

## Narrated Political Theory: Theorizing Pop Culture in Dietmar Dath's Novel *Für immer in Honig*

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### Abstract

In recent decades, debates on the relationship between pop culture and the political have transgressed academia and have even been prominent in pop (media) discourses and texts, including pop literature. Amongst the contributions at the intersection of art, theory and entertainment are the novels and essays by the German author Dietmar Dath. Taking the example of his novel *Für immer in Honig* (Berlin 2005/2008), it will be discussed how the book reloads and theorizes pop culture, and how a common cultural-theoretical narrative of de-politicized pop is challenged by the imaginative narratives of the novel.

It will be argued that Dath's references to affective 'mattering maps' of pop culture, that on the one hand tend to fall into the pitfalls of exclusive 'pop sophistication', nevertheless play a key role for his aesthetical/theoretical project of political emancipation, and that these references can be viewed as examples of why popular passions matter for the formation of political identities/subjectivities as well as for the production and reading of political theory.

**Keywords:** Dietmar Dath, *Für immer in Honig*, pop, political theory, narratives.

‘The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought’

Jacques Rancière

‘Screw theory, let’s rock’

Robert Rolf

## Introduction: Dietmar Dath’s Novels as Pop Literature

Within German literary studies, the term *pop literature* is used to describe literary texts that, since the 1960s, are characterized by a blurring of high- and low culture, thus ‘incorporating themes, styles, modes of writing and living of mass- and everyday culture into literature’ (Ernst 2001: 9),<sup>1</sup> ranging from popular fiction to avant-garde writing.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, *Für immer in Honig*, an epic novel of more than 1,000 pages by the German author Dietmar Dath, first published in 2005, was described as one of the ‘most consequent pop novels’ (Zurschmitten 2008), incorporating objects of *the mundane/profane* into the cultural archive (Baßler 2002: 21).

Especially in the 1990s the label *pop literature* (Büsser 1999; Ullmaier 2001; Baßler 2002; Arnold 2003) was popularized through the market success of several German ‘pop authors’, but it has also been criticized, since it groups together texts that seem to differ in many ways (Seiler 2006: 16), pointing to the question of whether or not the texts fit into a literary line of tradition that takes as a subject the ‘intensity of the lived moment, [...] music, [...] an emphatic sense of existence – but also the mediated nature of this moment’ (Helmut Böttiger, quoted in Seiler 2006: 276f) – as, for example, Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, Hubert Fichte, Reinald Goetz and Thomas Meinecke have done (Schumacher 2003; Hägele 2010).

From a political science perspective, it is also possible to categorize pop literature according to their conception of the political:<sup>3</sup> Do the texts inquire into the political aspects of pop culture or not? Are concepts of ‘subversive writing’ pursued, or rather, is an affirmation of media culture being made without a ‘subversive’ agenda (Ernst 2001: 74)? With regard to these questions, Dietmar Dath’s texts can be located both within an explicit claim to ‘subversive writing’ as well as within a literary tradition of avowed pop sensibility.<sup>4</sup>

However, his writings can also be linked to a third feature of pop literature: In her recent feminist critique of German-speaking pop discourse, Nadja Geer (2012) has discussed the pitfalls of *sophistication* as the dominant ‘style of thinking’ in current pop theory and pop literature. According to Geer, many of these texts are defined by an ‘aesthetic tactic’ which encompasses the display of one’s own knowledge as a *pose* (ibid.: 13), as a male-coded expertise (ibid.: 25), that creates

exclusionary and therefore undemocratic distinctions and thus subverts the authors' own 'subversive' political claims.

*Für immer in Honig* could well be read in that vein. It combines highly sophisticated theoretical concepts such as mathematic *category theory* and a Marxist critique of deconstructivism with a mix of high and low culture and various references to pop culture.

Although I share Geer's concern about potential de-politicizing effects of current pop literature, I want to argue in the following that *Für immer in Honig* nevertheless pursues a project of political emancipation and that it can be interpreted as a piece of political theory in the context of an 'ethics of action' (Whitebrook 1996). The article starts with some brief notes on the possible insights gained from reading fictional texts for political theorizing. I will then explain the specific 'problem horizon' of pop culture, political agency and the 'aporia of subversion' before I discuss the novel along this theoretical research interest.

## **Fictional Narratives and Political Theory**

By asking what novels have to offer to political theory, the political theorist Maureen Whitebrook (1996) highlights 'the implications and consequences of choices' that novels present: Following Martha Nussbaum and the 'narrative turn' in Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy, she argues that imaginative literature can assist political theory in an 'ethics of action'. For her, the novel 'depicts the individual in relationship with others, and in their social setting, and thus extends interest in individual selves to a potentially political context' (ibid.: 33, also 43-44, 46, 48). According to Whitebrook, the theorizing of political choices cannot be confined to conventional modes of political theory, since these often fail to account for the emotional or affective elements in the formation of political identities. In this way, it can be argued that fictional literature can provide a more substantial description of the 'mattering maps'<sup>5</sup> that form a basis for political identities and attitudes. As scholars of Cultural Studies have highlighted, mattering maps are to a large degree constructed through affective engagements in popular culture (Grossberg 1992: 63; 1992a: 80-87). This can be related to Chantal Mouffe's (2000) thoughts on political subjectivisation and democratic passions: She argues that democratic consciousness is not solely realisable through (liberal) rational argument, but also via sensible and emotional experiences. With the current dominance of the liberal elements of the 'democratic paradox' (ibid.: 3-4), the democratic semantics of popular culture (Stäheli 2003) take on an important role in processes of political subjectivisation.

As a political scientist I am interested in the possible insights that can be gained reading fictional texts for political theory, by asking how political narratives are adopted and transformed in literary texts, and in what ways alternative political narratives are generated in literature (see i.a. Löffler 2010; Zelger 2011).<sup>6</sup>

Here, Jacques Rancière's (2004, 2011) thoughts on the political practice of literature (disrupting the 'distribution of the sensible') can serve as a starting point for investigating whether and how principles of social division are developed in literary narratives that allow alternative viewpoints and the opening of spaces of thought and action, which might otherwise be hidden. Even political theories make use of narratives and narrations, and they can be read as stories analogous to literary narratives (Bevir 2006; Schaal 2009). But literature, in contrast to academic writing, must 'not hide its fictional core behind rules of discipline' as Torsten Hahn (2003: 20) observed.

In this way, it can be productive to engage in a parallel reading or 'textual co-operation' of political theory and fictional literature with regard to a specific political 'problem horizon' (Löffler 2012). The problem horizon that interests me here is the inconsistent relationship between *pop culture*, *emancipatory politics* and *political action* in post-democratic times.<sup>7</sup>

### **Problem Horizon: Pop Culture and Political Agency**

If questions concerning the political are raised in pop theory today, such questions are dominated by complaints over *the loss* of (pop) political agency, as well as the affirmative character and the diminishing political relevance of global pop culture.<sup>8</sup> Previously, emancipatory politics and (youth) rebellion lifestyles seemed to be clearly intertwined within a dominant narrative of pop culture theories. But the classic concepts of *counterculture* or *subculture*, formulated within Cultural Studies and pop journalism (such as the German pop culture magazine *Spex*), which positioned *underground* pop culture in opposition to parent, high and/or mainstream cultures, have been increasingly called into question since the 1990s. According to this new critical narrative, with the emerging 'new spirit' of cultural capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005), the mainstream has become 'a mainstream of minorities' (Holert & Terkessidis 1996: 6). In post-Fordism, pop-cultural tactics of agency such as coolness and deviant individualism, which once challenged parent cultures and political authorities, lost their alleged *subversive* qualities, and turned into empty and sometimes affirmative pose of *sophistication* (Geer 2012). In Rancière's terms, they do not disrupt the distribution of the sensible, but reinforce 'la police'.

These 'aporia of subversion' (*Aporien der Subversion*), as Thomas Ernst (2008) calls them, are also reflected in pop literature. Novels such as *Für immer in Honig* can be seen as 'archives' of subversive discourse, but, as a part of (avant-garde) pop culture, they also refresh, discuss or challenge these concepts (Ernst 2008: 112). According to Ernst, there are at least three ways in which literary texts can be potentially connected to the 'subversive':

- by inscribing a 'sub-cultural discourse of the subversive' or revolutionary political concepts on the plot level;

- through (post) avant-garde techniques of ‘montage, collage and cut-up’;
- through the deconstruction of identities, hybrid characters or forms of writing (such as the mix of academic language and fiction), as well as inter-textuality (Ernst 2010: 147-8).

In what follows, I will therefore discuss Dietmar Dath’s novel along the described problem horizon, how it reloads and theorizes relationships between pop culture and emancipatory politics. Methodologically, this is based on three related dimensions of analysis: (1) a contextualising of the novel and its political and theoretical conjunctions in pop cultural and alternative left-wing media reviews. This helps to trace the specific aesthetics of reception (Iser 1980) and the ‘triggering effects’ of pop-cultural experiences and identifications that are offered by the text. (2) I will present a number of examples of the novel’s inter-textual playing with pop-cultural metaphors and the references to pop sensibilities. Both serve, as I will argue, because of their sensual appeal, as triggers of the readers’ pop experience/receptions and, as a result, for political identities and attitudes (similar to evoking ‘geographical and cultural background knowledge’ through using real places in literary topography, see Martínez & Scheffel 1999, 151-52). They also stand for the ‘creative power’ of metaphors through the ‘poetic qualities of language’ (Viehöver 2012: 103ff).<sup>9</sup> (3) Since Dath consciously uses fictional narratives to pursue his political and theoretical agendas, I will also focus on his various statements on writing techniques and aesthetic strategies, which in my opinion provide some insights into relations of fictional writing and political theorizing.

### **Narrating Theory in *Für immer in Honig***

*Für immer in Honig* can be interpreted as a literary contribution to the debate on current ‘aporia’ of pop and the political, addressed at a pop political cultural scene that is engaged with this question. And in fact, it was received in this vein by this very scene: Thus, with regard to the problem horizon of pop culture and political agency, *Für immer in Honig* was interpreted by the German *tageszeitung* (*taz*) as an attempt to settle scores with the ‘Poplinke’ – a milieu that Dath himself still remains a part of, and that, according to the reviewer, engaged with theories ‘from Adorno to Foucault, Deleuze, Hall and Butler to Negri/Hardt [...] has forgotten the most rational thing, that is the revolution’ (Rapp 2005). The German left-wing alternative weekly newspaper *Jungle World* characterised the book as a ‘playing through of the potentials of revolutionary practice in a postmodern world of hyper-reality and de-centred subjects’, based on a Marxist-Leninist philosophy of praxis and, surprisingly, on the category theory of modern mathematics, which deals with ‘the dialectic transfer of mathematic things/“objects” into mathematic practice, that is the mathematic method for substituting equations and thereby identities [...] with transformations’ (Janz 2005).

In fact, the book connects mathematical metaphors and ways of thinking with the justification for the need for socialism, enlightenment and social progress, an approach that can also be found in many of Dath's other texts, including *Maschinenwinter* and *Der Implex*: A key sentence of *Für immer in Honig* proclaims: 'People are composed of other people, not just of themselves. If we know that. Then we will become' ('*Menschen sind aus anderen Menschen zusammengesetzt, nicht bloß aus sich selber. Wenn wir das wissen. Dann werden wir.*') (*FiiH*: 260).

On plot level, *Für immer in Honig* deals with the theme of a confused left-wing pop intelligentsia coping with their personal and political crises through the character of the journalist Robert Rolf, Dietmar Dath's alter ego, who is struggling with the antinomies of the radical poststructuralist theories and views (which are held without consequences) and the bohemian-bourgeois lifestyles of his peers. He is unhappy with his role as an 'instant intellectual' who interprets the world without the will to change it (*FiiH*: 139), serving as a 'halftime clown of the crisis' (*ibid.*: 215) (*Pausenclown*, a term that Dath used recently to describe his own work for the *FAZ*). In a self-destructive attempt to provoke an older colleague, Rolf decides to start a (fake) sexual relationship with a fifteen-year-old girl, thus testing the attitudes of his friends and colleagues.<sup>10</sup> This 'experiment' sets the events of the novel in motion.

### Arguments and Narrations

Dath is known as an expert of the 'drastic' and 'fantastic', of science fiction literature, heavy metal and of soft-horror TV series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.<sup>11</sup> In many of his books, he tries, as he says, to adapt and re-invent 'Anglo-American genres such as horror, science fiction and fantasy' for the German literary scene (Hatzius 2011: 136). *Für immer in Honig* thus is a textual hybrid, combining a number of 'drastic'<sup>12</sup> and fantastic genres with a personal and political agenda.

Describing his approach to fictional writing, Dath says:

I am expanding the genres of the fantastic with my experiences and those of the people who I think might read the results. And I try to put [...] myself or people from my auto-biographic history into new constellations of contingency (*Möglichkeitsräume*). [...] You take a form of a genre and put characters into the constellations of contingency that are provided by this genre. (*ibid.*: 141)

*Für immer in Honig* can also be viewed as a textual hybrid in another respect: It combines the *narrative* with the *argument* in a productive way. A story about zombies, Armageddon and hedonistic heroes with super powers who fight undead Nazis and global capitalism is juxtaposed with essay-like theory sections.<sup>13</sup> With regard to his literary strategies, Dath highlights this distinction between two modes of writing – (1) arguments (*argumentieren*) and (2) narration (*erzählen*) – which he frequently combines in his texts (Dath 2007: 15; Bomski 2010: 321, Hatzius 2011: 158). *Für immer in Honig* includes both perspectives:

a raging engagement with a specific intellectual milieu that, for a journalist of Spex, was located somewhere between the Frankfurt School and Post-Structuralism’ as well as ‘a narration of the relationships between [...] persons/characters that I see as desirable. The way the heroes and heroines act towards each other is a glimpse of what I envision. (Hatzius 2011: 165)

Most of the novel’s chapters are set into a narrative frame, but there are also essay-like passages cast as letters or diaries, analysing global capitalism after 1989 and a recognizable but partly fictional dystopian present time and near future.<sup>14</sup> In the book, the *undead* have returned, and earth is populated by zombies, ‘Zombotics’ and the ‘W’ – transforming hybrid creatures with super powers. A Leninist manifesto of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (*FiiH*: 501ff)<sup>15</sup> written by one of the characters titled ‘Book A’ (chapter 30, 39) explains how progress failed to succeed, analyses the crises of a defeated left after 1989 and argues for a politics of action that will bring revolution. According to Book A, society was re-mythologized and humans became ‘enchanted’ or ‘bewitched’,<sup>16</sup> which is quite reasonable since it is beyond comprehension that money – something dead – and not the people has become the subject of history.

In *Für immer in Honig*, the metaphors of the capitalist enchantment of things and the ‘specters of Marx’ (Derrida) are thus taken literally.<sup>17</sup>

There are dozens of other explicit references to political theory in the 62 chapters and three appendices of the book, ranging from post-structuralism to variations of Marxism to the sciences (especially mathematics).<sup>18</sup>

### **Presenting Attitudes that Matter, Fantastic Daydreams**

Interestingly, even if he starts from a differing political standpoint, Dath’s aesthetic agenda resembles in some ways Maureen Whitebrook’s (1996) moral philosophical arguments: He sees the potential of art in the sensual experience of speculating thoughts (Hatzius 2011: 131) – ‘to see how it could be, should be, or the opposite’ (ibid.: 153). With reference to the late East German writer Peter Hacks, Dath claims that art, and especially fictional literature, should offer or illustrate attitudes (*Haltungen*) towards the world (Dath 2010: 1255; Hatzius 2011: 114). According to Dath, ‘[t]he attitude that I want to convey is this: We can comprehend the world. There is right and wrong. And if someone has figured something out, he or she is obligated to act accordingly’ (Lakeberg 2006: 34). In *Für immer in Honig* this idea is present in the heroes’ and heroines’ struggle to find out who they are (they have forgotten their ‘W’ powers), to remember their friends and the oath they once swore to each other as high school kids to end capitalism. ‘The story of how three friends, two men and a woman, tried to never betray each other, no matter what the world does to them, would outlive these three friends [...]’ (*FiiH*, 872).

With regard to the key role of popular culture’s mattering maps for the formation of political identities and attitudes, Dath claims in the afterword that the

book ‘contains everything that had to be said to all the things *that matter to me* in retrospect to all my work since 1994’ (*FiiH*: 1031, emphasis added). He refers to music that inspired some of the chapters and writes that ‘the television was on many times’ – and that the book includes various references to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Roswell*, *Dawson’s Creek* and the *X Files*.

For Dath, the genres of the fantastic – fantasy, science fiction, horror and pornography – ‘represent the world more realistically than realism itself’ because ‘in reality, fantasies play an important role in how we live as humans’ (Kasper 2007: 459-60). For example, in his epistolary novel *Die salzweißen Augen. Vierzehn Briefe über Drastik und Deutlichkeit* (2005), there are numerous passages in which the connection between the drastic and the enlightenment – as an ‘aesthetic remnant of the enlightenment following its political defeat’ (ibid.: 162) – are discussed. The drastic is described as the cultural-industrial form ‘that the desired self-image (*Selbstwunschild*) and anxiety image (*Angstbild*) of modern people adopts when the social promise of modernity cannot be redeemed’ (ibid.: 167).

In an interview with the magazine *de:bug* Dath also talks about his preference for *science fiction* instead of *utopia*, because the former offers a way ‘from wishing to willing’ (*‘vom Wünschen zum Wollen’*), ‘connecting the conjunctive and indicative mode more closely’ (Lakeberg 2006: 34). For Dath, the artist’s work starts with this wishing/desire and ends with an aesthetic representation of the world (Hatzius 2011: 115). This might explain why *Für immer in Honig* begins with a dialogue about the *Monkees*’ pop song ‘Daydream Believer’ (*FiiH*: prologue). And a central wish/desire that might be identified in the book can be found in a sentence that is repeated several times throughout the novel: After reading a book by the fictional Vietnamese mathematician Eugen Leviné, named after an actual German-Russian communist who was murdered in 1919, the three main characters of the book Robert, Jennifer and Philip are banded together by a daydream: ‘When will we be free?’ (*‘Danach verband die drei ein Wachtraum: Man kann die Welt verstehen. Wann werden wir frei sein?’*, *FiiH*: 60).<sup>19</sup>

*Für immer in Honig* includes dozens of references to genres of the fantastic and other elements of popular culture, and it can be argued that the sensations provided by these genres (the book, for instance, includes some quite pornographic chapters) offer a reading experience that transgresses ‘proper’ political theory.

Pop culture, according to *Die salzweißen Augen*, promises ‘the valid [...] the supra-individual’ because it, ‘like socialist politics and mathematics, promises salvation from a solitary existence’ (*SwA*: 145). Pop, according to Dath & Kirchner in *Implex* (2012), contains ‘the prospects of a collective of people who are just not held together by fear, by violence and the threat thereof, or by persecution and conformity, but by the socially organized promise of happiness’ (ibid.: 783).

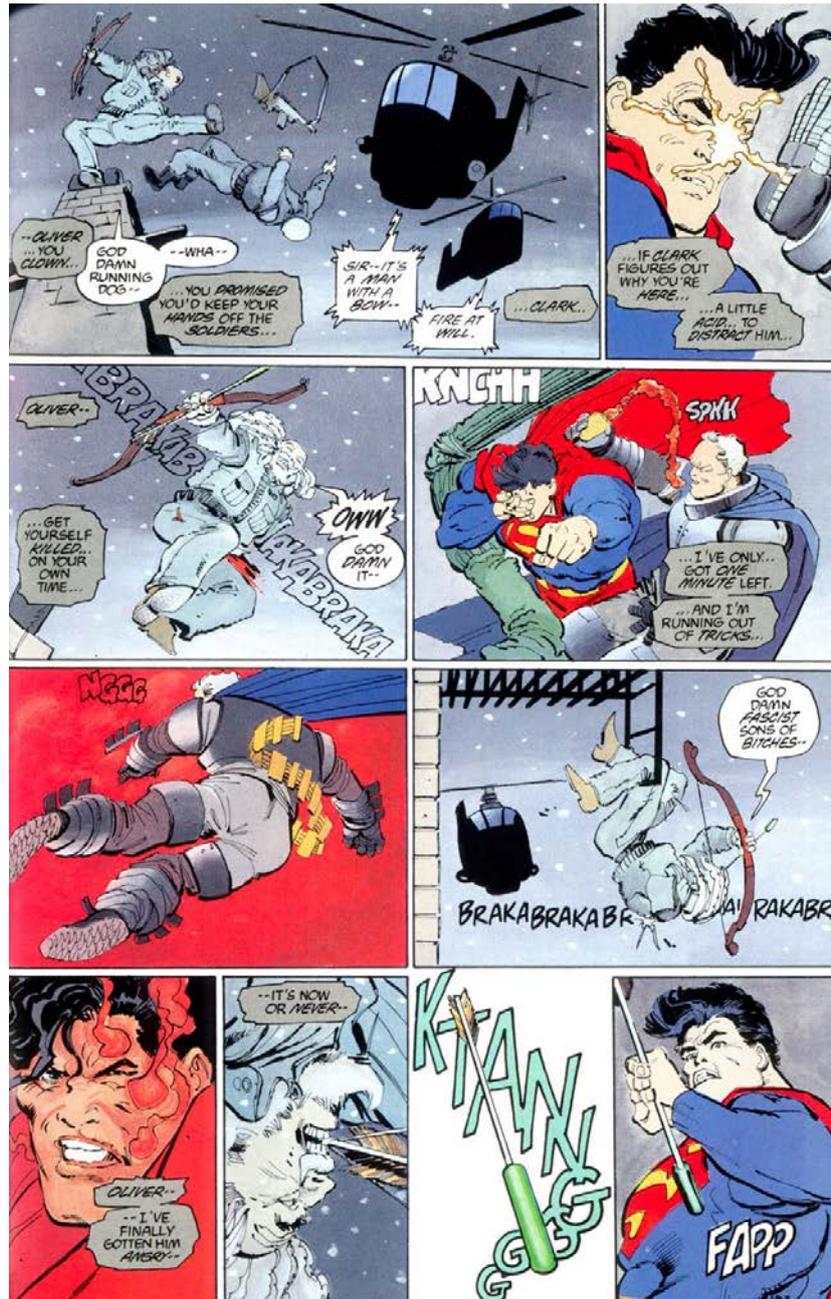
## Pop Metaphors as Sensual Triggers

As argued above, the inter-textual playing with pop-cultural metaphors and pop sensibilities in *Für immer in Honig* also offers specific ‘triggering effects’ – a potential that can be actualised through the reading process (the concept of ‘implied reader’, Iser 1978: xii), and that, as I will show in the following with reference to reactions of pop cultural reviewers, were actually taken up by readers who shared the repertoire of pop cultural materials that are presented in the novel.

(1) In *Für immer in Honig*, references to pop songs describe and evoke certain *moods* of scenes or characters. As Dath wrote in an appendix to the book, the darkly mysterious song ‘Echo’s Answer’ by the British electro-pop band *Broadcast* could have served as the book’s ‘theme song’ (*FiiH*: 1032). Inter-textual lines from the song are interspersed in one chapter, with two characters commenting: ‘Holy crap ... this is totally weird. [...] And beautiful’ (*FiiH*: 252, ‘*Meine Fresse... das ist ja total unheimlich. [...] Und wunderschön*’). With regard to Dath’s ‘drastic’ proclivities, it is not surprising that heavy metal also plays an important role in the book. Lines from songs by *Savatage* and *Metallica*, for example, serve to establish the mood of chapters (*FiiH*: 151-2). In addition, on plot level, several male protagonists are characterized as (former) heavy metal fans and are defined by this passion. This applies to the (self-) stylisation of a young minor character, who, out of unrequited love, musters the courage to wage his solitary campaign against the heroes and heroines from the sounds of *Slayer* and *Voivod*. Heavy metal is also linked to the question of *memory* – specifically to the (day-) dreams of youth. A rummage through Philip’s old metal record collection is described as a ‘booster shot’ (*Nachimpfung*), as a ‘dose’ of the ‘noise traces that shaped you, on which you depend, that you inhabited libidinous’ (*FiiH*: 328, ‘*Lärmspuren, die einen geprägt haben, an denen man hängt, die man libidinös besetzt hat*’). Here the youthful music experience is compared to a ‘language of yesterday,’ as a ‘dialect of the newly grown-up,’ as ‘first contact with the violence and the ur-evil,’ as something with which you can ‘say lifelong truths, so you have to be careful that you haven’t forgotten how to make sentences with it’ (*FiiH*: 329). In accordance with Dath’s pronounced interpretation of the connection between enlightenment and the drastic, metal guitar riffs are described as the ‘blows’ and the ‘kick’ with which ‘a new way of thinking’ could be ‘rung in’ (*einbimmeln*) like bell strikes ‘with all their might’ (*FiiH*: 46-7).

(2) With regard to experiences of pop reception that are offered in the text it is not surprising that a number of pop media reviews responded to these references and point to the affective potentials of the book: ‘Great teenage fantasies of “it can be done” are formed in the reader’s head’; ‘you should become hero-like through reading, like in the book’ (Sdun 2005). A good example of what reviewers might have had in mind is a dialogue in the book between ‘J’ (Jennifer) and ‘F’ (Freddy) about the attitude towards life and politics that ‘J’ and her friends shared in their

high school years – ‘Us against the world’ (*‘Wir gegen alle’*) – and that ‘J’ compares to a picture in Frank Miller’s graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*, where, as she remembers, the injured Green Arrow takes on a whole fleet of helicopters, with his last words ‘God damn fascist sons of bitches!’ – ‘a battle cry that could have been ours’ (*FiiH: 767*). ‘We were happy. Of course we never realised, like all young geniuses. We were much in love [...] in such a strange pathos, the whole time’ (*ibid.*).



Frank Miller: *The Dark Knight Returns*

(3) A *Jungle World* review mentions the ‘gravity attraction’ that the novel creates in paragraphs like the one where ‘F’ asks his friend ‘J’ about her favourite song (‘Oh Year’ by *Roxy Music*), and where ‘J’ explains how for her the chorus of this song connects to the moment of revolution, forcing the reviewer to put the book aside and listen to *Roxy Music* (Janz 2005).

J: How the chorus suddenly breaks out of Ferry’s elegiac crooning, some... somewhere, this huge signal, curtain up, the glittering rain, the headlights, this becoming, lifted up by warm winds ... This is how I imagined it, the moment when the upside-down world comes crashing down. At the moment of the revolution, when history becomes true again, instead of just real. When the false vacuum collapses. (*FiiH*: 390)

In another review, a metaphor of music experience/reception is used to describe how Dath manages to present new perspectives on the theories that are debated in the book.

This creates a similar effect to the one with all the cited pop songs: You suddenly realise that the whole time you’ve been singing along with a line in a wrong way, and this experience clears the head and the ears for new, more conclusive interpretations of what one has heard. (Schmidt 2006)

Gunther Nickel (2011: 64) interprets Dath’s references from the drastic arts accordingly as an attempt to ‘share and come to terms [with] experiences that are not yet fully understood, but accompany the perception of the world in a diffuse way. The unreal arts do not capture them reflectively, but give them an expression.’ This would be connected to the attempt to create a ‘form of reception’ that ‘models the emotions and perceptions in a way that for Dath constitutes a critical, reality-altering potential’ (*ibid.*: 64).

Such a view could also be linked to practices of *sensual or mimetic reading*: Following Adorno’s (1965/2007) considerations of the inspired idea (*Einfall*) as a ‘crystallisation of unconscious knowledge’ and his definition of the idea of philosophy as ‘the effort to go beyond the concept, by means of the concept’ (*ibid.*: 140), it can be argued that for reaching conscious thought, ‘the I must dilute itself in a double sense; it must make permeable the seal against that which is not part of itself – the unconscious and the exterior – without being inundated so that it drowns’ (Babenhäuserheide 2010: 272).

Following Nadja Geer’s (2012) arguments on *sophistication* and pop literature, criticism could also be applied. Texts, which are situated ‘in the grey area between understanding and identification’, can directly hinder the formation of collective political subjects if they do not ‘step out from the grey zone of habitualised normalcy (*Selbstverständlichkeit*)’ and attain ‘a special visibility through consolidation, explication and stylisation’ (*ibid.*: 233-34). This danger exists in current pop theory and pop literature, not least because these are, according to Geer and as stated above, characterised by *sophistication* as a pose, by the ‘presentation of edge’ (*Inszenierung des Vorsprungs*) through exclusive pop-cultural references, instead of disclosing the sources and cross-references of this ‘world knowledge’

(ibid.: 25). Those who have not read *The Dark Knight Returns* or who do not have the *Roxy Music* song in their ears, in contrast to those pop-culturally versed critics, will be excluded from the aforementioned political subjectivisation. This is also true for a book like *Für immer in Honig*, even if the educational canon laid out here – with its celebration of the grungy and drastic genres such as heavy metal – does not necessarily lie in the alternative mainstream of pop sophistication.

It is obvious that Dath's books have little to do with popularizing. The author himself writes that his texts are primarily addressed to intellectuals ('Not many read it, because not many live as the characters live, that I know of', Hatzius 2011: 198). So it is also no coincidence that the theme of the avant-garde is always present in Dath's texts. Even the references to Lenin's writings in *Für immer in Honig* can be read as such an engagement with questions of the (revolutionary) avant-garde. And Dath emphasises in interviews the necessity of an avant-garde – understood as 'people who start sometime. [...] Somebody must get started' (Hatzius 2011: 227).

## Conclusion

In a review of Dietmar Dath's and Barbara Kirchner's book *Der Implex*, the novelist and political theorist Raul Zelik (2012) criticises the political basis of the book from a rivalling Marxist perspective, but concedes that the language of the text 'mushrooms in so many directions that it aesthetically prevents the proclamation of truth'. Now *Der Implex* is not an obviously fictional text, even if the authors describe the book as 'a kind of novel of concepts' (*Implex*: 15).<sup>20</sup> But as a fictional narrative, *Für immer in Honig* is even farther removed from the codes of academic writing and stringent argumentation than *Der Implex*. The meanings mushroom, to continue Zelik's image, in this novel much more fully than in *Implex*.<sup>21</sup>

In fictional writing, the actions of characters do not have to be consistent and can change over time. But if Dath says that 'the way [his] heroes and heroines act towards each other is a glimpse' of what he envisions, then this gets tricky in the case of his characters in *Für immer in Honig*, who, in accordance with his reading of category theory, are constantly *transforming* (this, for instance, can be seen in the characterisation of 'Cordula Späth', a character who features in many of Dath's books, and whose actions are depicted in a very ambivalent way, leaving it to the reader to fill these gaps.).

It is not surprising that reviewers have pointed to the contradiction between Dath's critique of poststructuralist theories as it is played out in *Für immer in Honig* and the structure of the text that (through its intertextuality, shifting points of view and fluid characters) itself can be labelled as 'postmodern' (Nickel 2009, 2011: 62).

How is this then related to questions of pop culture and the political? According to Thomas Ernst, most of the current literary texts dealing with the subversive 'have given up the claim to a direct, committed and lasting intervention into society' and confine themselves to 'the role of archiving and reflecting subversive concepts and aesthetic strategies, challenging at the same time any pretension for a new Utopia or truth' (Ernst 2008: 125). *Für Immer in Honig*, however, keeps up a 'strange pathos' of truth, subjectivity and action/agency through a detour into genres of the fantastic, into fictional fantasies and dreams, in addition to the aesthetically deconstructive structure of the novel. The text therefore pursues a modernist project (progress, truth, emancipation, revolution) with the aesthetic strategies of post-modernism and drastic pop culture.

With regard to the problem horizon of the political potentials of pop, *Für immer in Honig*, despite all obstacles, updates the political promise of happiness once again – by affective means of popular culture. The daydream: *When will we be free?* recalls Helmut Salzinger's classic essay from 1972, *Rock Power oder Wie musikalisch ist die Revolution?* [*Rock Power or How Musical is the Revolution?*], which ended with Eric Burdon's song 'New York 1963 – America 1968,' where it says: 'Want to be free [...] You are not alone.'

Considering the potentials of a parallel reading of political theory and fictional literature, it can be argued that, in contrast to Dath's essays *Maschinenwinter* or *Der Implex*, *Für immer in Honig* provides a more sensually accessible and thus more complete picture of his political theories and attitudes. Moreover, despite its 'aesthetic of sophistication', the book's attractive play with pop-cultural metaphors and modes of pop reception makes clear the important role mattering maps and the, at least potentially, 'de-differentiated' and 'universal' semantics of popular culture (compared to the post-democratic, differentiated political system) can have for processes of political subjectivisation today (Stäheli 2003). These insights can be linked to political theories that highlight the importance of sensible and emotional experiences for the articulation of political passions, as a basis for democratic societies.

In this way, *Für immer in Honig* can be read as an independent theoretical counter narrative, challenging current pop theories that downplay political potentials of pop. The book (re)articulates narratives of radical political agency ('revolution') with political subjectivisation and affective mattering maps, thus noisily disrupting the 'distribution of the sensible' of post-democratic politics, where tunes of democratic emancipation are often turned into a mute mode.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All direct German quotes have been translated into English.
- <sup>2</sup> I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of *Culture Unbound* and to Marion Löffler und Sabine Zelger for their very helpful comments on earlier version of this paper.
- <sup>3</sup> In my use of ‘the political’ I am following authors who emphasise a difference between *politics* – a concept then associated with post-democratic governance or administration of society – and *the political*, as ‘something that always escapes the efforts of political or social domestication’ (Marchart 2007: 6). This split is also present in Jacques Rancière’s distinction of ‘le politique’ into ‘la police’ and ‘la politique’ (the political) (Rancière 2004a), with the latter manifesting the *demos* by disrupting the ‘distribution of the sensible’.
- <sup>4</sup> If pop is understood as an ‘attitude’, a sensibility and a ‘mode of reception’ that can best be grasped and described ‘from within’, as Baßler says, then Dietmar Dath seems to be well suited for this mission (Baßler 2006: 422). Born in 1970, he is a highly prolific author. From 1998 until 2000 he worked as a chief editor for the German pop-culture magazine *Spex*; then from 2001 to 2007 he served as an editor for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*. Since the mid 1990s, he has written around 20 novels and a number of plays and essays, among them the novels *Dirac* (2006), *Die Abschaffung der Arten* (2008) and the book-length essays *Maschinenwinter* (2008) and *Der Implex* (with Barbara Kirchner, 2012).
- <sup>5</sup> According to Lawrence Grossberg (1992a: 80-82), mattering maps organise ‘the affective plane’ and ‘direct people’s investments into the world. [...] They tell people where, how and with what intensities they can become absorbed - into the world and their lives’.
- <sup>6</sup> I would follow a definition of political theory in the narrow sense that includes all attempts to understand, interpret or systematize politics and the political via terms, concepts and categories and that – in contrast to some conceptions of political philosophy – should be compatible with the analysis of concrete political practices.
- <sup>7</sup> In Rancière’s conception, ‘post-democracy’ describes a state of democracy when ‘le politique’ is reduced to ‘la police’ – ‘the government practice and conceptual legitimization of a democracy *after* the *demos*’ –, to ‘the consensual practice of effacing the forms of democratic action’ (‘la politique’), thus ‘making the subject and democracy’s own specific action disappear’ (Rancière 2004a: 101-2).
- <sup>8</sup> Here the term ‘pop’ includes music, parts of film and television culture, fashion, lifestyle magazines, art and literature; see Weinzierl 2000: 15.
- <sup>9</sup> Regarding Dath’s use of Donald Davidson’s metaphor theory, see passages in Dath’s book *Sie ist wach* (2003: 137) or *Der Implex* (2012: 398).
- <sup>10</sup> This motif can also be found in Joachim Lottmann’s novel *Mai, Juni, Juli* (1987: 138ff), which is also partly set in the milieu of the *Spex* editorial team.
- <sup>11</sup> On *Buffy*, Dath wrote the book *Sie ist wach. Über ein Mädchen, das hilft, schützt und rettet* (2003). In 2012 he published a text on the TV series *Lost*.
- <sup>12</sup> The ‘drastic’ is defined in Dath’s writings as the grungy, trashy parts of popular culture, its ‘chewing, sucking, disgust, rigor, lust’, and the ‘anti-bourgeois literalness’ of showing everything (‘*antibürgerliche Buchstäblichkeit*’) (Dath 2005: 17-19).
- <sup>13</sup> The somewhat cryptic title of the novel refers to a passage in the book about ‘eyes in honey’ as a symbol for ‘cruel beauty, art, contemplation and philosophy’ (*FiiH*: 622).
- <sup>14</sup> There are also three epilogues/afterwords, and the book includes transcripts of articles that Dath had published in the *FAZ*. In addition, there are drawings of formulas or *morphisms* of category theory in several chapters.
- <sup>15</sup> Dath has dealt with Lenin in other texts, including his 2012 introduction to *Staat und Revolution* (2012a).
- <sup>16</sup> The re-enchantment of the world can also be found in Dath’s novel *Phonon oder Staat ohne Namen* (2001), a story of the chief editor of the pop magazine ‘phonon’, which is set in a fairy-tale Germany ruled by the ‘owl princess’ and full of supernatural phenomena.

- <sup>17</sup> Gunter Nickel (2011: 63f) has convincingly interpreted the fantastic plot of the novel and the 'zombie conditions' described therein as a literal retranslation of a metaphor used by Marx in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), in which Marx observes: 'The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just when they seem to be occupied with revolutionising themselves and things, with creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the ghosts of the past to their service, borrowing their names, battle cries and costumes in order to enact a new scene in world history in this time-honoured disguise and with this borrowed language.'
- <sup>18</sup> Dath introduces characters such as 'Jürgen' [Habermas] and 'Jacques' [Derrida] – whose fictional normative philosophical debates on the 'posthuman' society after the return of the undead are portrayed in an ironic way (chapter 42; the neo-Marxist thinker Wolfgang Pohrt appears as their more rational opponent) – or the resurrected German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (chapter 37, 40).
- <sup>19</sup> For a discussion of daydreaming, wish fulfilment and science fiction see Jameson 2005: 45ff. Dath's novel *Sie schläft* starts with a quote from Heiner Müller that deals with dreaming as an ideal art: 'Fear is worked off through dreaming it. It is indeed the problem of the writer and the artist in general during his whole working life trying to reach the poetic level of his dreams' (Bomski 2010: 339-440). *Der Implex* (2012: 357) also includes a discussion of 'true and waking dreams', with reference to Ernst Bloch.
- <sup>20</sup> 'Hero of the book' is the concept of the 'implex' (ibid.): 'the belief that certain degrees of freedom are inherent to a particular moment of productive force (*Produktivkraftbestand*) that can stimulate the human potential and lift it up into realisation' (ibid.: 316).
- <sup>21</sup> Dath's strategy of fictionalisation has also been interpreted as a way to bring the 'state of being right in the middle' (*Mittendrinsein*) of pop reception – as well as political unambiguity – to a more distanced position via the installing of 'a narrative agent between author and text', granting the 'political author-person a free space: exactly the distance that the old model of a left-wing intellectual demands' (Boatin 2011: 21).

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