

Interview with Klaus Theweleit on Male Fantasies Today

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If you're curious about the intellectual roots of my former theory collective Adilkno and the current Institute of Network Cultures, look no further than the book I read in early 1983, half a year before I graduated in political sciences at UvA: the two-volume *Male Fantasies* by Klaus Theweleit (then only available in German). This was not just because of its Melanie Klein-style psychoanalysis of historical German fascism but also because of its liberating essay style and pop culture imagery, mixed in such an original way with the latest French theory (primarily Deleuze and Guattari). The study dives deep into streaming metaphors such as floods, blockages and armours (English summary here). Unlike the Derrida deconstructivist conceptual school, Theweleit's old-school Freudian approach emphasises storytelling and case studies. His approach, also in his later books, is personal, experimental, radical and shows how relevant (media) theory could be done. Goodbye to left dogmatism and stiff, abstract, Marxist academia. In the decades after university, Klaus Theweleit would remain my hero and role model, for instance, with his Book of Kings and later Pocahontas series. At 83, the master is still alive and kicking, as the interview below, conducted by Zeit Online, shows.

As you may have noticed, INC has not only been running a series of longforms on Girl Theory but also contributes to 'manosphere studies' with research conducted by Kate Babin, Francesco Barchiesi, Ruben Stoffelen, August Sundgaard and most recently Merthe Voorhoeve (on Giga Chad). What do 21st-century male fantasies look like? Does it still make sense to study the First World War traumas of German soldiers as the West German 68 generation once did, fifty years after the defeat of World War I? Many of us wondered: what would Klaus Theweleit himself make of today's online toxic masculinity?

Klaus Theweleit: "These men are not born to the end."

Cultural scientist Klaus Theweleit says we are living in an unthinkable time. With soldier-like bodies, empty language, and brazen lies, a new reality is emerging.

Interview: Lenz Jacobsen and Livia Sarai Lergenmüller

(Zeit Online podcast, 18 May 2025, the original German can be found here, translated by DeepL, edited by GL)

His 1977 book *Männerphantasien* was an event. Klaus Theweleit was one of the first to analyse the connection between masculinity and violence from a psychoanalytical perspective. Since the Russian attack on Ukraine, he has hardly spoken out publicly. Now, Theweleit is welcoming us to his home in Freiburg for an interview. It will be about Trump and Putin, about the return of soldierly masculinity, incels, and the question of whether we can understand this present in the first place.

Zeit Online: Mr Theweleit, we would have liked to have photographed you for this interview. But you didn't want us to. Why?

Theweleit: It's not the time for such personal underlining. A few weeks ago, there was an interview with Herfried Münkler in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He can be seen with a thinking forehead. In the interview, he makes many predictions about what we can expect from Putin, Europe, and Trump. Arbitrary assessments, the vast majority of which will probably never materialise. The horrors of war, the terrible reality, the

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VOLUME 2



KLAUS THEWELEIT

torn bodies, the destroyed lives, the societies devastated by war are not mentioned in this cool strategic speech. It is so completely inappropriate. The only real thing about this speech is the excessive overestimation of the speaker's own importance. This also applies to the photos and statements of Jürgen Habermas in the same newspaper a few days later.

Zeit Online: Are you bothered by the staging and the self-assurance?

Theweleit: Absolutely. The entire linguistic gesture is not just in Münkler and Habermas. In a newspaper commentary, a journalist recently wrote, "Putin is playing for time". What kind of crazy words are those? Like a football match. Or like from a political seminar: we hear.

German politicians who have spread the word in every country in the world that Putin's war always includes the adjective "contrary to international law." That is the most groundless thing of all: international law is talk. People who once agreed to the Charter of Human Rights may feel free to talk like this, but not Putin, Trump or Netanyahu. Their political speeches are unreal. And the so-called experts speak after them as if their voices had any global significance.

Zeit Online: How could things be different? How could we talk about the world differently?

Theweleit: In Claude Lanzmann's films about the Shoah, a Polish officer, Jan Karski, appears. During the Second World War, he infiltrated one of the Nazi extermination camps in Poland. He saw what the Nazis were doing there and reported to the Polish government in exile in London and other audiences, including with Franklin D. Roosevelt in Washington. Roosevelt passed him on to one of his advisors, Felix Frankfurter, one of the chief justices of the USA, a Jew born in Vienna. When Karski finished his report from the death camps, the judge stood up and said: "Young man, I don't believe you." Because he knew humanity, the human brain. He did not say that Karski was lying. "I say that I don't believe him". Decades later, when he appears in the film, Karski tells Lanzmann this story, and he adds, as if in Frankfurter's apology, that he still doesn't believe it himself, even though he had seen it. Nobody in the whole world could believe it.

Zeit Online: We can't quite keep up. Why are you telling us this story?

Theweleit: Because of Claude Lanzmann's conclusion, with Karski's help. The reaction of Judge Frankfurter is for them proof that the Nazis had actually succeeded in creating that "new type of person" that they were constantly talking about. The Nazis introduced a new way of thinking and acting into the world that would never have been thought possible before. It was too incredible. It

paralysed your actions and made your brain doubt what your eyes had seen. Something similar is happening in the world. What Trump, Putin, and other potentates do and how they talk – I didn't think this was possible before.

Zeit Online: And what does that mean?

Theweleit: We shouldn't pretend that we can understand and explain everything that is going on around us like a course of billiard balls. The evening before Putin's

full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there was a discussion in a bookshop here in Freiburg: the mood was that he's not doing that, it's out of the question. And at seven the next morning, my wife tells me to listen to the radio. My assessment was that nothing would happen. That says something about the shortcomings of one's own perception.

Zeit Online: That's why you've hardly spoken out publicly for three years. Publicly for three years. But now you're giving us this interview. Why is that?

Theweleit: I would like to ask whether something is happening again with the human species, as in Karski's story, that exceeds our comprehension ability. And whether the clichéd and complacent language spoken publicly doesn't stand in our way. Politicians and others pretend to know what they are talking about. They usually don't.

Zeit Online: We have the impression that what you wrote almost 50 years ago in your book *Männerphantasien* also helps us understand what is happening today, especially the renewed resurgence of a certain form of violent masculinity. We have brought you a picture that Elon Musk posted, which reminds us very much of the male psychic armour that you have shown and described in male fantasies.

Theweleit: Yes, it's very similar. Without massive violence, you can't be peaceful either, says Mr Musk. Just like the body type we're talking about here always claims to be acting in self-defence, because the rest of the world is taking away his space to live and threatens to destroy his physicality. His body constantly threatens to fragment, against which he tries to armour himself. His way of being equals violence.

Zeit Online: What do you mean by a fragmenting body?

Theweleit: These men are, as I call it, "not born to the end." This is the fear-ridden principle of masculinity,

Zeit Online: We humans are all born unfinished.

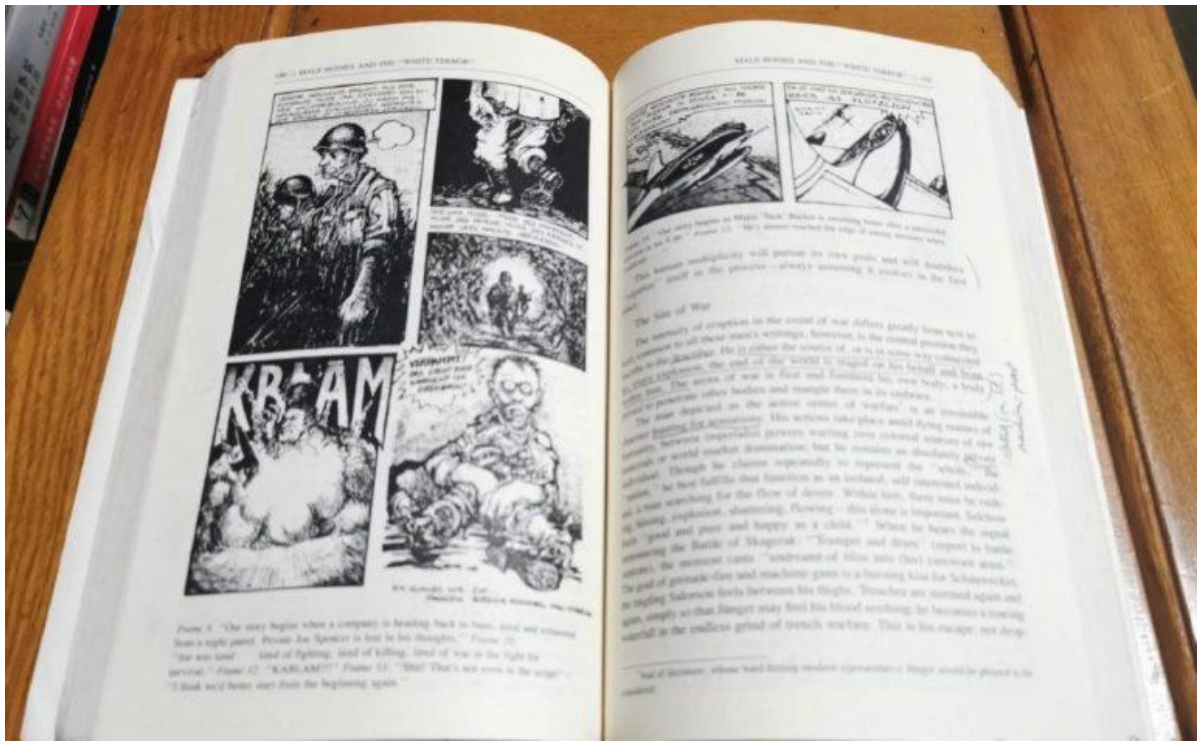
Theweleit: How you then develop is different for everyone. A baby's body that is treated kindly develops what psychoanalysis calls the libidinal occupation of the skin, of one's own outer boundary; through touch, being held, and feeding. These experiences enable small children to free themselves from the symbiosis with the mother. The child learns to recognise itself as a self distinct from the environment and other people. They develop a sense of their own boundaries. It becomes an ego. When you are beaten, left cold, not regularly fed or otherwise rejected, this does not work.

Zeit Online: What happens then?

Theweleit: You flee inwards from these intense and negative stimuli. The body fills up with fears that cannot be expressed. This is the anxiety-ridden masculinity principle that I have described. That's why these men try to build themselves armour, and that's why these men always speak in self-defence. Their primary means of "communication" becomes violence. The self-armour replaces their ego.

Zeit Online: Even with politicians.

Theweleit: Hitler only spoke in alleged self-defence. Throughout the thirties, he said that Germany had been cut up. Alsace-Lorraine, Saarland and North Schleswig are gone, and Upper Silesia and the Polish Corridor are gone. It should all be there again, as a whole body that is no longer mutilated. The Nazis drew their maps of



Germany with thick borders: Germany was cut out of the world. Then they added one part after another: first Saarland, then Northern Schleswig, the Polish corridor, Upper Silesia, and the Munich Agreement. And when he was ready, Hitler attacked Poland. “Make Germany Great Again” was the programme. The body was complete, “whole” with Austria on board. What Trump is saying now, with the Bay of America, Greenland, Gaza or Panama, is very similar.

Zeit Online: In *Male Fantasies*, you outline “soldierly masculinity”. Have you observed a return to this form of masculinity since Ukraine and the rearmament in Europe?

Theweleit: Of course, it’s easy to see, and this has been going on for a long time, at the latest after the Yugoslav war of disintegration during the 1990s. Not much can be done about the findings: The killers kill, rapes happen, and the victims are predominantly civilians. The number of femicides is rising. Men around the world are still a species that produces people who enjoy killing. Even the Hamas terror adds nothing to this that we have not already seen elsewhere. Anyone who wants to know all this knows this. What changes is the intensity with which the horror unfolds in the different parts of the world. I have never written about war. But about violence by certain men. About the lust for violence and the desire to kill. This is not linked to war.

Zeit Online: What constitutes this desire? Why is the military in particular so important, so attractive to the kind of violent men you describe?

Theweleit: Many of these men with fear-filled bodies are helped by the military. They enjoyed and still enjoy its coercive structure. In Germany until 1945, the military was seen as a place of male rebirth. It helped to break out of the perceived negative association with the principle of femininity. The man who armours himself transforms the physical symbioses into hierarchies. This is the basic process of so-called fascist behaviour. Everything that was once symbiotic and rooted in relationships is transformed into a tiered hierarchical social principle. As we are now learning without the military.

Zeit Online: The clear hierarchies save on tedious relationship work.

Theweleit: It was supposed to be a work among equals. But we are dealing with physically anti-democratic people. You can say that much. They spend their whole lives obsessively building the inviolability of their physical boundaries. Their armour becomes brittle as soon as complicated situations approach the body. These include demands from women, including eroticism. Each differentiated reality immediately threatens them; everything around them should function exactly as they obsessively imagine. Therefore, the result for the incels is: not a single woman fulfils my standards.

Zeit Online: The starting point for your analysis in *Männerphantasien* was the records of Free Corps fighters in the 1910s and 1920s. That's a hundred years ago. Since then, things have changed; boys are brought up differently, more empathetic, more loving.

Theweleit: Of course, an enormous amount has changed! My father used to say: If you love your children, chastise them. That's in the Bible. That was the only sentence he ever quoted from the Bible. But my generation no longer had to join the military. In the fifties and sixties, we developed a specific perspective on things as young people. Strolling around the city, from pinball to pinball arcade, we would say: "Look at that one over there. I wonder which concentration camp a guard was in." That was our view of "the old ones". Then, in the sixties and seventies came political anti-colonialism, feminism and the ecologists. As a result of all this, the level of poison, as I call it, has dropped significantly.

Zeit Online: But now it's rising again.

Theweleit: Yes, now the poison level is rising again.

Zeit Online: How do you explain that?

Theweleit: Explaining would be too much. But it could be the reaction to a vacuum. It's not the first time it's happened. Thomas Heise made the documentary film *Stau* in the nineties, about right-wing youths in the former GDR, in Halle-Neustadt. They walked through the streets shouting racist slogans. Many of them were children of single mothers who, with the so-called reunification, lost the structures they had built up in communist East Germany. These boys were from the military and had not experienced the beatings of their fathers like the Freikorps people. Some were unemployed at 16, looking for a job, failed an exam, were thrown out, and had nothing. Before that, in the FDJ (the communist youth organisation), there was always someone they could talk

to, says one of them. This framework fell away. Some were right-wing out of conviction, but others were right-wing out of abandonment, because they were in a vacuum.



Zeit Online: And this vacuum was then filled by neo-Nazis.

Theweleit: West German neo-Nazi right-wingers who looked after the young people. While the “liberal West” closed down its youth centres. These young people are now of a good AfD age.

Zeit Online: So what vacuum is the current masculine backlash a reaction to?

Theweleit: The vacuum is different in different parts of the world, and at other times. We should not believe that we can explain everything with just one thing. In the new epilogue to *Male Fantasies*, I have included research by Screen El Feki on Arab young men from Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Palestine who feel downright

“emasculated” when they don’t have a job. They are supposed to feed their families, but cannot. They feel threatened in their genitals; they actually speak of castration. That’s not quite so blatant in our culture.

Zeit Online: In Western countries, the male provider model is also declining. Old industrial jobs are being lost, and boys are failing at school. These are real experiences. In the election, the AfD was the strongest party among men aged 35 and 44.

Theweleit: Yes. In the meantime, I suspect that the structure of current developments, if you dispense with the big word “understand,” would be more appropriate. The admission that we are dealing with something unfamiliar, possibly with a new perception of reality, would be more appropriate.

Zeit Online: A new way of perceiving reality – what do you mean by that?

Theweleit: I have described the anxiety-ridden, violent masculinity. Think of the assassin in Halle, who failed. When he fails to break down the door to the synagogue, he insults himself as a bottle that has fucked everything up again. He films himself doing it. But this, what is happening now, is what Trump, Putin or even Le Pen or Weidel are doing has a side that seems fearless. A new kind of trumpeting superiority. That attracts people. They lie and are completely blunt in their deception; they twist everything to suit themselves and are sure that this is exactly what their followers want. It is a leap into a new way of dealing with reality.

Zeit Online: But for which you still lack the tools, the language?

Theweleit: The language that I hear everywhere doesn’t capture it. It’s like quantum physicists who can no longer find the words for the capabilities of the new generations of computers they are inventing. Gottfried Benn wrote that our language is far behind the actual development of mankind. This is another reason why the talk of politicians today seems so formulaic. You always hear them say the same thing, as if we are all hard to understand. This language is also a kind of armour, that protects us from what is already real, but what we cannot or do not cannot or will not describe. However, I am in the fortunate position of not having to not have to express myself. The political professionals don’t have that freedom.

Zeit Online: The spectacular thing about *Male Fantasies* was that you managed to find a new language for male violence with the help of psychoanalysis. What is new in the current phase? What is there to discover behind the ideologies?

Theweleit: If you include electronics, there are new things to discover. A vast mass of people who were previously in the dark can now connect via the net and be called out for any shit that they write. They get millions of clicks and an imaginary power that can be politically translated into reality. The strategy of Flooding the zone with shit only works thanks to electronics. You can spread nonsense about anyone, regardless of whether it’s true or not, and get away with it.

Zeit Online: Why?

Theweleit: Television presenters, for example, are completely helpless to deal with it. They still believe we can argue with such people. Every time they talk to them and calculate them: What you say is not proper, Mrs Weidel (the AfD leader). You can’t

argue with people who, firstly, know that what they are saying is not true and who are triumphant and can get away with it. They know that their supporters find what they call “arguments” ridiculous.

Zeit Online: How did this new way of thinking come about, and what does electronic media have to do with it?

Theweleit: You can’t help but perceive the electronic as a part of the body. Just as in previous centuries, machines have become part of our physicality. Electronics changes our brains at an early stage, switches the synapses differently. This can now be proven neurologically. I am not against electronics; on the contrary. Combating climate change is only possible using the latest technologies. But my wife, with her psychoanalyst with an eye for children, is constantly noticing children who already have a monitor in their pram. Pushed by parents who are glued to their mobile phones. This creates a relationship vacuum.

Zeit Online: Young men also seem to be particularly affected by this. They sometimes orient themselves in the digital world towards role models that are called toxic today. For them, there would need to be an offer, an attractive masculinity that they can grow into, one that is neither violent, nor does it simply consist of adopting female-connoted characteristics.

Theweleit: You don’t have to take on feminised roles for this. Why should caring for children only have a feminine connotation? My wife and I had shared childcare, both with part-time jobs: as a psychologist in child and adolescent psychiatry and a part-time writer. That was easy to do. It’s only bad for the pension; otherwise, it was great. Part of the male self-commitment, in my view, includes recognising the forms of violence that have entered one’s own body and to distance oneself to remove them, to dismantle them – something like the civilizing task for masculinity today. This is only possible with the help of women.

Zeit Online: Is that also your personal experience?

Theweleit: I was a pretty choleric guy as a boy, and I was always fighting. Football helped sometimes, but I’ve become a reasonably tolerable person, mainly because of women.

Zeit Online: A man can’t do it on his own.

Theweleit: You should always assume that a person does not exist alone. The number one should be cancelled. Philosophers and historians always start from the number one: The brain thinks, the subject acts. However, the individual subject does not exist; that is, a historical chimera. The subject begins between twos; then threes, fours – the constellation is expandable.

Zeit Online: You mean that one is always about others.

Theweleit: Yes, and if you cut off these relationships—it is well documented with the well-known assassins—that it ends in violence. People can only change and develop through relationships. You imagine all sorts of things about your own structure, but that means nothing.

Zeit Online: What does this mean for politics? Is there, for example, a way of dealing with Russia's threat and the possibility of a war that does not revert to the old patterns of soldierly masculinity?

Theweleit: The first thing would be to realise that one's own position of speech is not a position of power. What we say in the private sphere or the literary centre is transferred into the private sphere or the literary centre. Most people can't stand that. They want what they say to be meaningful. This is the claim to exercising power, which easily leads to the suppression of anything that interferes with this exercise of power. For example, other positions or the tiresome, so-called contradictions perceived as disturbing should disappear.

Zeit Online: You mean the whole performative declaration of war... celebrities who say: "I would fight!"

Theweleit: Terrible! Just like these men and women who, from their talk show chairs, are calling for weapons and bombs. To speak like that, I find it thoughtless, to put it kindly. If you start thinking about it, you would realise how deeply you are stuck in the so-called contradictions. I can say: I am absolutely against the war. What Putin does will not change this stance. Nevertheless, Ukraine naturally has the right to defend itself. And they need weapons; someone has to give them those. That completely contradicts what I think as an absolute opponent of war. But that's not why I'm taking to the streets and holding up banners with the inscription "No weapons for Ukraine". Passive resistance, for example, was not even considered. These kinds of conflicts are full of contradictions; they cannot be resolved logically.

Zeit Online: Does that also apply beyond the war in Ukraine?

Theweleit: Yes. Hamas wants to wipe out Israel, and Netanyahu wants to wipe out Hamas. In other words, this situation is an insoluble problem. The constant talk of omnipotence, which also permeates almost all the media, as if it had solutions, solves nothing.

Zeit Online: How do you put up with it?

Theweleit: Not going mad about the "human construct" is quite an art. One of the things you can learn from psychoanalysis would be to familiarise yourself with one's own actual powerlessness. Take a look at Karski's story again. Hitler and Eichmann could not be stopped, Karski and Lanzmann concluded, because no real person could believe what they were doing. You can't reach such shifts in reality by joining a party or something like that. None of that works. It only works through the way we live together. That is a real, viable way for individuals. Enough sensible and helpful things can be done in everyday life, in attentive life processes and in what you write and say. I can't believe that I could convert Putin or Trump. Forget them and do not let them come close to you.

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