen, in front of which Michael is standing. The last shot of Brian and Justin could thus be understood as a mise-en-abyme, because we see their representation within another representation. As already pointed out with regards to the queer club, the Babylon produces "a hyperreal feel" (Fraser 157) by employing juxtaposition on both its material and formal level. This references Rice's concept of cool as a (rhetorical) strategy "for creating associations and emotional responses out of the combination of unlike words and images" ("Writing", 223). It is this mixing of various

levels of representation and its translation into, accordingly, "cool" new media that make the club the only appropriate place for Brian to put his rules of conduct, the eternal search for excess, into practice. Liu observes that "[w]holly improvisational cool may seem", it "has something deeply to do with 'technique', whose efficient alignment with technology has been the premise of both industrialism and postindustrialism" (*Laws*, 294). On the dance floor, Brian's dancing and seduction techniques are employed for the sublime effect, which accordingly becomes (re)presented via the use of cool high-tech equipment and digital media. Hence, the sublime of the dance floor is visualised in the aesthetics of electronic culture and high (entertainment) technology.[156]

However, the representation of the scene on the video-screen not only reveals the sublime's reliance on cool technology, but could in itself be understood as further contributing to the sublime effect. In fact, Fredric Jameson detects "a postmodern or technological sublime" (37) in the "networks of the reproductive process" (37). What is sublime in today's post-industrial society is high technology. The technology of contemporary society is, however, "mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer a representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp" (Jameson 37-38). The representation of the above analysed scene on the club's video wall, in slight distortion of the "original" image, hence contributes to its sublime qualities. Thus, the prior scene in the Babylon as well as its repetition on the video wall represent how the postmodern sublime and contemporary notions of cool are closely entwined and, in fact, enhance each other.

Conclusion: To Make It Perfectly Queer

By way of conclusion, I want to focus in greater depth on the already implied parallels and common processes involved in the concepts of the sublime, the queer and modern-day cool. As the character of Brian and his apparently effortless juggling with any of these notions suggests, there is a great amount of overlapping and relationality to be perceived in the way these are generally conceptualised. Just like contemporary notions of cool, queer "means everything and nothing at once" (Rice, "Cool", par. 2) and just like the sublime, it exudes a "terrible uncertainty" (Burke 58). Indeed, the manifold parallels could be understood as revealing that

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[156] Furthermore, Brian's above described desire for youth and his embrace of the gay youth cult is also appropriately depicted via notions of cool. As has been pointed out, cool bears an especially stringent connection to the young, as do new media and technology. For instance, Daniel Harris gives the example of the "cyberspace rebel whose coolness inheres in his graceful mastery of machines, his effortless ability to crack the codes of ATMs and hack into his high school's computer" (42). Hence, the issue of youthfulness is also reflected on the formal level by the above mentioned cool aesthetics conjured up by the Babylon and its use of high technology.

both the concept of the sublime and that of cool bear a strong potential for being conceived of as an inherently queer aesthetic.

As Freeman has pointed out, the sublime is informed by underlying instabilities and inconsistencies and ultimately "resists categorization" (2). It blurs long-established binaries and is "always that which is in excess of any kind of limit or boundary" (xxii), as Phillips observes. Hence, it seems to be, above all, their common agenda which allows the sublime to be brought into the vicinity of queer. Just like the sublime in Burke's later writings is implicitly conceived of as the marginal and the liminal, which brings about chaos, anarchy and destruction, so queer is understood as a strategy to "dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire" (Jagose 3). As an interesting aside, both the sublime and queer have transcended their traditional disciplines (the study of aesthetics and sexuality respectively) and are employed for the analysis of a wide range of cultural practices.[157]

Likewise, there are stringent connections to the postmodern aesthetic of cool, which especially the character of Brian and his promotion of exactly these parallels reflect. "[P]art of queer's semantic clout, part of its political efficacy, depends on its resistance to definition" (1), Annemarie Jagose argues, and David Halperin notes that "*[t]here is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*" (62, italics in the original). A similar claim might, and in fact has been made about cool. Pountain and Robins for instance admit that "[t]he next worst sin is to do precisely what we are doing here, namely attempt to define and analyze Cool" (24). Similarly, Rice, who observes that "[t]he question 'What is Cool?' […] escapes answer" ("Cool", par.2), has shown that its effect is produced by mixing and combining formerly distinct and supposedly incompatible qualities. This results in a queer hybridity, as the analysis of Brian's gender has demonstrated. Furthermore, contemporary discourses on cool suggest that it is not a quality you have or are (despite the frequent exclamation "That's cool!"), but that it is much rather performed and quite carefully constructed. Evidently, queer works along the same lines, as it is fundamentally conceived of as a "non-identity" (Halperin 62).

With regards to this chapter, one could further argue that in heteronormative discourse, "excess is thematized as a 'blocking agent'" (Freeman 25). The queer world, which is created at the Babylon via dancing, seduction and similar strategies, can be understood as yielding a genuine hybridity by embracing rather than eschewing this excess. As the above analysis has shown, Brian employs his infinite

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[157] Evidently, queer theory has nowadays pervaded academic study in general and proves to be a highly useful analytical tool for a variety of issues and areas of research. The notion of the sublime, on the other hand, has been employed in psychoanalytical studies, general cultural theory and feminist studies, to name just a few.

desire to display a "new, hybrid sexuality" (293), as Johnson calls it. Indeed, his desire for excess makes him doubly queer, because he not only revels in same-sex, but supposedly even more deviant sexual pleasures, which the intended threesome reflects. His resulting bold queerness is, first of all, tightly connected to the typical ambiguous appeal of his Byronic character. Furthermore, his hybridity both contributes to and is informed by his display of coolness. Brian links this coolness to queerness by promoting and selling the latter in the guise of the former. What brings about the sublime on the dance floor is exactly his cool queerness, which is consequently represented and envisaged in the accordant hyperreal manner. Thus, the Babylon is not merely a particularly fascinating example of those queer lifewords where "being fabulous was hard currency" (Buckland 36). Much more so, Poole suggests thinking of the Babylon as an example of heterotopia, which, according to Michel Foucault, is "outside of all places" ("Spaces", 24). As a counter-site, an "effectively enacted utopia" (Foucault, "Spaces", 24"), the gay club manages to provide "a space of queerness" (Poole 162) for the sublime to be, literally, projected, danced to and revelled in. And it is these moments of apparently rare postmodern sublimity which serve to prove that there is, indeed, nought as cool as folk.

CONCLUSION

Cool rules, and so do its material representatives in the fortress that we understand as today's popular culture. Truly paradoxically, the leadership of today's heroes, the kings and queens of contemporary film and television, is democratically sanctioned: it is the people who attest to their royalty and who hand them their globus cruciger and sceptre in the much smarter and handier guise of black shades and fast cars. A cool ruler's ermine coat bears a label by either Tommy Hilfiger or American Apparel and comes in a considerably darker shade, so that tyrannical rage necessarily must make way for royal nonchalance. Terrifying and yet irresistibly attractive as the celebrated new sovereigns are, their subjects and, oftentimes, simultaneous creators sense that deep within their encompassing novelty, it's all been done before. The shutter Queen Kathryn's unatoned cruelty exposes her voluntary victims to, the awe Prince Edward's breath-taking rebelliousness inspires in every onlooker and the colossal magnetism a King like Kinney enacts on common mortals feel uncannily familiar. Cool and its rulers, whose heritage in Lord Byron's protagonists make them not so contemporary after all, reign by making use of and at the same time inducing moments of sublimity. What seems to be most valued by their audience is a novelty brought about by a combination of long established and universally acknowledged ingredients. In other words, what I will propose in these concluding remarks is that the cool rulers' subjects value a sublime effect produced by postmodern processes of collage and pastiche, thereby creating one of the most precious royal jewels the fortress has to offer.

At this point, it thus appears pertinent to place the preceding discussion into the broader context of postmodern theory and examine closely the inferences that might be drawn from the preceding analysis. The foregoing study of the three primary texts suggests that the relation between the sublime and modern-day notions of cool as well as the according use of characters illustrating this relationality might be treated as an instance of postmodern reworking. This implication is in line with the frequently staked argument that, far from constituting a distinct period with new sensibilities and epistemological concerns, postmodernity ought rather be treated as "a situation in which we are not sure there is so coherent a thing as an 'age', or zeitgeist or 'system' or 'current situation' any longer" (xi), as Fredric Jameson describes the cultural logic of late capitalism. Rather than being unambiguously delineated by unique, novel art forms which supposedly characterise any age, postmodernism appears to be dominated by processes of recycling,

reworking and restoration. Everything, as Jameson puts it more bluntly, is "rewrapped in the luxurious trappings of their putative successor" (xii). However, the very critics of these recycling processes will have to recognise that this new wrapping of earlier gifts occurs in highly sophisticated styles outdoing by lengths the original layers.

The applications of cool aesthetics analysed in this thesis can be considered a case in point for these processes of reworking. They are, in other words, results of Jameson's professed sophisticated rewrapping. Far from constituting an utterly novel aesthetic category, modern-day notions of cool indeed reveal a rich ancestry, both in terms of the way cool is theoretically conceptualised as well as practically employed in contemporary popular texts. The pervasiveness of the Byronic hero as a major cool figure in today's popular culture provides ample proof for these processes of recycling. Whereas his popularity has remained unharmed or, in another explanatory attempt, has been successfully rekindled, the reasons for this obvious appeal appear to have changed significantly. The insights so far gained in the present thesis suggest that these reasons might well be traced in the shifting aesthetic attitudes of Romantic and postmodern audiences. The rewrapping in which the sublime appears seems to have been modified in a variety of ways. Above all, the preceding analysis has shown that accessories, styles, looks and attitudes associated with the creation of a cool posture are employed to create a moment of sublimity. In accordance with the workings of contemporary cool, sublime aesthetics become attributed to the cool character rather than a scenery or landscape. Consequently, it is the character, i.e. the Byronic hero, who displays the cool characteristics crucial for the provocation of the sublime. These characteristics include, above all, contradiction, unknowability, excess, and resistance to dominant discourses. What is thus produced is a sentiment traditionally associated with the experience of a sublime moment, which Byron's protagonists, in the original context of European Romantic poetry, never fail to provoke in their readership.

As a first step, the foregoing analysis has thus attempted to provide a persuasive account for the popularity of Byronic characters in contemporary US-American film and television. The close scrutiny of the chosen primary texts was intended to refute and counter previous arguments based on rather abstract and generalised explanations for the figure's pervasiveness in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century popular culture. Rather, the Byronic hero's appeal to a postmodern audience appears to be intrinsically linked to dominant aesthetic tendencies. His intimate relationship to modern-day cool, a posture, look and

emotional style he is more often than not depicted to display *par excellence*, apparently constitutes a central motivation informing his use as a major contemporary character type. In accordance with Carrol L. Fry, I furthermore argue that his coolness vitally contributes to his association with "many of the values of postmodernism" (277), including the above elicited sublime characteristics of contradiction and ambivalence, uncertainty of ultimate truths and alienation from conventional beliefs. *Cruel Intentions*, *Twilight* and *Queer as Folk* have thus shown how their respective Byronic heroine or hero might well stand in "as a contemporary model for postmodern creatures of the night" (Fry 277) by displaying the outward as well as moral attributes of cool. Above all, it seems to be their excess of binary oppositionalities which establishes the scrutinised characters as apt creators of sublimity. Arguably, this is an excess which acts as one of the major stances in postmodern theory.

Secondly, then, the examination of these Byronic figures sheds light on the specific processes of reworking, recycling and cultural translation involved in the relation between the sublime and notions of cool. Evidently, a central element in the sophisticated rewrapping the sublime and its representation via the Byronic hero had to undergo is its translation from a European elitist into a US-American popular context. The most influential theoretical treatises on sublime aesthetics by the British Edmund Burke and the German Immanuel Kant testify to the specifically European perspective taken on, as do Lord Byron's literature and Romantic visual arts intent on portraying sublime landscapes. Hence, it is worth noting how in the preceding analysis Byronic characters, firmly grounded in European literary and cultural tradition, are not only employed in US-American texts, but become tightly linked to a literally *American Cool* (1994), as suggested by Peter Stearns:

> Cool. The concept is distinctively American and permeates almost every aspect of contemporary American culture. From Kool cigarettes and the Snoopy cartoon's Joe Cool to *West Side Story* ("Keep cool, boy.") and urban slang ("Be cool. Chill out."), the idea of cool, in its many manifestations, has seized a central place in the American imagination. (1)

Despite the nowadays widespread appeal of coolness well beyond the United States, the concept's (African) American roots and its initial perception as a US-American rather than a global phenomenon is not only acknowledged by Stearns, but by almost all the theorists quoted in earlier chapters. Hence, Dick Pountain and David Robins may well propose that "cool is by no means solely an American phenomenon" (12). Expressively, however, the alleged evidence they provide to support this claim forces them to qualify their argument. When outlining cool's

coming-of-age, Pountain and Robins must concede that

> its modern manifestation was incubated among black American jazz musicians during the first decade of the twentieth century, before being discovered by hard-boiled crime writers and Hollywood scriptwriters during the '30s and '40s, and finally injected into white youth culture during the '50s by Elvis Presley and rock'n'roll. (12)

Following this enumeration, modern-day notions of cool apparently not merely originate in a US-American context. Even more significantly, the concept of coolness seems to be composed of constituents like "rock'n'roll", "hard-boiled crime" and "Hollywood", which are characteristically associated with a US-American, and therefore cool, way of life. Thus, one part of the processes involved in the reworking of a Romantic sublime into contemporary cool aesthetics appears to be the translation from European high-brow to American mass and popular texts. The transformation thus also occurs in terms of cultural contexts. Additionally, the history of cool appears to be dominated by processes of collage, cultural borrowing and exchange, which further highlights its status as a dominant postmodern aesthetic. In accordance with the strategies of pastiche and nostalgia, art forms identified as "neutral practice", "linguistic mask" and "blank parody" (Jameson 17) and regarded as expressive of this "period of slackening" and the "end to experimentation" (Lyotard, "Postmodernism", 71), cool presents itself as resulting from, yet at the same time initiating further processes of cultural recycling and reworking.

Apart from the translation of cultural contexts, the analysed primary texts in this thesis permit further inferences concerning the actual nature and degree of reworking in the contemporary use of cool aesthetics. First of all, Kathryn and her version of a feminine sublime elucidate how the notion of excess and transgression of material, cognitive and moral boundaries is central to both traditional sublimity and postmodern coolness. Her character and *Cruel Intentions* in general highlight the affiliation of cool to concepts of displeasure, such as terror, fear and death, which Burke has defined as utterly crucial for the production of any sublime moment. The closely analysed, notorious kiss scene between Kathryn and Cecile accordingly constitutes such a moment. It visually presents how a scene effecting postmodern sublimity is prone to be decoded by contemporary audiences: the scene is described and understood as "cool" (*Cruel Intentions*), an effect which is evidently inspired by the detached attitude and emotional coldness of Kathryn.

Secondly, the sublime moment in *Twilight* is equally reliant on coolness, which is expressed materially by Edward's cool skin. The glittering, icy texture of this skin in bright sunlight contributes to his Byronic status as an outsider and someone

who is, in this case quite literally, "[m]ad – bad – and dangerous to know" (Lamb, quoted in Rogers 298). In that respect, it contributes to the simultaneous attraction and repulsion, threat and promise exuded by Edward's personality and the resulting sublime effect. This effect culminates in the conversion, which is, as a popular metaphor in monster narratives, equally informed by contradictory undercurrents. In accordance with Lyotard's definition of a postmodern sublime as one which necessarily has to remain "unpresentable" ("Postmodernism", 78), the act of blood-sucking does not occur in the text. As the analysis of Bella's almost-conversion has, however, shown, its sublimity is eventually imagined via contemporary notions of cool. Contrary to the usual portrayal of moments of passion and pain in terms of heat, *Twilight* imagines the conversion as detached, nihilistic and, ultimately, cool. Its analysis thus reveals how the sublime in this text relies heavily on cool's etymological roots in literal coldness and the accordant attitudes displayed by the Byronic vampire.

In *Queer as Folk*, finally, the sublime becomes represented in a similar way. Brian's gender hybridity not only contributes to the Byronic hero's already established ambiguous attraction, but also reveals how his character, similar to Kathryn's, centres upon the notion of excess. This is best played out on the dance floor of the Babylon, where the sublime is created due to the heightened significance attached to excess. The desire promoted and exerted in the queer club is thus informed by paradox and excess of boundaries alike. The revelation of these premises results in "an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain" (Lyotard, "Postmodernism", 81), which, similar to that in *Twilight*, appears to be closely related to notions of cool. Via the presentation on the club's video wall, the sublime scene is brought into close vicinity of and relationality with contemporary notions of cool. It is hence not merely produced by Brian's cool attitude and his embrace of the gay youth cult, but also reproduced via cool hi-tech and new media equipment. These not merely translate onto a formal level the dance club's production of "juxtaposition, counterpoints, polyrhythms" (14), as Fiona Buckland terms it, but also contribute to the accordant sublime effect. Furthermore, Brian's promotion of queer desire also provides insights into the enticing parallels and relationalities that can be found between the sublime, the queer and contemporary notions of cool.

The undertaken comparison of a specifically Romantic aesthetic category with its supposed heir in the twenty-first century does, however, not only elucidate strategies of reworking, which are central to the postmodern (artistic) landscape. What is more, these comparisons also shed new light on processes of periodisation

and such apparently stably defined concepts as Romanticism. While the preceding analysis suggests that the sublime reinstates itself as a major sensibility within contemporary popular texts, I would nonetheless refrain from wholeheartedly supporting arguments like Patricia Waugh's, who proposes to treat the Romantic period "as a 'beginning' for Postmodernism" (4) due to the perceptible continuation of aestheticist thinking. As the primary texts scrutinised in this study suggest, the sublime is certainly neither employed naïvely nor traditionally. Its apparent relation to modern-day notions of cool can be understood as resulting in an aloofness from its contextual origins in Romantic literature. Again, this is perfectly demonstrated by the figure of the Byronic hero: as the foregoing study suggests, the reasons for his appeal to contemporary viewers differ decidedly from those responsible for the very same attraction exerted on the original, Romantic audience. The mere production of terror, which, according to Burke, "is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime" (54), would not be sufficient to secure his wide-spread popularity in contemporary texts. It is only through the character's use of coolness via its most prominent insignia and styles that the Byronic hero can live up to Fry's above quoted postulation. This further implies that the sublime effect in today's postmodern landscape is necessarily created via a cool surface and hence differs in varying degrees from its counterpart in Romantic texts.

While the current situation might hence not necessarily be regarded in the way that Waugh suggests, as a "late-flowering Romanticism" (3), the preceding analysis nonetheless yields some valuable implications with regards to literary and cultural periodisation. To resort to the already introduced insights gained by Queer Theory, instances of the sublime in postmodern texts might be understood as revealing the potential for ruptures, incoherencies and inconsistencies. Not only with regards to political systems, as Burke argued, does the sublime hence assist in the undermining of supposedly fixed binaries. Dominant perceptions of both literary periods and aesthetic sensibilities might be contested and reconsidered to make way for alternative explanations. This entails that allegedly stable periods like the eighteenth century, whose second half was dominated by Romantic thought as exemplified in Kant's and Burke's theories, can be constructed in utterly novel ways. Hence, today's widespread use of the sublime in popular film and television does argue for the existence of strong parallels between Romanticism and postmodernism. Accordingly, Alan Liu, whose analysis of *The Laws of Cool* (2004) proved to be highly valuable for the aims of this thesis, argues that "interpreters like Habermas or Lyotard implicitly recommend measuring the history of the new that is

postmodernism against the history of the new that was Romanticism" ("Remembering", 275). In seeming agreement with Waugh's critique of the "radical break theory" (4), Liu disapproves of the "narrowness of the 'modern versus postmodern' debate" ("Remembering", 273). What he suggests as an antidote is to explore "a particular episode in such history: what might be called the 'Romanticism of postmodernism'" ("Remembering", 272). While one might thus not necessarily conceive of a wide-spread continuation of thought and aesthetics since the Romantic era, the latter has certainly introduced a new sensibility, whose repercussions are still traceable today. This appears to be what Waugh describes as "a tradition of specifically *aestheticist* modern thought" (3, italics in the original). Hence, Romanticism, as the results of my analysis suggest, can be regarded as the initiation or launch of novel aesthetic tendencies, which have had a notable influence until today.

Both Waugh's and Liu's argument seem to mirror that of the leading Romantic scholar M.H. Abrams, who as early as in the 1960s described the Romantic era as "the cataclysmic coming into being of the world to which we are now becoming fairly accustomed" (76). The apparent, manifest repercussions of Romantic thought might hence be considered as newly reinvigorated via the intermingling with supposedly novel aesthetics. While Liu argues that "the list of themes that Romanticism and postmodernism share is surprisingly replete" ("Remembering", 275), the first item in his subsequent list is indeed nothing less than the sublime. The analysis of the latter, the propounded endeavour to look "closely *into* those aesthetics to descry their internal dynamic and external affiliations" (Liu, "Remembering", 271, original emphasis) is what the present thesis was intent on achieving. Consequently, the foregoing analysis sought to contribute to the detection of ever more manifold parallels and unearth the strategies involved in their creation. In view of that, it is expedient to recognise that "[s]o many and so important are these shared problems, and so often do interpreters of postmodernism allude to Romanticism, that there is every reason to think the two epochs intersect in more than an accidental way" (Liu, "Remembering", 275). One of these more than accidental intersections might well be located in the figure of the Byronic hero, whose current pervasiveness augments the necessity of an interview between postmodernism and Romanticism.

Allegedly, such an interview has to be conceived of as a progressing endeavour rather than a task destined for quick completion. By common agreement, the situation we find ourselves in today is doomed to be only thoroughly grasped,

analysed and decomposed well after it has been replaced by its follower. Similarly, the notion of cool might well have gained increasing prominence over the last decades, or, to use a phrase introduced further above, have eventually come of age, but possibly not yet to its full bloom. Especially the field of youth and counter cultures, from which cool originates, is a fast-changing one. As history has shown, it is highly receptive to and productive of emerging cultural trends and tendencies.[158] The much commented on characteristics of cool might well undergo further significant adaptation and transformation, thus outliving their alleged Romantic ancestry. Equally, the potential of the Byronic hero as a major representative of postmodern aesthetic and "values" (if that, in fact, were not a paradox in itself) seems to be far from exhausted. In the course of time spent working on this project, many more contemporary versions of Byron's protagonists have made their debut on the big screen.[159] Invariably though, coolness appears to remain central to the character conceptualisation of the contemporary Byronic hero. Its specific effects and the guises in which it presents itself to audiences to come might, however, change considerably over time and is thus well worth observing in greater detail. At the same time, it remains to be examined how the ancestry of the sublime and its conceptualisations by Kant and Burke continue to shape, influence and instigate allegedly novel aesthetics as well as (sub, alternative) cultural contexts. As the preceding analysis suggests, there is a wide field of non-Gothic popular texts, especially in the field of film and television, in which the sublime emerges in both its traditional and postmodern form. Similarly, Lyotard's predication of an elitist postmodern sublime should prove to be vastly inspiring for researching similar phenomena in visual arts beyond the conventional high-brow/low-brow distinction. After all, it is the dismissal of this and similar binaries for which postmodernism has come to be dreaded, celebrated and cherished. Especially the methodologies and strategies proposed by Queer Theory lend themselves to attack and diffuse binaric oppositionalities in the study of a postmodern sublime. Furthermore, the enticing amount of overlapping and commonality perceptible between the latter notion and those of queer and cool, unfortunately well exceeding the scope of this thesis, provide ample ground for further analysis.

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[158] According to Alan Liu, cool as the dominant aesthetic stance of today's corporate culture did not exclusively emerge from counter culture, but was produced between the three poles of mainstream – subculture – counterculture of the cultural triangle. However, it was counterculture which "added its own style (a whole alternative lifestyle) to the mix" (*Laws*, 132) and, eventually, "incorporated within itself the entirety of that baseline" (*Laws*, 136) of the original triangle. Hence, counter culture provided the means for cool to become the dominant attitude within postindustrial society, as its non-conformity was the most cherished style of the era.

[159] Including, for instance, the protagonists of *House* (2004-) and *Californication* (2007-).

"The only true Romantics today", Liu observes by way of conclusion, "are those who are 'cool'" ("Remembering", 275). The only true rulers, one might add, are those who succeed in merging the one with the other. Postmodernism, to resort to the supposition this thesis has started with, is far from a literary, cultural or artistic period of its own. It is, consistent with the preceding analysis of cultural reworking, constituted and informed by the wholesale, unapologetic recycling of well-established fashions, styles and techniques. This, as Peter Barry has been quoted at the outset, makes meaning contingent, truth provisional and human nature a myth. By eternal deferral, such a mantra becomes in itself a prime instance of the provisional truths of postmodernism. Another one of these strange and provisional truths, however, seems to be effortlessly encapsulated in an even simpler phrasing: the most "delightful horror" (Burke 67) arises under the rule of the cool, for the Romantic, the postmodern, and beyond.

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Index

Abstract

Originating in Lord Byron's poetic closet dramas like *Manfred* (1817) and *The Corsair* (1813), the figure of the Byronic hero, "a man proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection" (T.B. Macaulay) proves to be all-pervasive in contemporary popular culture. My thesis aims to contribute to the long-established analysis of Byronic film and television characters by explaining their widespread appeal via the display of particular aesthetics. Concretely, I argue that Byron's original heroes captured Romantic sensibilities by exposing their readers to the typical effect of the sublime, famously defined by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant as the paradoxical blending of simultaneous horror and delight. For contemporary audiences, as I intend to demonstrate, the Romantic sublime reappears in the concept of cool. I understand the notion of cool as the dominant attitude, style and aesthetic norm of today's post-industrial society. Drawing on theories of a postmodern sublime by Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson, I will regard cool as resulting from sophisticated reworkings of its Romantic precursor, produced via the postmodern strategies of cultural translation, collage and pastiche, and thus central to the contemporary Byronic character. On a more general basis, my thesis thus supports the widespread argument that Romanticism and postmodernism share a wide range of themes and concerns. These manifold parallels appear to be far from accidental. Via my examination of aesthetic tendencies, I thus intend to further the already progressing interview between the Romantic and the postmodern.

My analysis focuses on three recent manifestations of the Byronic hero in US-American film and television. Kathryn Merteuil from the 1999 movie *Cruel Intentions* will be treated as rare instance of a Byronic heroine. Via her closeness to excess, she perpetuates a feminine version of the traditionally phallocentric sublime, which is provoked by her invariably maintained cool attitude. Secondly, I will analyse the Byronic vampire Edward Cullen from the novel adaptation *Twilight* (2008). The vampire's act of blood-sucking and the thus initiated conversion of his victim will be read as a prime moment of sublimity, which the movie accordingly imagines in terms of cool aesthetics. Finally, I will focus on the Byronic hybridity of Brian Kinney from the Showtime series *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005). It is on the dance floor of his much cherished club Babylon that the sublime moment of paradox and unattainable desire is played out. This, in turn, becomes literally projected in a cool style, exploiting the affinity of modern-day cool to youth culture, new media and high technology.

Zusammenfassung

Die von Lord Byron in seinen Dramen wie *Manfred* (1817) oder *The Corsair* (1813) geschaffene Figur des Byronschen Helden, von T.B Macaulay beschrieben als „a man proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow, […] implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection", ist in der zeitgenössischen Populärkultur allgegenwärtig. Meine Diplomarbeit möchte zu der etablierten Analyse Byronscher Film- und TV-Charaktere beitragen. Deren umfassende Anziehungskraft auf ein heutiges Publikum führe ich auf ihre Ästhetik zurück. Ich argumentiere konkret, dass Byrons Helden die romantische Sensibilität einfingen, indem sie ihre Leserschaft dem typischen Effekt des Erhabenen, von Edmund Burke und Immanuel Kant definiert als eine paradoxe Mischung aus gleichzeitigem Horror und Entzückung, aussetzten. Für das zeitgenössische Publikum erscheint das Erhabene der Romantik im Konzept des Coolen. Der Begriff des Coolen wird von mir als die dominante Geisteshaltung und Ästhetik der heutigen postindustriellen Gesellschaft verstanden. In Bezugnahme auf Theorien eines postmodernen Erhabenen von Jean-François Lyotard und Fredric Jameson betrachte ich den Begriff des Coolen als das Resultat differenzierter Überarbeitungen seines romantischen Vorgängers. Es wird durch die postmodernen Strategien der kulturellen Translation, der Collage und der Pastiche produziert und ist damit zentral für zeitgenössische Byronsche Charaktere. Meine Diplomarbeit unterstützt damit den weit verbreiteten Standpunkt, dass Romantik und Postmoderne eine Vielzahl an Themen und Anliegen teilen. Diese mannigfaltigen Parallelen scheinen mehr als zufällig zu sein. Durch meine Untersuchung ästhetischer Tendenzen beabsichtige ich, das bereits fortschreitende Interview zwischen dem Romantischen und dem Postmodernen voranzutreiben.

Meine Analyse konzentriert sich auf drei Manifestationen des Byronschen Helden im jüngsten US-amerikanischem Film und Fernsehen. Kathryn Merteuil aus *Eiskalte Engel* (1999) ist das seltene Beispiel einer Byronschen Heldin. Durch ihre Nähe zum Exzess verbreitet sie eine feministische Version des traditionell phallozentrischen Erhabenen, die durch ihre coole Haltung hervorgerufen wird. Zweitens wird der Byronsche Vampir Edward Cullen aus der Romanadaptation *Twilight* (2008) analysiert. Das Blutsaugen des Vampirs und die Konvertierung seines Opfers ist ein erhabener Moment, welchen der Film durch coole Ästhetik darstellt. Zuletzt konzentriere ich mich auf Brian Kinney aus der Serie *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005). Auf der Tanzfläche des Babylon entsteht ein Moment des Erhabenen durch Paradoxien und unerreichbares Begehren. Dieser wird in einem coolen Stil projiziert, was die Affinität des Coolen zu neuen Technologien nachempfindet.

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