

“The Werther-pistol killed me!”
 Understanding Ulrich Plenzdorf’s Novel
Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.
 as a Cult Book

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“The Werther-pistol killed me”

This loose paraphrasing and combining of Edgar Wibeau’s words alludes in a succinct and amusing way, via the name Werther and the use of teen slang, to the two primary¹ models for Plenzdorf’s novel *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.*, namely, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s 1774 novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* and J.D. Salinger’s 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, both of which were cult books in their own right. The question before us is, therefore: What are the characteristics of a cult book? More specifically, what are the characteristics that make *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* a cult book?

To understand what makes a cult book, it is important first to understand how the word cult originated and what meanings and uses it has had. According to *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, the word cult originated from the Latin *cultus* meaning “care” or “adoration”; *cultus* is also the past participle of *colere* meaning “to cultivate.” The definition of cult encompasses formal religious veneration, a system of religious beliefs and ritual, as well as a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious. In addition, cult is defined as a great devotion to a person, idea, or thing, especially such devotion regarded as a literary or intellectual fad and/or the small circle of persons united by devotion or allegiance to an artistic or intellectual movement or figure.

To further narrow the criteria for a cult book, it will perhaps be insightful to look into the characteristics of a religious cult, as John J. Collins does in his book *The Cult Experience*. In chapter one, “The Concept of Cults,” Collins draws on anthropological, sociological and religious studies in an attempt to establish defining criteria for the

concept of religious cults. To summarize Collins, religious cults represent a sharp break with society and are centered around a person with great personal force or charisma. Cults seek mystical experiences, i.e., personal encounters with higher realities; they are often small in size, short-lived and of local character. Cults are concerned with the problems of the individual rather than those of the larger world — although, Collins notes, some cults are concerned with saving the world or building a better society than with the lesser needs of any individual. But in either case, rejection and criticism of the status quo are at the heart of the cult experience. Finally, cults involve innovation and represent something new from outside the boundaries of the establishment.

If we consider these criteria and apply them not only to religious cults, but to literary cults and cult books in general and to the reception of Plenzdorf's work *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* in particular, we will find many of the same characteristics. It is, however, important to distinguish between types of cult books and types of cult responses to a given book. Not all cult books are the same, nor are they cult books in the same way. There are books that transcend local or national boundaries and become works of great and/or world literature (e.g., Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*) in addition to being cult books. There are also books that are only remarkable as a cult phenomenon in literary history but do not go beyond a certain momentary fascination (e.g., Michael Ende's *Momo*). There are also different cult responses. There is a naive response in which there is overwhelming personal identification between the reader and the protagonist or between the reader and the work itself. This response is often immediate, emotional and subjective. The other cult response is characterized by a greater distance between reader and protagonist or reader and work and is the stimulus to a critical understanding of the text. It is delayed, rational and objective.

For example, Goethe's epistolary novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* was a cult book that elicited a naive cult response initially. It became an overnight sensation; not only Germany, but all of Europe exploded in "Werther-fever." Young men began dressing in blue tailcoats with yellow vests and yellow knee breeches just like Werther. A number of them even went so far as to commit suicide like Werther. Ute Brandes refers to this naive reception of Goethe's Werther:

In their involved and, at times, fatally naive identification with the *Weltschmerz* of the subjective protagonist they mistook Werther's sufferings for a direct outpouring of the author's voice. It was in order to counteract this naive reception that a third group of critics—late Enlightenment rationalists such as Campe, Lessing, and Lichtenberg, and zealous clergy such as Goeze—bitterly accused Goethe of having forgotten his duties towards God, society and his readers. In some of their essays and parodies Werther was "corrected" and reshaped into a repenting, positive middle-class hero. (113-114)

However, it is not enough to read *Werther* as an unhappy love affair or as a justification or sanctioning of suicide, just as it is not enough to read *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* as a literary East German *Rebel Without A Cause*. In the mid-1770s, one could wear a blue tailcoat with a yellow vest and read Klopstock, Homer and Ossian because Werther did without developing a critical understanding of Werther, the role of those works in the novel and Werther's issues with the society of his time. Likewise, one could wear blue jeans, grow long hair and listen to jazz while leading a Bohemian existence like Edgar Wibeau without understanding the criticism inherent in Edgar's nonconformist behavior in the mid-1970s. These are naive cult responses, and although the naive cult response is important to a work's reception history, it is the focus of this paper to examine those elements which lend themselves to a deeper understanding of a work as cult book.

Why choose Ulrich Plenzdorf's novel *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* as a cult book? One reason is the overwhelming response from both East and West. It was a literary and critical sensation, with reactions ranging from the highest praise to the bitterest vitriol. This overwhelming response was due, in part, to the timing of its publication. The issues Plenzdorf dared to address and his break with the tenets of Socialist Realism were also significant contributing factors.

Plenzdorf first began working on *Die neuen Leiden* as a film script in 1968, the same year Christa Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.* was published. After repeated rejections, it remained in his desk drawer until the early seventies. Plenzdorf stated that it was origi-

nally written for the *Schublade*, referring to the impossibility of publishing a work that was subjective and critical of GDR society, its *Vorbildkultur* and its glossing over of bourgeois classical literature in education. Although "unofficial" and contradictory to the right to freedom of expression guaranteed by the constitution of the GDR, literary censorship still existed, albeit in the guise of *Literaturförderung*, as Herbert Wiesner has expressed (10). *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* was finally published at a critical point in the history of East Germany's *Kulturpolitik*; in December 1971 a period of liberalization was ushered in after Erich Honecker succeeded Walther Ulbrichts as secretary of the Central Committee of the SED. Honecker stated at the time of his succession that, from the secure standpoint of socialism, there should be no taboos in the areas of art and literature. Plenzdorf's work was the first to test how deep the waters of artistic and literary liberalization ran. It was published in March 1972 in *Sinn und Form*, the most important literary journal in the GDR. In the summer of 1972 a play adaptation of *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* was produced on fourteen different stages in East Germany with enormous success. Finally, it was published in book form in 1973.

Returning to Collins' discussion of religious cults, a number of the criteria he established will be useful in determining why *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* can be considered a cult book: a sharp break with society; focus on the problems of the individual; rejection of the status quo; criticism of the establishment.

As previously mentioned, Plenzdorf broke with the tenets of Socialist Realism which demanded simple, understandable language, a clear authorial position, as well as the depiction of a positive role model and the promotion of socialist ideals. By juxtaposing the emotive language of *Empfindsamkeit* with teen slang peppered with English, Plenzdorf used two kinds of language not readily accessible to the worker majority for whom he was supposed to be writing. Intentionally leaving the text open to interpretation, Plenzdorf avoided establishing a clear authorial position, and by making his protagonist an outsider who turns his back on socialist society, he presented readers with a literary figure unfit as a positive role model and representative of socialist ideals. In this way, Plenzdorf served notice that he was breaking with the demands of GDR society and rejecting the status quo. Not surprisingly, reactions to *Die neuen Leiden* in the GDR

tended to be negative. In a letter to the editorial staff of *Sinn und Form*,² F. K. Kaul accused Plenzdorf of falsifying socialist reality in and reproached the journal for what he described as the irresponsible publication of Plenzdorf's narrative without the appropriate commentary to guide the GDR reader to an acceptable interpretation of the text. Friedrich Plate condemned *Die neuen Leiden* for its ambiguity and lack of a clear authorial position:

Diese Breite der Auslegungsmöglichkeiten macht die Arbeit Plenzdorfs, ohne ihr Verdienst schmälern zu wollen, in meinen Augen weitgehend fragwürdig. Natürlich ist unsere Literatur auf Vielfalt orientiert. Trotzdem ist von dem einzelnen Autor zu erwarten, daß er um eine klare Position bemüht ist, daß er mit seinen Arbeiten hilft, die Realität unseres Lebens in all seiner Widersprüchlichkeit durchschaubar zu machen. . . . Die breite Diskussion um Plenzdorfs Arbeit scheint mir weniger aus ihren Stärken, als vielmehr aus ihren Schwächen zu resultieren. Ich meine damit die Breite der Assoziationsmöglichkeiten bei dem Fehlen einer deutlichen Autorenposition. Plenzdorf provoziert nicht durch einen klaren Standpunkt zu der aufgeworfenen Problematik, sondern durch relative Standpunktlosigkeit. (228-229)

Barbara Currie sums up reactions to *Die neuen Leiden* in the BRD as follows:

While the postmodernist ethic in the West was soon to allow for the integration of history, politics and mass culture into literature, Plenzdorf was dismissed by all but a few critics as too old-fashioned, too imitative, too unserious, and because he was East-German and not ashamed of it, too unpolitical. (293)

Jeans and long hair had long been the badges of anti-establishment youth not only in West Germany, but in the United States as well. It is perhaps difficult for today's readers to see anything more than rebellious teen posturing in Edgar's behavior. Yet for Edgar Wibeau and other GDR youth, wearing jeans, growing long hair and

listening to jazz were not merely acts of rebellious nonconformism bordering on the subversive, they were treasonous in a society in which conformity was the absolute rule. That is why Edgar asserts, “. . . Jeans sind eine Einstellung und keine Hosen” (27). In their collaborative article authors Ute Brandes and Ann Clark Fehn discuss “the special type of generation gap in the GDR - between an older generation, which built the state under difficult circumstances, and its children, who have never lived under any other system” (608). In citing Heiner Müller, who saw the then generation of thirty year olds as having experienced socialism as deformed reality, rather than as the hope for something better, Brandes and Fehn refer to what Müller calls “die Farce der Stellvertreterkriege (gegen Jazz und Lyrik, Haare und Bärte, Jeans und Beat . . .)” as an indicator of how far socialist reality in the GDR was from the ideal (608).

In addition to breaking with society and rejecting the status quo, *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* focuses on the problems of one individual, Edgar Wiebeau, and his criticism of the establishment. Edgar describes himself as a “verkanntes Genie” and turns his back on the collective in an effort to create his own mist-free paint sprayer or *nebelloses Farbspritzgerät* (NFG) (111).³ He has visions of grandeur focusing on his elevated status and individual recognition after successfully inventing an NFG where the collective failed to do so. He chafes at the Germanization of his Huguenot name from Wiebeau to Wiebau — an act tantamount to denying his right to individuality. But the conformity did not stop at Edgar’s name. In an absurdly amusing but also disturbing anecdote, Edgar recounts to readers just how far the ideal of conformity was taken when his mother tried to force him to become right-handed. According to Edgar, his mother tried everything to get him to stop writing with his left hand until he began to stutter and wet his bed. The doctors eventually intervened, and Edgar was once again allowed to write with his left hand. The stuttering and bed-wetting soon stopped. Edgar notes with satisfaction, “Das war ungefähr das einzige, was Mutter Wiebau [sic] mir nicht abgewöhnen konnte” (138).

In fact, it is Edgar’s own willingness to conform that is the catalyst behind his quitting his apprenticeship and running away to Berlin. He was tired of being the *Musterknabe*, of always going along with whatever his mother and his teachers wanted: “. . . ich machte

Pfötchen wie immer” (11). Edgar became possessed with the idea of dying without having accomplished one thing on his own, without leaving his mark as an individual:

An einem Tag war ich mal auf den blöden Gedanken gekommen, was gewesen wäre, wenn ich plötzlich abkratzen müßte, schwarze Pocken oder was. Ich meine, was ich dann vom Leben gehabt hätte. Den Gedanken wurde ich einfach nicht mehr los. (23)

In Berlin, Edgar takes up residence in a *Gartenlaube* that is scheduled for demolition. In the *Plumpsklo* behind the *Laube*, Edgar finds a copy of Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*. This brings up an interesting and important point in Plenzdorf’s criticism of the GDR’s attitude towards bourgeois classical literature. How is it that Edgar did not know the text’s author or title? This question has been overlooked in the secondary literature. Quite often, critics allude to the coverless *Werther* without considering how it came to be that way, or worse still, state that it was coverless when Edgar found it.⁴ Not only was it not coverless, it only became that way as a result of Edgar’s immediate need for *Ersatz* toilet paper: “Ich opferte zunächst die Deckel, dann die Titelseite und dann die letzten Seiten, wo erfahrungsgemäß das Nachwort steht, das sowieso kein Aas liest” (35).

It is significant that he “sacrificed” only the cover, title page and the afterword. First, it is a continuation of Edgar’s criticism of an education system built on models where students read only those books recommended and, therefore, deemed appropriate by their teachers (and by the State). Edgar states: “Meine Erfahrungen mit empfohlenen Büchern waren hervorragend mies. Ich Idiot war so verrückt, daß ich ein empfohlenes Buch blöd fand, selbst wenn es gut war” (33). That Edgar would find a copy of *Werther* in a *Plumpsklo* stands as further criticism of a system that not only claimed to accept Goethe’s works as classics, but to prescribe them as models for East Germany’s writers; Plenzdorf, however, revealed in “Diskussion um Plenzdorf” that this was not necessarily the case when it came to *Werther*: “*Werther* stand nie auf dem Lehrplan” (243). Theodor Langenbruch corroborates this in his article by stating that *Faust* and *Wilhelm Meister* were “preferred to the Storm and Stress excess” of *Werther* in the GDR

literary canon (60). Langenbruch adds that *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* seems to provide “a certain protective use of Goethe’s authority: covered by the shield of established classical literature, Plenzdorf asserts and defends certain truths about the human condition which tend to be forgotten or even repressed in Socialist literature” (67).

Second, by having Edgar strip the book of cover, title page and afterword, Plenzdorf was stripping it of all previous associations and interpretations, in particular of the Lukacsian interpretation of the work which had been the standard in the GDR and which stated that *Werther* did not have anything to offer an East German readership because the society it portrayed had already been overcome in the GDR. Plenzdorf essentially allowed Edgar to read Goethe without interference from State sanctioned interpretations; to borrow from Jaub’s reception theory, Edgar approached the work with an open *Erwartungshorizont* which allowed him to read and understand the novel in a way that would have been impossible had he known its author or title or allowed himself to be influenced by the commentary of the text usually included in the afterword. In a sense, Edgar and Plenzdorf perform their own kind of censorship of Goethe’s text, a censorship which has the ironic opposite effect on the text from the usual effect of censorship: Only those things were taken away which would limit or influence a reading of the work; by “censoring” *Werther*, its range of interpretation was broadened instead of narrowed. Plenzdorf achieves twofold criticism here: of the education system as well as of literary censorship.

Another source of Plenzdorf’s criticism of GDR society lies in the circumstances surrounding Edgar’s death. How are we to understand Edgar Wibeau’s death and the Edgar from beyond who narrates and comments throughout the story? In addition to those who insisted that Edgar’s death was not to be accorded the same importance and tragic stature as *Werther*’s,⁵ there are those critics and academics who have come up with some rather disappointingly prosaic reasons for Wibeau’s death. For example, Barbara Currie prefers to see Wibeau’s death as an artistic ploy: “Plenzdorf needed a good ending. Suicide was too obvious, reform too boring. The solution of the accident flavours the text with a kind of tantalising ‘what might have happened if, . . . !’” (291). Wolfgang Werth writes in a similar vein in

his article that Wibeau’s death was due to several reasons. First, it was the result of his decision to work alone on his *NFG* instead of working with the collective. Second, Wibeau’s untimely death extricated him from a sticky situation in which he would have been forced to choose between staying in Berlin and returning to Mittenberg (and *Mutter Wibeau* was already on her way to Berlin — the implication here is that Edgar would have been forced to make the “right” choice and return home). And third, Edgar’s death was required not by Plenzdorf, but rather by the story line dictated by Goethe (287).⁶ Friedrich Plate deemed Edgar’s death an artistic ploy of another kind: “Es gibt nur eine Notwendigkeit für das Sterben des Hauptakteurs in dieser Arbeit: Der Autor braucht eine interessante Erzählperspektive, die ihm der tote Held liefert,” by which he was referring to Plenzdorf’s use of the eighteenth century “voice from beyond.” (226)

Some critics went to great pains to view the Edgar from beyond as a corrected, mature and socialist voice, and it is true that the Edgar from beyond seems to be just that. For example, Wilhelm Girnus maintains that the Edgar from beyond is indeed corrected and asserts that Wibeau’s commentary from beyond is designed to indicate to readers that only an immature Wibeau, not yet ready to establish a clear and well-adjusted relationship to society, is dead:

Aus der ironischen Distanz zu sich selbst jedoch spricht bereits ein neuer Wibeau, dem diese seine eigene Vergangenheit schon Geschichte ist. Auf diese Weise bedeutet er uns, nicht Wibeau überhaupt ist gestorben, sondern dieser Wibeau in ihm, . . . (194)

In his article N. L. Thomas stated that the Edgar from beyond signifies the desired *and* desirable objectivity necessary for literature in Socialist Realism (181). Even Ute Brandes describes the Edgar from beyond’s perspective as “a more tolerant, mature socialist outlook” (117). However, *Schein* and *Sein* are not the same, and what appears as a correction of Edgar’s earlier views may simply be camouflage.

The primary reason for seeing the Edgar from beyond as corrected and objective stems from the ambiguity of Edgar’s statements. He often refers to himself as an idiot, an *Irrer* or a *Narr*. It is particularly important that the Edgar from beyond be viewed as the objec-

tive counterpart to his subjective self *diesseits* since the dogma of Socialist Realism demanded positive role models and, above all, objectivity. However, Langenbruch goes beyond the surface camouflage of Edgar's commentary from beyond:

. . . , the allegation of Edgar's posthumous "better insight" (which is taken to put his earthly errands into the proper perspective) is a shaky assumption, since it is based on the overinterpretation of some of Edgar's remarks concerning his having been a "fool," an "idiot," or a "madman." Indeed, there are strong assertions of Edgar's to the contrary, above all his defiant "Aber ich bedaure nichts. Nicht die Bohne bedaure ich was" (p. 126). (66)

If we were to assume that the Edgar from beyond is no less subjective than the Edgar he is commenting on, in a supposedly self-critical and objective fashion, what would his motive be? Put simply, it is to allow some readers to conclude, as the State did, that Edgar's death was accidental due to inexpert handling of electric current. Edgar's death looked like an accident because it was supposed to look like an accident — at least to those who wanted to interpret his death as such. Did Edgar have to die? Edgar was in a lose-lose situation; he could not make the impossible choice between Berlin and Mittenberg, so he chose a third option instead: death. Why was death Edgar's only real option? Seen from his mother's standpoint (who represents GDR society), Edgar's only option was to return to Mittenberg and integrate himself into socialist society as a productive member. Seen from Edgar's point of view, returning to Mittenberg and its stifling confines was a living death. Why not really die? Edgar could not simply commit suicide. The socialist State in the GDR viewed suicide as an unacceptable and unnecessary solution; the society created by the State had overcome the need for suicide — any suicide. Edgar even echoes the official position on suicide after reading *Werther* for the first time: "Nehmen wir mal an, an die Frau wäre wirklich kein Rankommen gewesen. Das war noch lange kein Grund, sich zu durchlöchern" (37). Edgar did not want to be remembered as a productive member of the collective, instead he wanted to be remembered, as making his mark as an individual. In fact, being remem-

bered at all is of concern to Edgar. Edgar says his chances of being remembered are slim because he died so young; this statement is merely more camouflage. It is not his death at age seventeen which will determine whether he is forgotten or remembered, but rather *how* he died. As Dieter Sevin points out in his book, had the official ruling on his death been suicide, Edgar's life *and* death would have been *totgeschwiegen* (94).

There is textual proof that Edgar knew what was going to happen to him when he tested his *NFG*, despite the official ruling that his death was an accident due to inexpert handling of electric current. First, we must remember that Edgar asserts:

Ich hätte diesen Reinformalfall sowieso nicht überlebt. Ich war jedenfalls fast so weit, daß ich Old Werther verstand, wenn er nicht weiterkonnte. Ich meine, ich hätte nie im Leben freiwillig den Löffel abgegeben. Mich an den nächsten Haken gehängt oder was. Das nie. Aber ich wär doch nie wirklich nach Mittenberg zurückgegangen. (147)

In addition, according to his *Kumpel Willi*, Edgar was very talented when it came to his studies, musical instruments and building things out of the most unlikely materials: "Er konnte Rechenmaschinen aus Pappbaun [sic], die funktionieren heute noch" (20).

Returning to the death notice at the beginning of the novel, we read: ". . . Edgar W. [war], . . . unsachgemäß mit elektrischem Strom umgegangen" (7). What if this phrase could be understood in more than one way just like the phrase: "Nach dem, was die Ärzte sagten, war es eine Stromsache," can be understood in more than one way (148)? In fact, it is important to note that *umgehen* not only means "to deal with," "handle" or "manage," it can also be understood figuratively to mean "evade," "elude" or "circumvent." *Stromsache* refers literally to the electric current with which Edgar Wibeau was electrocuted. There are, however, references to other kinds of current in the text: "Strom von Musik" (60) and "Strom des Genies" (18). In her article, Christine Cosentino refers to *Stromsache* as the difficulty of swimming against the current of societal norms:

. . . der Versuch [wird] unternommen, das kurze Leben dieses introvierten Einzelgängers noch einmal einzufangen bis zu dem tragischen Ereignis, das in der Tat glaubwürdig ein Unfall ist — ein tödlicher Stromstoß, der in der offenen Erzählstruktur des Werkes jedoch gleichberechtigt symbolisch wie ein warnendes Menetekel wirkt für jene, die mit Bravour gegen den Strom gesellschaftlicher Normen zu schwimmen wagen. (498)

Is it possible that the statement, "Edgar W. war unsachgemäß mit elektrischem Strom umgegangen," when understood in conjunction with *Stromsache*, not only means that he handled electric current (in)expertly, but that Edgar expertly (if tragically) circumvented the deadly current of societal norms and that Plenzdorf thereby expertly (if controversially) circumvented those voices demanding a clear authorial position and created a cult book? The answer is a definite Yes.

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Notes

¹See Kurt J. Fickert, "Literature as Documentation: Plenzdorf's *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.*" *International Fiction Review* 13.2 (Summer 1986): 69-75. for a compelling argument regarding other literary models for Plenzdorf's novel.

²See Girnus' article: "Diskussion um Plenzdorf."

³See Gertrud Bauer Pickar's article "Plenzdorf's *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.*: The Interaction of Portrayal and Social Criticism" and chapter two in Dieter Sevin's book *Textstrategien in DDR-Prosawerken zwischen Bau und Durchbruch der Berliner Mauer* for further discussion and insights into the interpretive meanings of the initials NFG.

⁴See Barbara Currie's article, "Diverging Attitudes in Literary Criticism: The 'Plenzdorf Debate' in the Early 1970s in East and West Germany."

⁵See Wilhelm Girnus' article "Lachen über Wibeau . . . aber wie?" and Friedrich Plate's article "'Neue Leiden' ohne Standpunkt." for various views on the difference between Werther's and Edgar Wibeau's deaths.

⁶"Erstens hat Edgar Wibeau den Fehler gemacht, allein an der Sache zu arbeiten, anstatt sich mit dem ganzen Kollektiv über sie zu beugen. Zweitens mußte er scheitern, um sich nicht entscheiden zu müssen: Am Tag des Tests war Mutter Wibeau, die nun doch seine Adresse erfahren hat, nach

Berlin unterwegs. Und drittens, weil seine ihm nicht von Plenzdorf, sondern von Goethe vorgeschriebene Geschichte den Tod des Helden verlangt."

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Technologies of Death in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*

Julian Nelson

In Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Hans Castorp confronts disease and death to transcend his morbid obsession with them. Mann himself points to the pedagogical function of death in the epilogue.¹ As Hans Castorp puts it after his near-death experience in the "Schnee" Chapter, "Der Mensch soll um der Güte und Liebe willen dem Tode keine Herrschaft einräumen über seine Gedanken" (Mann 695). In Mann's view, exposure to illness and death is a necessary route to knowledge, health, and life, echoing his Romantic precursors, who regarded the two as a vehicle of evolution or *Steigerung*. Mann partakes of this tradition and employs the technology of the sanatorium as the apparatus which will mediate Hans Castorp's exposure to it.

Foregrounding death as a pedagogical tool makes sense in terms of the history behind Mann's novel, but turn-of-the-century scientific discourse, as expressed by the clinic, tries to repress death through its regulation. Technology doesn't efface death in the novel, however, it only renders it more abstract and disembodied. It really doesn't allow Castorp to transcend his morbid fascination, but allows him to experience death in a detached, fragmented, and aesthetized form. Even though the mechanization of death will activate his complicity as a consuming spectator, and then as a willing participant, technology also mediates brief, transcendent moments and eventually facilitates his return to the flatlands. Technology, then, is instrumental in Hans Castorp's "aesthetic education." This points to a viable reading of the contradictory ending of the novel, where Hans Castorp becomes a soldier on the killing fields of the Great War.

Mann situates Hans Castorp in the Davos clinic to overcome death through death, a homeopathic cure mediated by medical technology. Slavery to a death fascination, a product of repression and an