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Mediazation and Marginalization of the Feminine in Böll’s *Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*

Abstract: Böll’s most popular novel, The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum, presents a storyline that is painfully germane four decades later since it is not only a commentary on the increasing dangers of unbridled state power and media propaganda, but is also a comment on how women were (and are) marginalized. Blum is implicated in the criminal acts of Communism seemingly because she spent the night with an alleged Communist. From merely meeting someone at a party, Blum is besieged by the media, especially the News journalist Tötges, who does everything in his power to obfuscate the facts and make Katharina’s life a nightmare. Böll writes adroitly about how Katharina has become marginalized and abused by the media merely for the sake of corporate profit.

Böll’s most popular novel, *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*, is still a social commentary for two reasons: first, the storyline is painfully germane even a quarter century later since it is not only a commentary on the increasing dangers of unbridled state power and media propaganda, but is also a treatise on the abuse of women. Coupled with that is the fact the novel is not written in the “normal” manner of a representational novel. The novel is a tale of a woman implicated in the criminal acts of Communism seemingly because she spent the night with an alleged Communist. The circumstances that begin as innocuously as Katharina meeting someone at a party, end with a full-scale attack by a German Swat team on her residence. From that moment on, Katharina is besieged by the media, especially the News journalist Tötges, who does everything in his power to obfuscate the facts, destroy objectivity, and make Katharina’s life a veritable nightmare. In the end, Katharina kills him.

Structurally, the novel is unique in that Böll writes it in an ironic, quasi-journalistic style that, at one and the same time, parodies the alleged objectivity of the journalistic ethic and plays havoc with the notion of how German novels had been written. The unremitting journalist Tötges clearly takes advantage of his station to become the sole arbiter of Katharina and does so without legitimate evidence in an attempt to further the newspaper’s socio-political campaign against Communism and to increase paper sales. The novel was written 14 years after the erection of the Berlin Wall and was a precursor to Böll’s autobiography, *What Is to Become of the Boy* (1984), which alludes to the same theme of societal sickness and its affects upon all aspects of German life. Ultimately, the novel was a scathing attack on the yellow journalism of the Springer periodicals since Springer was the Rupert Murdoch of his time and his corporation essentially held a monopoly on what got printed and what did not. It was not serendipitous that Springer built his headquarters adjacent to the Berlin Wall as a way of flaunting the superiority of the Capitalist system over the Communist one. His newspapers included the enormously popular tabloid the *Bild-Zeitung*, a periodical that thrived on sensationalistic and marginally accurate, if not fictitious, stories. “For most artists and intellectuals this manipulation of the media constituted a dangerous manipulation of the public mind. For many, including Heinrich Böll this is essentially anti-democratic, and the mentality that promotes such behavior is merely a continuation of the mentality that led to fascism.”