

In order to create a happy ending, Thoeren fabricates a plan for Krull that involves confessions, blackmail, magic drugs, escapes and finally a miraculous reunion with Krull's real love Zaza. It is hard to believe that Erika Mann who cooperated on the screenplay approved of these fantastic plot elements. Her father's version reminds us of a Brecht like open ending that leaves room for the imagination, indeed it inspired many readers and writers to come up with a "Schluss". Hence Thoeren's ending does not live up to Mann's literary standards.

The silly denouement of Thoeren's script does not nonetheless diminish the exuberant mood that this movie generates. That mood is generated and sustained by the performance of Horst Buchholz. After he had received the Best Actor Award at the Cannes Film Festival for his role in Helmut Käutner's film "Himmel ohne Sterne" in 1955, he got a part in the movie "Die Halbstarke" in 1956. But his breakthrough came with his portrayal of Felix Krull in 1957. The movie was an international success as well and led to his career in Hollywood.

Buchholz was perfectly cast for this role, combining a wonderful voice, aristocratic good looks, great sex appeal and first rate acting skills. He rendered his foreign language dialogue with great ease, especially French. Buchholz makes it impossible to dislike this con-artist, even when he is allowing himself to be seduced by rich women in order to liberates their *Schmuck!* His rendition of Krull as Marquis de Venosta enables you to eagerly suspend your disbelief (*mehr Schein als Sein*) and you cheer when he always lands on his feet as the *Glückskind* intended by like Thomas Mann.

## Schein und Sein

The social ascent of Felix Krull fulfills the dream of any ordinary person to live without financial worries and needs, to be respected everywhere and to live life with a form of *Leichtlebigkeit* that only seems possible in the upper levels of society. But the fact that Felix (*der Glückliche*) achieves this through deceitful charm also holds a mirror to society since society itself functions as a codependent enabler (*mitschuldig*) of Felix' success. "*Die Menschheit möchte etwas vorgespielt bekommen. Sie möchte betrogen werden.*" Mann seems to be echoing Shakespeare here: "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts."

Felix certainly plays his parts to perfection, so much so that society is eager for his performance. Yet Felix is not an evil person. He really doesn't harm anybody. His dazzling deception is instantiated with *Eleganz und Eloquenz*, and this of course leaves us wondering where *der Schein* ends and *das Sein* begins. This is probably what Thomas Mann intended all along, both for his time and ours.

# THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

## Friday Film Fest Series



## Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull

By Kurt Hoffmann

March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014

• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

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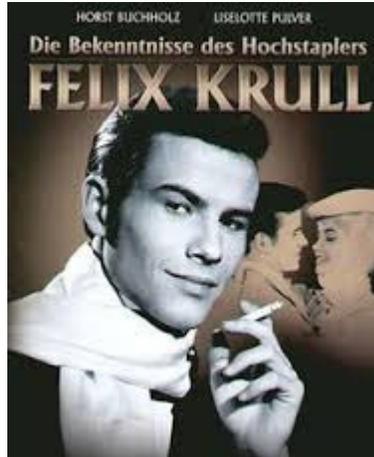


# Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull

## Confessions of Felix Krull (1957)

### Credits:

Director:	Kurt Hoffmann
Writer:	Nach dem Roman von Thomas Mann
Screenplay:	Robert Thoeren Erika Mann
Production:	Hans Abich
Music:	Hans Martin Majewski
Camera:	Fiedl Behn-Grund Dieter Wedekind
Length:	107 Minutes
Cast:	Horst Buchholz -Felix Krull Liselotte Pulver -Zaza Ingrid Andree -Zouzou Kuckuck Paul Dahlke -Professor Kuckuck Ilse Steppat -Maria Pia Kuckuck Peer Schmidt -Marquis de Venosta Susi Nicoletti -Madame Houplé



Commentary by Karl Moehlmann

## Der Roman

Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull. Der Memoiren erster Teil. Roman von Thomas Mann (1875 – 1955), erschienen 1954.

The origin of this book goes back to the year 1910. Thomas Mann interrupted his work on this novel in the summer of 1911 and published the first section in 1922 “*ein Torso des geplanten Ganzen, als Buch der Kindheit*”. In 1937, an edition was published that was expanded by an incomplete second section. In 1943 Mann gave up on his plan to complete the fragment in favor of writing “Doktor Faustus”. It was not until 1951 that he took up work on Felix Krull again. It was published in three sections ( Bücher) in 1954, one year before he died.

“Die Bekenntnisse” are a parody on the *Bildungs-* or *Entwicklungsroman* and are closer to a picaresque novel. Felix Krull writes the fictitious autobiography at the end of his *Weltfahrt* with meticulous honesty and no trace of regret or moral doubt. It can be assumed that he was born around 1870 and that the story takes place around 1890 during the Second Empire with its *Obrigkeitsstaat* and militarism.

Felix (the lucky or happy one) is the son of a bankrupt champagne producer. Already as a child he lets himself be honored as an emperor and is regarded as a child prodigy (*Wunderkind*) in front of a spa audience when he imitates violin playing with “Fiedel und Vaselinebogen” with the help of playback and an orchestra. In another memorable scene, he gains exemption from mandatory military service by convincingly faking an epileptic attack via his extraordinary acting skills.

With the help of his uncle, he moves to Paris to start a career in the prestigious hotel Saint James and Albany. He seems well suited for this business since his good looks and manner and his extremely charming linguistic talents get him promoted quickly, not to mention drawing the attention of several female guests. He meets Madame Houplé again, the wife of a rich toilet bowl maker from Straßburg (In the movie he is a *Gänseleberfabrikant*). Krull had stolen her jewelry box at the border control and sold it at a pawn shop in Paris. After a passionate night with her he confesses the theft, but she not only forgives him but also urges him to take more as part of her *Liebeswunsch*.

The most important event in Krull’s life is his *Existenztausch* with the Marquis de Venosta. The latter gives Krull his papers and money in order to start a year-long worldwide educational trip. This trip was arranged by his parents in order to force de Venosta to escape from his girlfriend Zaza, of whom the parents do not approve. On the train ride to Lisbon, Krull makes the acquaintance of professor Kuckuck, a paleontology professor and director of the Paleontology Museum in Lisbon. He also becomes acquainted with the professor’s daughter Zouzou and wife Maria Pia. In the guise of Marquis de Venosta he gains access to the upper crust of society and is even admitted to an audience with the Portuguese King.

Having postponed the next leg of the world tour, a trip to Argentina, Krull visits a bull fight and becomes entangled in a romantic encounter with the daughter Zouzou, orchestrated by the mother, only to become entangled with the mother (it is unclear who is the seducer and who is seduced). The novel ends abruptly with the words:

*“Holé! Heho! Ahé!” rief sie mit mächtigem Jubel. Ein Wirbelsturm urtümlicher Kräfte trug mich ins Reich der Wonne. Und hoch, stürmischer als beim iberischen Blutspiel, sah ich unter meinen glühenden Zärtlichkeiten den königlichen Busen wogen.*

Not all literary critics think that this ending is unfinished. Could it be that this passionate union between Krull and the “Rassekönigin” (his nickname for Maria Pia) is the highpoint of Krull’s development and that Thomas Mann after a 50 year long occupation with this work simply decided to end the novel on this note? In 1958 H.P. Dorn attempted a *Fortführung des Felix Krull*. His novel *War ich wirklich ein Hochstapler* starts where Thomas Mann had ended, with Krull returning to the same Hotel in Paris where he had begun his career.

## Der Film

There are major differences between the book and the movie. The ending is based on an idea by screenwriter Robert Thoeren. In the movie Krull meets and falls in love with Zaza (played by Liselotte Pulver) who was already involved with the Marquis de Venosta. The drama develops further when Zaza disappears and Venosta becomes the prime murder suspect. He returns home and confesses the “Existenztausch” to his surprised parents who had believed he was in Lisbon. To save their son, they travel to Lisbon and confirm that Krull is their real son, outwitting even Krull who consequently is arrested for murder and put into prison.